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Leah O'Toole
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# A Bio-ecological Perspective on Educational Transition:

# Experiences of Children, Parents and Teachers

Leah O'Toole

Thesis submitted for the award of PhD

Supervisors: Prof Nóirín Hayes and Dr Máire Mhic Mhathúna

Dublin Institute of Technology, School of Languages, Law and Social Sciences

2016

**Abstract**

This thesis explores the potential of Bronfenbrenner's Bio-ecological Model of Human Development (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006) as a framework for theory and research in psychology, sociology and education. It draws on other well-known conceptual approaches, particularly Bourdieu's theories of social reproduction, habitus, field and cultural capital, investigating points of theoretical enhancement and synthesis. This culminates in the development of eight Propositions for a Bio-ecological Framework. These are then tested using data from a qualitative examination of two key educational transitions, pre-school to primary and primary to secondary school. Using qualitative methodologies, this research explores perspectives of children, teachers and parents in a case-study primary school in Ireland, the three pre-schools that feed into it, and the two secondary schools into which it feeds. The data are analysed using the Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) approach (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006), and yield the key finding that relationships are crucial to positive transitions, perhaps even more important than the contexts in which they take place. Other findings emphasise the impact of diversity (cultural, socio-economic, etc), specific skills for traversing new settings, the importance of time, both personal and socio-historical, and the vital nature of supports for transition, locally and at policy-level. The research is particularly innovative in foregrounding the potential impacts of transition on parents, and their roles in supporting children at these times. Interestingly, the findings were remarkably similar for both transitions, regarding fears and hopes of parents and children. The Propositions of the Bio-ecological Framework are supported by the data, and so it may provide an appropriate conceptual basis for future work. The thesis concludes with recommendations for policy, research and practice.

*Key-words:* Bio-ecological, Educational transition, Children, Parents, Schools,

## Declaration

I certify that this thesis which I now submit for examination for the award of PhD is entirely my own work and has not been taken from the work of others, save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

This thesis was prepared according to the regulations for postgraduate study by research of the Dublin Institute of Technology and has not been submitted in whole or in part for another award in any other third level institution.

The work reported on in this thesis conforms to the principles and requirements of the DIT's guidelines for ethics in research.

DIT has permission to keep, lend or copy this thesis in whole or in part, on condition that any such use of the material of the thesis be duly acknowledged.

Signature _____ Date _____

Candidate

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## Glossary and List of Abbreviations

### Glossary

| | |
|---|---|
| Accommodation: | Piagetian concept. When learning new information, humans may change their understanding of an idea to incorporate the new information into their previous understanding. |
| Assimilation: | Piagetian concept. Through assimilation, we take in new information or experiences and incorporate them into our existing ideas. The process is somewhat subjective, because we tend to modify experience or information somewhat to fit in with our pre-existing beliefs. |
| Attachment: | Bond formed by an infant with the primary care-giver, postulated by Attachment Theorists to form the basis of all future relationships, and of psychological health and well-being for the rest of the individual's life. Attachment may be 'secure', 'insecure ambivalent /resistant', 'insecure avoidant' or 'disorganised'. |
| Bio-ecological Model: | Model of human development conceptualised by Urie Bronfenbrenner and colleagues. Central features include an emphasis on relationships and interactions with other human beings as well as objects and symbols, and the importance of context in understanding development. |
| Bio-ecological Framework: | Extension of key principles of the Bio-ecological Model to incorporate insights from a wide range of other theories from psychology, sociology and education. |
| Chrono-system: | Bio-ecological concept. A level of context within Bronfenbrenner's Bio-ecological Model; the patterning of environmental events and transitions over the life-course of the person. |
| Cultural capital: | Bourdieusian concept. The idea that the habitus (or taken-for-granted behaviours and ways of being) of certain groups and individuals are valued by the dominant culture whereas the habitus of other groups and individuals are devalued. |
| Demand characteristics: | Bio-ecological concept. Characteristics of the child which invite or discourage reactions from the social environment of a kind that can foster or disrupt the operation of 'proximal processes'. |

Directive belief systems: Beliefs developed by means of internalisation of experience, through which children begin to conceptualise a sense of agency (or potentially helplessness) within the world. Such belief systems may direct behaviour, thereby impacting on future experiences, which can in turn reinforce directive belief systems in a process of reciprocal determinism. This concept is evident in many theories such as Social Cognitive Theory and Bio-ecological Theory.

Dispositions: Characteristics of the child which may be 'generative', inviting positive responses from others, or 'disruptive', inviting impatient, aggressive or other negative responses from others. This concept has been explored by many writers from psychological, sociological and educational perspectives.

Educational transition: May refer to 'multiple transitions'. In the current work, educational transition refers to the move from pre-school to primary school and from primary to secondary school.

Embodiment: Bourdieusian concept. People's relationships to dominant culture are conveyed in a range of activities, including eating, speaking and gesturing. As such, the social becomes 'embodied' and is inscribed in the body of the biological individual.

Equilibration: Piagetian concept. Piaget believed that children try to strike a balance between assimilation and accommodation and this is achieved through equilibration. Disequilibration is considered important in Piagetian theory because it motivates children to explore the world and thus develop their understanding.

Exo-system: Bio-ecological concept. A level of context within Bronfenbrenner's Bio-ecological Model; links between those systems of which the child has direct experience, and those settings which the child may never enter but which may nevertheless affect what happens to them.

Field: Bourdieusian concept. An environment, or space in which childhood is under question with both a literal, practical meaning, and a symbolic, cultural one.

Habitus: Bourdieusian concept. A set of dispositions, reflexes and forms of behaviour that people acquire through acting in society.

Internalisation: Interweaving of cultural, relational and biological influences to determine the characteristics and behaviour of the child. This concept is evident in many theories such as Attachment Theory, Bio-ecological Theory and Socio-cultural Theory.

Internal working model: Concept from Attachment Theory. Internalisation of the quality of attachment with the primary care-giver, which then forms the basis of the child's concept of self (as loved and lovable or unloved and unlovable) as well as providing foundation and direction to future relationships.

Linkages: Bio-ecological concept. Experiences, structures and processes that tie various micro-systems together and encourage individuals to apply the learning from one setting to events in another.

Macro-system: Bio-ecological concept. A level of context within Bronfenbrenner's Bio-ecological Model; the wider pattern of ideology and organisation of social institutions common to a particular social class or culture to which a person belongs.

Mediated learning: Socio-cultural concept. Acknowledges biological inheritance as the basis for subsequent development, but maintains that higher order functioning develops through social activity that is embedded in the cultural values of particular communities.

Meso-system: Bio-ecological concept. A level of context within Bronfenbrenner's Bio-ecological Model; the level taking account of interconnections and relations between two or more settings, such as school, peer group and family, and acknowledging their impact on the individual. In short, the meso-system is a system of two or more micro-systems.

Micro-system: Bio-ecological concept. A level of context within Bronfenbrenner's Bio-ecological Model; the level of which the individual person has direct experience on a regular basis.

Neoliberalism: A political theory supporting minimisation of government interference in the 'free-market'. In an educational context, such approaches argue in favour of accountability, narrowing of curriculum, and measurement of achievement through standardised testing.

Nurturing pedagogy: Approach to early childhood education which emphasises the educative value of care and the caring nature of education.

Parenting styles: Patterns of disciplinary interactions between adults and children which can be authoritarian (characterised by complete control by adult), permissive (characterised by complete control by child) or authoritative (whereby control is judiciously shared within a loving relationship).

Proximal processes: Bio-ecological concept. Progressively more complex reciprocal interaction between an active, evolving, biopsychological human organism and the persons, objects and symbols in its immediate environment.

Resilience: Complex interaction of protective and risk factors in interaction with the personal characteristics of the child, leading to positive or normative outcomes in spite of challenging or traumatic circumstances.

Resource characteristics: Bio-ecological concept. Experience, knowledge and skills required for effective functioning of 'proximal processes' at a given stage of development.

Scaffolding: Socio-cultural concept. Gradual removal of adult support as a child becomes more competent.

Self-efficacy: Concept from Social Cognitive Theory. A person's self-efficacy beliefs reflect the level of competence they believe themselves to have in a given domain.

Social reproduction: Bourdieusian concept. Our individual habitus leads us to reproduce the social conditions we ourselves experienced. This idea has been used to explain intergenerational cycles of poverty and disadvantage.

Synaptic pruning: The process by which the brain adapts to experience. Synapses or brain connections that have been reinforced by virtue of repeated experience in early life tend to become permanent; the synapses that were not used often enough in the early years are eliminated – in this way experiences (positive or negative) that children have in their early lives influence the ways their brains will be wired in adulthood.

System blockage: The tendency for systems to instil inertia in those within them.

Temperament: The child's tendency to respond to the environment in characteristic ways, in terms of energy levels, persistence, and tolerance of frustration.

| | |
|---|---|
| Zone of Proximal Development: | Sociocultural concept. The gap between what a child can achieve alone, and that which can be achieved with support from a 'more expert other'. |

**Abbreviations**

| | |
|---|---|
| DAP | Developmentally Appropriate Practice |
| DEIS | Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools |
| ECCE | Early Childhood Care and Education |
| FPSY | Free Pre-school Year |
| HSCL | Home School Community Liaison |
| ITE | Initial Teacher Education |
| NCCA | National Council for Curriculum and Assessment |
| NEYAI | National Early Years Access Initiative |
| PISA | Programme for International Student Assessment |
| PIRLS | Progress in Reading Literacy Study |
| PPCT | Process-Person-Context-Time |
| SCP | School Completion Project |
| SEN | Special Educational Needs |
| SES | Socio-economic Status |
| ZPD | Zone of Proximal Development |

# Chapter 1: Introduction

Bronfenbrenner's Bio-ecological Model of Human Development has been identified as an appropriate conceptual framework for a wide range of educational and developmental research (Lewthwaite, 2011). It can assist in elucidating potential contributors or inhibitors to positive outcomes and explain interactions between various influential factors (Downes, 2014; Tobbell and O'Donnell, 2005). However, the power of the Bio-ecological Model has remained largely unrealised to date, in terms of its potential to provide for conceptual synthesis of other theories from psychology, sociology and education. Disciplines within the social sciences are often experienced by those meeting with them for the first time as a collection of disparate theories and ideas, often with little obvious relation to each other or to real world situations. Bronfenbrenner's focus on the child in society allows for consideration of a multitude of factors, and even permits analysis through the lenses provided by many other theorists without losing coherence. It also allows us to reconsider false lines of disciplinary demarcation between the areas traditionally studied by psychologists and those studied by sociologists, which is particularly useful for educational research. Real children, with real families in real schools do not exist in compartmentalised worlds for ease of study, and this is clearly recognised by a Bio-ecological approach.

Since Bronfenbrenner's conception of his own theory involved evolution, flux and development (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006), this allows for understanding of the theory to be further elaborated by those who follow. This thesis aims to develop the potential of the Bio-ecological Model as a unifying structure within which to understand other important theories, and to analyse how they apply in practice. Thus, a 'Bio-ecological Framework' is developed, drawing on many important theories from psychology, sociology and education. This Framework aims to support theoretical coherence in these fields, encouraging

interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary work, and also enhancing understanding of key elements and predictions of the Bio-ecological Model itself. Specifically, eight 'Propositions' are developed which, this thesis argues, may provide a conceptual framework for further research on a diversity of topics from a variety of disciplines.

While the applications of a Bio-ecological perspective are extensive therefore, one potential criticism of Bronfenbrenner's work is that rather than designing any practical research through which to test his Model, his writing remained largely theoretical. In his seminal chapter with Pamela Morris (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006), Bronfenbrenner called for future researchers to develop such practical work. This doctoral research is a response to that challenge. It tests the predictions of the eight Propositions of the synthesised Bio-ecological Framework through confrontation with data on the specific area of children's educational transitions, and the multitude of other factors impacting on them, particularly parents' involvement.

