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-
- 02 Editorial**
Deirdre Horgan and Maja Haals
Brosnan
-
- 07 Transition from preschool to primary school: Key messages from research, policy and practice**
Mary Daly and Arlene Forster
-
- 13 Exploring how primary school teachers understand Aistear – a pilot study**
Margaret O'Donoghue
-
- 19 Supporting transitions: A children and young people's services committee initiative in Galway and Roscommon**
Caroline Duignan, Marie Gibbons and Bridie Thornton
-
- 25 Self-reported early school experiences of children from low socioeconomic status backgrounds: The children's thoughts about school study**
Christine O'Farrelly, Ailbhe Booth, Mimi Tatlow-Golden, and Orla Doyle
-
- 31 Play affordances in early childhood education and care: A paradigmatic shift and political transition from protectionist to participatory perspectives?**
Frances Clerkin
-
- 37 The importance of including the child's voice in the transition process: Signposts from a national evaluation of concepts of school readiness in Ireland**
Emer Ring and Lisha O'Sullivan
-
- 45 The role of play in preparing children for big school**
Emma Reilly
-
- 51 Building identities as learners: Supporting transitions through reflecting on pedagogical documentation**
Marlene McCormack and Nickola Cullen
-
- 57 Transitions: Space and place**
Miriam Twomey
-
- 65 Transitioning via transportation for a young person with autism**
Rachel Ferguson, Dierdre O'Shea, and Fiona McCaffrey
-
- 71 Adolescent transitioning and substance misuse**
Denis Murray
-
- 77 From cared to carers: Adolescent transition at a time of maternal cancer**
Leonor Rodriguez, AnnMarie Groarke, Pat Dolan and Padraig MacNeela
-
- 83 Healing transitions in serious fun camps**
Peter J. Kearney

Editorial

We are delighted to present this issue of the Children's Research Digest, focusing on the topic of transitions in the settings, themes and stages of childhood and young adulthood. Transition plays an important role in the lives of all children and young people, and how they manage these transitions and the supports available to manage them can have profound impacts on their lives. Transition refers to movements or changes from one period or state into another and these changes can occur either suddenly or over a gradual period. Some transitions are predefined by external structures such as the education system and the law, and common transitions include starting preschool, primary school, moving to secondary school and transitions to adulthood. Within childhood development, children move through a range of stages and the rate of transition and the exact type of changes that occur may be unique to each child. Transition is not just temporal in the lives of children and young people, but also horizontal referring to movement across various settings that a child and his/her family may encounter within the same time frame.

In general then, transition can be understood as a change of contexts - the movement from one institutional setting to another either horizontally (within the same timeframe) or vertically (across time). It also includes any changes that may affect children. These can include events such as bereavement, loss, independence, illness, changes in family structure, changes at school or friendship. Transition, then, can be understood as a change process and a shift from one identity to another. 'It is usually a time of intense and accelerated development demands that are socially regulated' (Fabian and Dunlop, 2002: 3). Recognition of the importance of supporting and strengthening effective transitions is one of the transformational goals of the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People: Better Outcomes – Brighter Futures (2014).

The diversity of transitions that children and young people may experience throughout their lives is well represented in this issue of the Children's Research Digest. We encounter

educational transitions, first into preschool and then, from preschool to primary school and we learn of the differences and similarities in such experiences for children with special educational needs and from lower socio-economic status backgrounds. We learn of the difficult transition experiences as children enter adolescence and start their journey into adulthood; how this increases their risk of engaging in substance misuse or how these years are sometimes made especially difficult when parents become seriously ill. Again, we see how transitions become especially challenging for young people with intellectual disabilities on a daily basis as they have to horizontally transition between different settings such as the family home, transportation devices and community settings. Finally, we are brought through a theoretical investigation of how transitions impact on children's lives, in a longitudinal research study on sick children's engagement in Fun Camps.

The term transition is commonly used and understood in the field of early childhood education and increasingly research looks at transitions from preschool to primary school. This was very much reflected in the submissions received for this Special Issue. The 'dynamic effects model' (Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta, 2000) of transition is clearly evident in much of the work. This holds that children's transition to school is a dynamic process and is understood in terms of the influence of different contexts experienced by the child - the home, classroom, and the community - and the connections between these contexts over time. It helps shift the focus away from a family-based deficit perspective and instead recognises the shared responsibility of this complex transition for children. Also evident in these articles is that transition is not simply a move from the preschool to the school context, but a shift in identity from child in preschool to pupil in school. Furthermore, as in the general literature on transitions, terms such as continuity and discontinuity; ready school and readiness for school; adjustment and adaptation; coping strategies; as well as children

as agents in transitions all appear. Throughout there is a preoccupation with how we can better understand the meaning and role of transitions, including through specific research methods, and develop supports to alleviate the stress and challenges of transitions, through a number of examples of good practice in successfully managing or easing transitions for children and young people.

The majority of articles in this issue focus on vertical transitions from preschool to primary school settings. There is a focus on the structural conditions for such transitions, in particular the supports required by children before, during and after the transition process. Daly and Forster discuss commissioned research which informs the NCCA's work in developing a reporting template to improve arrangements for the transfer of information between schools and state-funded ECCE settings about the progress and achievement of students. They argue that, despite the potential offered by Aistear and Siolta, a clear national implementation plan to help practitioners and teachers to use these resources to extend and enhance children's experiences is lacking. This is evidenced by O' Donoghue who makes a case for the discontinuity in practice between pre- and primary school settings. In this pilot study, exploring how primary school teachers understand and implement Aistear in their practice, O' Donoghue highlights the importance of Aistear as a tool to support the transition from preschool to primary school. Duignan and Gibbons similarly emphasise the contribution of the Aistear framework in their discussion of a Children and Young People Services Committee (CYPSC) project in Galway on supporting transitions to primary school, focusing on the development of a booklet 'This Is Me' which is underpinned by Aistear. Early years practitioners involved welcomed the booklet as a transparent way of sharing appropriate information with schools that could help to support children's transitions.

Within this structural focus it is important to consider disadvantaged children's experiences. Some of the articles highlight children's everyday

concerns on transitioning to primary school for specific cohorts of children experiencing social and economic disadvantage. Research has highlighted the links between early childhood disadvantage and adversity and difficulties during this transition (O'Kane and Hayes, 2006; Jackson and Cartmel, 2010). Here, in this Issue, we encounter the additional difficulties faced by children from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds. For example, O' Farrelly et al. discuss The Children's Thoughts about School Study (CTSS) which sought to address the absence of the perspectives of children from low-SES backgrounds in policy and practice. Although the participant children from low-SES junior infant classes described the move to primary school as challenging they also relished the opportunities that school offers and welcomed aspects of school including opportunities to play, predictable access to outdoor space, and access to toys, books, and food. They especially sought support in language, literacy, and numeracy, toileting, motor skills, and the social skills needed to make and maintain friendships and avoid bullying.

As we delve deeper into children's experiences of transitions, Clerkin sets the scene by describing a current paradigmatic shift within the structural conditions at policy level with regards to early childhood care and education. Recent research (see O'Kane, 2015) argues the case for interactive, play-based learning in the early years of primary school and indicates that the use of more formal approaches has the potential to impact negatively on children's transition experiences. Through tracing political developments (structural transitions), Clerkin examines play in early years, specifically, the challenge of balancing the right to protection with the right to experience 'risky play'. We then turn to the details of the importance of play-based approaches that proactively include children's voices. The theme of giving children a voice and enabling their active participation in transition processes runs through the remaining articles on early years transitions to primary school, starting with Ring and O'Sullivan's article which presents the findings from a National Evaluation of Concepts

of School Readiness in Ireland. These indicate that children perceived primary school in terms of the size of the buildings; the limited availability for play; the centrality of homework and the importance of making friends. The authors emphasise the importance of children being adequately informed and consulted in relation to the transition process and conclude that it should be reflective of the process quality embedded in the principles of Aistear. Reilly, utilising Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective, looks at the role of play in preparing children for 'big school' and describes preparation for the transition in a piece of action research in one preschool which included walking trips to the primary school, visits to the school during breaktime, taking photos, drawings, and dressing up in school uniform. Reilly recommends implementation of key strategies, including engaging play episodes, to give children a more comprehensive experience of what to expect and to support their transitions to primary school. McCormack and Cullen's article offers an engaging examination of transitions to primary school as they explore a learning story of children helping to close their preschool experience and resituate themselves as 'big school' learners. They look at reflective journaling with children as a means of acknowledging their growth and acquired skills in preschool and empowering them as confident learners as they prepare for their transition to primary school.

Next, the attention turns to transition experiences for children diagnosed with autism. Here we start with Twomey when in *Transitions: Space and Place* she describes innovative research methods including puppetry and role play used to elicit children's experiences of transitions into and between early years settings. This article highlights how inadequate support and planning, including delays in diagnosis, can have negative implications for transitions and can result in exclusion for some children. Through also engaging with parents, Twomey demonstrates that parent involvement was essential to the success of transitions, as indeed do a number of the articles. Ferguson, O'Shea and McCaffrey

follow up on the challenges faced by children with autism in managing transitions but move from a focus on vertical to horizontal transitions that happen on a daily basis. We also move in focus to the later years of children's lives by following a sixteen year old girl as she has to physically transition via transportation and the authors provide us with useful, practical strategies for young people managing such daily transitions.

Murray stays within the focus on transitions in adolescence with an examination of vertical transitions of young people navigating through their teenage years and preparing themselves for adulthood. Informed by his work as a practitioner, Murray has conducted a wide-ranging and enlightening literature review on the increased risk of substance misuse faced by adolescents, and again we are provided with useful strategies for practitioners to smooth the transition process and significantly reduce the risk of adverse experiences, including dangerous health behaviour. Rodriguez stays within vertical transitions during adolescence when she investigates the impact of young people learning of their parents' diagnosis with serious illness, such as cancer, and the issues that such young people experience in transforming from being cared for by their parents to themselves becoming carers, or their parent's parent.

Finally, Kearney provides us with an apt detailed theoretical discussion of some of the processes at play in children's experiences of transitions. Kearney specifically looks at the example of the power, or magic, of seriously ill children's participation in fun camps in different jurisdictions and cultural settings. Across these diverse contexts, the powerful moments of transformation, children's transitions from sick patients to active, empowered children who have fun, is remarkably similar and affords us a thought-provoking theoretical framework to understand such transitions.

Dr. Deirdre Horgan

Guest Editor, University College Cork

Maja Haals Brosnan

Editor, Children's Research Network for Ireland and Northern Ireland

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Transition from preschool to primary school: Key messages from research, policy and practice

Mary Daly and Arlene Forster

Introduction

This paper outlines the task set out for the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) regarding the development of templates to transfer information on children's learning and development between preschools and primary schools in Ireland. It also focuses on the outcomes and implications of a research review on the transition from preschool to primary school commissioned by the NCCA to underpin this work. The key messages from this research highlight that:

- 1 a positive experience during the transition to primary school is important.
- 2 certain dispositions, skills and knowledge are important for children as they make the transition to primary school.
- 3 greater alignment in curriculum and pedagogy across preschools and primary schools is needed.
- 4 supporting transitions is a shared responsibility between children, families, communities, preschools and primary schools.
- 5 the transfer of information on children's learning and development between preschools and primary schools is an important part of the transition process.

National frameworks and their support for the transition to primary school

Both *Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009) and *Siolta: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* (CECDE, 2006) highlight the importance of transitions, including the transition to primary school. The *Aistear Siolta Practice Guide* (www.aistearsiolta.ie) is an on-line resource to support practitioners to use the two frameworks together. A number of resources, including a self-evaluation tool are available to help practitioners support children and families with the transition to primary school.

The NCCA's role in supporting the transition from preschool to primary school

The transition of children from preschool to primary school is an area of work for the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment over the coming years. The NCCA advises the Minister for Education and Skills on curriculum and assessment for early childhood, and for primary and post-primary schools. As part of *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020* (2011) the NCCA was assigned responsibility for developing suitable reporting templates and to make these available on-line to

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

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

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

- *Transition from Preschool to Primary School: Research Report 19* (O'Kane, 2016) which is a review of the literature nationally and internationally.
- *Transition from Preschool to Primary School: Audit of Policy in 14 Jurisdictions* (O'Kane and Murphy, 2016a) which looks at data transfer and the transition process.
- *Transition from Preschool to Primary School: Audit of Transfer Documentation in Ireland* (O'Kane and Murphy, 2016b) which is an audit of ten transfer documents that have been

developed collaboratively between preschools and primary schools.

Executive summaries of the above three papers outline key learning from each paper and are available at www.ncca.ie. A synopsis of key messages from the three papers is now presented.

Key messages from the transition research papers

Key message 1

A positive experience during the transition to primary school is important

The main findings of the literature review support the view that a positive experience during the transition to primary school is a predictor of children's future success in terms of social, emotional and educational outcomes (Dockett and Perry, 2007; Peters, 2010). Children experiencing social and economic disadvantage, children with English as an additional language (EAL) and children with special educational needs may require particular supports at the time of transition to primary school. Despite the importance of this educational transition there is little evidence of it being recognised at policy level nationally or in the jurisdictions reviewed in the international audit.

Key message 2

Important dispositions, skills and knowledge for children as they make the transition to primary school

In terms of key dispositions, skills and knowledge that best support children as they transition from preschool to primary school, a good degree of consistency is found in the literature nationally and internationally. The focus is on social and emotional skills, communication and language skills, positive learning dispositions like independence and curiosity, and self-help skills, with less focus being placed on academic skills (O'Kane and Hayes, 2010; Jones, Greenberg and Crowley, 2015).

Key message 3

Greater alignment in curriculum and pedagogy across preschools and primary schools is needed

While the research reviewed highlights the importance of greater alignment between curriculum and pedagogy across preschools and primary schools, there continues to be a discontinuity, particularly in terms of pedagogical practice. Research has indicated that formal approaches to education during the early years of primary school have the potential to impact negatively on children (Fabian 2013, Petriwskyi 2013, Fallon and O'Sullivan 2015), thus supporting the case for interactive, play-based learning.

Key message 4

Supporting transitions is a shared responsibility

The need for families, preschools and primary schools to communicate and to work together to support children making the transition from preschool to primary school is emphasised in the research (Educational Transitions and Change (ETC) Research Group, 2011; Trodd 2013; Dockett and Perry, 2014). However, it appears that collaboration and communication between families, preschools and primary schools is still not happening in any systematic or comprehensive manner, nationally or internationally.

Key message 5

Transfer of information on children's learning and development between preschools and primary schools is important

The research highlights that a key part of communication includes the transfer of relevant information on children's learning and development between preschools and primary schools (ETC Research Group 2011). No jurisdiction reviewed has a nationally agreed template for the transfer of information on children's learning and development as proposed for Ireland, though in Ireland as in many other jurisdictions templates to transfer information have been developed and used on an *ad hoc* basis.

Conclusion and implications for NCCA's work

The transition from preschool to primary school is an important milestone in children's lives. The commissioned research papers provide important messages not only for NCCA but for all those concerned with this important educational transition. The papers extend our understanding of some of the issues surrounding this transition internationally and nationally, and give insights into the multiple factors which influence this important event in children's lives. The key messages confirm that a positive experience during the transition to primary school is important. Certain dispositions, skills and knowledge are important for children as they make the transition and therefore should be focused on in preschools. Supporting transitions is a shared responsibility between children, families, communities, preschools and primary schools. Yet communication and relationship-building are not happening for many children and this issue needs to be addressed.

The transfer of information on children's learning and development between preschools and primary schools is an important part of the transition process. While this transfer of relevant information is not happening in any systematic way as yet, the development of national templates as prioritised in the *Literacy and Numeracy Strategy* (2011) should be helpful in this regard if supported by a wider commitment to the transition process. Work will begin shortly by the NCCA on developing draft templates that are relevant, user-friendly and manageable for the Irish context. In 2017, NCCA will work with a small number of preschools and primary schools to try out the templates and following feedback, these will be further developed and made available in 2018. Parents and children will be involved in the process. In addition, NCCA will add to the resources in the *Aistear Síolta Practice Guide* to provide further guidance on supporting this important transition.

Greater alignment in curriculum and pedagogy across preschools and primary schools is

needed and again this is an area of work for the NCCA. The structure of the *Primary School Curriculum* (DES, 1999) and the use of time across it, are being looked at by the NCCA over the coming months and could help in working towards a greater alignment of curriculum and pedagogy between these two educational settings. The NCCA's work on transition templates and on the structure of, and use of time, in the primary curriculum provide important opportunities for helping children to make a successful transition from preschool to primary school in Ireland.