The importance of transitions through education systems has been highlighted in this country (Mhic Mhathúna, 2011; O'Kane, 2015; O'Kane and Hayes, 2006) and internationally (Brooker, 2008; Dockett and Perry, 2013), focussing on transition from pre-school to primary school and continuing to transition from primary to second level. A review of the literature on educational transition highlights the complexity of transitional experiences for children and families, with O'Kane (2007; 2015) suggesting that influences are multi-level, from home, through schools and into communities. However, the experiences of parents and families at times of transition are under-represented in the literature (Dockett, Perry and Kearney, 2012). Equally, Tobbell and O'Donnell (2005) argue that much research on educational transition is flawed by the failure to locate it within an appropriate theoretical perspective, allowing for

coherent analysis of multiple interacting factors, and acknowledgement of the complexity of experiences at these times:

> Children acknowledge the need to know the rules but there is little information on what constitutes these rules or how children negotiate them. Teachers and parents recognise the importance of relationship but the nature of these relationships in the school is not discussed. School is a societally constructed institution designed to promote learning, yet the content of that which must be learned remains unexplored (p. 3).

The Bio-ecological Framework allows elucidation of these elements. This thesis is not the first work to frame educational transition within a Bio-ecological approach (Margetts and Kienig, 2013), and in fact Brooker (2008) refers to Bronfenbrenner as "the 'father' of transitions studies" (p. 5). The current thesis builds on this previous work, and the application of the Bio-ecological Framework to the specific area of educational transition has two clear aims:

1. To test various predictions and the eight key Propositions of the newly synthesised Bio-ecological Framework through confrontation with real-world data, as suggested by Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006).
2. To elucidate seemingly disparate findings on educational transition through theorising them as advocated by Tobbell and O'Donnell (2005).

This thesis begins in Chapter 2 by outlining the Bio-ecological Model as described by Bronfenbrenner, while also maximising the utility and flexibility of the Model as a Framework or 'meta-theory', drawing on various other sources and modes of thought. It particularly draws parallels between the Bio-ecological Model and Bourdieu's (1973; 1986) theories on field, habitus, capital and social reproduction, but also incorporates numerous other important theories such as, for example, Attachment Theory, Humanism, Baumrind's theories on disciplinary styles and Socio-cultural Theory. The chapter is organised using

Bronfenbrenner's (1995) Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) conceptualisation, and following the most recent formulation of Bio-ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006), 'process' is foregrounded. This analysis leads to the development of the eight key Propositions of the Bio-ecological Framework.

Chapter 3 explores Irish and international literature on transition from pre-school to primary school and primary to secondary school through the lens of the Bio-ecological Framework developed in Chapter 2. The literature on the two transitions is again structured around the influences of 'process', 'person', 'context' and 'time' on experiences, emphasising 'process' for children, parents, teachers, schools and communities. It then goes on to explore the impact of diversity on individual experiences of transition with regards to culture, language, religion, socio-economic status, disability, gender and family structure.

Chapter 4 describes the qualitative methodology (interviews, focus groups, observation and text analysis) used within the PPCT structure in this doctoral research. The chapter begins by exploring the paradigms underpinning the research, and locating Bronfenbrenner's PPCT approach within both interpretive and critical paradigms. It then explores ethical considerations, describes the sample in terms of both participants and school/pre-school contexts, and finally gives an outline of the research instruments used and the mode of data analysis.

Chapter 5 presents and discusses the findings of the research. It mirrors the structure of Chapter 3, organising results in terms of 'processes' for children, parents, teachers, schools and communities, followed by consideration of issues of diversity that may affect all groups. Throughout, the data are critically analysed with reference to existing literature on both

educational transition and parental involvement, and this chapter addresses the aim of theorising educational transition within the Bio-ecological Framework.

Chapter 6 addresses the aim of testing the predictive power of the key theoretical and conceptual Propositions identified in Chapter 2 through confrontation with practical findings. It indicates that the data from the current research support a Bio-ecological conceptualisation of a child's world, characterised by complexity, synergisms, multi-factorial and bi-directional influences, all negotiated by active children and families with individual needs and strengths. The Propositions of the Bio-ecological Framework are, in the main, supported by the data.

Chapter 7 discusses the implications of these findings, and offers conclusions and recommendations regarding support for children, families, schools and communities engaged in educational transition. Recommendations are structured around 'process' at micro-level, meso-level and finally exo- and macro-levels, with the understanding that the temporal concerns of the chrono-system permeate all levels.

Due to the case-study nature of this Bio-ecological study, no claims of generalisability are made. Nevertheless, this thesis offers a strong contribution to the fields of psychology, sociology and education in the form of the synthesised Bio-ecological Framework which could potentially be applied to research on a wide variety of topics within a diversity of disciplinary perspectives. Equally, the research sheds light on previously disparate findings on educational transition through theorising them, and the data gathered on educational transition in the Irish context provide rich, contextual understanding of such processes in this country. The work is particularly innovative in foregrounding the experiences of parents and families, and in identifying the importance of relationships in the meso-system during

transition. Therefore, in spite of the small-scale nature of the research, some findings may be transferable to other settings and this research may be useful to those working in the area of educational transition in policy, practice and research.

# Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

## 2.1 Introduction

The theoretical framework for the current doctoral work draws on Bronfenbrenner's Bio-ecological Model of Human Development, and the Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) structure it provides. However, this thesis aims to illustrate the explanatory power of the model by developing its potential as a 'Framework' within which to incorporate many other theories and modes of thought, from disciplines including psychology, sociology and early childhood education. The chapter begins with a brief introduction of the Bio-ecological Model, followed by analysis of points of commonality between it and the sociological theories of Pierre Bourdieu.

Much of the remainder of the chapter is structured around the concept of 'process' (or relationships) which is foregrounded in the most up-to-date versions of the Bio-ecological Model (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). In elucidating this concept, various theoretical understandings of relationships are incorporated, including Attachment Theory, Baumrind's (1971) theories on disciplinary 'styles', Rogers' (1974; 1995) Humanism, Piaget's (1951; 2001) Theory of Cognitive Development and Socio-cultural Theory. Due to the mutual influence between 'process', 'person', 'context' and 'time' posited by the model, many aspects of the other elements are incorporated into the exploration of 'process'. However, the chapter then goes on to explore in more depth the synergy between 'person' and 'context', drawing not only on Bronfenbrenner's conceptualisations, but also the sociological theories of Bourdieu (1973; 1986), the psychological work of Bandura (1994), Dweck (1999; 2007) and Thomas and Chess (1977), and research in early childhood education by writers such as Carr and Claxton (2002) and Katz (1988; 1993a). The chapter finally examines the

importance of 'time' in understanding children's development, incorporating the work of Elder (1998), explorations from various sources on the concept of 'sensitive' periods for development, and consideration of the theoretical and policy-making 'zeitgeist' (Gergen, 1973), particularly the current shift towards neo-liberalism in education (Sahlberg, 2014).

In the course of the development of a newly synthesised 'Bio-ecological Framework', this chapter identifies eight 'Propositions' that this thesis argues are key to understanding children's development in context.

## 2.2 Bronfenbrenner's Bio-ecological Model of Human Development: An Introduction

According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), no child lives in an isolated vacuum. It is impossible to understand a child's development if we do not consider its social context. He has therefore presented an ecological model of child development, which allows consideration of a child's world on a number of levels. This model has been updated a number of times since its original (1979) exposition, to incorporate biological components and temporal concerns, and is now referred to as the Bio-ecological Model of Human Development (Bronfenbrenner 1993; 1994; 1995; Bronfenbrenner and Ceci, 1993; 1994; Bronfenbrenner and Morris 1998; 2006). Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) refer to the model as "an evolving theoretical system" (p. 793), and the current doctoral work seeks not only to embed understanding of educational transition within Bio-ecological Theory, but also in turn to support the continued evolution and understanding of the theory through confrontation with data on educational transition in Ireland. Therefore, what follows outlines the Bio-ecological Model as described by Bronfenbrenner, while also maximising the utility and flexibility of the theory as a framework or 'meta-theory'.

The concept of child development, as defined by Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998), refers to "stability and change in the bio-psychological characteristics of human beings over the life-course and across generations. There are no restrictive assumptions of change 'for the better', nor of continuity in the characteristics of the same person over time" (p. 995). These are seen as issues to be investigated. The Bio-ecological Model operates through a multi-layered approach, at the centre of which is the child, viewed by Bronfenbrenner as an active agent in his or her own world. The personality traits, temperament, motivations, genetic inheritance, and dispositions[1] of the child influence and are in turn influenced by the other levels of the Bio-ecological system. A child's dispositions may be 'generative', inviting positive responses from others and so in a cyclical fashion supporting development of future generative dispositions, or 'disruptive', inviting impatient, aggressive or other negative responses from others, potentially leading to exacerbation of disruptive tendencies in the child in the future (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006).

The 'micro-system' refers to the level of which the individual person has direct experience on a regular basis, e. g. school, home, etc. This is the level on which psychology has traditionally focused without, Bronfenbrenner argues, due regard to other environmental influences on both the system and the child therein. The Bio-ecological Model describes the micro-system as:

> A pattern of activities, social roles and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given face-to-face setting with particular physical, social, and symbolic features that invite, permit or inhibit engagement in sustained, progressively more complex interaction with, and activity in, the immediate environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1994, p.1645).

The 'meso-system' describes the level taking account of interconnections and relations between two or more settings, such as school, peer group and family, and

[1] 'Dispositions' is a much contested term within psychology, sociology and early childhood education. While it is briefly introduced here, it is deconstructed in great detail on page 58 under the title 'The Synergy between Person and Context'.

acknowledging their impact on the individual. In short, the meso-system is a system of two or more micro-systems (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 1998; 2006). This is a very powerful concept which elucidates how behaviour in any one setting is a function not only of experiences in that setting, but in the full range of settings experienced by the person. For example, Slesnick, Prestopnik, Meyers and Glassman (2007) outline the power of the meso-system in explaining the problems faced by homeless youth, showing how "an individual's relationships in every setting are impacted by relationships in other settings in that individual's life. There is… a chain of activity that individuals drag with them across micro-systems" (p. 1238). According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), this happens through 'linkages' that tie various micro-systems together and encourage individuals to apply the learning from one setting to events in another. The stronger the linkages and the more consistency experienced by children in the meso-system, the easier it is for them to traverse micro-systems. The Bio-ecological model emphasises that lives are lived interdependently through a network of shared relationships, or 'linked lives'.

The 'exo-system' consists of links between those systems of which the child has direct experience, and those settings which the child may never enter but which may nevertheless affect what happens to them. This includes such areas as a parent's workplace, parent-teacher meetings, school-community links, etc. In other words:

> The exo-system comprises the links and processes taking place between two or more settings, at least one of which does not contain the developing person, but in which events occur that indirectly influence processes within the immediate setting in which the developing person lives (Bronfenbrenner, 1993, p. 24).

This assumes a two-step causal sequence in development, whereby events in the exo-system affect the developing person's micro-system, hence influencing the person's development, but a causal sequence is also postulated to run in the other direction, whereby a

person may set in motion processes in the micro-system that reverberate through other systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The 'macro-system' consists of the wider pattern of ideology and organisation of social institutions common to a particular social class or culture to which a person belongs, such as patterns of racism, cultural norms, etc. It refers to similarities within a given culture or subculture in the form and content of its constituent micro-, meso- and exo-systems, as well as any belief systems underlying such similarities. Cultures and subcultures can be expected to be different from each other, but relatively homogenous internally (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The most recent addition to the model is the 'chrono-system'. This refers to the patterning of environmental events and transitions over the life-course of the person (Bronfenbrenner 1995; Bronfenbrenner and Morris 1998; 2006). In effect, this recognises that experiences and reactions to experience often change over time. For example, research shows that the effects of divorce peak in children after one year, and by two years after the divorce, the family is more stable (Hetherington, 2003). The chrono-system also considers the effect of socio-historical conditions on the development of the person. For example, women are more likely to be encouraged to have a career now than they were fifty years ago, and so this would shape the ambitions of individual women (Santrock, 2011), showing that "the life course of individuals is embedded in and shaped by the historical times and events they experience over their life-time" (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 1998, p.1020).

According to Tudge et al. (2009), the Bio-ecological Model was in a continual state of development, up until Bronfenbrenner's death in 2005. The most complete version was

published by Bronfenbrenner and Morris posthumously in 2006 (a re-working of their 1998 chapter), although it should be noted that even this was considered by the authors to be a 'work in progress'. It synthesised the levels of child, micro- meso- exo- macro- and chrono-systems as well as the fluid interactions between them, into four key elements to be used both in understanding child development, and in structuring research on it: Process, Person, Context, Time (PPCT). Within this approach, each element must be examined individually and in terms of their interaction (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006).

Regarding 'process', one of the central principles of the Bio-ecological Model is that children develop through the relationships they experience. Bronfenbrenner refers to these important relationships as 'proximal processes': "Human development takes place through processes of progressively more complex reciprocal interaction between an active, evolving biopsychological human organism and the persons, objects and symbols in its immediate environment" (Bronfenbrenner, 1995, p. 620). These interactions, it is thought, must occur regularly over time in order to be effective. The form, power and direction of 'proximal processes' affecting human development may vary as a joint function of the bio-psychological characteristics of the developing person, of the environment, both immediate and remote in which the processes are taking place, and the nature of the developmental outcomes under consideration. As such, Bronfenbrenner's model to some extent resolves the age-old nature-nurture debate, or at least 'reconceptualises' it, describing "environmental influences and the extent of their power to actualize individual differences in genetic potentials for human competence" (Bronfenbrenner and Ceci, 1994, p. 570).

Developmentally effective 'proximal processes', it is posited, are not unidirectional. In the case of interpersonal interaction, this means that initiatives should not come from just

one side, but there should be 'reciprocity of exchange' (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 1998; 2006). This means that, regarding 'person' factors, the individual is not viewed as a passive recipient of experiences within settings and 'processes'. The idea of a passively adapting child was sometimes invoked to critique the original ecological model (Santrock, 2011), and one of the driving forces leading Bronfenbrenner to write his 1989 chapter "re-assessing, revising, and extending—as well as regretting and even renouncing—some of the conceptions set forth in my 1979 monograph'' (Bronfenbrenner, 1989, p. 187) was the clarification that the child is an active participant in his or her own development. In the Bio-ecological Model, the person is seen as someone who helps construct settings through the actions they take within the opportunities and constraints of history and social circumstances. In this way, the biological component enters the model. The bio-psychological characteristics of the individual influence both sides of the equation; they are at once the product of prior developmental processes, and the partial producers of the person's future developmental course (Bronfenbrenner, 1995; Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 1998; 2006). Thus, the characteristics of the 'person' actually appear twice in the Bio-ecological Model - first as one of the components influencing the form, power, content and direction of 'proximal processes', and then again as 'developmental outcomes'.

In fact, an earlier iteration of the model (Bronfenbrenner, 1995) referred to the conception of humans as active agents in and on their environment as the first defining property of the Bio-ecological paradigm. These 'person' characteristics are also included in the definition of the micro-system, in the characteristics of parents, relatives, close friends, teachers, or any others who participate in the life of the developing person on a regular basis over time (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 1998; 2006).

With reference to ‘context’, the Bio-ecological Model rests on the assumption that biological factors and evolutionary processes do more than simply set limits on human development. They also impose imperatives regarding the environmental conditions necessary for a person to achieve their full potential (Bronfenbrenner and Ceci, 1993; 1994). This provides the necessity to investigate which environmental conditions are supportive to children. As Elder (1998) suggests, not even great talent and industry can ensure life success over adversity without opportunities. While later versions of the Bio-ecological Model place much stronger emphasis on other aspects, in particular ‘process’ (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006), it is perhaps the identification of the importance of ‘context’ for which it is best known, through its concepts of the micro-, meso-, exo- and macro-systems (Downes, 2014). Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006), while lamenting the overemphasis on ‘context’ to the detriment of ‘process’, ‘person’, and ‘time’ factors, do acknowledge that one of the key successes of their work has been to draw psychology away from a sole focus on “the study of strange behaviour of children in strange situations for the briefest possible period of time” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), towards a discipline steeped in ‘ecological validity’, recognising the futility of studying child development outside of the contexts in which it takes place.

Regarding the ‘time’ element of the model, Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) indicate that the form, content and direction of ‘proximal processes’ are strongly influenced by the “social continuities and changes occurring over time through the life course and the historical period during which the person has lived” (p. 798). This dimension has a prominent place at a number of levels. Micro-time refers to continuity versus discontinuity of relationships within the micro-system. Meso-time is the periodicity of these episodes across broader time intervals, such as days and weeks. Macro-time focuses on the changing expectations and events in the larger society, both within and across generations, as they

affect and are affected by processes and outcomes of human development, over the life course (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 1998; 2006)[2]. Effects of specific experiences may also be cumulative over time, with changes in outcome quite small and perhaps statistically insignificant initially, but yet predictive of significant changes in years to come (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006).

Drawing together the elements of 'process', 'person', 'context' and 'time' as the Bio-ecological Model does makes it imperative that human development is understood in both its cross-cultural context, that is in terms of its similarities and variations across cultures and subcultures, and its historical context, that is in terms of its similarities and variations over time. Looking at each of the elements of 'process', 'person', 'context' and 'time' as a system means recognising that no cog in the system moves in isolation and that actions in any one part of the system affect all the other parts. Indirect effects of 'person', 'context' and 'time' on 'proximal processes' are seen as 'more than the sum of their parts' rather than simply additive. This yields an impressively fluid, dynamic model built on "bidirectional, synergistic interrelationships" (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006, p. 799) that allows us to begin to unravel the complexity that is human development.

Downes (2014) refers to this 'mutual constitution' as 'interinfluence'. He identifies it as a key strength of a Bio-ecological approach, although he puts forward an analysis in which later iterations of the model represent a less innovative structure, with stronger emphasis on causal relations. Such criticisms may be valid with regards to the 1979 and 1995 iterations of the model, but the 2006 Bronfenbrenner and Morris chapter very clearly indicates (p. 817) that it is futile to try and 'control' for the interaction between variables such as social class or

[2] The original exposition of the Chronosystem referred to macro-time only, the introduction of Time into the PPCT model necessitating a refinement to include additional elements such as micro-time and meso-time. This is a good example of how the model has developed and changed.

ethnicity, since "no process occurs outside of a context. And if we want to understand context, we need to take it into account, not pretend to control it away" (Steinberg, Darling and Fletcher, 1995, p. 424). This resonates strongly with Downes' (2014) contention that "intervention models that 'work' causally have hidden necessary conditions in the system of relations without which the more obvious causal elements could not have occurred" (p. 36). As such, the Bio-ecological Model, emphasises complex, interactive, non-linear approaches to understanding factors involved in child development, and this represents a significant advantage to those attempting to understand the 'messiness' that is a child's life.

## 2.3 From Bronfenbrenner to Bourdieu: Habitus, Cultural Capital and Reproduction with reference to the Bio-ecological Model of Human Development

While Bronfenbrenner emphasises 'the child in society', it could be argued that as a developmental psychologist, he has tended to focus on the 'child' in somewhat more detail than on societal influence. Therefore, the functioning of the 'society' element of the model can be elucidated by drawing on the work of eminent sociologists such as Pierre Bourdieu. For Bourdieu, the goal of research is to uncover the most deeply buried structures of different social worlds, as well as the mechanisms that tend to ensure either their reproduction or transformation over time (Bourdieu, 1996; Reay, 2010). Within a Bio-ecological Framework, his work is particularly interesting in clarifying how events in the macro-system and chrono-system may impact on individuals. However, his theoretical work also supports the study of childhood at micro and macro level, potentially allowing "better understanding of why and how childhoods 'on-the-ground' are as they are, through interrelating private troubles with public issues" (Alanen, Brooker and Mayall, 2015, p. 1). Elements of his work are relevant to 'process', 'person', 'context' and 'time', so while the other theories incorporated into the Bio-ecological Framework in this chapter are largely analysed in terms of how they elucidate

one of these concepts, the theories of Bourdieu are first introduced in relation to all four, and also support the development of the concepts as the chapter progresses.

In explaining interlinkages between the child and society, Bourdieu's most famous concepts are the ideas of 'embodiment', 'field' 'habitus', 'capital' and 'social and cultural reproduction', and many of these can enhance conceptual elements of PPCT. As Reay (2010) explains, in Bourdieu's theories people's relationships to dominant culture are conveyed in a range of activities, including eating, speaking and gesturing (Bourdieu, 1984). As such, the social becomes 'embodied' and is inscribed in the body of the biological individual (Bourdieu, 1985), a concept consistent with a *Bio*-ecological Model of Human Development and relevant to both 'person' and 'context'. This embodied 'way of being' is known in Bourdieu's theories as 'habitus', or "a set of dispositions, reflexes and forms of behaviour that people acquire through acting in society" (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 19).

However, like Bronfenbrenner's theories on interlinking layers of environmental influence (micro-, meso-, exo- and macro-systems, or 'context'), Bourdieu, through his concept of 'field' shows that we do not all experience the same 'society'. Following Alanen et al. (2015), Bourdieu's notion of field is applied in the current research as "an environment, or space in which childhood is under question" (p. 4) with both a literal, practical meaning, and a symbolic, cultural one. Some major fields (and 'contexts') of operation for the participants in the current research are 'family', 'pre-school', 'primary school' and 'secondary school'. While they are 'real', practical spaces inhabited daily, they also can have symbolic meaning for individuals that may be contested. For example, if parents have had negative experiences of education they may assume that their children's experiences will be similar (Räty, 2010), even though the field of education has changed since they developed

their perceptions of what 'school' entails (Mayall, 2015). For children transitioning from pre-school, 'big school' may symbolise leaving behind the people, places and activities that they are comfortable with, and so may represent discontinuity and anxiety (Dunlop and Fabian, 2003).

A central aspect of Bourdieu's theories is that our individual habitus leads us to "'reproduce' the social conditions of our own production" (Bourdieu, 1990c, p. 87). This idea of social reproduction has been used to explain intergenerational cycles of poverty and disadvantage. Reay (2010) indicates that habitus is primarily a method for analysing the dominance of dominant groups in society and the domination of subordinate groups, and it can easily be applied to the analysis of gender or racial (as well as socio-economic) disadvantage. One of Bourdieu's best known and most widely-cited concepts in this context is that of 'cultural capital', or the idea that the habitus (or taken-for-granted behaviours and ways of being) of certain groups and individuals are valued by the dominant culture whereas the habitus of other groups and individuals are devalued – in other words, some groups and individuals possess better 'cultural capital' than others.

It is important to note that the basis of cultural capital is in fact a 'cultural arbitrary' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). As Brooker (2015) explains, "Culture is itself arbitrary: there is no objectively right or wrong way to bring up children. Instead every culture, and every type of cultural capital, derives from the field of practice in which it develops" (p. 43). The operation of habitus regularly excludes certain practices that are unfamiliar to the cultural groupings to which the individual belongs (Reay, 2010), so that, for example, the cultural capital possessed by children and parents from working class backgrounds may not be

appropriately valued in school settings that are based on middle-class culture (Mulkerrins, 2007). As explained by Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) without reference to Bourdieu:

> Parents living in a middle-class world are themselves more apt to possess and exhibit the knowledge and skills they wish their children to acquire. They also have greater access to resources and opportunities outside the family that can provide needed experiences for their children (p. 803).