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Author Information

Arlene is Deputy Chief Executive in the NCCA with responsibility for early childhood and primary education. Arlene began her career teaching in the early years and primary both in Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland. She joined the NCCA in 2001 to contribute to the Council's work on early childhood education. Since then, she has led the development of Aistear which is Ireland's curriculum framework for all children from birth to six years. As a director, Arlene has also worked in the areas of assessment and reporting, curriculum review, language and maths. She was appointed to her current post in March 2016.

Mary is an Education Officer with the NCCA. She is a graduate of UCC with a BA in Early Childhood Studies and her Ph D. focused on young children's well-being. Mary has worked in the early childhood sector in a number of different capacities over the past 15 years, working with the NCCA for the last 9 years. Mary was part of the team that developed Aistear and she was also involved in developing the Aistear Síolta Practice Guide (aistearsiolta.ie) an on-line resource to help practitioners to use Ireland's curriculum and quality frameworks together. Mary's current work focus is the transition of children from preschool to primary school in Ireland.



Exploring how primary school teachers understand Aistear – a pilot study

Margaret O'Donoghue

Introduction

In Ireland, the forthcoming revised primary curriculum for Junior and Senior Infants will seek to ensure 'greater consistency' with Aistear (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment 2012, p14). This has many positive implications, firstly it recognises the period of early childhood as a time in and of itself and not the child as 'becoming', and secondly, it acknowledges children as 'social actors' whose well-being and development are dependent on the relationships of those adults around them. Both of these concepts support a children's rights perspective and support the UNCRC 1989 *General comment No 7* which calls on countries to implement coordinated strategies in early childhood education.

While Aistear (NCCA 2009) has provided a framework that can support those working across early childhood education (ECE) to develop a continuum of practice for children aged between 3-6 years, it does not follow that there is a continuum of practice. A study by O'Toole et al. (2014) which looked at educational transitions in Ireland found that primary school teachers reported either not knowing much about Aistear (NCCA 2009) or not using it due to lack of time. Providing continuity for children in their learning experiences will require an exploration of how primary school teachers understand Aistear (2009).

A range of educational researchers have argued persuasively that providing continuity within and between early years settings requires a common language and understanding regarding transitions between preschool and primary school (O'Kane and Hayes 2006; Dunlop 2007; Brostrom 2011). A study by O' Kane (2007) regarding transition from preschool to primary school in Ireland found that, while early childhood practitioners and primary school teachers were open to the idea of greater communication in order to provide a continuum of curriculum, there was little congruence in their approaches to children's learning. There was

no evidence of high levels of continuity across both settings, and there was an absence of any shared view of children as learners between both groups. Ensuring continuity in the absence of discussion and analysis of what constitutes "key elements" and how those working in ECE understand ECE is to ignore the very essence of an appropriate early childhood curriculum.

Aistear as a transitional support

As an early childhood curriculum framework, Aistear acknowledges that children learn and develop holistically, and supports the continuity of children's learning experiences as they transition from preschool to primary school. Aistear supports a unitary approach between preschool and primary school and focuses specifically on learning throughout early childhood. The framework is set out under four themes;

- Well-being
- Identity and belonging
- Communicating
- Exploring and thinking

These four themes provide a flexible framework for early childhood settings and "conveys successfully the integrated and holistic development of the young learner and the totality of his/her learning needs" (NCCA 2004, p22). Aistear is shaped by a view that children's interests and learning dispositions for curiosity, wonder, resilience, and playfulness are at the centre of what and how they learn (NCCA 2012). Aistear highlights the critical role of play, relationships and language for young children's learning. The framework has both implicit and explicit links with the new primary school curriculum (Department of Education and Skills 2016).

The aim of the pilot study was to gain an understanding of how primary school teachers understand Aistear (NCCA 2009). The study which was carried out in 2015, was guided by two research questions.

The first key research question was:
How do primary school teachers understand Aistear (NCCA 2009), Ireland's early childhood curriculum framework?

A related sub-question was:
How does their understanding of Aistear (NCCA 2009) influence their teaching practice?

Method

The use of focus group as a data collection method facilitated a broad exploration of how the teachers understand Aistear, and how their understanding influences their teaching practice. In line with my ontological point of view, the study adopted a constructivist approach. Constructivism sees knowledge as coming from experience and interaction with others. Lincoln and Guba (2005) suggest that working within a constructivist paradigm, acknowledges that realities are constructed from multiple, intangible mental constructions that are socially and experientially based. Furthermore, they suggest that constructivism is local and specific in nature. Findings from the focus group discussion highlighted issues that were both specific and individual to the teachers. In analysing the data, the three teachers are represented as T1, T2, and T3.

Findings

The study found that there was a general consensus amongst the teachers that Aistear, as a curriculum framework, involved children learning through play. However, rather than play being integrated throughout their classroom practice, findings show that play is understood to mean something that is peripheral to the learning of academic skills, and has been introduced in a limited way with just thirty minutes a day allocated to Aistear.

Views on children as self-directed learners

There was no evidence in the teachers' descriptions of play that it was ever initiated by the children. The findings suggest that despite the espoused views about the prevalence of play, the language used by T1 and T2 described their role during what they described as 'Aistear Time' in a very structured and teacher-led approach. Teachers' approaches to how play based learning is incorporated into the classroom are influenced by their perspectives on the purpose of play. The findings suggest that T1 and T2 left little choice to the children in directing their own learning through play. There was no discussion in relation to the children's interests, knowledge, or skills. T3 described a less didactic approach and described a practice that allowed the children some choice in their learning.

Strengths based approach

Aistear highlights that children become positive about themselves and their learning when adults value them for who they are. Children achieve better outcomes when their diverse strengths, abilities, interests, and cultural practices are understood and supported (Diversity in Early Childhood Education and Training 2011). Analysis of the data suggests that T1 and T2 talked about the children in their classes in a way that draws on a deficit model of children as learners. There were no references to the positive attributes that the children bring to their classroom. In contrast, there were references to what the children lacked in terms of their social skills. T2 for example spoke of the children in their class in a way that suggested that all children need to be at the same level in order to learn. The teachers identified that many of the children attending their classes did not have English as their first language and argued that this posed a difficult reality for them in implementing their curriculum. During the discussion in relation to the children who did not have English as their first language, T1, T2 and T3 made no reference to the needs of the children other than their lack of English. The emphasis during the discussion

was in relation to the importance of the children learning English, their second language. The teachers did acknowledge the help they have from a language support teacher; however, the support teacher was available to support the children in developing their English. There was no discussion in relation to supporting the children to develop their first language.

Parental Involvement

Quality ECE requires respectful relationships between the primary school teacher and the child's parents (NCCA 2009). T3 noted the importance of involving parents at the beginning of their child's education and spoke about the importance of developing a relationship with parents from the start. T3 also suggested that building collaborative relationship between parents and teacher can facilitate a more supportive environment for the child when doing homework and promote a more comfortable relationship between teacher and parent. Findings suggest the need to look at how ECE teachers could be supported to work in partnership with parents. The teachers acknowledged the importance of parents being involved in their child's early years in school. However, all three teachers had negative views of the parents in terms of their understanding of play, and their knowledge of how to encourage their children to play.

Conclusion

The findings from the pilot study highlight the need to explore how primary school teachers understand Aistear and to look at how teachers can be supported to work in partnership with parents. Primary school teachers play a critical role in laying strong foundations for ensuring the continuity of experiences for young children as they transition from preschool to primary school. Ensuring greater consistency between the revised primary curriculum for Junior and Senior Infants and Aistear (NCCA 2012, p19) will require an understanding of the contextual realities

teachers face in delivering a new primary curriculum through Aistear. The findings from the pilot study will be used to inform a further study which will be undertaken as part of my Doctorate in Education. The proposed study will seek to gain an understanding of the constraints and realities that may impact on the implementation of Aistear (NCCA 2009), within the new language school curriculum for junior and senior infants (DES 2016). Primary school teachers work in different environments with different constraints and realities that impose on their day to day practice. There is a need to consider other aspects such as school intake, history, staffing, school ethos and culture, 'material' elements like buildings, resources and budgets, as well as external environments. The proposed study will look at how primary school teachers, perceive and implement Aistear (NCCA 2009) within their classrooms, and will examine the localised nature of how the teachers manage the implementation of Aistear (NCCA 2009).

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Author Information

Margaret ran her own Montessori school for twelve years, during that time she returned to part time education and completed a Bachelor of Arts (Hons) in Child and Family and Youth Studies and a Masters in Child Family and Community Studies. Margaret is also interested in taking the primary school curriculum outdoors and is a qualified Forest School Programme Leader. She is currently studying for an EdD at Sheffield Hallam University, her research interest is focusing on understanding the link between context and the implementation of Aistear (NCCA 2009), within the new primary language curriculum for junior and senior infants.



Supporting transitions – A children and young people's services committee initiative in Galway and Roscommon

Caroline Duignan, Marie Gibbons
and Bridie Thornton

Introduction

Moving from preschool to 'big school' is an important, exciting but often stressful and daunting transition for young children and their parents. The first days and weeks in their new educational setting can present many challenges as well as wonderful new learning experiences, and for young children, moving from preschool to primary school can feel like a transition that brings enormous change. Research highlights the importance of smooth transitions between these settings, and while many children cope well with the changes that come with this transition, some children are more vulnerable than others (Cryer *et al* 2005). Research by O'Kane and Hayes (2006) finds that there are links between early childhood disadvantage and adversity, and difficulties during this transition. How children and parents respond to transitions depends on many factors, such as the resilience of the child, the development of positive dispositions to learning, children's attributes such as self-confidence and independence, as well as the support network that surrounds the child and family. To ease potential difficulties and to promote a more successful and smooth transition between preschool and primary school, it is vital that there is partnership between both settings and that a system for transferring information is in place. It is also important that parents and children are supported during this time, as research suggests that children's particular adjustment to the challenges of their new school environment can have a real and lasting impact on their lifelong learning journey (Morrissey, 2009). In this paper, a collaborative approach to supporting positive transitions for preschool children in Galway and Roscommon is described, and a pilot project on one interagency initiative is discussed.

Children and Young People's Services Committees (CYPSC) Transitions Project

In 2015, a subgroup of Galway and Roscommon CYPSCs, consisting of early years practitioners,

teachers, Child Care Committee and TUSLA staff was established to address the need to support transitions from preschool to primary school. The initial work of the subgroup consisted of a review of current practice, research and theory and an exploration of the models that support transition nationally. Two models that were influential in the initiative were the Child Snap-Shot, developed by Hayes and O'Kane (2013), and the 'My 'I Can' Booklet from Kildare CYPSC. Working collaboratively, the sub-group developed a booklet entitled 'This is Me' which was then piloted in seven preschools in Galway and Roscommon in May, 2015.

Exploring a 'transitions' theme

Approximately 80 children from the preschools, who were transitioning into eighteen national schools in Galway and Roscommon were included in the pilot of This is Me. Each child was supplied with a Transitions Booklet that was completed by the practitioner in partnership with the child and parents. Practitioners in the ECE settings were also supported to spark the children's interest in the upcoming transition by exploring the theme of 'Starting Big School'. It was suggested to practitioners that following the Open Days in the different primary schools, the practitioner could invite each child to discuss their new school, their thoughts, fears, observations, new activities explored, new friends and the new teacher. This could also provide important opportunities for the practitioner to discuss and address children's fears, anxieties and worries of the impending transition. Children could also be invited to paint, colour and draw pictures of their new school, classroom, friends etc. Age-appropriate, colourful and inviting picture story books exploring themes such as 'new school' and 'new friends' were also suggested for reading in story-time to explore the topic and enhance the children's interest and understanding further. Role-playing the teacher in their play activities and modelling their uniform could also support the child's interest in their transition. Parents were invited to participate in the theme, for example by talking to their child

about their own positive memories of starting primary school or share photographs with their child of their first day in primary school to stimulate and encourage conversation.

Throughout the pilot, the practitioners observed the positive reactions of the children, who connected immediately with the Transitions Booklet, with one child even requesting "Can I bring it home with me?" Overwhelmingly evident was the children's positive responses, enthusiasm, interest and their distinct pride in their achievements as the Booklet provided an opportunity to reflect on their ability and capacity as a competent and confident learner subsequently nurturing further positive self-esteem and self-confidence. The key themes that emerged for the early years practitioners were that they welcomed the booklet as a trusted and reliable way of sharing appropriate information on children with schools that could help to support their transition:

It is a way of sharing "small pieces of information" on the child that the early years practitioner feels the teacher should know; it reinforces skills for school and supports parental involvement and it demonstrates that the early years service is documenting in a holistic way (Early years Practitioner).

For parents, the booklet highlighted the developmental and social areas that are needed for a smooth transition and helped them in their own preparation for their child's move to national school:

The booklet has stuff you take for granted and don't think about, like I wouldn't have thought too much about his independence skills but it's actually the important things that will help him settle in school (Parent).

For teachers it provided them with a holistic and strengths-based image of the child in advance of their transition:

It is well laid out and covers all areas. Having read it before the child started I knew exactly what her strengths were (Teacher).

Findings from the pilot were used to finalise the design of the Booklet. Children in the preschools involved in the pilot contributed with their art, which was incorporated into the final design. The Booklet was then translated into Irish and the two versions, 'This is Me' and 'Seo Mise', were printed and made available free of charge to every preschool in Galway and Roscommon in April and May 2016, through County Child Care Committees.

This is Me/ Seo Mise; The Transitions Booklet

The Transitions Booklet is underpinned by the Aistear Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009) and, in addition, recognises each child as a unique, active, learner. 'This is Me' presents children's learning through the four interconnecting themes from Aistear: Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communications and Exploring/Thinking. Key learning dispositions, skills, knowledge and values are identified in the booklet under each theme to support children as competent and confident learners and to make a successful transition into primary school. Crucially, the Booklet supports the "Transitions" Standard 13 of Siolta, which highlights:

Ensuring continuity of experiences for children requires policies, procedures and practice that promote sensitive management of transitions, consistency in key relationships, liaison within and between settings, and the close involvement of parents and where appropriate, relevant professionals (CECDE, 2006, p. 89).

The language in the Booklet is simplified to ensure and support child participation and a rights-based and strengths-based approach. Taking a rights-based approach and supporting Article 12 of the UNCRC (UN, 1989), each child is invited by the practitioner to participate and contribute during the process of completing the Booklet. The wording of each disposition/skill is strengths-based and describes the ability and capacity of the child in all areas of the

themes ensuring that a positive image of every child is reflected. The Booklet is universal and inclusive and practitioners who were presented with booklets were informed that every child transitioning to primary school should have a Transitions Booklet.

Standard 3 of *Síolta* requires practitioners to ensure parents' and families' involvement in their child's early learning and development, "valuing and involving parents and families requires a proactive partnership approach" (CECDE, 2006, p.29). During the pilot scheme, one practitioner was concerned with a child displaying audibly loud vocals throughout the preschool sessions and had carried out several exercises to determine if the child had a hearing impairment. The child displayed excellent listening skills. The partnership with parent and holistic approach taken by the practitioner allowed the mother to reveal that she suffered a hearing impairment and subsequently the child was encouraged from birth to shout for her attention. The practitioner, with consent of the parent included this crucial information in the booklet, in order for the primary teacher to understand the child's need to shout. This example highlights the powerful effect of the Transitions Booklet on practice as an important holistic tool for stakeholders to share information and work together to support the successful transition into primary school for each child.

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For further information on the work of Children and Young People's Services Committees please refer to www.cypsc.ie. To find out more about the 'This is Me' Transitions Project please contact Galway or Roscommon Child Care Committees.

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Author Information

Marie Gibbons works with TUSLA, the Child and Family Agency supporting the work of the Children and Young People's Services Committees in Galway and Roscommon. Marie is also a PhD student in the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre and her PhD is exploring the experiences of young children and early years practitioners in a consultation process in the context of Roscommon Children and Young People's Services Committee. Marie's background is in social care and early years inspection and she also tutors on the BA in Early Childhood Studies and Practice in N.U.I.Galway.