Thus, Bourdieu's theories can be used to focus on the ways in which the socially advantaged and disadvantaged play out attitudes of cultural superiority and inferiority ingrained in their habitus in daily interactions (Reay, 2010). Habitus, capitals and fields interact, to the advantage of some and the disadvantage of others. Bourdieu specifically explores the impact of cultural capital on educational achievement, describing "the domestic transmission of cultural capital" as "the best hidden and most socially determinant educational investment" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 48). Of relevance to a study on transition is the idea that the habitus, or the "taken-for-granted" (Reay, 1995, p. 365) in one field or culture may not be valued in another. This means that there may be a sense of 'disjuncture' when moving between fields because an individual's habitus may not fit well with the expectations of the new field.

This echoes Bronfenbrenner's emphasis on the potentially damaging effects for children of disruptions in the meso-system and the impact of 'process' on development. Since Mayall (2015) makes the point that defining the borders of particular 'fields' can be difficult, citing the example of the crossover between home and school in children's education, Bourdieu's concept of 'field' could perhaps be enhanced by the mutuality, interinfluence and perhaps even disjuncture, inherent in Bronfenbrenner's idea of the meso-system. As Brooker (2015, p. 51) points out, Bourdieu's concept of field "rarely took account of the increasing plurality of values in many societies".

With regard to transitions, educational and otherwise, the "taken-for-granted" may vary greatly between school and home, erecting barriers to educational success for the child (Brooker, 2015), and limiting the capacity of parents to contribute meaningfully to their children's education (Mulkerrins, 2007). Of course economic capital is also relevant because when families can afford for one parent to stay at home with their children or to buy in tutoring, they are in a better position to impart skills and knowledge that will offer an advantage to children starting school – "among more privileged classes, the acquisition of cultural capital begins from birth" (Brooker, 2015, p. 39).

With this in mind, the analysis presented here will now turn to a consideration of Bronfenbrenner's Bio-ecological Model as a potentially powerful Framework or meta-theory for psychology, sociology and education, followed in Chapter 3, by application of this analysis to the practical concerns of educational transition for children and families in Ireland.

## 2.4 Bronfenbrenner and Beyond: Bronfenbrenner's Bio-ecological Model as a Framework for theory in psychology, sociology and education

When encountering the social sciences for the first time, students often begin with a search for 'truth' or real solutions that apply in most, if not all, settings. They expect solid answers to their questions, reminiscent of other fields of endeavour such as the physical sciences, where it is possible to be definitively 'right' or 'wrong'. This mirrors the development of the social sciences over time. For example, in psychology one may begin with Behaviourist emphases on objectivism and positivism, and developmental stage approaches such as those outlined by Piaget, Kohlberg and Freud which purported to apply to all children regardless of circumstances. However, novice students quickly discover that the

social sciences provide little in the way of ‘hard facts’, and in fact many well-established theories seem, on the surface, to present opposing views of reality and of the human beings living, learning and developing within that ‘reality’.

This leads students, following in the footsteps of the social sciences themselves, towards ideas of social constructivism, social constructionism, and a sense that perhaps, in fact, it is all relative, so that the only real answer that research and theory can give to questions on human experience is ‘It depends…’. This mode of thinking can sometimes lead the student to an experience equivalent to that described by Gergen (1973) as a ‘crisis in social psychology’ – the questioning of whether the social sciences have anything to offer after all, if relativism abounds and there is no agreement on anything. However, the student that persists eventually begins to notice commonalities across theories and disciplines, that may when explored further, offer glimpses of a more coherent whole.

Bronfenbrenner’s Bio-ecological Model of Human Development has the potential to provide a powerful Framework around which this coherence can coalesce. The analysis to follow begins to explore how other important theories fit within a Bio-ecological Framework, and while it by no means purports to return us to a positivist level of certainty and generalisability, it could perhaps help us to progress from ‘it depends…’ to ‘it depends but probably…’. It does not aim to provide objective truths regarding human experience, and in fact acknowledges the points made by reconceptualist writers such as Woodhead (1999) and James and Prout (2015) that such universalism is not an appropriate aim when studying childhood. Rather, this analysis aims to provide a common structure through which to interpret childhood, rather than relying on a field of disparate, unrelated theories with little relevance to each other and sometimes contradictory viewpoints. It does so through analysis

of where other theories fit within the Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) approach, and it is by no means exhaustive with regards to theories that could shed light on human experience within this Bio-ecological Framework.

### 2.4.1 'Process'.

> The most significant feature of any child's environment are the humans with whom they establish close relationships. The most important powerful routes to learning are through cognitive tools that are themselves products of human civilization. (Woodhead, 1999, p. 12).

According to Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006), the effect of 'process' is more powerful than that of the 'context' in which it occurs. Increasingly, the focus of attention in contemporary educational research has moved away from considering the most effective methods of instruction, towards understanding the power of the interpersonal and the role of 'process' (relationships) in learning (Hayes, 2004a; 2013; Riley, 2011). Bronfenbrenner's concept of 'process' also goes beyond the interpersonal to incorporate "progressively more complex reciprocal interaction with objects and symbols" (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006, p. 814). A number of key theories can be incorporated within the framework provided by Bronfenbrenner's concept of 'process', or more accurately, relationships and their importance for children's development. One such important psychological theory that was explicitly acknowledged by Bronfenbrenner (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006) as having relevance for understanding proximal processes was Attachment Theory (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters and Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1969; 1973; 1980; 1988; Main and Solomon, 1986).

#### *2.4.1.1 Attachment Theory.*

In spite of the dismissive reference to 'strange behaviour' and 'strange situations[3]' noted earlier, and critique of the work of early attachment theorists regarding limited understanding of the fluid nature of attachment across the lifespan and an almost exclusive focus on mother as attachment figure (Berk, 2009), Bronfenbrenner acknowledged that the relationship between a child and their primary caregiver was vital to their current and future functioning. He also noted that Attachment Theory provides important insights into that relationship (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). The central argument put forward by Attachment Theory is that the bond or attachment formed by an infant with the primary care-giver forms the basis of all future relationships, and of psychological health and well-being for the rest of the individual's life. According to Bowlby (1969; 1973; 1980; 1988), the growing child needs to develop a sense of trust, and later a growing autonomy, and this trust, security, confidence and optimism (as opposed to distrust, insecurity, inadequacy and pessimism) are developed in infancy through affection, continuity of caring and the reasonably prompt satisfaction of the infant's needs.

Children engage in attachment behaviours in situations which engender distress, such as hunger, pain, fatigue, threat or anxiety (Herbert, 2008). A parent's response in these circumstances is hypothesised to form the basis of attachment between infant and parent. If parents respond consistently and warmly, trust and secure attachment is formed, but if parents consistently fail to respond to an infant's need, a sense of 'learned helplessness' (Seligman, 1975) is developed, and the baby develops an insecure attachment to the parent. The work of Ainsworth et al. (1978) identified two categories of insecure attachment – 'insecure-avoidant' and 'insecure-ambivalent/resistant' – and these classifications have been confirmed in the

[3] This referred to the work of Mary Ainsworth and her colleagues, in which they used the 'strange situations test' to identify children's attachment styles (Ainsworth et al., 1978).

Irish context (Wieczorek-Deering, Greene, Nugent and Graham, 1991). Main and Solomon (1986) later identified the 'disorganised' category of insecure attachment. This is relevant not only to concepts of 'proximal processes' within the Bio-ecological Model, but also to Bourdieu's ideas on 'capital', since as O'Connor (2013, p. 9) points out:

> It is true that poverty and deprivation don't automatically lead to poor attachment – far from it, in fact. But we must never underestimate the impact of difficult circumstances on the physical and mental health of parents and the direct impact this can have on their capacity to be responsive to their children.

According to Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1980, 1988), as children grow older, their attachment becomes less reliant on physical proximity and more dependent on the abstract qualities of the relationship such as affection, trust, etc. Thus, the quality of attachment becomes internalised as the child grows older. This is known as an 'internal working model' of the relationship with the mother or other important attachment figures (Bowlby, 1988, Main, Kaplan and Cassidy, 1985). Importantly, this internal working model then forms the basis of the child's concept of self (as loved and lovable or unloved and unlovable) as well as providing foundation and direction to future relationships – when a child expects the world to be comforting and supportive, they approach new relationships with this expectation, and so securely attached children tend to invite future supportive relationships; on the other hand when a child expects the world to be dangerous and unsupportive, they equally approach new relationships with this expectation and, through defensiveness and fear, may repel potentially corrective emotional relationships (Riley, 2011).

This resonates with Bronfenbrenner's explanations of how experience becomes internalised, influencing the direction of generative or disruptive dispositions, and so is incorporated into the 'person' characteristics of the child. Thus, in a process of mutual influence and reciprocity, 'dispositions' are both a product of and a producer of experience

and development. In the terminology of the Bio-ecological Model, early 'proximal processes' produce 'proximal processes' throughout development (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006), and Bronfenbrenner's statement that "through progressively more complex interaction with their parents, children increasingly become agents of their own development" (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006, p. 797) could conceivably have been written by an Attachment Theorist. As such, "proximal processes become the measurable mechanisms for bringing about what in an earlier era of developmental theory and research was called *internalization*" (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006, p. 815 – italics his own).

In fact, the most up-to-date understandings of the neuropsychological bases for internalisation of attachment experiences through the impact of the stress hormone cortisol (Balbernie, 2007; DeBellis, 2005) and the anti-stress hormones opioids and oxytocin (O'Connor, 2013) on brain structures offer support for both Attachment Theory and for the Bio-ecological Model. Through the power of relationships ('process'), early experiences become incorporated into the 'person' characteristics of the individual and in turn influence future experiences and processes. The Bio-ecological Model, like Attachment Theory, predicts that relationships and patterns of interaction established with parents in early childhood will impact on relationships later on, and it would seem that research supports this prediction.

There is extensive evidence of the impact of early attachment on children's later emotional and behavioural development. Attachment to the mother at twelve months has been found to correlate with curiosity and problem solving at age two, social confidence at age three and empathy and independence at age five, as well as lack of behaviour problems at age six (Berk, 2009). In other words, security of attachment may predict the kinds of

behaviours which are seen in pre-schools and primary schools in the early years. Sroufe's (2005) longitudinal study found that pre-schoolers who were securely attached as babies were rated by their teachers as higher in self-esteem, social competence and empathy than their insecurely attached counterparts. At age eleven, children also had better relationships with peers, closer friendships and better social skills (Sroufe, 2005), and there is even evidence that security of attachment in childhood is related to quality of friendships and romantic relationships in adulthood (Feeney and Noller, 1990) as well as parenting skills with one's own children (Van Ijzendoorn, 1995).

As such, future relationships or 'proximal processes' may be very much dependent on the original attachment relationship that a baby forms with his or her primary care-giver, and Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) specifically identify teachers and early childhood professionals as potential partners with children in the development of relationships whose prototype lies in the parent-child relationship. This is supported by the work of John Bowlby's son Richard Bowlby (2007) who identifies the importance of developing a 'secondary attachment' while the child is in non-parental day-care. There is evidence that this idea may also be applicable to later educational settings, and Riley (2011) offers an extensive analysis of the student-teacher relationship through the lens of Attachment Theory, in which teachers can potentially provide children with a 'secure base' from which to explore their learning.

Of course, the 'person' characteristics of important adults in the child's life, such as their teachers, are incorporated by a Bio-ecological Model into the micro-system of the child, and the model predicts that certain 'person' elements related to those adults will impact on 'proximal processes' just as much as the personal characteristics of the child. This prediction

has also been supported by research on attachment between teachers and children, with Riley (2011) showing that teachers' own attachment style impacts on the 'processes' he or she forms with children. As could be expected, Riley's work has shown that teachers who themselves possess a secure attachment style are best placed to support optimal 'processes' for learning - "Teachers are best able to serve students when they themselves have been adequately served" (Sergiovanni, 2005, p101). In particular, Riley (2011) explores how the attachment styles of both teachers and children can impact on disciplinary interactions, and another theory that may be relevant in this regard is that of Diana Baumrind regarding disciplinary styles.

#### *2.4.1.2 Disciplinary interactions.*

The Bio-ecological Model argues that the degree of stability, consistency and predictability over time in any element of the systems constituting the ecology of human development is critical, with an intermediate level of flexibility optimal. Either extreme of disorganisation or rigidity represents a block to development (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 1998). This resonates strongly with Baumrind's work (1966; 1968; 1971; 1978; 1989; 1991; 1996), and an individual mother or father's parenting style can be a key indicator of the quality of 'proximal processes' between parent and child. Baumrind's (1971) conceptions of parenting styles may also be transferable to school and pre-school settings, and can help illuminate 'process' between children and educators.

Along with the work of others who have extended her original findings (see Berk, 2009 for an overview), Baumrind identified three features that consistently differentiate 'effective' parenting styles from those which are 'less effective':

1. Acceptance of the child and involvement in the child's life; an emotional connection.
2. Control of the child which promotes mature behaviour.
3. Autonomy granting which encourages self-reliance.

Of course these concepts only have value when viewed through the lens of cultural diversity. Brooker (2015) maintains that when we reduce 'good parenting' to checklists and simplistic formulas, we miss the point that there are many ways to be a good parent. For example, the extent of 'autonomy granting' deemed appropriate varies across contexts and cultures. However, Baumrind's work is sometimes simplified into two aspects of authoritative parenting that seem to contribute to its effectiveness (Gregory et al., 2010), 'support' (parental warmth, acceptance and involvement) and 'structure' (strictness and close supervision as reflected in parental monitoring and limit-setting). This conceptualisation is useful when thinking about parenting across contexts - Baumrind's work indicates that children need both to know that they are loved (as shown in culturally and individually specific ways) but also what the (culturally specific) rules and boundaries are, and there is much evidence to support this (Berk, 2009).

Based on various combinations of these features, Baumrind identified three main parenting styles, 'authoritarian', 'permissive' and 'authoritative': 'Authoritarian' parenting styles are low in acceptance and involvement, high in coercive control, and low in autonomy-granting (Baumrind, 1968; 1971). Such parents are often rejecting, and criticise children; they expect the child to accept their judgment unquestioningly. Authoritarian parenting suppresses children's self-expression and independence and authoritarian parents often engage in 'psychological control' – "behaviours that intrude on and manipulate children's verbal expressions, individuality and attachments to parents" (Berk, 2009, p. 571). They withdraw

parental love when they are dissatisfied and affection or attention is contingent on compliance (Baumrind, 1968; 1971). Such psychological control can lead to children being unable to make decisions for themselves, leading to both anxious, withdrawn behaviours and defiant, aggressive behaviours which may impact on ability to cope in stressful times such as educational transition (Barber and Harmon, 2002). Authoritarian parenting styles have also been linked with unhappiness, low self-esteem, dependency, getting overwhelmed by challenging tasks, and poor academic performance (Baumrind, 1978), consistent with the prediction of the Bio-ecological Model that extreme rigidity of experience will have potentially negative implications for developmental outcomes (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006).

In the school setting, authoritarian teachers focus on strict discipline that may run the risk of being perceived as unfair by children. They use punitive disciplinary consequences such as suspension and expulsion, as well as 'zero-tolerance' sanctions for even minor violations of school rules, with little or no consideration for the circumstances of behaviour, or the child's intentions (Tebo, 2000). According to Toshalis (2010), teachers are often conditioned to blame the children in their classes when they struggle to find teaching methods that engage them. Often through low self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1994), teachers may resort to authoritarian styles because they are fearful of losing control of the class, and they may not have the skills to engage the children more appropriately. Authoritarian teachers tend to focus more on discouraging misbehaviour than on promoting learning or inspiring engagement (Toshalis, 2010). This can cause alienation from the system that results in challenging behaviour, disengagement and poor academic performance on behalf of children (Downes and Maunsell, 2007; Freire, 1972), particularly at times of transition (Smyth, McCoy and Darmody, 2004).

On the other extreme of the scale identified by Baumrind was the concept of 'permissive' parenting. Permissive parents exercise little control over their children and instead of judiciously granting autonomy, they allow children to make many decisions for themselves when they are not yet ready to do so (Baumrind, 1971; Berk, 2009). There may be a number of reasons for this kind of approach on behalf of parents. In some cases, they genuinely believe that this is the right approach to take (Oyserman, Brickman and Rhodes, 2005). They are warm, accepting and over-indulgent, and they are permissive because they believe that children should be allowed to 'decide for themselves'. On the other hand, sometimes parents lack confidence in their ability to control their child and so, fatalistically, they disengage from discipline (Oyserman et al., 2005). Sometimes they are emotionally detached with low acceptance and involvement and this is often linked to parental depression where parents are so overwhelmed by life stresses that they have little time or energy for interacting with their children (Berk, 2009). At its extreme, this style of parenting is child neglect, and this latter category is often treated in the literature as a fourth parenting style (e. g. Berk, 2009). Again, as predicted by the Bio-ecological Model (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006), such extremes of disorganisation and lack of predictability within the parent-child dyad have been linked with poor developmental outcomes for children, socio-emotionally, behaviourally and educationally (Berk, 2009).

Equally, permissive teachers who tolerate a wide range of student behaviour run the risk of a level of disorder that means children's learning is inhibited (Gregory et al., 2010). Following Baumrind's conceptualisation, permissive teachers may be indulgent or neglectful. Where teachers are over-indulgent and fail to offer direction to children, their learning is limited, and where teachers are disengaged or neglectful, consequences can also be negative for the children they teach (Gregory et al., 2010).

The most successful parenting style identified by Baumrind was the 'authoritative' style. This involves high acceptance and involvement, adaptive control techniques and appropriate autonomy-granting (Baumrind, 1966; 1968; 1971). Such parents are warm and attentive and emotionally fulfilling but maintain firm, fair and reasonable control. They focus on self-regulation but also on emotional expressiveness, communication, and where possible, joint decision-making (Berk, 2009), reminiscent of Bronfenbrenner's ideas on environments that are neither too fluid nor too rigid (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 1998). Authoritative parents meet children's developmental needs with structure that includes establishing clear rules, monitoring behaviour and enforcing rules consistently, but they also support their children with warmth and encouragement (Gregory et al., 2010). As Baumrind (1996) describes it:

> Within the authoritative model, behavioural compliance and psychological autonomy are viewed not as mutually exclusive but rather as interdependent objectives: Children are encouraged to respond habitually in pro-social ways *and* to reason autonomously about moral problems *and* to respect adult authorities *and* to learn how to think independently (p. 405).

Authoritative teachers also aim for a 'middle ground' that allows for consistent, firm, but fair implementation of school rules, while also ensuring the kinds of environments where students can express their creativity and their emotional needs are met (Gregory et al., 2010). Such teaching styles have been linked to better academic performance (Goodenow, 1993; Gregory and Weinstein, 2004) and engagement in school (Maehr, 1991). Emotional support from teachers is also linked to lower levels of bullying in schools – if children feel that their teacher is caring and concerned they are more likely to seek help when they are bullied (O'Moore, 2010; Unnever and Cornell, 2004), and when children seek help, bullying is reduced and schools are safer (O'Moore, 2010; Smyth et al., 2004). This again confirms the prediction of the Bio-ecological Model that environments that are neither too rigid nor too

permissive offer the optimal environment in which children will thrive (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006).

The Bio-ecological Framework reminds us that parenting, or indeed child-care or teaching, does not happen in a vacuum. Adults influence children, but children also influence adults. For example, if adults are firm but warm, children tend to comply with what they say, and when they comply, adults are likely to be firm but warm in the future (Berk, 2009). Equally, Whiteside Mansell's (2003) cross-cultural research has shown that when adults discipline with harshness and impatience, children tend to rebel and resist, and because this is stressful for adults, they become harsher and more impatient, increasing their use of punishment. Children with 'difficult' temperaments (Thomas and Chess, 1977) tend to evoke harsher disciplinary approaches from adults whereas children with 'easy' temperaments tend to elicit calmer responses (Berk, 2009). Thus, there are bi-directional influences between adults and children, in other words, each influences the other, a key principle of the Bio-ecological Model. As such, there are 'person' influences on the 'processes' involved in disciplinary interactions. There are also broader influences on family dynamics and school dynamics such as culture, socio-economic class, poverty, etc, and therefore parenting and teaching style may also be a function of 'context'. Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) identify such bi-directional person-context influences as a key component of the concept of 'proximal processes'. The impact of personal characteristics on quality of relationships was also central to the Humanist work of Carl Rogers.

#### *2.4.1.3 The Humanism of Carl Rogers.*

Rogerian psychology originally stemmed from a therapeutic orientation relying primarily on the capacity of the client. In other words it focuses on human agency to direct

the course of our own lives (Rogers, 1995), reminiscent of Bronfenbrenner's conceptualisation of the child as an active agent in his or her development. Rogers (e. g. 1974; 1995) describes the capacity of all humans to achieve insight or constructive self-direction, and to deal with his or her psychological condition for all aspects of life that can potentially come into conscious awareness. This conscious rejection of deficit models of human functioning in favour of a focus on growth also has much in common with Bronfenbrenner's work (Downes, 2014). Equally, Rogers' emphasis on 'the relationship' has strong corollaries in Bronfenbrenner's concept of development within 'proximal processes'.

Within this orientation, the function of therapy is to provide a supportive relationship within which capacity for self-direction can be exercised. This is reminiscent of Bronfenbrenner's image of human agency and generative dispositions developing through 'proximal processes' (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). Rogers' concept of the relationship mirrors Bronfenbrenner's concept of 'proximal processes' in that both are impacted by the 'person' characteristics of all those involved, and require bi-directional engagement by both participants. Unlike other therapeutic orientations which demand objectivity and separateness from the therapist, a Rogerian therapist is highly important part of the human equation – *"*what he does, the attitude he holds, his basic concept of his role, all influence therapy to a marked degree" (Rogers, 1995, p 19). Rogers requires therapists to exhibit three central characteristics: Congruence (genuineness), unconditional positive regard (acceptance, trust) and empathy (understanding from the client's viewpoint – or 'internal frame of reference').

Rogers (1995) maintains that the greatest tool a therapist has is acceptance, reflective of Bronfenbrenner's pronouncement (2005) that "In short, somebody has to be crazy about that kid" (p. 262). Acceptance of the child does not mean passivity or indifference – a lack of

involvement is experienced by children as rejection. What is recommended by Rogerian approaches is a very active engagement, or in Bronfenbrenner's terms, 'bidirectional reciprocity of exchange' (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). Rogers' concept of person-centredness has been transferred to the educational arena through these ideas of self-direction and the importance of the relationship, in an approach known as 'student-centred teaching' (Rogers, 1995). His educational ideas are similar to constructivist approaches such as those of Lev Vygotsky and Jerome Bruner in terms of allowing children to discover learning for themselves, and the role of the teacher as facilitator rather than direct instructor. An educator working with a child must therefore try to see the world through his or her eyes and make it very clear that this is what he or she is trying to do (Rogers, 1995).