Bridie Thornton is an Early years Practitioner and Montessori Teacher from Amberley Montessori in Galway. Bridie is a graduate of the BA (Hons) in Early Childhood Studies and Practice and is undertaking an MA in Early Childhood Studies in N.U.I. Galway. Bridie was one of the members of the Children and Young People's Services Committee subgroup that developed the Transitions Booklet initiative, and was also involved in the pilot project. Bridie has presented to other Early years Practitioners in Galway and Roscommon on the topic of Transitions, and she also shared her experiences using the booklet at its launch.

Caroline Duignan is employed by Tusla, Child and Family Agency as the Coordinator of the Children and Young People's Services Committees in Galway and Roscommon. She has previously worked as a Social Worker and a Childcare Training Officer. She is also a PhD student in the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre and her research is focusing on how power and power relations influence collaborative working among agencies towards children and young people's outcomes.



Self-reported early school experiences of children from low socioeconomic status backgrounds: The children's thoughts about school study

Christine O'Farrelly, Ailbhe Booth,
Mimi Tatlow-Golden, and Orla Doyle.

The importance of effective transitions for children from low socioeconomic status communities

Kagan (2010) likens early childhood transitions to something that is "as common as air and as complex as the molecules that compose it" (p.3). This is an apt description of the transition to school, a move that nearly all children encounter, yet one that brings considerable changes in value systems, demands, practical concerns, group dynamics, and cultural traditions (Fabian and Dunlop, 2002). Negotiating these changes is challenging and carries high stakes, as children who struggle to adjust well to school are more likely to experience poorer outcomes (Ladd and Price, 1987; Kagan and Neuman, 1998). This is especially true for children from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds, who frequently start school behind their peers, without the socioemotional, cognitive and behavioural skills needed to navigate school successfully (Doyle, McEntee and McNamara, 2012).

Accordingly, children from low SES backgrounds are often the focus of interventions that seek to improve school readiness and promote positive transition experiences. Developing effective and efficient supports, however, requires an understanding that spans the full complexity of these transitions. Valuable research has been undertaken to this end, for example on how parents, education systems, and communities can work together to promote positive transitions to school (see e.g., reviews by Public Health England 2014; Woodhead and Moss, 2007). Yet this work relies almost exclusively on parents' and teachers' perspectives and where children have been consulted, this tends to involve middle or mixed SES samples. As documented in the inaugural digest issue (Bourke and Kinlen, 2014), the absence of the perspectives of children from low SES backgrounds means that the policy and practice landscape for transitions is built on only a partial understanding of what these experiences mean for children (O'Farrelly, Booth, O'Rourke and

Doyle, 2014). This gap is notable not least because it is at odds with national policy frameworks which privilege both children's participation rights and the importance of early interventions that promote positive transitions (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2013, 2014).

The children's thoughts about school study

The Children's Thoughts about School Study (CTSS) sought to address this gap by consulting forty-two junior infant children from DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) schools, approximately seven months into the new school year. The study had two goals. The first aim was to provide a better understanding of the transition and early school experiences of children from low SES backgrounds. The second aim was to use this knowledge to contextualise the goals and effectiveness of an early intervention programme, *Preparing for Life (PFL)*. *PFL* was a longitudinal randomised controlled trial of an intensive home visiting programme that sought to improve children's school readiness by working with families from pregnancy until children started school. The *PFL* evaluation enrolled 233 pregnant women from North Dublin communities regarded as low socioeconomic status and that have above national average rates of unemployment, school dropout, lone parent households, and public housing. Families were randomised to receive either the home visiting programme and low level supports (intervention group) or low level supports only (control group) (for more information on the *PFL* evaluation and outcome results see <http://geary.ucd.ie/preparingforlife/>). CTSS purposefully sampled children in the *PFL* catchment communities whose families had received (1) the *PFL* home visiting programme and low level supports, (2) *PFL* low level supports only, or (3) no intervention.

Children were recruited over two years. All families of junior infants children in two catchment schools were approached in March 2014 and the sample was further supplemented

in March 2015 through targeted recruitment of children who were known to have participated in the *PFL* programme. Parents of junior infants children were given an information pack including an illustrated booklet designed for the children themselves. Children whose parents had provided consent for their participation were then invited by the researcher to participate in a one-to-one interview, using the booklet as a tool to support the assent process. During interviews children were shown pictures of nine school-day scenarios (such as arriving at school, listening to the teacher, and going into the yard) and were asked how the children in the pictures felt as per the Pictorial Measure of School Stress and Wellbeing (PMSSW; Murray and Harrison, 2005). The children were also asked whether they liked school and looked forward to going to school (School Liking and Avoidance Questionnaire; Ladd and Price, 1987) and to draw a picture of themselves in school and tell the researcher about their drawing. Finally, an anthropomorphised character "Riley Rabbit" was used to ask children semi-structured questions about adjusting to school such as "what will Riley need to know about school?; what will Riley's first day of school be like?". Interviews were analysed using the principles of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), involving both inductive and deductive approaches.

Data generated from the CTSS interview were used to inform a series of outputs (detailed below) addressing the study's two goals. First a bottom up approach was employed (focusing on those children whose families received no intervention) to generate a general picture of the school experiences of children from low SES backgrounds. Subsequently, data were added from the children whose families had received either low level supports or the home visiting intervention. The expanded framework was then reviewed using the lens of the five school readiness domains (see below) that formed the primary outcome of the *PFL* evaluation.

Understanding the early school experiences of children from low ses backgrounds

In the paper "Little bit afraid 'til I found how it was", O'Rourke, O'Farrelly, Booth, and Doyle (under review) document how children's initial uncertainty at school commencement gave way to detailed and rich understandings of the internal workings of school. Children emphasised tension between their competencies and evolving skills, and the importance of peer and family relationships to support their school wellbeing. Separately, in "Look I have my ears open", Tatlow-Golden, O'Farrelly, Booth and Doyle, (2016a) used the interviews to specifically examine factors that enable and constrain the resilience of children from low SES backgrounds at school entry. Positive factors included resource provision, school activities and routines, play, and relationships with the teacher. Negative factors included bullying, difficulties engaging with peers, and using the toilet. The descriptions of toileting were particularly vivid, thus a dedicated output focused in on children's responses to this PMSSW scenario. In "Bursting and other experiences" Tatlow-Golden, O'Farrelly, Booth and Doyle (2016b) document that most children had negative, or mixed responses to the toileting scenario, such as fear of not identifying the right toilet, fear of being alone, lack of privacy, and potential bullying. These findings of children's early school toileting experiences are significant as delayed toilet use can have lasting consequences for children's urinary and bowel health (e.g., von Gontard, Niemczyk, Wagner and Equit, 2016).

To contextualise the goal and outcome results of the *PFL* intervention and evaluation, the frame of the five outcome domains of school readiness (cognitive development, language development, social and emotional development, attitudes to learning, physical well-being and motor development) was employed to determine their relevance to all three groups of children. In the final report of the *PFL* evaluation, Doyle and the *PFL* evaluation team (2016) detail how children's

rich and nuanced accounts offered insight into what school readiness means to children on the classroom floor. In terms of *cognitive development*, children valued opportunities for learning through play, as well as skill in spatial reasoning – especially related to block play, and numeracy. Children enjoyed and sought mastery in *language development* and literacy and access to books, they were proud of their reading and letter/sound recognition, yet found these aspects of school challenging. They held remarkably positive views of school, conveyed strong appetites for and *approaches to learning*, and were rich in imagination. For many children, *physical wellbeing and motor development* equated with having the physical independence to handle daily routines and toileting; having the strength and coordination to avoid falling in the yard and play sports and games; and having the fine motor skills to draw, trace, and write. Importantly, several children also valued access to healthy meals and food. For many children, *socioemotional development* related to the skills needed to navigate some sadness, anxiety, and loneliness, and avoid social exclusion, peer aggression, and bullying.

Learning offered by the CTSS

Collectively these outputs draw out new insights into the lived transition experiences of children from low SES backgrounds. Although children describe these moves as challenging they also relish the opportunities that school offers. Welcomed aspects of school include opportunities to play, predictable access to outdoor space, and access to toys, books, and food. Mastery and agency is important to children as they start their school careers, and they especially seek support in academics (i.e. language, literacy, and numeracy), toileting, motor skills, and the social skills needed to make and maintain friendships and avoid bullying. These findings suggest that children themselves endorse the goals of interventions such as *PFL* in providing them with the skills they need for school. Moreover, children offer important food for thought for how these programmes

might be potentiated by educational strategies that support healthy eating, bladder and bowel health, motor development, and healthy peer relationships.

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Author Information

Dr Christine O'Farrelly is a research associate at the Centre for Mental Health, Imperial College London.

Ailbhe Booth is a PhD candidate at the UCD School of Psychology and Geary Institute for Public Policy, University College Dublin.

Dr Mimi Tatlow Golden is a Newman Research Fellow at the School of Medicine and Medical Science, University College Dublin.

Dr Orla Doyle is a lecturer and research fellow at the UCD School of Economics UCD Geary Institute for Public Policy, University College Dublin, Ireland.



Play affordances in early childhood education and care: A paradigmatic shift and political transition from protectionist to participatory perspectives?

Frances Clerkin

Introduction

This article explores a current paradigmatic transition from a protectionist perspective to one that emphasises opportunities for children's increased participatory play experiences within Irish early childhood education and care contexts. It makes the case for the benefits of play and acknowledges children's rights to play and particularly to participate in challenging or "risky" play. The changing culture of ECEC in Ireland is acknowledged as influenced by external structures on children's opportunities for play and learning. In this regard the impact of key policies including Aistear, Síolta and the initiative "Better Start" are explored. As such the focus is on structural transitions rather than transitions as experienced in the lives of children and their families.

A landmark in how children are viewed in Ireland has been a recognition of all children from birth to age eighteen as citizens with rights (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989 ratified by Ireland 1992) including the right to engage in play (Article 31). While there is no universally accepted definition of play, the process of play has become intrinsically linked with social and cultural theories of learning and development (Bruner 2008). However, children's access to the affordances of play is dependent on adult gatekeepers, whose social and cultural attitudes to play will impact on how such experiences are mediated in home and out-of-home contexts. Kernan and Devine (2010, p. 371) observe that

One feature of modernity has been the institutionalising of childhood space — the demarcation of specific places within which children are gathered, primarily for the purposes of play, learning and 'caring'.

Greater female participation in the workforce has increased demand for out-of-home care. Recent research suggests that children in Ireland on average spend less time outdoors than the daily one hour afforded prison inmates (Brennan as cited by Bray 2016). Various reasons

have been suggested for the decline in outdoor activities, including the growing proliferation of indoor screen-based technologies. Recently, concerns around long-term physical and mental health, and rising obesity levels in young children has focused attention on increasing children's outdoor play and physical activities (Sandsetter 2012, Maynard and Waters 2014). This article adopts a holistic focus on children's right to engage in play, with an emphasis on experiences within indoors and outdoors ECEC contexts prior to formal schooling. Recent transitions in the early years sector are discussed alongside implications for children's opportunities to actualise play affordances in ECEC.

Play matters in early childhood

The ubiquitous nature of play in children's lives is summed up by Cole-Hamilton and Gill, (2002, p.14):

Children play wherever they are. This might be indoors or out. Children play in their home, at school, in childcare and play provision, and in the public and private places they visit with their friends or with adults.

Trevarthan's studies (2004) indicate that children's intrinsic motives for playful collaborative meaning making commence in earliest infancy. This understanding is elaborated through analysis of early "meta-conversations" where infants have been shown to respond to, as well as elicit the liltily playful interactions of parents and close carers, often described as "motherese".

In Ireland, an historical expectation for parents to provide for children in the early years has meant that out-of-home care and education has developed in an ad hoc way with a mixture of voluntary, community and private providers. This market-based model has been critiqued for high costs, identified by Barnardo's and Start Strong (2012) as some of the most expensive in Europe. Workers in the sector have also been campaigning against the low status, pay and conditions within the profession (Association

of Childhood Professionals 2016). Education and care prior to primary school is mostly regulated by Tusla which is a child and family agency, under the remit of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. The Department of Education and Skills has also started to inspect preschools. Responsibility for primary school education lies with the Department of Education. A division in policy and practice is reflected in the higher qualifications, pay, status and working conditions associated with primary schooling. In 2010, investment in ECEC prior to formal school underwent a major transition with the introduction of the ECCE free preschool scheme (Department of Children and Youth affairs 2013b). The universal nature of the scheme was welcomed yet also critiqued, for the continued lack of emphasis or supports for children in the vital birth to three stage of development.

However, Aistear, the early years framework (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment 2009) does emphasise the importance of supporting holistic development for all children from birth to age six. The emergent and dynamic nature of the framework involved considerable research and engagement with literature on national and international best practice. Síolta (2006), the national quality framework, reflects similar aspirations and principles for children from birth to age six. The image of the child is one of an active playful learner developing and responding within multiple cultural contexts both indoors and outdoors). Hayes (2010) emphasises the importance of the mediating role of the early years professional in supporting children's emerging dispositions and learning interests. Increasingly, the significance of outdoor play in support of children's holistic development, has been identified in research (Maynard and Waters 2014). Both understandings are implicit in the interpretation of Aistear and Síolta.

Balancing the right to protection with the right to experience 'risky play'

The affordances of early years environments have been linked to both the qualifications

of early year's professionals and individual pedagogical abilities to recognise play affordances (Kernan 2010). The preschool regulations primary focus on health and safety over the provision of holistic developmental benefits has been critiqued by Start Strong (2012). New preschool regulations (DCYA, 2016) set minimal qualifications (level 5 on the National Qualifications Framework) for all staff working directly with children in ECEC contexts. This benchmark is arguably low given that research evidence of high quality adult/child interactions in ECEC has consistently been linked to engagement of highly qualified staff with opportunities for ongoing education and training (Melhuish 2004). Current expectations and increased responsibilities for ECEC staff to implement Aistear and Síolta remain at odds with the low qualifications requirement and the lack of paid non-contact time to upskill and experience ongoing training and development.

Adult attitudes to the Irish weather have also been identified as a barrier to children's opportunities to experience outdoor play, commonly associated with challenging and stimulating affordances (Kernan and Devine 2010). A lack of emphasis at regulatory level on provision or planning for outdoor space has also been critiqued. New regulations now require all early year's settings to provide suitably "safe and secure" outdoor spaces for all children to have access to on a daily basis (DCYA, 2016).

"Risky play" affordances contain both emotional and physical aspects and by inference require space and place which provides a balance between the right to protection and the right to participate. Stephenson (2003, p.36) defines "risky play" as: "attempting something never done before; feeling on the borderline of out-of-control – often because of height or speed; and overcoming fear." An aspect of risky play relates to how much adults participate in acknowledging children as citizens with rights and expertise in their own lives in the here and now (Clerkin 2014).

Balancing play, risk and challenge –Bridging gaps between policy and practice

Aistear and Siolta are not compulsory. However, their increasing use in both pre-primary and primary schooling has been observed and both frameworks have been received positively in Ireland and abroad (Murphy 2015). A higher capitation afforded to services implementing the ECCE scheme establishes new minimum qualifications for ECEC workers, with no such provision for children in the birth to three age group. In 2014 attempts to address the continued lack of initiatives for the youngest children, and media reporting of the poor quality and treatment of children in some settings led to the establishment of "Better Start" (DCYA 2016), a national quality development service. Its main function is to provide mentoring supports for services to address quality concerns identified in Tusla inspection reports. However, issues of qualifications, pay and conditions for ECEC workers remain contentious.

Paradigmatic transition from protectionism to increased participation?

Despite recent transitions in ECEC at policy level in Ireland, a top down tendency still reflects policy implementation indicative of a view that the older the child, the more worthy of investment. The impacts are manifold, including the financial constraints on early years settings to engage, retain and support highly qualified staff to implement Aistear and Siolta and initiatives such as Better Start. A primarily protectionist view of childhood associated with a custodial level of care rather than the promotion of children's holistic development in the early formative years is indicated within the low qualifications benchmark of the preschool regulations.

At a societal level we need to challenge the low pay and status of the early year's professional

role. Research on practitioner attitudes to outdoor play also indicate a need, at training level, to encourage all students to challenge personal attitudes to play, risk and play affordances. The vital mediating role of the early years professional requires informed practice in order to address parental and societal concerns on balancing children's right to protection with the right to participation in suitably challenging and risky play. The risk of not doing so may be too high.

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Author Information

Frances Clerkin is a lecturer in the Early years and Montessori (Hons) Degree programmes of Cork Institute of Technology. I hold a European Masters in Early Childhood Care and Education. My PhD thesis concerned transitions and identity formation in a pre-school community of practice in Ireland, I am membership secretary of OMEP Ireland. My current research interests include transitions in ECEC, children's rights, play affordances in ECEC with particular emphasis on the formative birth to age three years, participatory identities within early years communities of practice and the impact of children's motives and dispositional interests on deep level learning.