Of course, it could be argued that educators often guide learning towards short and long-term learning goals that they are aware of although the child is not, and may have limited interest in. Equally, as noted by Baumrind, to optimise attention and learning, this support for self-direction needs to be experienced alongside significant challenge. However, according to Freiberg and Lambe (2009), a 'student-centred' approach based on Rogers' theories may in fact provide greater challenge to children rather than less, since through increased levels of engagement, they often choose more challenging tasks, and the teacher using these approaches can support and guide children through learning goals so long as they are also listening to the wishes and interests of children (Rogers, 1974). In an educational setting, the role of an educator using this approach is to create a supportive, trusting relationship through their own congruence, unconditional positive regard and empathy. Rogers (1974) describes the rationale behind a list of "questions I would ask myself if I were a teacher", many of which are highly relevant to the concept of 'the relationship', or in Bronfenbrenner's terms, 'proximal processes':

> Do I dare to let myself deal with this boy or girl as a person, as someone I respect? Do I dare reveal myself to him and let him reveal himself to me? Do I dare to recognize that he/she may know more than I do in certain areas—or may in general be more gifted than I? (Rogers, 1974, p. 3)

In asking these questions, Rogers (1974) recognises something that Bronfenbrenner does not make explicit - although perhaps it is implicit - that there is risk involved in the development of true and genuine human relationships. Rogers' insights into the very human emotions that are involved in the creation and maintenance of relationships could support educators, researchers and policy makers to value both the 'thinking life and the feeling life', as Rogers (1974) refers to a holistic understanding of children's development in the context of their relationships.

According to Downes (2003), such an emotionally supportive and holistic approach to teaching is central to the ethos of the Irish Primary School Curriculum (Department of Education and Science, 1999), and it is also key to the concept of a 'nurturing pedagogy' (Hayes, 2004a), which underpins Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework, along with an emphasis on the importance of relationships within the care and education of young children (French, 2007). 'Nurturing pedagogy' emphasises the educative value of care and the caring nature of education. Under this model, 'care' is reconceptualised so that it ranks equally with education, particularly in early educational process and practice (Hayes, 2003; Karlsson and Pramling, 2003). This again emphasises the importance of 'the relationship' in educational settings.

Therefore, the insights provided by Attachment Theory, Baumrind's Parenting Styles, Rogers' Humanism and Hayes' Nurturing Pedagogy can be synthesised within a Framework provided by Bronfenbrenner's ideas on 'process'. However, Bronfenbrenner's concept of

'process' goes beyond the interpersonal to incorporate "progressively more complex reciprocal interaction with objects and symbols" (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006, p. 814), and this leads to consideration of the cognitivist psychology of Jean Piaget.

#### *2.4.1.4 Interaction with objects and symbols.*

Piaget (e. g. 1951; 2001), describes how a child comes to know his or her world by building cognitive structures, or mental maps, schemes, and networked concepts for understanding and responding to physical experiences within his or her environment (Berk, 2009). The application of Piaget's theory has presented a view of a very structured, pre-determined and universal course of development (sensori-motor, pre-operational, concrete operational, formal operational) that has been extensively criticised (Burman, 2008; Donaldson, 1978; Morss, 1992; 2013; Woodhead, 1999) and does not fit well within a Bio-ecological Model founded on recognition of individual differences and cultural influences on development. The timing of Piaget's stages has been questioned (Aguiar and Baillargeon, 1999; 2002) and research in different cultural settings has shown that children in different cultures reach developmental stages at different ages based on their experiences (Rogoff, 2003). It may be that acquisition of skills and understanding such as object permanence, conservation, etc are gradual achievements rather than sudden and stage-like as depicted by Piaget (Berk, 2009). He also neglected variability in development and temperament and did not consider the crucial interplay between a child's intellectual development and his or her social experiences (Berk, 2009) that is core to the Bio-ecological Model. As Hayes (2004a) puts it, young children develop "in a far messier and entangled way" than Piaget envisioned (p. 2).

Nevertheless, to use some oft-quoted phrases, consigning Piaget's work to "the dustbin of history" (James, Jenkins and Prout, 1998, p. 9) may be to "throw out the baby with the developmental bathwater" (Woodhead, 2000, p. 31). Piaget maintained that over time a child's cognitive structure increases in sophistication, moving from a few innate reflexes such as crying and sucking to highly complex mental activities. Piaget projected the image of an active child, constantly trying to interpret and predict the world around him or her. This 'construal' process indicates that we either predict correctly or change our ideas to survive. Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) describe 'proximal processes' between the child and 'objects and symbols' in the environment, whereby the opportunity to explore, manipulate and engage with new, and sometimes challenging environments, leads to progressively more complex engagement, thereby significantly changing the processes involved, their outcomes, and the features of the environment that become most relevant. In Piaget's terminology, Bronfenbrenner and Morris have described 'accommodation', 'assimilation', '(dis)equilibration' and the process of child development.

Piaget's insights on how we make sense of the world around us through accommodation, assimilation and (dis)equilibration have largely been supported by up-to-date findings from neuropsychology on how information is encoded in the brain, albeit with two provisos: much neurological change happens 'on the inside' before behavioural change is evident 'on the outside'; and his idea of progressively more complex cognitive structure may be insufficient since up-to-date neuro-imaging techniques have shown the brain to be more complex and, to some degree, counter-intuitive in its pattern of development (Berk, 2009).

In educational terms, Piaget's emphasis on the 'teacher as facilitator' providing instructional material that use demonstrations, illustrative examples and corrective feedback rather than direct instruction also fits well with Bronfenbrenner's ideas on progressively more complex interaction between the child and the environment, and is supported by the most up-to-date, constructivist understandings of how children learn (Berk, 2009). Considering the fact that Rogers (1974) also maintains that a good teacher should spend the majority of their time creating resources to support children's learning through discovery rather than directly transmitting knowledge, this may be one occasion where the fog of relativism clears to allow for some coherence across theories, coalesced through Bronfenbrenner's concept of 'proximal processes'.

Of course the focus on creation of mental images or schemas as envisaged by Piaget is a very individualised process, and it may be that as a result there is no such thing as externally verifiable 'facts', rather there are internal 'constructions' of reality whose validity are then negotiated with others – as Gergen (1985) puts it, "the process of understanding is not automatically driven by the forces of nature, but is the result of an active, cooperative enterprise of persons in a relationship" (p.266). This returns analysis to the idea of 'proximal processes' involving relationships between people, within social settings. It is within these relationships that our concepts of 'objects and symbols' develop. Thus, the notion of 'process' would appear to be strongly consistent with Socio-cultural Theory.

#### *2.4.1.5 Socio-cultural Theory.*

In his book on second language acquisition, Ellis (2012) outlines key components of Socio-cultural Theory, and reading this through a Bio-ecological lens highlights several consistencies between the two theoretical stances. These key ideas include 'mediated learning', 'internalisation', 'self-regulation' and the 'Zone of Proximal Development'.

With regard to mediated learning, like the Bio-ecological Model, Socio-cultural Theory acknowledges biological inheritance as the basis for subsequent development, but maintains that higher order functioning develops through the "interweaving of cultural and biological inheritances" (Lantolf and Thorne, 2006, p. 59). In Bronfenbrenner's terms, such interweaving constitutes an element of 'process'. Socio-cultural theorists believe that "mediated minds are developed out of the social activity that is embedded in the cultural values of particular communities" (Ellis, 2012, p. 524), and this is in harmony with a Bio-ecological perspective on the child in society.

Later Socio-cultural Theories, such as 'Activity Theory' (Leontiev, 1981) are particularly consistent with the Bio-ecological perspective on individual differences within cultures. Activity Theory emphasises 'motives' which may be biologically based (like hunger) or socially constructed (like the need to learn about a theory to pass an exam), and they can determine how each individual approaches a task. Activity Theory, like a Bio-ecological perspective, recognises the intertwining of the social and the psychological, as well as the biological or embodied, in this concept of

socially constructed motives. For example, Wertsch, Minick and Arns (1984) found differences between middle class urban mothers and rural uneducated mothers in Brazil in how they instruct their children, with middle class mothers aiming to teach skills for future use, and rural mothers aiming to get the task completed in the most efficient and straightforward manner possible, so relying on more directive approaches. This resonates with Bourdieu's notion of habitus, and a sense of 'what is important' based on social class.

Within Activity Theory, the 'activity system' (Engstrom, 1993) incorporates the individual, the object of activity, the mediational means and the contextual framework provided by the community and its social rules. The Bio-ecological Model offers a framework within which to synthesise and understand all of these concepts. In describing human learning, the socio-cultural theorist Lantolf could be writing about Bronfenbrenner's concept of 'process':

> The person and the world are necessarily connected in a dialectic and inseparable relationship (Lantolf, 2005, p. 343)… [Development is] about the appropriation by individuals (and groups) of the mediational means made available by others (past or present) in their environment in order to improve control over their own mental activity (Lantolf, 2000).

Here we see the key Bio-ecological concepts of relationships and interaction between the child and people or objects (in the language of Socio-cultural Theory 'artefacts') in the environment over time. However, it could be argued that the Bio-ecological Model extends these ideas beyond the Socio-cultural interpretation since Socio-cultural Theory largely emphasises the influence of culture ('context') on the individual mind ('person'), whereas Bio-ecological theory agrees while also recognising that the individual influences the culture in a bi-directional fashion.

According to Socio-cultural Theory, as the child develops and becomes more proficient he or she begins to depend less on external 'artefacts' and 'mediators' and more on internal ones, moving from 'object-regulation' to 'other-regulation' to 'self-regulation' (Ellis, 2012). As discussed with reference to both Bowlby ('internal working model') and Bourdieu ('embodiment'), these concepts of 'internalisation' and 'self-regulation' that are key to a Socio-cultural perspective (Ellis, 2012) can be readily accommodated and explicated within a Bio-ecological Framework. Experience becomes incorporated into the 'person' characteristics of the child, and thus, in a process of mutual influence and reciprocity, influences the direction of future development. In fact, there are echoes of Bronfenbrenner's notion of 'process' in this oft-quoted segment by Vygotsky (1981):

> Any function in the child's cultural development appears twice, or on two planes. First it appears on the social plane, then on the psychological plane. First it appears between people as an interpsychological category, and then within the child as an intrapsychological category… It goes without saying that internalization transforms the process itself and changes its structures and functions. Social relations or relations among people genetically underlie all higher functions and their relationships (p.163).

It is worth noting that the language used by both Vygotsky (1981) and Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) is similar, in that the characteristics of the 'person' appear twice in the Bio-ecological Model - first as one of the components influencing the form, power, content and direction of 'proximal processes', and then again as 'developmental outcomes', or qualities of the developing 'person' which emerge later as a result of the influence of development. This is somewhat different to Vygotsky's conceptualisation of culture appearing first outside the child and then within as it becomes internalised – in fact Bronfenbrenner and Vygotsky appear to envisage the flow from the interpersonal to the intrapersonal in opposite directions; for Bronfenbrenner the starting point is the child, whose

characteristics determine how he or she engages with the culture, whereas for Vygotsky the starting point is the culture, whose characteristics determine the formation of the mind of the child. Nevertheless, the processes described by each are notably similar with regard to incorporation of external experiences into the internal life of the child, and it could be argued that in a circular process, debates about the starting point matter little.

For Socio-cultural theorists, language is key to such internalisation, as social speech becomes inner speech with children's development, thus shifting the direction of activity from external control to internal control and self-regulation. For example, Wertsch (1985) showed how children developed self-mediation through private speech as they moved from reliance on verbal instruction from parents to complete a puzzle, to verbally instructing themselves. Thus, the Socio-cultural notion of 'private speech' could be one mechanism by which the external becomes internal as postulated by Bio-ecological theory.

Ellis (2012) also identifies Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the Zone of Proximal ZPD) development as another key element of Socio-cultural Theory. ZPD suggests that children can achieve to a higher level in interaction with a 'more expert other' than in isolation. This 'more expert other' is usually an adult but may be a peer, and ZPD hypothesises that cognitive development results when a child learns through problem-solving experiences shared with someone else. This concept is supported by extensive empirical work on the benefits of cooperative learning, or learning in the context of relationships with others (Hmelo-Silver et al., 2013; Johnson and Johnson, 1990; 1999; O'Toole, 2014; Slavin, 1995). In terms of understanding how 'proximal processes' work, Vygotsky's (1978) ideas of the social formation of the mind through

the mechanism of culture indicate that not only are our understandings dependent on our personal construct systems, but also on the construct systems inherent within cultures. This is consistent with the Bio-ecological emphasis on the influence of the macro-system on individual functioning.

The concept of ZPD underlies several important pedagogical approaches in recent years. Many of these approaches draw on the related Vygotskian notion of 'scaffolding' (Wood, Bruner and Ross, 1976) whereby the educator acts as mediator of learning through social interaction and creating contexts for learning within the child's zone of proximal development, gradually withdrawing support as the child becomes more self-regulated. For example, formative assessment or 'assessment for learning' (Wiliam, Lee, Harrison and Black, 2004) is premised on the idea that we should assess what children are capable of with adult support ('potential development' in Vygotskian terms) rather than their current performance or 'actual development'. Through a Bio-ecological lens, this again reflects the use of relationships and 'process' to support learning and development.

Ellis (2012) indicates that the concept of 'scaffolding' has to some extent fallen out of favour in the literature in recent years, as it is seen as something that the adult 'does' to the child, and in fact, the more up-to-date conceptualisations based around dialogic discourse identified by Ellis such as 'collaborative dialogue' (Swain, 2000) and 'instructional conversation (Tharp and Gallimore, 1988) are even more consistent with a Bio-ecological interpretation of the bi-directionality of 'process'. They emphasise intersubjectivity and relationships in which the adult and the child each influence the other. What is important in both 'process' and in notions associated

with ZPD is reciprocity between learner and mediator. "ZPD is premised on the view that development has both a social and a psychological dimension" (Ellis, 2012, p. 532), as is the Bio-ecological Model, and both Socio-cultural Theory and the Bio-ecological Model are two of the few accounts of human development that go beyond traditional dichotomies of 'nature vs nurture' to investigate how the social and the psychological interact to direct outcomes.

Therefore, it is arguable that rather than framing childhood from either a Developmental or a Socio-cultural perspective, the Bio-ecological Model provides a framework through which to synthesise these traditionally polarised perspectives, as recommended by Tzuo, Yang and Wright (2011). In fact, Woodhead's (1999, p. 5) call for a move away from "standardisation" and towards "the experience of children in families, schools and other settings… [encompassing] the possibilities for childhood past, present and future" finds an echoing response in the Bio-ecological concepts of 'process', 'person', 'context' and 'time'.

#### *2.4.1.6 Summary.*

In summary, this section has highlighted potential points of synthesis between the concept of 'proximal processes' and the insights of a number of important theories, including Attachment Theory, Baumrind's theories on disciplinary styles, Rogers' Humanist psychology, Hayes' 'nurturing pedagogy', Cognitivist approaches such as those of Piaget, and Socio-cultural Theories such as those of Vygotsky, Wertsch and Lantolf. This synthesis supports a first key Proposition of the Bio-ecological Framework:

**Proposition 1: Relationships (with 'objects and symbols' but more importantly with other people) are key to the development of human beings emotionally, socially and cognitively.**

Due to the interactive nature of the PPCT model, thorough explication of 'process' has necessitated some exploration of the impact of 'person', 'context' and 'time' on 'process'. While 'process' is highlighted by Bronfenbrenner as the 'primary engine of development', the power of 'proximal processes' to influence development is seen to vary substantially as a function of characteristics of the developing 'person'. This necessitates more thorough treatment of the 'person' element of the PPCT model. Equally, however, the Bio-ecological Model emphasises the inextricable links between 'person' and 'context'. Therefore, this chapter now proceeds to examine in more detail the already noted synergy between 'person' and 'context', with an examination of 'time' to follow.

### 2.4.2 The synergy between 'person' and 'context'.

The Bio-ecological Model envisions the child as an active agent in his or her world, both influenced by and influencing the environment. This is significant, since most developmental research treats personal characteristics as developmental outcomes rather than recognising that they are both outcomes and producers of development (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). The Model also foregrounds the influence of diversity, and the futility of expecting all children, parents and teachers to behave in the same way, regardless of the individual characteristics they bring to a situation (O'Toole, 2011). These personal characteristics are described by Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998; 2006) as:

1. Dispositions: Characteristics setting 'proximal processes' in motion in a particular developmental domain, and continuing to sustain their operation, or alternatively,

interfering with or preventing their occurrence. These are seen to be operative from early infancy onward, to evolve over the life course, and to still be manifest in old age.

2. Resources: ability or disability, experience, knowledge and skills required for effective functioning of 'proximal processes' at a given stage of development.
3. Demand characteristics: those which invite or discourage reactions from the social environment of a kind that can foster or disrupt the operation of 'proximal processes'.

The term 'dispositions' is contested and has been subject to extensive work in psychology, sociology and early childhood education that can be incorporated into a Bio-ecological Framework in order to elucidate the concept.

#### *2.4.2.1 Dispositions, resources and demand characteristics.*

Early debates around the meaning of 'dispositions' to some extent fall within the traditional nature-vs-nurture dichotomy. Katz (1993a) draws attention to the 'Comprehensive Dictionary of Psychological and Psychoanalytical terms' (English and English, 1958) which defines 'dispositions' as "the sum of all innate tendencies or propensities" (p.158), with the implication that dispositions are solely internal to the person, little influenced by external factors. Conversely, Carr and Claxton (2002) note the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) who argue that learning and behaviour are so situation specific that there is no such thing as dispositions, or traits and inclinations that are stable across settings. However, through the lens of a Bio-ecological reconceptualisation of the nature-nurture debate (Bronfenbrenner and Ceci, 1994) neither position on dispositions seems quite right. While theories of 'personality', represented by the English and English (1958) definition, seem to overlook the effects of internalisation of experience, it seems that such polarised Socio-cultural thinking as that of

Lave and Wnger (1991) neglects the power of the meso-system, and how individuals 'drag' their experiences with them from setting to setting (Slesnick et al., 2007).

Instead, a Bio-ecological perspective views the development of 'dispositions' in a circular manner, through the power of 'process'. A child's dispositions influence the way he or she experiences the world and so acts in it, in turn influencing the way the world responds, in turn influencing the development of further dispositions and so on. Dispositions are seen as operative from early infancy onward, to evolve over the life course and to still be manifest in old age. In this regard, experiences in early childhood are seen as particularly powerful, and this has relevance for the 'time' element of the model also.

Bourdieu also foregrounds the importance of early experiences in this regard, and his sociological notions on dispositions are readily incorporated within the Bio-ecological Framework. He viewed them as:

> A tendency in the child to approach daily experience in certain ways, with determination and resilience or uncertainty and a faint heart; with confidence and self-esteem or fear of failure; with ambition to compete and succeed, or with a preference for holding back and watching (Brooker, 2008, p. 51).

The system of such dispositions in any individual comprises their 'habitus', and Bourdieu's outlook is similar to Bronfenbrenner's in that dispositions are not seen as a sole function of biological inheritance, but rather reflect the interaction between innate traits and experiences ('process'). Consistent with Bronfenbrenner's concepts of the child as an active agent, influencing and influenced by their micro and macro environment, in Bourdieu's theories, the individual acts upon the environment and in turn 'embodies' the micro and macro environment around them, so that experiences become part of the 'person'. Individual

cultures develop individual ways "of standing, speaking, walking, and thereby of feeling and thinking" (Bourdieu, 1990a, p. 70).

According to Mayall (2015), in Bourdieu's theories, "the concept of dispositions [and habitus], what we bring with us to negotiations, has to take account of learning processes. Dispositions cannot be regarded as fixed" (p. 18). When applied to the school setting, the habitus acquired in the family is the basis of structuring and understanding school experiences, but the habitus is transformed by the actions of the school (Reay, 2010). This is reminiscent of Bronfenbrenner's ideas of the child mutually acting upon and being influenced by his or her surroundings, and the Bio-ecological reconceptualisation of the traditional nature-nurture dichotomy (Bronfenbrenner and Ceci, 1994). In fact, Reay (2015) has recently presented an analysis of psychosocial aspects of habitus that is even more consistent with the Bio-ecological conception of the "mutual constitution of the individual and the social relations in which they are enmeshed" (Reay, 2015, p. 9).

The idea of habitus and the system of dispositions within it, like the core concepts of the Bio-ecological Model, acknowledge the complexity of human behaviour, interactions and development. As Reay (2010) tells us, the practical logic that defines habitus is not one of the predictable regularity of modes of behaviour, but instead "there is an indeterminacy about the concept that fits in well with the complex messiness of the real world" (p. 438). According to Reay (2010), Bourdieu views the dispositions which make up habitus as the products of opportunities and constraints framing the individual's earlier life experiences. There are also interesting parallels between the idea of 'cultural capital' and Bronfenbrenner's notion of 'resource characteristics', or experience, knowledge and skills required for effective functioning of 'proximal processes' at a given stage of development. Bourdieu's 'cultural

capital' may enhance the idea of 'resource characteristics' through recognition of how the resources required for particular fields may vary, and are often based on a 'cultural arbitrary'. For example, children with middle-class accents and linguistic constructions may 'fit in' more easily in a middle-class school setting, but Pinker (1994) has shown more internal grammatical consistency in Black English Vernacular (BEV) in the US than in the language patterns of academics presenting at conferences. In other words, the 'resource characteristic' of speaking 'proper' English only becomes more useful based on what is valued in certain circumstances, rather than possessing any inherent value of its own.

This is even more interesting when one synthesises Bronfenbrenner's concepts of 'demand characteristics' (whereby certain characteristics invite or discourage supportive reactions from others) with Bourdieu's ideas on 'cultural capital' (whereby the embodied values and understandings of some classes are more valued than those of others). Allocation of a particular characteristic as 'inviting' or 'discouraging' positive interactions may, to a large extent, be in the 'eye of the beholder', and so one can note the congruence with Bourdieu's ideas around cultural capital, cultural arbitrary and the devaluation of an individual's dispositons (habitus). For example, Tudge et al. (2009) give examples of 'demand characteristics' as age, gender, skin colour and physical appearance – all characteristics that are subject to application of prejudiced beliefs in particular circumstances. The concept of social reproduction would indicate that the 'habitus' (Bourdieu) of a working class child might be inappropriately seen as a 'disruptive demand characteristic' (Bronfenbrenner) in the context of the largely middle class educational system. Tudge et al. (2009) describe 'resource characteristics' as characteristics not immediately apparent, but sometimes induced, not always accurately, from 'demand characteristics', so for example teachers may assume inaccurately that the level of 'intelligence' or 'motivation' possessed by

working class children is lower than that of middle class children, and the occurrence of such unfounded assumptions by teachers based on social class is well established (Drudy and Lynch, 1993). As Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) explain, personal characteristics:

> Place that person in a particular environmental niche that defines his or her position and role in society. Recognition of that ambiguity moves us to change in focus from developmentally relevant characteristics of the person to their counterparts in the structure and substance of environmental contexts as they affect developmental processes and outcomes (p. 814).

From a psychological perspective, also relevant here is Thomas and Chess' (1977) concept of 'temperament'. The view of 'person' characteristics impacting on and impacted by environmental factors ('context') is particularly congruent with their further elaboration of temperament through the concept of 'goodness of fit'. This indicates that a child born with a 'difficult' temperament can have the 'difficult' aspect of their personality exacerbated through inconsistent, harsh or neglectful parenting (Baumrind's authoritarian or permissive parenting styles) or alternatively minimised through supportive, calm and responsive parenting environments (in Baumrind's terms, an authoritative style).