The importance of including the child's voice in the transition process: Signposts from a national evaluation of concepts of school readiness in Ireland¹

Emer Ring and Lisha O'Sullivan

¹This article is based on the following research report, which is currently 'in press': Ring, E., Mhic Mhathúna, M., Moloney, M., Hayes, N., Breathnach, D., Stafford, P., Carswell, D., Keegan, S., Kelleher, C., McCafferty, D., O'Keeffe, A., Leavy, A., Madden, R. and Ozonyia, M. (2016) An Examination of Concepts of School Readiness among Parents and Educators in Ireland. Dublin: Department of Children and Youth Affairs, [In press].

Introduction

In a recent national evaluation of concepts of school readiness in Ireland commissioned by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) through the Irish Research Council (IRC), one of the participants, observed that "The School is big...bigger than any school in the world...bigger than a giant" (Ring and Mhic Mhathúna et al., 2016). The observation was made by a preschool child in the period prior to transitioning to primary school. A particular focus of the research was the inclusion of children's voices at preschool level in order to establish what mattered most to children at this critical phase of transitioning from preschool to primary school. Fifty-seven children, aged between three and four, participated in ten child conferences (Clark and Moss, 2011). The research findings suggest that adopting a pedagogy of voice and a pedagogy of listening as children transition from preschool to primary school has the potential to enrich and enhance how children, parents and educators experience the transition process.

A Pedagogy of Voice and a Pedagogy of Listening

Article 12 of The United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) states that children have the right to have their opinions taken into account and their views respected in decision-making that affects them (UN, 1989). However, while including the voice of the child is articulated as a key principle in international education policy and practice contexts, ensuring that the child's voice is meaningfully included and responded to, continues to challenge education systems (Deegan, 2015). Deegan poses the question whether we are truly convinced of the value of child voice in our practice (ibid.). A democratic education system acknowledges the importance of child voice and recognises that prioritising "participation" enhances children's self-esteem and confidence, promotes their overall development and develops children's sense of autonomy, independence, social competence and resilience (Dewey, 1916;

Lansdown, 2005). If we believe that a democratic education system presupposes that the voices of all children, irrespective of age or ability are included and listened to, it requires us as researchers to develop innovative and creative ways to capture and respond to the voices of all children.

Transition from Preschool to Primary School

Research nationally and internationally indicates that high quality early years education impacts positively on the social-emotional, cognitive and academic aspects of learning and development for children and has wider benefits for families and society (Heckman, 2013; O'Sullivan and Ring, 2016). However, research also indicates that transitioning from preschool to primary school can be a particularly stressful time for children (Ring and Mhic Mhathúna et al., 2016). Effective transitions are systematically planned and supported and have a positive and lasting impact on children's first experience of school (United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 2012). Communication has been identified as a key element of successful transitions, where children and parents are fully informed, know what to expect and have confidence that there is continuity between preschool and primary settings (Dockett, Perry and Kearney, 2010; UNICEF, 2012). Conscious that the voices of children were rarely included in research focused on this transition phase, the researchers devised a research methodology, to ensure that children's views were meaningfully represented in the study.

Research Methodology

The research adopted a sequential exploratory mixed-methods methodological approach, comprising semi-structured face-to-face interviews (14 principals and junior infant teachers; 18 early educators and managers); semi-structured telephone interviews (30 parents), an online survey (distributed to 500 early years settings and 500 primary schools) and child conferences. This paper focuses

specifically on the fifty-seven children, aged between three and four, who participated in ten child conferences (Clark and Moss, 2011).

In selecting preschools for participation in the study, details of all primary schools were obtained from the Department of Education and Skills (N=3,158) and a stratified random sample was selected from the list with reference to the grouping criteria detailed in Table 1. below. Each of the seven primary schools selected was invited to provide the names of two feeder preschools and ten out of the fourteen preschools nominated agreed to participate in the research.

Parents were asked to indicate their consent to their children's participation in the research and children's assent was secured through eliciting their response to the questions detailed in Table 2.

Based on the child conferences referred to by Clark and Moss (2011), the researchers developed a methodology where conversations were conducted with groups of children, augmented by a draw-and-tell approach (Lambert, Coad, Hicks, and Glacken, 2014). Child conferences comprise discussion groups, which are flexible and responsive to children's needs and combine opportunities for children to express their views in a structured way or through a play-based approach (Clark and Moss, 2011). A wide range of attractive drawing implements and paper was provided representing a range of shapes, sizes, textures and colours. Children were invited to represent their concept of primary school visually and supported by the researchers in discussing their drawings during the conference sessions. This enabled children to express their ideas through imagery and visual spatial memory (Wright, 2013).

The questions detailed in Table 3 were used to prompt discussions with the children and differentiated by the researchers as required.

The children's drawings, were conceptualised as a representation of the manner in which children make sense of their experiences, and express and communicate their thoughts, beliefs and ideas (Lambert et al., 2014). The analysis of

children's drawings therefore was linked with the Nvivo (QSR International, 2013) data analysis in which categories were derived from the data through a process of inductive reasoning informed by theories, themes and concepts that emerged from the literature review.

Children's Perspectives on Transitioning from Preschool to Primary School

Consonant with current research, the significance of the transition from preschool to primary school for children was captured both in children's narratives and drawings. In particular, children's concepts of primary school suggested that they perceived primary school in terms of the size of the buildings; the limited availability for play; the centrality of homework and the importance of making friends

The significant impact of the physical, temporal and interactional environments on young children is well documented (Pairman and Terreni, 2001). Children's observations that "The school is big...bigger than any school in the world...bigger than a giant [and the children would need] help finding their way around by the teacher" captures how children perceived the scale of the physical environment of the primary school. This perception was clearly reflected in children's drawings as illustrated at Table 4. .

Children's apprehension in relation to the scale of the primary school environment was evident in the use of phrases such as "This is the big school. They have a mountain and they are all scared" and "No, you have to go in there 'cos there's no monsters".

Play has been identified as intrinsically motivating for young children and its relationship with initiative, engagement, persistence, curiosity, cooperation with others and self-regulation identified in a range of research (Whitebread, 2013; O'Sullivan and Ring, 2016). While a number of children did state that they looked forward to playing with toys in primary school, there

Table 1: Overview of Subgroup Sampling of Primary Schools

| School | Location | Grouping |
|--------|----------|--|
| 1 | Urban | Primary school located in an area of socio-economic disadvantage |
| 2 | Urban | Irish language medium primary school |
| 3 | Urban | Mainstream mixed-gender primary school |
| 4 | Urban | Special school for children with disabilities |
| 5 | Rural | Mainstream mixed-gender primary school |
| 6 | Rural | Mainstream primary school in an Irish language speaking area |
| 7 | Rural | Mainstream single-sex primary school |

Table 2: Assent Form for Children

Title of Project: An Examination of Concepts of School-readiness among Parents, School Principals, Teachers, Early Years Educators and Children

Child's name: _____

Pre-school setting _____

Parent's consent given Yes No

I am happy to talk about starting school.



I know that I can go back to my group at any time.



You can tell what I said in your book, but do not give my name or school.



You can use my pictures in your book.

**Table 3: Children's Semi-Structured Interview Schedule**

What do you like about being in preschool?

Who talks with you about going to big school?

What do they tell you?

What do you know about big school?

Are you happy about going to big school?

What are you looking forward to?

Would you like to draw a picture about big school?

Can you talk to me about your picture?

Table 4: Drawings of Primary School by Children at Preschool Level in Ireland**Table 5: Drawings of Primary School by Children at Preschool Level in Ireland**

were also clear indications that some children perceived that there would be limited availability for play with a greater focus on structured activities. Children variously remarked that “they only get a tiny bit of playtime”; “there’s going to be more work”; and “you have to go inside [when the teacher rings the bell]”. Children associated school with homework and often referred to numbers, noting that “Ah, am doing homework there”; “You do lots of homework there” and “You do your numbers”. These findings in relation to children’s perceptions of play in school are congruent with earlier research which indicates that young children make clear work-play distinctions (Howard, 2010). Given that children tend to perform better when they perceive learning activities as playful, this has powerful implications in terms of their motivation to engage in learning in school (Whitebread, 2013).

The importance of having friends in primary school was frequently referred to in children’s narratives: “I’m going to draw Natasha”; “You have to make friends, you know” and “I am going to play with my friends”, and children’s friends were often included in children’s drawings as evidenced in Table 5. The importance children place on friendship reflects the basic psychological need for relatedness which is achieved through having opportunities to connect with others and to feel valued by others (Whitebread, 2013). Through the draw-and-tell approach, children articulated their implicit understanding that opportunities to relate to others are important for overall well-being and success in school.

Children’s reliance on their parents, in particular mothers and occasionally grandparents, in providing reassurance in relation to primary school was evident in observations such as being told by these adults that “school is lovely”; “mum collects us after break” and there is “a clock on the wall. It tells the time”. Siblings were also identified as key informants in relation to primary school activities and were reported by children as informing them in relation to activities such as football, homework, drawing and the limited availability for play. This is consistent with the

existing research which suggests that when children arrive at school they bring with them a wealth of prior knowledge in relation to teaching and learning (Brooker, 2010). Clearly, tapping into to this prior knowledge can play an important role in supporting transition.

Conclusion

Through including children’s voices in this research, valuable insights are provided on children’s perceptions of primary school at this critical transition phase in children’s lives. The areas highlighted by children in this research highlight the importance of children being adequately informed and consulted in relation to the transition process and are reflective of the process quality embedded in the principles of *Aistear; The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), 2009); *Síolta: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE), 2006) Primary Curriculum (NCCA, 1999) and the *Quality Framework for Early Years Education-focused Inspections (EYEI)* (DES, 2016).

It is timely at the 100th anniversary of the publication of John Dewey’s *Democracy and Education* (Dewey, 1916) to remind ourselves that the child is the starting point, the centre, and the end of what we do. Listening and responding to the voices of children irrespective of age, or ability at this critical phase of transition between preschool and primary school is essential to ensuring that children and parents experience high quality and effective transitions.

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Author information

Dr. Emer Ring is Head of Department of Reflective Pedagogy and Early Childhood Studies and Course Leader for the Bachelor of Arts in Early Childhood Care and Education (BAECE) at Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. Her research interests include policy and practice in early years education, special education and initial teacher/early years education.

Dr. Lisha O'Sullivan is a lecturer in the Department of Reflective Pedagogy and Early Childhood Studies at Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. Her research interests include playful approaches to learning in the early years and the role of play in supporting young children's self-regulation.

The role of play in preparing children for big school

Emma Reilly



Introduction

Transition to school has significant implications for the child in a physical, social and academic context (Fabian and Dunlop 2002; Volger, Crivello and Woodhead 2008). With this in mind, I deploy Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective, which approaches child development as set within a system of relationships that are bi-directional in their influences (Ryan 2000), to understand how transitions impact on children. Although evidence indicates that a successful transition can have long-term positive outcomes for children both in their educational success and in terms of social and emotional development (Margetts, 2009; Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People's Services (C4EO), 2010), there has, historically, been little emphasis on transitions in the ECCE sector.

This article presents findings from action research conducted for my master's thesis, which sought to address the question: "What can I learn from my preschool children to improve my practice of preparing them for primary school?". The aim here was to improve practice, rather than produce knowledge (Elliot 1999). Adopting the Problem Resolving Action Research (PRAR) model espoused by Piggot-Irvine (2002), the research places the child at the centre, working with them to co-construct how the journey of moving from preschool to primary school has impacted on each child and how this journey can be built upon in order to improve the practice of preparing children for school.

As manager of an early childhood care and education setting, the research was inspired by my setting's experience of a formal Pilot Síolta Quality Improvement Programme run by the then Irish Preschool and Play Association (now Early Childhood Ireland). Although we received the highest overall score of four, we only received a rating of three for Standard 13: "Transitions". This prompted significant reflections within the setting on what transitions mean for children and how our practice could be improved. The research consisted of three cycles with the same

cohort of seven children participating in each cycle. In the first stage, children were introduced to the notion of making the journey from preschool to primary school, through a multi-method play-based approach. This approach draws on the national curriculum framework, Aistear (NCCA 2009), in which play is promoted as the primary context for learning. It also draws on the work of Brennan (2008) who argues that children use socio-dramatic play as an important mechanism through which they can develop the skills and systems for participation, and thereby for learning. In preparing the children in this way, it was hypothesised that they would be better prepared for their journey to school. The second stage built on and expanded the opportunities for exposure to the primary school environment. The third cycle invited the same cohort of children back to their preschool setting eight weeks after they started school, to participate in a focus group discussion exploring the effectiveness of the preparatory play interventions undertaken in the previous cycles. Methods included interviews with the seven children, an experiential trip to the school, role play activities and focus group discussions.

The journey to school

Initial interviews with the children revealed that half of them did not know where the school was physically or what they might need to bring with them to school. Three children said they needed lunch boxes none mentioned a school uniform. We therefore arranged a walking trip to the school with the help of parents. The children were encouraged to take photos on the way to the school and bring pencils and paper for drawing when we got there. In discussing Vygotsky's theory, Brostrom (2007) explains that signs and tools have a mediating function: in allowing children to document their experiences through the use of signs (mark making, talking, drawing) it affords them an opportunity to manage and negotiate higher thinking. The photos and drawings were then used to encourage reflection on the experience the following day. This reflection was facilitated

through the compilation of a learning story with the children. The children stuck the photographs onto the learning story book and were asked to talk about the experience. Some mentioned that it was a "long way away" (geographically), while others spoke of siblings and friends who had already started school. They talked about how big the school was and the train they heard whizzing by when we were there. We documented the narrative of the children and encouraged them to draw the school or themselves walking to it and added them to the learning story. The story was hung on the wall so that the children could share the adventure with their parents.

After the journey to school, Cycle One of the action research concluded with school uniforms and school bags with lunch boxes, copies and pencil cases introduced into the dress-up area for the children to explore. A full-length mirror was also introduced so that children could see what they looked like when dressed in the uniform. When asked if they wanted a photo taken while wearing the uniform to put in their learning books, most agreed. Some of the boys helped each other close the buttons and put on the ties. One of the girls put the uniform on and kept it on for the entire duration of the session, and repeated this for a number of days. The children appeared proud when they engaged in this activity. According to Brooker (2008) every transition into a new group challenges our sense of identity and successive experiences teach us strategies for coping with the challenge. This moment may have been the moment that the children's self-image/identity started to shift from that of preschool child to that of school child. It was a powerful moment for the children involved, a positive memory that they can draw on in times of challenge.

Fabian and Dunlop (2007) argue that the greater the cultural gap between pre- and primary school, the greater the challenge for the child in successfully completing the transition. With this in mind, the research sought to provide children with concrete experiences of the school to narrow that gap. Thus, in Cycle Two, a visit to the school library was arranged to coincide with

break time in school. Anecdotal evidence from parents in the past indicated that the volume and the noise of break time is a considerable challenge when first starting school. Moreover, currently, the preschool children had unlimited access to outside spaces consisting of grass, muck slopes, wheeled vehicles and more. I wanted them to experience what break time looked like in the school yard. We discussed what it might be like to play in the yard and compared it with what they were currently used to. On reflection, the children were overwhelmed with the experience and multiple visits would help construct a better picture for the children.

According to Margetts (2006), becoming a school child involves interpreting information and constructing understandings about school and the role of the students. The success of this, Margetts proposes, is the mediation on many fronts, including child, family, school and community. Thus, finally, as part of the experiential intervention, the school's lollypop lady was invited to visit the setting to share her story of what she does with the school children. She spoke of crossing the road safely and allowed the children to role play and take turns with the high visibility jacket and lollypop stick. This was further explored in their mark-making and craft activities over the next few days and weeks.

The lived experience

The third and final cycle of the research consisted of a focus group discussion with children as well as informal conversations with their parents. According to Harris, Goodhall and Power (2009) the evidence is clear that parents who engage with and support their children's learning have a substantial, positive impact on their child's achievement. In order to include the children's families, I spoke to the parents about the research and helped to reinforce this with a publication from Early Childhood Ireland called "Going to Big School". Finally, I continued to engage and liaise with the children's parents in the first weeks of starting school.

Table 1. Children's experiences of starting school

| | |
|---------|--|
| Greta | "I had to sit on a chair at the blue table, and there was a white board". |
| Oisín | "Hmm, I only remember a little bit, it was autumn, that's all I remember". |
| Alannah | "You was not allowed past the blue line in the yard". |

Strategies for preparing children for big school

Dress up uniforms, ties, schoolbags, pencil cases and lunch boxes available all year round in the dress up area.

Encouraging role play and exploration of the children's experiences through multi method approaches, photographs, art and storytelling.

Encourage role play scenarios for example getting lost, nobody to play with, and encourage the children to problem solve and manage such scenarios.

Introduce transitioning children to the school mid-way through the year by, for example, the facilitation of school visits once a month to the school library.

Visits from the junior infant teachers to the play school.

Liaise with the school before class allocation for September to ensure no child is left isolated i.e. Transition Buddy.

Arrange visit for transitioning children in the month of June to the class they will attend. The existing junior infants can 'scaffold' the visit and be included in the process, and share their experiences.

Exchange of relevant information through 'child snap shot' form (O'Kane and Hayes, 2010) and adapting said form after the consultation process.

Asking children what they would like their teacher to know about them.

Engaging parents in the process through information leaflets (for example by Early Childhood Ireland) and encouraging participation in school visits.

Engaging with the Aistear Síolta practice guide and the pillar transitions.

From the discussions with parents, it appeared that the majority of the children settled well, with the exception of one child. A girl I here name Alannah found yard time very difficult, resulting in prolonged crying on separation from the parent for a couple of weeks. The situation as relayed by the parent was one of a child very traumatised by the yard experience. I thus asked Alannah to draw a picture of what it was like to start school, and of the yard, and to bring the drawing along for the focus group. The drawings Alannah made contrasted with her mother's descriptions. They were not dark and disorganised, but were full of bright colours with the sun shining. When asked about the experience there was little to indicate trauma or distress: "if you start school you might cry a little bit but you will get better the next day cause you're allowed cry for a little bit and if you get better like me I did that but, em..., if you do that then well then you will calm down in a few minutes". Other contributions are outlined in the table below.

One could argue that the role play experiences from playschool, coupled with her resilient disposition, helped Alannah and the other children cope with this change. I also suggested a yard buddy to her mother, an additional intervention which Alannah found beneficial in reducing the anxiety. On reflection, if I had not had the opportunity to engage with Alannah's mother in the early days of school and thus suggest the yard buddy, Alannah might have had a different experience. This reflects the observation that events in the child's microsystem are affected by patterns of activities, roles and relationships experienced in another (Peters 2010).

Changes in practice

In light of this research, the following strategies are recommended to ease the transition of children from preschool to big school. It is envisaged that the implementation of these strategies will give children a more comprehensive experience of what to expect during the transition to primary school.

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Author information

Emma Reilly originally trained as a children's nurse then changed career pathways to take her to her current position as an early childhood specialist with Early Childhood Ireland. She has over 25 years' experience in working with children having also ran her own early years service for 13 years. Emma has a BA in Early Childhood Teaching and Learning as well as recently completing Marte Meo colleague training. She recently presented at ECCERA with colleagues on a piece of research titled 'Professional Pathways- Up Skilling the Early Years workforce'. Emma is currently working on various training and continuous professional learning programmes tailored for educators working in the early childhood sector.

Building identities as learners: Supporting transitions through reflecting on pedagogical documentation

Marlene McCormack and Nickola Cullen



Introduction

"I am a powerful learner" James told the teacher on his first day of primary school. This self-knowledge reflects the young boy's confidence and identity in making the transition from one learning institution to another. Going to school is a big deal and it has long been associated with special expectations and excitement, tensions and anxieties (Broström, 2002). Once there, being at school involves learning a new set of conventions and values while negotiating new identities, roles and relationships. Confident in his core identity as a powerful learner, James was setting a marker and shaping his scholastic trajectory as he began his first day at 'big school'.

This short article was prompted by a story of change in the end-of-year pedagogical practices within one preschool and the possibilities it may offer to the young group of powerful learners as they leave their early childhood setting. What follows is a brief consideration of transitions, a discussion on the use of pedagogical documentation and a reflection on implications of changing practices for children's identities as learners as they make the transition to primary school.

About transitions

Understandings of transitions have evolved from being a physical activity, that is, as a movement from one institutional setting or activity to another (Lombardi, 1992), or a change of contexts (Dockett and Perry, 2001), to a broader conception of transitions as a change process (Fabian and Dunlop, 2002) and pertinent to this article, as a shift from one identity to another (Griebel and Nielsel, 2002). Transitions are well recognised as a significant life event and as a factor in future engagement with education (Huser et al., 2016). They are central to young children's experiences and well-being, but should not be conceptualised as happening at one specific point in time, in this case "the first day" in big school. Transitions are a fact of life, "ongoing multi-layered and multi-year processes involving

multiple continuities and discontinuities of experience" (Petrowskyj et al., 2005, p.63).

For children the transition to primary school is influenced in no small measure by the belief system and approach of the early childhood educator and her/his view about appropriate early education (Peters, 2002). The theoretical lens of the educator will invariably influence practice within the setting. A developmental perspective, which is grounded in the concept of "readiness" and "age-appropriateness", will encourage transition to school at a definite point in time when the child reaches a specific age or stage. An ecological approach suggests that transitions are part of an interactive system where the involvement of parents, teachers, educators and children themselves are seen as a core element of the change process. A socio-cultural view will understand transitions as relational, happening within a community, with the active involvement and voice of the child shaping the experience. Currently the metaphor of transitions as a bridge (Huser et al., 2016) begins to elucidate concepts of narrowing gaps, connecting cultures and settings, creating space, time, direction and movement, all of which illuminate the complexities of moving from preschool to primary school.

Within the Irish policy and practice context there is a strong recognition of the importance of all transitions in children's lives. Standard 13 in *Síolta*, The National Quality Framework (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education [CECDE], 2006) guides educators in the sensitive management or facilitation of transitions and promotes the active involvement of children and parents as well as educators and teachers in the process. The *Aistear/Síolta Practice Guide* (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 2016) prompts thinking around the role of props, activities, dialogues and visits in supporting transitions and urges that all initiatives are embedded within a strengths-based approach, viewing the child as a competent and agentive social actor (Rinaldi, 2006).

Recognising the importance of transitions, the move to primary school has become the focus of a number of projects internationally (Perry and Dockett, 2011). Closer to home, parents, educators and teachers engage in "priming events" (Corsaro and Molinari, 1992, p.168) or activities, such as visiting the primary school, that set out to create stress-free bridges (Fabian and Dunlop, 2007, p.21) between one world and another. Another, under-researched, tool or approach to supporting transitions is that of pedagogical documentation.

Pedagogical documentation

Documenting children's learning is a core aspect of pedagogical practice, promoted in *Síolta* and *Aistear* and sought as part of the new education focused inspections from the Department of Education and Skills. Pedagogical documentation refers to procedures that make the everyday activities, challenges, possibilities, processes and thoughts of children and adults visible and consequently open to debate and reflection (Carr and Lee, 2012). The nature and use of pedagogical documentation varies significantly across settings and has many purposes. The literature outlines the many benefits of providing possibilities for communication between stakeholders, e.g., parents, children and settings (Picchio et al, 2014). It has a role in evaluating practice, in helping to make children's learning visible (Rinaldi, 2006) and is long established as means of supporting the professional development of educators/teachers (Dahlberg et al, 2013). Some, such as Rinaldi (2006, p.63), contend that the value of documentation is "after the fact" and that in reviewing it, the pedagogical team (individually and collectively) can find meaning in the children's learning. Through this dynamic form of professional development, educators deepen a pedagogy of listening and are better positioned to provide rich, authentic opportunities for learning and possible future experiences. Undeniably a core value in developing pedagogical documentation lies in its intentions and use. Documentation in some early childhood settings can be

understood or interpreted as an end in itself, with observations and plans completed and stored for the relevant Inspector to view. With increased levels of training, documentation is increasingly understood as a core working tool of the ECCE profession, which serves to progress children's learning.

A recent Learning Story from Beverton Preschool in North Co. Dublin highlights how pedagogical documentation becomes a tool of reflection for the children and how their self-concept, as competent learners, is strengthened as they prepare for the transition to school. As the story reflects, crucial herein is that the staff group at Beverton understand the values of "now", slowing down and revisiting experiences for all children in the setting.

June was traditionally one of the busiest and therefore one of the most stressful months of the year at Beverton Preschool, that is until the team did a piece of in-house Continuous Professional Development on reflective practice. Whilst planning the final six weeks of the preschool year, the team discussed the stress of preparing the children for their graduation celebrations, ensuring every child's learning journal was up to date and that observations and checklists were completed and signed off. The team decided that the children's last memories of the preschool should not be rushed, adult-led, product-based activities but instead should be a natural winding down and celebration of the wonderful journey of learning that has taken place over the last one to two years.

This "closing down" process was carried out over the last month of preschool by, amongst others, encouraging the children to take down their photos on their coat hangers and family wall pictures and to "put away" equipment and store it for the next children to discover when they started preschool in the new school year.

It was whilst the children were putting their old photos from their coat hooks and preschool book into their learning journals that the

magic of true reflective thinking happened. When comparing their old photos with how they looked today the children noticed....

"Look at me when I was only 2, I look different now, I am big and I can ride my bike without stabilizers now that I am 4!" (Cherry)

"I had a different friend when I was three (Roisin's friend Isadora had left for big school last year), now Cherry is my best friend!" I couldn't lift Cherry up when I was three, but now I can!" (Roisin)

"Hughie was with the preschool for two and a half years, that's a lot of growing he did during his time with us!" He noticed.... "Look - when I was only 2 I couldn't swim - that's me but look at me now, I am like a whale and can swim really good" (Hughie)

Discussion

The act of children using their journals to look back over their time in the early childhood setting, to see changes in themselves and others, to recognise their growing skills and competencies empowers children as conscious and confident learners. As Carr (2011) tells us, when children are facilitated to reflect on their learning they contribute to their understandings of how they learn and develop their identities as learners.

Children develop as competent and confident learners within loving, reciprocal and responsive relationships (NCCA, 2009). In looking through their learning journals, children in Beverton reflected on the changes they had experienced and journeys they had travelled. The conversations emerged in the relaxed context of the group and:

when children have conversations about their learning journeys with adults whose ideas they trust, they become aware of the ways in which their intelligence is malleable (Carr, 2011, p.3).

Through reflective dialogue the children constructed theories about who they are and how they are in the world.

In the process of articulating their ideas publicly the process of self-reflection is promoted; forcing the speaker, in this case the children, "to bring to consciousness the ideas that they are just beginning to grasp intuitively and to justify" (Siraj-Blatchford and Manni, 2008, p.8). This is evident in Hughie's contribution in the learning story where he realises that he is a learner "look - when I was only 2 I couldn't swim - that's me but look at me now, I am like a whale and can swim really good".

In articulating their stories, Cherry, Roisin and Hughie are narrativising their experience and positioning themselves publicly as powerful reflectors and learners. Nelson and Fivush (2004) suggest that in learning to narrativise, children learn to remember their specific past and to imagine their specific future. In the case of Hughie it creates a new identity as a capable and competent swimmer. Perhaps it also suggests to Hughie that his ability to learn is transferable to new situations and challenges.

Conclusion

In this story from Beverton, the Learning Journal was the focus of reflection and as some suggest, the use of journals is far more powerful and far-reaching in its effects than is generally recognised (Hallberg, 1987).

The power of the journals lay in the children's reflections on and insights into themselves as learners. It suggests the need to reposition young children as respected, reflective beings and to foster this capacity for their transformative learning and empowerment. How can this approach, explicitly initiated in Beverton as part of their end of year curriculum, be enhanced with next year's group of children to more effectively support them in making the transition to school? Ultimately, and as with James in the opening lines, did the reflective experience in Beverton mirror a host of 'powerful

I have lots of friends
I can ride my bike without stabilizers
I have my own room
I look different now I am 4, I am big.
I am going to big school

learners' moving confidently into mainstream education? We will watch this space. Reflection and reflective practice is highly valued within all levels of education.

In this short piece we have drawn on research and practice to highlight possible linkages between the process of reflection in young children and the successful transitioning to primary school. We are confident in listening to Cherry that her reflections and discussions with her peers and the staff can only build her confidence and identity as a learner.

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Author information

Marlene McCormack is a committed early childhood professional with a broad range of experience and expertise in the areas of practice, policy and provision. She has worked directly with young children in private and community settings, has spent many years with Early Childhood Ireland leading the Knowledge Directorate and is currently lecturing with DCU on the Level 8 BECE.

Nickola Cullen has run a multi award winning private sessional service in north county Dublin for the last 15 years. During this time Nickola developed a deep passion and appreciation for the betterment of the early years sector, she is currently studying for her BA in Early Childhood Studies in DKIT.

Transitions: Space and place

Miriam Twomey

Introduction

Children in Ireland experience a range of educational transitions in their young lives. During transitions, children make the daily 'border crossing' from the familiar to the unfamiliar (Vogler, Crivello and Woodhead, 2008, p. 28). With regard to children with special educational needs, transitions have been recognised internationally as a key principle in the field of Early Intervention (Workgroup on Principles and Practices in Natural Environments, 2007). While many children experience difficulties in their early educational transitions, children with ASD experience significant challenges and require a range of interventions to address these challenges.

This paper draws on a longitudinal research project that involved carrying out in-depth qualitative case studies of young children with ASD transitioning to early education settings. Findings include the importance of nuanced approaches to transitions for children with ASD, the need to involve parents and the recognition that all children, including children who are nonverbal are agentic and have a voice.

Drawing from a review of the relevant literature, this article is structured around a discussion of the following central themes: the challenges experienced by children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) relating to transitions, the need for family involvement and children's agency

Significant developments in early intervention and primary school education provision for children with ASD in the Republic of Ireland has taken place (McCoy, Banks, Frawley, Watson, Shevlin and Smyth, 2014). Policy and legislation reinforce the inclusion of children with special educational needs (SEN) including children with ASD (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2014) in mainstream educational settings. Yet in their review of evidenced based practice relating to autism, Parsons, Guldborg, MacLeod, Jones, Prunty, and Balfe, (2009) identified transitions as a source of extreme stress and vulnerability for the individual with autism and their family.

More recently, Daly and colleagues (NCSE, 2016) noted more positive outcomes in relation to transitions between early intervention settings and mainstream primary schools. The effects of transitions in a variety of early years educational settings however require more research. This research attempts to address this gap and investigates the journeys of young children with ASD as they navigate different early years settings.

Transitions in the lives of children with ASD

Transitions are universally defined as a passage, movement or development, from one state or place of being to another (Meleis, 2010). Research has drawn upon the metaphor of a river (Peters and Paki, 2014) which has definition and direction but may also experience disruptions. For the child with autism, momentary changes defined as horizontal transitions are as challenging and important as changes in children's life trajectories (vertical transitions).

The difficulties faced by children with Autism Spectrum Disorders may present complex instructional challenges for teachers (Scheuermann, Webber, Boutot, and Goodwin, 2003). These children display significant heterogeneity, but share core impairments in verbal and non-verbal communication, social interaction and understanding, and repetitive or restricted patterns of behaviours, interests or activities (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Sensory integration difficulties (Miller, Anzalone, Lane, Cermak and Osten, 2007) have also been recently acknowledged. These impairments can influence various areas of development and learning (Rogers and Vismara, 2008). The complexity of the multifaceted nature of ASD highlights the need to adopt evidence-based practices (National Research Council, 2001). In addition, due to the heterogeneity of ASD, effective educators should possess the professional skills to work with other professionals, therapists, and parents to develop individualised programmes that include plans to teach and generalise

skills beyond initial educational circumstances (Ingersoll and Dvortcsak, 2006). Children with ASD may experience significant difficulty with change and interruptions in routine (Mesibov et al., 2005). They may experience transitions as potential disruptions conflicting with some children's unyielding need for sameness and difficulty generalising experiences in time and place. Sterling-Turner and Jordan (2007) emphasise that children with ASD require a range of interventions to address their transition challenges.

Children as Agents

Emphasising the voice of the child, this research sought to draw on Lam and Pollard's (2006) work which explored children's reactions to new settings. The authors observed that children are active, creative agents, capable of recreating and reconstructing the classroom according to their own needs. Based on this, this article suggests that children themselves should be involved in the transition process.

Methodology

In-depth, qualitative case studies including children with ASD, their parents and educators sought to explore experiences of transition. This research comprised 20 one-to-one semi-structured interviews with parents during a period of fifteen months. In particular, this research also sought to access the voice of the young child with autism using creative methods. A portfolio of alternative communication methods which will be described in the next section, was developed and used. Children were provided with change and stop cards so that they could withdraw from the research if they experienced any discomfort (Twomey and Shevlin, under review). For the purposes of this article, the experiences of Callum and Charlie and their parents will be documented in the Findings.

Creative approaches in this research included a portfolio of methods which were sensitively

developed to facilitate children with autism and address their communicative needs. This included a combination of methods including the use of 'objects of reference, a multi-sensory approach using real object or photos and pictures of real objects that have meaning for the child. Visual schedules, Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) and Irish sign language (LAMH) were also used. Rapport was enhanced with children through the introduction of puppetry and their performance of role play, which has been utilised in previous research (Dwight-Salmon, 2005). This research further developed these methods by establishing the puppets as co-researchers and conducting classroom interventions exploring topics such as friendship, play and inclusion (Twomey and Shevlin, under review). Methods and approaches attempted to invite children to contribute as active participants and researchers (Jones and Gillies, 2010; Kellett, 2006) giving them opportunities to use the puppets.

Findings

The data presented below illustrate some of the emergent themes including issues that emerged around children's transitions. The excerpts presented draw on parents' perceptions and understandings of transition as well as the responses of Callum and Charlie.

Support and Planning

This case study describes Charlie's experiences transitioning to a mainstream educational setting. Charlie's delay receiving a diagnosis meant that he had already started attending a mainstream preschool without adequate support and planning. Following a difficult transition, Charlie was withdrawn from this preschool and started attending an Early Intervention Unit. Charlie's mum Sue highlighted the lack of preparation before transitioning to her local preschool: "He would lie kicking and screaming – all the other children lined up beautifully. It was then we saw how difficult things were for him" (P2, EI 2) (Twomey and Shevlin, in

Table 1

| School | Early Intervention Unit 'Cherish' | Early Intervention Unit 'Nurture' | Rural Primary School | Sub-urban Primary School Nurture' | Early Intervention Unit 'Cherish' |
|--|--|---|---|--|---|
| Children | Jack (planning transition to special school) | Charlie (started Early Intervention) | Callum (Transitioned to junior primary school) | Aaron (Beginning participation in integration programme in adjoining primary school) | Adam (Started at Early Intervention Unit) |
| Child's age | 6 years | 3 years | 4 years | 4.5 years | 2.5 years |
| Parent/s | Jenny (P4) (Jack's Mum) | Sue (P3) (Charlie's Mum) | Kate (P2) (Callum's Mum) | Amy (P1) (Aaron's Mum) | Carrie and Dave (P5and6) (Adam's parents) |
| Individual interviews | Interviewed (n=4) | Interviewed (n=4) | Interviewed (n=4) | Interviewed (n=4) | Interviewed (n=4) Total (n=20) parent interviews |
| Parent focus group Other interviews | Focus group interview comprising 7 parents | multi-disciplinary Early Intervention and School Based team professionals | Teachers/ Special Needs Assistants/ School principals | | Total (n=83) interviews |

press). In contrast, daily, horizontal transitions were excellent at the Early Intervention Unit. Transitions were supported through the use of visual schedules, photographs, and objects of reference.

Parental Vulnerability

The following section provides excerpts from case studies involving Kate's experiences when Callum transitioned to his local mainstream primary school.

At the time of transition parental vulnerability was apparent. Kate explained that Callum had recently been assessed with an additional neurological condition. This did not hamper his day-to-day interactions. However, the effect of this additional diagnosis increased Kate's vulnerability and Kate feared that Callum would fail to access his local mainstream school. "I asked the paediatrician, will he ever attend mainstream school?" (P1, MS 2).

When Callum transitioned, he received support from the school-based, multi-disciplinary team. Teachers benefitted significantly from this collaboration. This included avoidance of distractions, a clear and unambiguous environment, as well as structured and informed practice. Evidence of success was apparent when daily horizontal transitions were adapted. These included accommodations such as delayed entry to the classroom and the incorporation of sensory interventions. Callum spent increasing amounts of time in his new environment and began to interact with peers.

Creative Methods

This research benefitted from creating innovative participatory research methods that engaged children's interest. Children with autism were supported with objects of reference, visual schedules, PECS and Irish sign language. As the research progressed, large child size puppets were introduced. The children named the puppets: *Pretty Girl* and *Pretty Boy*. The puppets performed role play and invited the children to

participate. Children began to associate research with fun. When the researcher arrived at the schools, the children asked: "Are the puppets coming?" Children spoke to the puppets about their experience of friendship, play and inclusion in the school setting and the playground. Evidence of success was apparent when Callum and Charlie began to address the puppets and communicate with them in an impromptu manner (Twomey and Shevlin, under review). Both Callum and Charlie's use of appropriate language increased. Both boys responded increasingly more favourably to other children's social initiations.

Discussion

The final section of this article will interpret the findings in light of the extant literature. While this research has taken the form of small-scale qualitative case studies, it also yielded valuable information relating to parents' perspectives of transitions and the development of creative methods designed to engage children and access their voice.

Beginnings, Endings and Beginnings.

In agreement with the literature, family-centredness was crucial. Parent involvement was essential to the success of transitions. Parents in the case studies in this research needed to be acknowledged as the constant in their children's lives and therefore required training and inclusion in focused collaborations.

Similar to Sterling-Turner and Jordan (2007), the children with autism in this study required a range of interventions to address challenges associated with transitions, particularly if they are to experience change. Without an extensive repertoire of spoken language, Callum and Charlie found it difficult to make their needs known, however with use of evidence based practice in social communication methods (Ingersoll and Dvortcsak, 2006; National Research Council, 2001), Callum and Charlie began to communicate more effectively with

the researcher and peers, identifying a possible opportunity for accessing children's voice. Similar to Trimmingham (2010) the use of puppets as reported by children, parents and teachers in this case study facilitated communication. The researcher observed that frequent visits by a familiar person enhanced adaptability, and provided children with ASD with predictability, safety and an ability to connect.

Conclusion

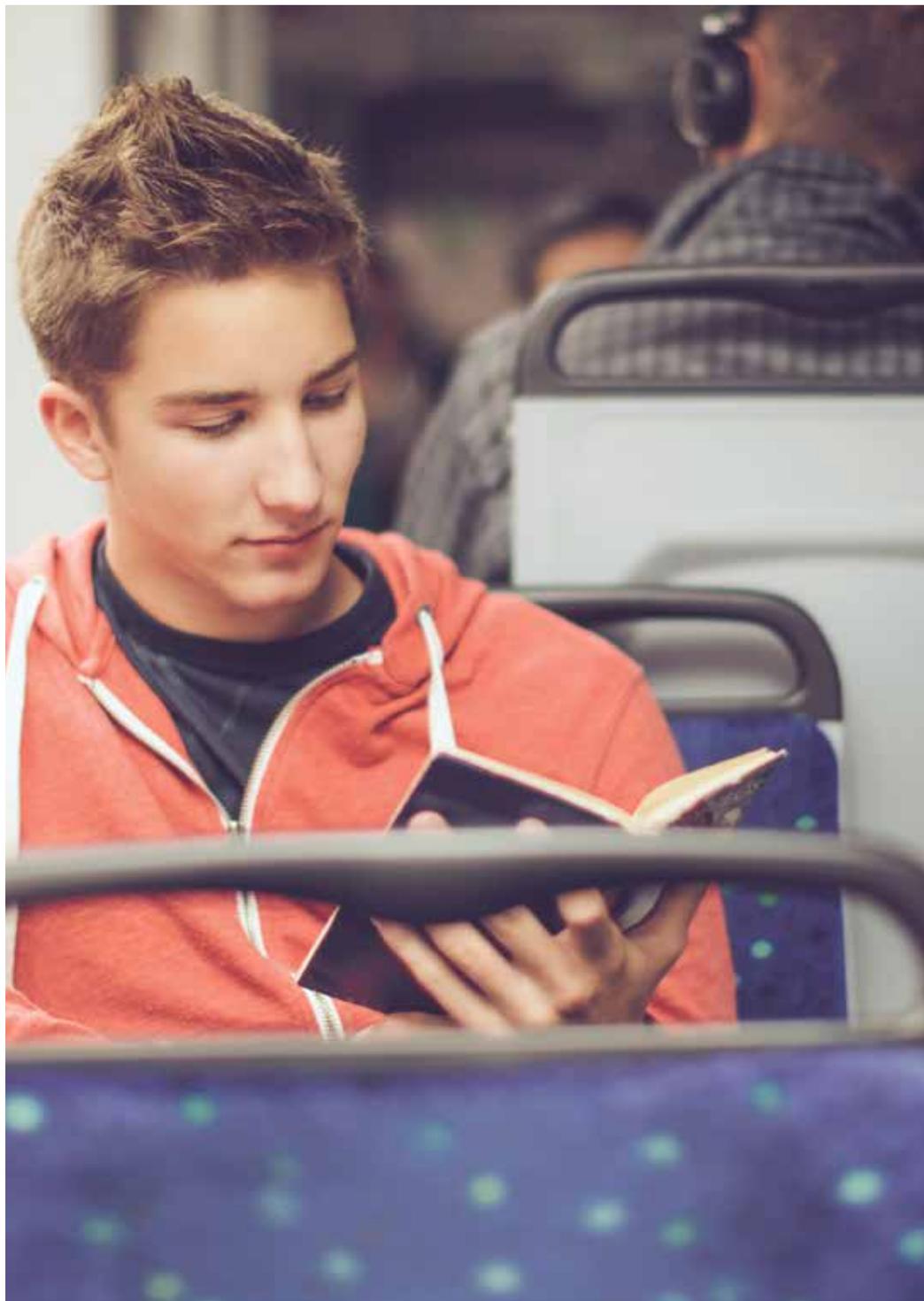
This research extended the metaphor of a river (Peters and Paki, 2014) and introduced puppetry as a bridge connecting the old with the new; enhancing continuity. Puppets did not have a finite existence, they acted as intermediaries; showing potential to connect children's experiences from the past with the future, through play. Puppets have potential to extend the social and learning journeys of all children, representing children's experiences over time. This empirical research adds to the nuanced development of transitions in the literature. Puppets can encourage children to tell us what is happening, and how they feel about it.

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Author information

Miriam Twomey is an Assistant Professor in Early Intervention at the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin and leads the new Masters in Early Intervention. Miriam has a Doctorate in Early Intervention, Special Education and Inclusion. Her Master's degree focused on play and the encouragement of social interaction in young children including children with Autism Spectrum Disorders. Miriam's research interests include Autism Spectrum Disorders, the role of movement in development, intersubjectivity and engagement, and Continuing Professional Development for early years educators, parents, teachers and other professionals.



Transitioning via transportation for a young person with autism

Rachel Ferguson, Dierdre O'Shea, and Fiona McCaffrey

Background

The act of movement between locations, environments, people, routines and activities is commonly known as 'transitioning'. Individuals with autism often find transitioning difficult (Hendricks and Wehman, 2009; Cihak et al., 2010; Mechling and Savidge, 2011) as it requires the ability to be flexible; accept change; regulate emotion and react appropriately to unknown events. This study aims to identify useful strategies to support individuals with autism to develop transitioning skills by using a case study of a young adult learning to independently use transportation.

Transportation involves the practice of transitioning between locations and also requires the individual to transition on and off the transportation device. The use of transportation is an essential skill without which individuals could not independently function throughout the day or access fundamental services such as education, employment, conveniences (e.g. food shopping) and social events. This paper describes transitional strategies used in the support of one adolescent with autism who was experiencing difficulties related to her educational placement and transportation.

Methods and Participants

This case study concentrates on one female, aged sixteen years and eight months, who was referred to Middletown Centre for Autism (MCA) for intervention as she was experiencing difficulty being included in her educational placement. This method was chosen because it offered researchers the ability to make significant design decisions regarding length of baseline data collection and when to implement intervention strategies depending on the participant and her unique presentation, circumstances and behaviour. The participant and her parents consented to take part in the study. All information has been anonymised.

G. H. is a sixteen year eight month old female with a formal diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder,

learning difficulties and language delay. She has been out of school for approximately two years and is currently living in residential care. G.H's school placement broke down due to her challenging and at times aggressive behaviour

Assessment

Direct standardised assessment of G.H was not appropriate due to her level of anxiety regarding new people in her environment. Given G.H's difficulties, assessment of G.H's strengths and needs occurred through observation and information gathering from G.H's family, education and health professionals by an Autism Intervention Officer from MCA. A functional behavioural assessment of challenging behaviours was conducted and focused on observing and understanding the environmental conditions most commonly associated with such behaviour – the antecedent; how the behaviour manifested; and finally what happened as a result of the behaviour – the consequence. Additionally, risk assessments regarding challenging behaviour, transportation, staff, G.H and the community were completed.

Findings

Results from the risk assessments identified that G.H had a 'Low' severity of risk (minor injury but no first aid requirement) with an 'almost certain' (daily basis) chance of occurrence.

Functional behavioural assessments, observation and information gathering identified that G.H's anxiety was heightened and her behaviour was particularly challenging during transportation. In particular, during baseline measurement G.H had successfully transitioned from her home environment onto the transportation, however, had never successfully transitioned from the transportation to a community area, which in turn resulted in limited interactions with the wider social community. At baseline, verbal instructions to transition off transportation to the community area were given by those working with G.H using no visual supports. Functional

assessments identified that these instructions consistently preceded instances of challenging behaviour and the consequence resulted in staff members returning G.H to her home environment.

It was therefore possible that with the right strategies in place that supported G.H's visual learning style, addressed her receptive language differences and reinforced her progress, the severity of risk and occurrence of challenging behaviours could be reduced.

Strategies Implemented

An individualised intervention programme blending a range of best practice strategies was designed for G.H. Focusing specifically on transportation, the following strategies were implemented:

Visual Aids – Care staff were taught to make an individualised visual schedule for G.H, this involved taking pictures of the bus and various locations where G.H would be attending. The care staff were instructed to communicate through pictures what G.H would be doing each day, i.e. where the bus would be taking her. Appropriate use of visual schedules are thought to reduce anxiety for individuals with autism (Rao and Gagie, 2006).

Modelling – care staff were encouraged to use G.H's favourite toys to model the desired behaviour (e.g. G.H calmly getting off the bus and walking to the duck pond). Modelling, or learning through observation, was first introduced by Albert Bandura as part of his seminal work on social learning theory more than forty years ago. It is recognised to this day as a useful learning strategy for individuals with autism to acquire new skills and imitate desired behaviours (Bellini et al., 2007; Reichow and Volkmar, 2010).

Repetition – care staff were instructed to take G.H to the same location for at least seven days in a row.

Waiting – care staff instructed to:

- Stop the bus at the preferred location
- Model the desired behaviour
- Wait – preferably in silence, until G.H

exited the bus or until ten minutes had passed. If G.H did not exit the bus within the specified time, the bus would take G.H and carers back to the residential home.

Praise – if G.H successfully exited the bus she was to be praised by the care staff. Equally, if G.H presented with the desired behaviour off the bus she was also to be praised.

These strategies were broken down into a seven step process for G.H and the care staff to follow, described in Table 1.

Outcome Measures

Quantitative data was collected on the completion of the seven step intervention process described in Table 1. G.H was scored out of a total of seven for each transition on and off the bus, were seven out of seven indicated that G.H had successfully completed all seven steps correctly, and zero out of seven indicated that none of the steps had been successfully completed. Completion of steps was monitored over two months from 25th May 2016 – 28th July 2016.

Results

Over the course of two months, G.H was transported a total of fifty times. G.H performed a complete correct sequence (seven out of seven times) of desired behaviour on fifty eight per cent (twenty nine out of fifty) of occasions; on these occasions, G.H. remained calm and did not demonstrate any challenging behaviour.

During the two months of intervention, G.H performed four out of seven steps correctly on twenty eight per cent (fourteen out of fifty) of occasions, however, G.H was still learning to imitate the desired behaviour during eight

Table 1: Seven Step Intervention Process

| Step | Intervention |
|------|---|
| 1 | G.H transitions out to the bus from Residential Care Facility |
| 2 | G.H sits in the bus as it is driving to the location |
| 3 | Upon arrival the location, G.H remains calm |
| 4 | Upon staff opening the bus door G.H remains calm |
| 5 | When staff begin modelling the activity with the toys G.H gets out of the bus |
| 6 | G.H continues with activity as planned |
| 7 | G.H gets back on the bus once activity is finished |

per cent (four out of fifty) of these occasions. That said, the same amount of steps were not performed or performed incorrectly during both months (Chart 1 and 2).

Discussion

Transitioning via transportation from one location to another is an essential skill for functional independence (Carnahan et al., 2009), however this critical skill can be compromised in individuals with autism (Dudley et al., 2012). In order to gain independence and greater access to life's essential amenities it is essential that professionals working with individuals with autism ensure those individuals can use transportation services effectively and safely.

Previous research has noted that the transport needs of those with learning difficulties has received little, if any, societal attention (Gentry, 2011), which limits an individual's functional independence and impacts on quality of life (Dudley et al, 2012). This case study highlighted that transitioning on and off transportation was causing heightened anxiety for the adolescent which resulted in challenging behaviour. Without appropriate intervention, challenging behaviours tend to persist across an individual's lifespan (Murphy et al., 2005).

This study illustrated how professionals can support an adolescent with autism and learning difficulties overcome her anxiety and learn appropriate behaviour for gaining access to community services through supported use of transportation. It is important to note that as with the heterogeneity of autism, transport issues vary significantly across individuals, therefore some individuals will require minimal guidance or modified transportation training, whilst others will require more assistance as in the case described in this study.

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Author Information

Rachel Ferguson is research officer with Middletown Centre for Autism. Rachel qualified as an Occupational Therapist in 2010 at the University of Ulster and completed her doctorate in Health and Life Sciences at the University of Ulster in 2014. Her research interests include children and young people with autism, sensory processing and issues around quality of life. She has presented her research both locally and internationally. Corresponding author: rachel.ferguson@middletownautism.com

Deirdre O'Shea is an Autism Intervention Specialist at Middletown Centre for Autism. Deirdre has worked as a Tutor for children with Autism at the Saplings School, Goresbridge, and as a Home Tutor providing early intervention programs. Deirdre has extensive experience in working with children and young people with Autism who display complex challenging behaviours. Deirdre has a Degree in Psychology with the Open University and has recently completed the Registered Behaviour Technician course with Queens University. Deirdre is also studying for her Masters in Autism.

Dr Fiona McCaffrey is Head of Research and Development at Middletown Centre for Autism. Fiona has worked individually and in-group sessions with older children and young adults with autism and their parents. Her PhD research addressed the area of managing anxiety in young adults with autism; she also holds an MSc in Counselling and a Postgraduate qualification in autism. Fiona is a Chartered Psychologist and has previously worked for Autism NI and the University of Birmingham.



Adolescent transitioning and substance misuse

Denis Murray

Introduction

Issues and trends in relation to substance misuse normally develop in the transitional phase of adolescence, as young people begin looking towards their peers for direction and are less subject to parental authority. In many situations risk and protection factors may exist in equal measure within different contexts. In circumstances where professionals are aware of young people engaging in substance misuse, it is important that they can identify processes and strategies to elevate concerns for such activity among young people themselves and with their parents, guardians and other adults, especially, in situations where a young person's use of substances extends beyond curiosity and experimentation. The fact that young people take risks is consistent with adolescent period of development, but it is the way in which adults respond that will determine its progress. This paper is informed by a review of literature on substance use/misuse in adolescence and outlines some of the factors influencing the onset of adolescent substance misuse in addition to factors prompting its continuance in order to identify lessons for practice. These lessons are

informed by the author's experience and practice of working within an adolescent addiction treatment service.

Adolescent substance misuse

Adolescence is regarded as a time when young people begin to assert independence and are more likely to engage in risky behaviours (Hemphill, et al. 2011; Arteaga, Chen and Reynolds, 2010). While many young people experiment with substances, it is reported that very few actually become addicted and that alcohol continues to be the primary substance of abuse (World Health Organization, 2007). Statistics for 2014 places Ireland fifth highest in terms of alcohol consumption out of twenty countries (OECD, 2016). Research by Long and Mongan (2013) revealed that seventy five per cent of alcohol consumed in Ireland was done as part of a binge drinking session. As a consequence, the risk for alcohol dependence in adulthood increases among this cohort. A study examining the nature of the association between early onset of alcohol use and adult misuse revealed that those who engage in regular drinking before age 21 have a

greater rate of alcohol dependence (Guttannova et al., 2011). Furthermore, it is reported that cannabis/weed is the most frequently used illegal substance in Ireland (Long and Horgan, 2012), and cannabis use among adolescents' is becoming as socially acceptable as tobacco and alcohol (Godeau, et al. 2007). See fig. 1 to view trends in relation to substance use by young people attending HSE Adolescent Addiction Service for period 1998-2014 (HSE 2015). This service covers five communities within West Dublin area.

Individual factors influencing adolescent substance misuse

It is thought that impulsivity may play a part in determining the difference between experimental or recreational drug/alcohol misuse (Moeller and Dougherty, 2002, p.8). Personality characteristics associated with youth substance misuse include low self-confidence, un-assertiveness and problems with interpersonal relationships, sexual promiscuity and poor decision making skills (Pumariega, Rodriguez and Kilgus, 2004). Furthermore, Kirby, Van der Sluijs and Inchley (2008) draw attention to the co-morbidity of substance misuse and other mental health disorders, indicating strong association between substance abuse, suicide, depression, and antisocial behavior.

Parenting and family factors influencing adolescent substance misuse

There is evidence that parental modeling and disapproval of substance misuse in addition to restricting access can inhibit or delay young people's induction (Ryan, Jorm and Lubman 2010). It is understood that parents who have authoritative and trusting approaches to their children are more successful at encouraging abstinence or harm minimization than parents whose approaches are either authoritarian or laissez-faire (Mendes, et al. 2001). A study by Peterson (2010) reveals that parents overestimate the influence of peer pressure and fail to take into account the culture of acceptance for substance

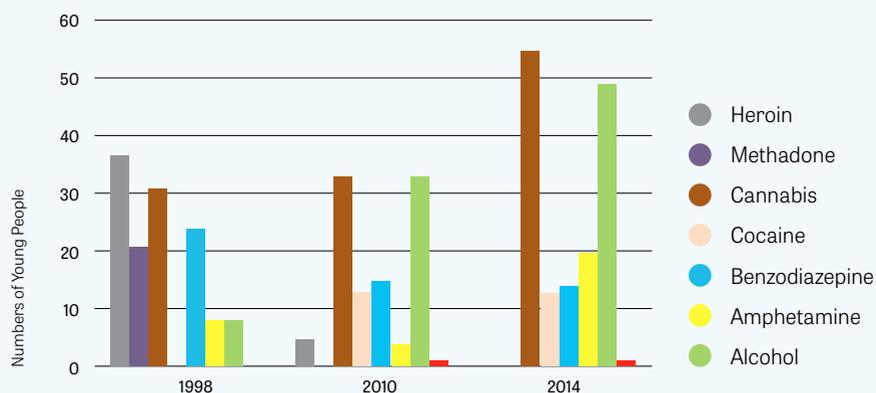
use within society, especially in relation to alcohol. Moreover, the study identified that adolescents want their parents to set boundaries, monitor their behaviour and to be active role models.

Research carried out by Chassin, Flora and King (2004) indicates that young people whose family has a history of substance misuse are at greatest risk of developing lifetime trajectories involving substance misuse. The level of risks for young people increases where there is family conflict, instability, harsh parenting, physical/sexual or emotional abuse and parental or sibling substance misuse, involvement of social services, lack of parental control or parental absence (NACD 2011; Stein, Newcomb and Bentler 1987). The extent to which substance misuse featured within the families of young people attending HSE Adolescent Addiction Service in 2014 was at forty five per cent and the number of young people who had parent/sibling linked to Adult Addiction Services was twenty four per cent, while the incidence of parental separation was seventy two per cent (HSE 2015). It has been this authors experience that some young people report that the only time their parents talk is when they are in trouble and as such young people often set themselves up in order to give parents a reason to engage.

Peer influences on young people's substance use

While the previous section highlighted evidence that initiation to substances often takes place within family contexts, having a network of friends who engage in substance misuse and other risk behaviours increases the likelihood of young people participating in such activity. It has been identified that sharing with peers introduces a social dimension to substance use and provides a level of safety in the early stages of experimentation (Heavyrunner-Rioux and Hollist, 2010). Additionally, Arteaga et al (2010) identify that fear of social isolation and peer rejection has a significant influence on young people's decisions in relation to drug/alcohol misuse.

Figure 1: Trends in substance misuse among young people attending Adolescent Addiction Service, Bridge House Cherry Orchard Hospital Dublin, for the period 1998-2014



The influence of school in young people's lives

Research by Trutz and Pratschke (2010) comparing Irish school attendees and early school leavers shows higher levels of substance misuse among young people who are out of school or who are in alternative education. Arteaga, *et al.* (2010) make links between early school drop-out, parent expectations for children's success, family conflict, instability and a young person's dislike of school. It is proposed that remaining in mainstream education provides a level of protection against substance misuse and that positive relationship with teachers and good communication between parents and school contribute to school retention especially in the transitional period from primary to secondary school.

Societal influences

While it is indicated that environmental factors have a significant influence in determining a young person's initiation and progression in relation to substance misuse (Mayock, 2000) and it is acknowledged that personality characteristics may determine which individuals develop problems, it is understood that societal attitudes generally determine which substances are tolerated (Kloep, *et al.* 2001). Additionally, research by Stein, *et al.* (1987) following an eight year study of multiple influences on drug use and drug use consequences identified that the proximal influences of personality and prior drug use combined with adult and peer attitudes are stronger predictors of problem drug use than the distal influences of wider community.

Lessons for practice

The message from literature review is that adolescent transitioning is a period of increased risk for substance misuse and indicates key areas of adolescents' lives where protective/preventative actions can be taken. The school environment is perhaps the most significant and influential setting in young people's lives where non parental adults can identify trends.

If a young person's participation or attendance at school gives reason for concern it may be indicative of absence of integration or disruption and lack of support in other areas of their life. The enhancement of decision making by young people could delay or inhibit their engagement in harmful activity including substance misuse. In this regard young people need to be supported in building resilience and the management of delayed gratification within all contexts. Hence, it is important at a policy level to ensure that schools are resourced and young people are encouraged to remain within mainstream education.

Within family and wider social system there may be conflicting narratives in relation to a young person's use of substances with parents and other adult language around consequences for the chaos that has been inflicted on family life, while the young person minimizes their activity within a quest narrative identifying drug use as something that provides release and helps them to feel connected. It is for this reason it is important for professionals to engage in conversations in ways that focuses on young people's strengths that otherwise might go unrecognized. As a result, opportunities may be opened up to rally people against the problems that are caused as a result of substance misuse while at the same time supporting the young person to develop their gifts and strengths.

In keeping with family support principles it is important that interventions target a broad population of young people in pre-adolescence when it is anticipated that programs can have the greatest influence on later behaviour. For young people within high risk category, early identification of risk is favorable towards establishing protective and preventative interventions. Also, working closely with families and significant others to improve communication and helps to mobilize resources in ways that enhances protection for young people. Fundamentally, good communication and relationship is central to effective intervention at all levels in addition to multidisciplinary approach and co-ordination

and collaboration between agencies. In circumstances where there are a number of family members engaging in substance misuse it is important that intervention encompass a systemic perspective as working at an individual level may be unproductive. While the preferred outcome by parents and professionals may be for young person to achieve total abstinence from substance misuse, deterring progression from less to more severe levels of misuse can be viewed as a worthwhile goal within a continuum of care while efforts are made to strengthen a young person's resolve in overcoming the seductiveness of substance misuse.

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Author Information

Denis Murray is a Family/Systemic Psychotherapist, Registered with Family Therapy Association of Ireland (FTAI), Irish Council for Psychotherapy (ICP) and European Association for Psychotherapy (EAP). He works within HSE Adolescent Addiction Service, Bridge House Cherry Orchard Hospital, Dublin, for past twenty years and previously worked within Non-Government Sector with young offenders and people returning to community from prison and their families. Denis is also a Registered Member and Supervisor with Addiction Counsellors of Ireland (ACI). He completed an M.A. in Life-course Studies at NUI Galway in 2013 and this article is based on extracts from his research thesis.

From cared to carers: Adolescent transition at a time of maternal cancer

Leonor Rodriguez, AnnMarie Groarke,
Pat Dolan and Pdraig MacNeela

Introduction

Maternal cancer can be a challenging for adolescents (Su and Ryan-Wenger, 2007) and some can report more psychosocial problems and intrusive thoughts than those who have healthy parents (Morris et al., 2016; Shallcross et al., 2016). Previous research has suggested, however, that only some adolescents struggle (Krattenmacher et al., 2012), while other young people have gains from the experience such as maturity and appreciation for others in their lives (Davey et al., 2005). Parental cancer presents challenges for adolescents who are at a particularly demanding developmental stage as they are transitioning from dependent childhood towards independent adulthood (Lalor et al., 2007) and parental cancer instead draws adolescents towards their families (Finch and Gibson, 2009).

Literature on young carers supports this analysis, as the initial stages suggested that young people were involved in caring roles toward their ill mothers and shared characteristics with young carers. Young carers is a complex term that has evolved over time, from a medical model, to a social model of disability, and finally to a young carers perspective and a family perspective (Halpenny and Gilligan, 2004). Fives et al. (2013) suggests that young carers can be defined differently according to different epistemologies, however what is essential, is to create services targeted at responding to the needs of young carers that also take into account the rights of their ill or disabled parents.

Young carers research is focused on understanding the experiences of young people who provide support for an ill family member (Ireland and Pakenham, 2010) or a family or household member who is ill has a disability, addiction or requires other care (Fives et al., 2010). Caring for other family members is part of normal childhood development (Aldridge and Becker, 1999) but if caring demands exceed a certain level, it can lead to impairment in the child's development (Fives et al., 2010).

In this article, young carer is defined as: "children and young people...whose lives are affected in some significant way by the care needs of another family or household member and who provide care, or help to provide care, to that person" (Fives et al., 2010:1). This article is focused on adolescents' experiences of transitioning from being cared for to becoming their mothers' carers, suggesting that these young people share similarities with other young carers although they may have been in this role for shorter periods of time.

Methodology

This study was part of a larger study that aimed to understand adolescent adjustment to maternal cancer (Rodriguez 2016). Participants for the larger study were invited to take part with two different methods. Firstly, mothers of adolescents attending cancer support centres were given information about the study and they informed their adolescents. Adolescents were invited directly through University emails. All participants received information sheets and consent forms.

This article is focused on the qualitative phase only, 15 adolescents completed semi-structured interviews and three interviews were purposefully selected for this analysis, as these were very detailed accounts of how adolescents transitioned from being cared to becoming carers of their ill mothers. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2009).

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis is a qualitative, experiential approach that is focused on understanding how people make sense of their lived experiences (Smith et al., 2009). IPA analysis consists of six steps: reading transcripts, initial noting, developing emergent themes, searching for connections among emergent themes, moving to the next case and looking for theme patterns across cases (Smith et al., 2009).

Results

The three adolescents selected were: Fiona (aged seventeen) who was in the process of leaving home to go to university when she found out about the diagnosis. Caroline (aged nineteen) also moved away from her family home to attend university when her mother was ill. Caroline had to deal with her mother's mental and physical illness simultaneously. Barbara (aged twenty) became her mother's sole carer during her illness. Barbara struggled to attend university due to these additional responsibilities. Once the analysis of interviews was completed, the following themes emerged:

Becoming my mother's mum

This theme describes the relationship between a caring daughter with her ill mother. One of the challenges faced by Caroline and Barbara was seeing the emotional and physical changes in their mothers. Adolescents recognised the severity of these changes and this motivated them to care for them. Caroline, for example, described that her mother became scared, vulnerable, in a state of desperation, trapped and claustrophobic. A mother in this state would be unable to provide care but instead required it.

...it was very upsetting to see your mother in such state like I mean that she was so vulnerable...I suppose she felt so trapped, claustrophobic...her behaviour was like someone that was really suffering... (Caroline).

Mothers unable to provide care was emphasized by Caroline as she described that her mother was unable to recognize her as the daughter and enact her usual maternal role and instead became like a vulnerable/ dependent child that needed to be comforted and taken care of.

I think it felt like the mother child relationships had reversed ...I felt like I was the one kind of caring for her, I was the one making her feel better, she was the one crying onto my shoulder...she became a young child, a very vulnerable young child...I had to comfort her.

Barbara assumed the responsibility of her mother's care on her own: "I didn't really think anything like that could ever happen but it did and...I took it on my shoulders more than anything".

Fiona's account is very different to the other two because she was physically separated from her mother and, therefore, was not able to become her mother's carer. This made her feel very guilty as she was neither caring for her mother nor able to fulfil all her university demands. "I felt guilty for being away ... I'm away so I am not even fulfilling what I am supposed to be doing while I was away".

Caring for their mothers required adolescents to surrender aspects of their own lives and their need to be cared for. The purpose of this was to avoid distress for their mothers and families. In this study, adolescents dealt with their own emotions by silencing them. Caroline, for example, described that she focused on her mother's wellbeing rather than her own emotions;

We just felt that if we were to let our feelings be the main reason rather than what was best for her, that would be selfish of us...her wellbeing needed to come before our feelings.

Adolescents, in a caring role, also chose their mum's needs over their own. Barbara described that even though she spent a long time with her mother in hospital, she was never offered any kind of help for herself and did not expect any,

I don't think it's about me when I go into the hospital, it's about my mum and how she is feeling and how to make her feel more comfortable like I can't expect people to be asking me like how I am feeling when there is you know a woman broken both inside and outside...

Overall, adolescents described that caring for their mothers was not a negative experience, this instead improved the relationship with their mothers by increasing intimacy and closeness; "...I'd talk to her about anything and she'd do

the same for me so it really brought us closer together" (Barbara).

Discussion

The analysis described the role adolescents had as carers and the challenges they faced in the caring process. Adolescents struggled to come to terms with the shock of maternal illness but developed a sense of care towards their mothers, above and beyond their own needs and emotions.

Previous research has described that young people make sacrifices when dealing with parental illness and place parental welfare above their own emotional fears and anxieties (Aldridge and Becker, 1993; 1999). The effects of serious illness may be the motivation for adolescents to assume a caring role as dealing with maternal changes made them feel upset and confused. Similar to this study, research by Davey et al. (2005) described that adolescents perceived their mothers as more emotional and vulnerable and they made the decision to be more affectionate and get involved in chores and caring duties. In this study, prioritising a mother's needs led to adolescents denying their own needs and emotions. Previous literature on young carers has emphasized the lack of open emotional expression in these young people, which can be a developmental risk as it can increase vulnerability, invisibility and isolation (Aldridge and Becker, 1993).

Overall, adolescents described that maternal cancer was one of the most difficult experiences they had but they could identify positive gains from it including more appreciation for their families. Abraham and Aldridge (2010) determined that carers can have positive benefits in their caring roles such as enhanced parent-child relationships. Aldwin (2011) described these gains as "tertiary appraisals". Thoits (1995) suggested that 'negative' life events do not always have a negative impact on health and mental health, as people try to solve the problems they face and grow and learn from

these 'negative' experiences or people may decide to change their situation and improve it, enhancing their well-being in the process.

This analysis attempted to expand the existent evidence for the concept of young carers which is currently focused on long term illness, excluding adolescents who experience a caring role over a limited time. There is paucity in the literature on adolescents who care for their parents with cancer as potential "carers" and this can lead to a lack of acknowledgment and validation of the significant care they provide. Fives et al. (2010; 2013) agreed that young carers are a hard to reach and invisible group, which, therefore, lack the appropriate supports to respond to their needs. Future research can benefit from a deeper understanding of the experiences of adolescents as "carers" to inform policy as to how to identify and respond to the needs of these adolescents that can be described as "temporary" carers but still experience challenges like long term carers do.

Caring for an ill family member can be a normal part of development but the challenges of maternal cancer can exceed normal developmental processes. Therefore, practitioners need to be sensitive to adolescents' needs to ensure that assuming caring roles does not have a negative impact on their lives. Assuming additional responsibilities can be burdensome for adolescents at this stage. Maternal cancer implied another transition from being cared for to becoming carers for their mothers and families. Even though these transitions were challenging, adolescents showed great bravery, resilience and determination. Adolescents became a source of support for their ill mothers and families at a very challenging time even if they were still in need of care and support from their mothers at this age (Davey et al., 2005).

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Author information

Dr. Leonor Rodriguez, UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre, ILAS Building, NUI Galway, Ireland. Leonor is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre. She has experience in health and clinical psychology working with families, children and young people that experience chronic illness in her native Costa Rica. Leonor completed her PhD in the School of Psychology, NUI Galway entitled: 'Understanding adolescent adjustment to maternal cancer: A study of personal experiences and psychological factors that promote adjustment'.

Dr. AnnMarie Groarke, Head of School of Psychology, NUI Galway. Dr Groarke, is a graduate of NUI Galway carried out research on cognitive and health psychology and was awarded MA and

PhD degrees in the field. Senior Lecturer in the School of Psychology she was appointed Head of School in 2009. Dr Groarke was elected Vice Dean of the Arts Faculty 2003 - 2006. She was the Director of the MPsychSc in Health Psychology Programme from 1998 - 2002 and was Chair of the Psychological Society of Ireland Health Psychology Special Interest Group for a two year term. She served as National Delegate for Ireland to the European Health Psychology Society (EHPS) and served as a member of the Scientific Committee for the EHPS Health Psychology Society Conferences 2005 and 2006 and as Track Chair 2013 and 2015. She is a chartered Health Psychologist of the British Psychological Society. Her current research work examines the psychological impact of cancer.

Professor Pat Dolan, UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre, NUI Galway. Prof. Dolan is joint founder and Director of the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre and Academic Director of the M.A. in Family Support Studies. He contributes to the undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes of the School of Political Science and Sociology. Prof. Dolan holds the UNESCO Chair in Children, Youth and Civic Engagement. He has worked with and for families as a practitioner, service manager and academic for over 20 years. He has an extensive body of research on family issues. His major research interests are Civic Engagement, Youth Mentoring Models, Adolescent Resilience and Social Networks.

Dr. Pádraig MacNeela, School of Psychology, NUI Galway. Dr Pádraig MacNeela is a lecturer and director of PhD studies at the School of Psychology, NUI Galway, and co-leader of the Community Engaged Research in Action research cluster at the Institute for Lifecourse and Society. His current research is focused on young adults' experiences of sexual health, alcohol use, and gender. He also has expertise in studying illness and well-being from the perspective of both health care providers and patients. Pádraig's research has included nurses, mental health professionals, general practitioners, community partners, and student services, and has had a particular focus on qualitative research methodologies.

Healing transitions in serious fun camps

Peter J. Kearney

Healing Transitions in Serious Fun Camps

Plato's analysis of Eros as a force that deprives one of one's faculties of distinction and judgement, thus allowing a potentially overwhelming capacity for imitative receptivity to take hold and to drive attempts to possess qualities and constitute identities, but that can at the same time shake up, turn around and elevate.

(Horvath and Szokolczai, 2014, p.69).

Introduction

Vulnerable campers returning from a short experience in Barretstown, a holiday camp for children with life threatening disorders, appeared changed for the better. The camp staff saw the change; the parents on reunion hardly recognised their children's demeanour and hospital carers were surprised. Social transformations in one to two weeks are remarkable. Popular accounts portray Serious Fun camps as magical places, but magic disguises a theoretical conundrum that needs elucidation through recognition of concepts that help understand the magic. Serious Fun camps may be like *rites of passage* which facilitate healing in *halls of mimesis* that are the special circumstances enabling subconscious imitation of revered counsellors¹. The opening quotation from Horvath and Szokolczai describes very well the force of *mimetic eros* ("imitative receptivity") that may transit children to wellbeing. The paper suggests that the outcome of camp is *salutogenesis* – whereby vulnerability has been transformed into *joie de vivre*. These concepts, elaborated below, may facilitate an understanding of how this can happen. This theoretical paper provides a framework for empirical research described elsewhere (Kearney, 2009; 2011), but briefly summarised, consisted of a mixture of clinical observations (as a paediatrician) in a leukaemia unit, participant observation at fun camps in different settings and jurisdictions, as well as interviews and focus

groups with camp staff, participants and alumni, conducted over thirteen years.

Rites of Passage

Serious Fun camps have a tripartite rite of passage structure (Kearney, 2009) of separation, transition and reintegration (Van Gennep, 1960) with experiences of liminality and *communitas* in the transitional phase (Turner, 1969). The campers completely separate from hospital routines and limiting medical conventions. They abandon prior lifestyles and sick roles to a sense of fellowship (an equality of common illness experiences). Liminality describes an in-between state or a borderland, where risks and opportunities of new possibilities (liberty) encourage communal fellow feeling of *communitas* (fraternity). Liberty, equality and fraternity hint of change in the air and even revolution. Rites of passage were tribal means of transforming social status from commoner to king or child to adulthood. These rites first dismantle social status and dispense with prevailing conventions. Levelling of ritual novices is a necessary precursor to progress into a more exalted status in society. When campers return home they do not have the benefit of a socially recognised change in status, but they convey a sense of being healed. In medical terms the children were still 'in status quo' – their burden of illness had not changed. Status change does not capture what was happening to these children. Nonetheless they had changed and interviews, several years later when the campers were adults, pinpointed the camping experience as a pivotal episode in their lives; but the nature of the children's social transformation was unresolved. Initial findings suggested that the ritual passage design of camp was an important context for facilitating transformation. Later interviews as adults focused on vivid memories of their Caras - Serious Fun camps are supervised by Counsellors and a constant presence for the children during camp. In Ireland, the counsellors are called Caras. The transformation seemed to depend on Cara-Camper mimetic relationships that opened new possibilities.

Halls of Mimesis

Mimesis is a Greek term for imitation. According to Merlin Donald (2005) there are overlapping levels of imitation ranging from mimicry, through imitation to mimesis. Mimicry, the simplest term is speaking like a parrot – a thoughtless copy; whereas imitation copies the purpose of action as well. Mimesis, the most complex form of reduplication, communicates action with creative representations as happens in pretend play. Donald suggested that early hominids communicated in mimetic cultures long before Homo Sapiens had language. The idea that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny or that child development replays evolution is regarded as an old fable (Ernest Haeckel, 1866, cited in Wikipedia, 2016). The notion fell into disrepute but has resurfaced through human genome research that traces our genetic heritage back into animal and plant kingdoms. Paediatricians are aware that human infants are able to communicate by overlapping levels of imitation in early childhood. Facial expressions, body language, gestures and pointing anticipate the development of speech that reprises Donald's suggestion of mimetic cultures preceding language acquisition in a symbolic culture.

Rene Girard (1996) suggested that socialisation and enculturation cannot proceed without mimesis of apprenticeship. Learning a mother tongue is a covert process, but can be made overt as word birth can be heard and recorded (Roy, 2009). Plato appreciated mimetic learning, but Girard's study of great literary works suggested a more fundamental operation: human desires are acquired by mimesis of appropriation. Longings are not our own, but are transmitted in halls of mimesis where we subconsciously absorb fashionable lifestyles, dress, cuisine and ambitions. Desires are constituted subconsciously from others as an unfathomable yearning that shapes our perception and behaviour. Mimetic desires may override appetites and free humanity from instinctive behaviours; but desires also generate envy that can easily get out of hand. Mimetic violence triggered by envious greed

and rivalry was dangerous. Innate mechanisms of dominance confined primate aggression to individual confrontations. Burgeoning mimetic skills in human evolution may have co-evolved with release from genetic constraints. The retreat of natural constraints permitted contagious mimetic violence in Homo Sapiens which became a threat to survival of the species. For Girard the scapegoat mechanism stayed the violence in a way that founded religion and culture. Scapegoats are random victims whose innocence generates a sacred peace. Children with cancer and leukaemia are likewise innocent victims – and they too have the power to still profanity and change their caretakers. The Caras say Barretstown was like a barracks square during training as they were cursing like troopers, but their language refined spontaneously with the arrival of children to camp. Little did the Caras realise that they were about to be placed on a pedestal as models for campers' brief liminal experiences of healthy possibility.

Mimetic Eros: *Dia agus Diabhal*

There is a startling difference between the attractive goodness and beauty that gathers people together, one by one, in saintly discipleship and the evil that spreads division through the masses (Paul Ricoeur, 1998, cited in Astell, 2004, p. 116).

Mimetic human desire can be either a source of greed, envy and violence or inspiration for "attractive goodness and beauty". God and the devil are two sides of the same mimetic coin acknowledged as *Gaeilge* by the close pronunciations of *Dia* and *Diabhal*. Eros is a wild card in liminal situations and has the power to propel participants towards either pole of the mimetic coin. According to Hamerton-Kelly (1992) Eros and Agape are extremes of mimetic human desire – Eros reflecting a disposition towards acquisition and conflict whereas the desire of Agape is gracious and generous; in other words, two forms of the same basic human propensity, one alienated and the other

integrated. This paper takes Eros as the generic form of human desire that when undisciplined can be a source of greed, envy and violence or a disciplined inspiration for 'attractive goodness and beauty' when converted to Agape. Eros is desire deformed by acquisitive and conflictual mimesis; Agape is desire reformed by gracious and generous mimetic behaviour. Somehow a desire for health or a longing for a wholeness of being was not part of Girard's theory, but has been rectified by Antonovsky's theory of salutogenesis (Antonovsky, 1987).

Salutogenesis

Antonovsky (1987) introduced the term salutogenesis to suggest questing for the good life that is achieved by experiencing life as coherent. He wanted to redirect health research away from emphasis on risk, ill health and disease, towards a focus on people's resources and their capacity to create health (Lindsröm and Eriksson, 2005). Antonovsky (1922-1994) a medical sociologist, born in America spent most of his academic life in Israel. He first introduced the concept of salutogenesis, because his research found some female survivors of the holocaust who enjoyed life to the full. They had somehow been instilled with a salutogenic joie de vivre in early childhood that was able to overcome the unspeakable experience of the holocaust. Counsellors in camp inspired children with salutogenesis – a longing for a wholeness of being – and unwittingly transmitted possibilities of health and wellbeing. Mimetic processes can be traced from infancy through childhood as intermittent social and cultural conditions of liminality that stamp a person's character for better or worse. The mimetic capacity in humanity seems inexhaustible. It has an immense subconscious power to coordinate beliefs, intentions and desires. The control of mimetic apertures is one of the keys to understanding transformations. We are very open to mimesis in fraternal situations such as the liminal phase in a rite of passage. These conditions in Serious Fun camps facilitate an intense one to one relationship between

campers and counsellors. For the campers, the relationship is effectively a discipleship as they are separated from their counsellors by seniority and fullness of being. Counsellors exist in a separate social space that makes mimetic relationships with sick children impervious to rivalry but permeable to a discipleship of health and wellbeing.

It's because of things my counsellors instilled on me the desire to act on my dreams, and if I didn't have camp I don't think I would have heard all those worldly stories. I don't think I would have that inner energy and desire to go for what I want. (Serious Fun Camper, California).

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Author information

Professor Peter Kearney is Emeritus Professor of Paediatrics at University College Cork. Retired Consultant Paediatrician, Cork University Hospital. PhD (Sociology) University College Cork, 2012. Temporary Lecturer in Sociology, University College Cork.



The Children's Research Network for Ireland and Northern Ireland

The Children's Research Digest is a publication of the Children's Research Network for Ireland and Northern Ireland. The Network is a membership organisation that aims to support the research community to better understand and improve the lives of children by:

- Creating and maintaining an inclusive, independent, non-profit network
- Sharing information, knowledge, experience, learning and skills.

Since its launch in 2010, the Network has over 300 members from academia, government, voluntary and independent sectors of children's research on the island of Ireland. The Network seeks to build bridges between researchers in the various sectors of the community and develop structures to promote the sharing of information, learning and good practice. We hope that the Children's Research Digest will

contribute towards the sharing of such learning by members both with other members and among the wider research community. Other ways in which learning is shared include an annual conference, thematic sub-groups (such as the Early Childhood Research Group), seminars throughout the island, PhD symposium and project days where links are built between practitioners and researchers. The Network accepts new members at any time of the year. As a member you are entitled to reduced cost or free attendance at training sessions and other events, mailings on upcoming events, news and jobs in the sector, access to our LinkedIn group, membership of sub-groups and the possibility to publish in the Children's Research Digest. We also produce a Members Directory with listings of names, organisations, contacts details and research interests of members.

The Network is supported by The Atlantic Philanthropies and the Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

Children's Research Network for Ireland and Northern Ireland

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