The concept of 'dispositions' has also evolved in the Early Childhood Education literature through much research and discussion by writers such as Margaret Carr and Guy Claxton. Carr and Claxton (2002) focus largely on 'learning dispositions' as opposed to the wider range of dispositions explored by Bronfenbrenner, Bourdieu and Thomas and Chess, but their work is interesting and relevant nonetheless, not least because they devote considerable analysis to the question of whether dispositions are innate or context specific. Carr and Claxton (2002) come to a similar conclusion to the Bio-ecological perspective, indicating that dispositions can be transferred across domains, but at the same time are not 'fixed'. They maintain that it is possible to support the development of positive learning dispositions within early childhood settings, particularly through the use of innovative

methods of assessment, and that this is more important than teaching children specific knowledge or skills. According to Carr and Claxton (2002), "the manifestation of learning dispositions will be very closely linked to the learning opportunities, affordances and constraints available in each new setting" (p. 12).

In terms of defining dispositions therefore, and deciding which traits qualify for the title, the literature provides a number of alternatives, and Appendix 2 shows a small number of illustrative examples of specific dispositions identified by various authors. Katz (1993a) notes the definition provided by Resnik (1987): "The term disposition should not be taken to imply a biological or inherited trait. As used here, it is more akin to a *habit* of thought, one that can be learned and, therefore, taught" (p. 4; italics hers). Katz (1988) herself maintains that dispositions "can be thought of as habits of mind[4], tendencies to respond to situations in certain ways" (p. 30). Carr (1999) defines dispositions based on their effects, indicating that they allow us to edit and interpret experience. Carr and Claxton (2002) develop this theme, "defining a disposition as a tendency to edit, select, adapt and respond to the environment in a recurrent characteristic kind of way" (p. 13). This echoes Bronfenbrenner's ideas on the ways that dispositions determine how the child experiences and so interacts with the world.

In particular, the Bio-ecological model posits the existence of 'directive belief systems' through which children begin to conceptualise a sense of agency (or potentially helplessness) within the world. Hayes (2004b) links this idea with work on belief systems, mastery learning, and learner identity (Ames, 1992; Dweck, 1999). Self-efficacy (Bandura, 1994) is also explicitly identified by Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) as a type of 'directive belief' that is relevant as a developmentally generative characteristic of the 'person'.

[4] The idea of 'habits of mind' has a long history, from Dewey (1910) to modern-day thinkers such as Costa (Costa and Kallick, 2008). There exists an extensive literature on this concept, which is relevant to exploration of dispositions but beyond the scope of this work.

### *2.4.2.2 Self-efficacy beliefs.*

A person's self-efficacy beliefs reflect the level of competence they believe themselves to have. Self-efficacy beliefs are posited to work through cognitive, motivational, affective (or emotional) and selection processes (Bandura, 1994). In other words, self-efficacy influences the way children (and adults) think, the way they are motivated, the way they feel and the kinds of challenges they expose themselves to. According to Bandura (1994), children with strong self-efficacy beliefs approach difficult tasks as challenges to be mastered rather than threats to be avoided, and when they are in threatening situations (such as the potential uncertainty provided by educational transition) they feel that they can exercise control over their circumstances. They set themselves challenging goals and stay committed to them in the face of difficulty. They quickly recover their sense of efficacy after a set-back, and when they fail they attribute it to not trying hard enough rather than not having the ability to succeed. Such strong self-efficacy beliefs lead to high levels of personal accomplishments, which in turn reinforce the sense of efficacy.

On the other hand, Bandura (1994) has shown that children with lower self-efficacy beliefs shy away from difficult tasks because they dwell on their personal deficiencies, the obstacles they will encounter, etc. Therefore, they have low aspirations and weak commitment in the face of difficulty. Such children are vulnerable to anxiety and depression, and by constricting activities and undermining motivation, disbelief in their own capabilities creates its own behavioural validation. Quite simply, people who do not believe that they 'have what it takes' to do well, do not tend to be motivated to try, and without requisite effort do not tend to succeed. As such, there is a two-way interaction between self-efficacy and achievement. Self-efficacy beliefs influence achievement but achievement also influences self-efficacy beliefs. This is known as 'reciprocal determinism' and Williams and Williams

(2010) have shown evidence of this across thirty-three cultures. Similar ideas have also been put forward more recently by Dweck (1999; 2007), and they are consistent with Bronfenbrenner and Morris' (2006) description of developmentally generative 'person' characteristics:

> Conceptualized primarily not as characteristics of the person sufficient unto themselves but as directional dispositions interacting synergistically with particular features of the environment to generate successive levels of developmental advance (p. 811).

#### *2.4.2.3 Active agents within a limited range of choices.*

Perkins' (1995) definition of dispositions leads to intriguing questions related to human agency – "Dispositions are the proclivities that lead us in one direction rather than another, within the freedom of action that we have" (p. 275). It is interesting to note that both Bronfenbrenner and Bourdieu show that the way a child's experiences become a part of his or her 'person' characteristics may dictate the future choices made. Bourdieu's work, like Bronfenbrenner's, has challenged the idea of the "active subject confronting society as if that society were an object constituted externally" (Bourdieu, 1990b, p. 190). According to Bourdieu, dispositions are "durably inculcated by the possibilities and impossibilities, freedoms and necessities, opportunities and prohibitions inscribed in the objective conditions" (1990a, p. 54). Reay (2010) goes so far as to state that as a result of this, practices or behaviours that do not fit with the acquired dispositions and habitus are rejected as unthinkable so that only a limited range of practices are possible (Reay, 2010).

This resonates not only with Bronfenbrenner's idea that individual agency is bounded by the opportunities afforded to that person, but also with Bandura's (1994) concepts of the limitations imposed by one's self-efficacy beliefs, and Vygotsky's (1978) ideas of the social formation of the mind and modes of thought through the mechanism of culture. However,

according to Reay (2010), neither was Bourdieu guilty of determinism as is often charged. Rather his theories stem from a joint freedom-determinism base, simultaneously enabling the individual to draw on transformative and constraining courses of action (Reay, 2010). This is consistent with the work of Bronfenbrenner, and his idea that while the individual is an active agent in his or her world, options are filtered and narrowed by particular contextual influences. In fact, it is also consistent with Socio-Cultural Theory generally, particularly Activity Theory and the idea of 'motives': "Subjects are constrained by the components of an activity system but they also possess agency and thus are able to reconstitute it to suit their own motives" (Ellis, 2012, p. 536).

While the individual is an active agent in the world, choices are made within the framework of opportunities and constraints in which the person finds himself / herself - his or her external circumstances (Reay, 2010). Within Bourdieu's theoretical framework, an individual's behaviour, motivation and ways of thinking are guided by an internalised blue-print that makes some possibilities inconceivable, others improbable and a limited range acceptable (Reay, 2010), and the same could be said of the Bio-ecological model also. Such analysis is also applicable to processes of educational change, according to Downes (2014), because individuals make choices in educational settings within the institutional norms of these settings, and in the context of their own personal and cultural experiences.

#### *2.4.2.4 Consideration of 'context'.*

While later iterations of the Bio-ecological Model have somewhat moved away from sole emphasis on 'context' (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006), there is no denying its importance and influence in a 'systems' approach to understanding human development. According to Downes (2014), a significant achievement of the Bio-ecological Model has

been to draw attention to 'silent' background conditions for causal impact in systems, and Downes' idea of an 'inclusive system' is based on identifying contextual supports for individuals within systems to overcome inertia and develop agency (2014). Therefore, 'contexts' for development are still key, even in more up-to-date iterations of the Bio-ecological paradigm, to how development happens within a relational process.

Bronfenbrenner identifies some features of an optimally structured environment or 'context' for child development. One important aspect is the provision of "objects and environments that invite manipulation and exploration" (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006, p. 815), reminiscent of Piaget's ideas on the child learning through exploration and discovery. Another, as previously noted, is the creation of stability and consistency but at the same time flexibility (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006), as advocated by Baumrind's 'authoritative' approach. Still another is through strong contact and mutual support between micro-systems, for example home and school, through the concept of the meso-system. However, most important in Bronfenbrenner's eyes are the 'proximal processes' within 'contexts':

> In order to develop—intellectually, emotionally, socially, and morally—a child requires, for all of them, the same thing: participation in progressively more complex reciprocal activity, on a regular basis over extended periods of time with one or more other persons with whom the child develops a strong, mutual, irrational attachment, and who are committed to that child's development, preferably for life (Bronfenbrenner, 1989, p. 5)

According to most up-to-date iteration of the model therefore (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006), strong 'proximal processes' can provide a buffer in less than ideal 'contexts', and in fact Bronfenbrenner draws on the work of Rutter (1985; Rutter et al., 1998) to show that the impact of protective forces such as strong, supportive 'proximal processes' with an important adult, on the development of resilience in children is even greater in 'at-risk' 'contexts'. As such, while the latest version of the Bio-ecological Model does still

acknowledge the importance of the micro-, meso-, exo- and macro-systems within which a child develops, such 'context' factors are less emphasised than in earlier models, and now in Bronfenbrenner's work, as in that of Rogers, Gergen and Bowlby, the relationship (process) is foregrounded. This is consistent with the maturation of developmental psychology generally, and the move away from simple linear models of causality towards understanding of interacting risk and protective factors (Downes, 2014).

#### *2.4.2.5 Summary.*

In summary, there are a number of important theories that can be synthesised through the framework provided by the Bio-ecological conceptualisation of 'person' and 'context' in synergy, including theories of 'temperament' and 'self-efficacy', extensive work in psychology, sociology and early childhood education on 'dispositions', and Bourdieu's ideas on 'embodiment' of 'cultural capital'. Drawing on these theories, as well as those of Vygotsky and Bowlby explored under the title 'process', the idea of internalisation of experience is central to the synthesised Bio-ecological Framework, so that 'person' characteristics are both products and producers of development. Therefore, the explanatory power provided by the Bio-ecological Framework supports five further key Propositions:

**Proposition 2: There is a bi-directional, exponential synergy between the personal characteristics of the developing person, and the contexts in which they develop, mediated by the significant relationships they experience.**

Personal characteristics influence how the environment and other people within it respond to an individual. In turn, experience of the environment and other people within it is internalised and embodied by the developing person, and forms the basis of future personal characteristics. As such, traditional

dichotomies of nature-vs-nurture are outmoded and irrelevant. A Bio-ecological framework foregrounds that nature and nurture are synergistic and mutually reinforcing in human development.

**Proposition 3:** **Diversity is a key feature of what it means to be human**, so it is senseless to expect standardisation of outcomes for children or families, socially, emotionally, behaviourally or educationally.

**Proposition 4:** **The course of human development is neither completely free nor completely pre-determined.** Human beings are active agents within a narrow range of choices, defined by complex interactions between personal characteristics and the environments and relationships in which they find themselves.

**Proposition 5:** **Children's development is inextricably linked with the context in which it occurs.**

**Proposition 6:** Less than optimal contexts can (to some extent) be overcome through the power of positive relationships, and contexts that on the surface appear to be supportive of development in fact lose their power in the absence of supportive relationships. **Resilience is best understood as reliant on a complex interaction of protective and risk factors in interaction with the personal characteristics of the child.**

### 2.4.3 'Time'.

However, even this understanding of relationships ('process') occurring between individuals with a diversity of characteristics ('person') in a variety of 'contexts', does not tell the whole story, and one must also consider the 'time' at which these processes occur, both in historical terms and within the life-course of the individual (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). Bronfenbrenner's Bio-ecological Model has sometimes been criticised for its lack of emphasis on the temporal dimension to development and systems' functioning (Downes, 2014), and even Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006, p. 796) concede that "the 1979 Volume scarcely mentions the term" time. Nevertheless, changes over time, particularly with regards to patterns of child-rearing, have been a feature of Bronfenbrenner's work since the 1950's (Bronfenbrenner, 1958).

This culminates in Bronfenbrenner and Morris' (2006) chapter, where 'time' is referenced in the very first paragraph, indicating that development "extends over the life course, across successive generations, and through historical time, both past and future" (p. 793). In fact the word 'time' is used on no less than eighty-seven occasions in that chapter, and it is referred to as "a defining property of the Bio-ecological paradigm" (p. 820). The idea of time in a Bio-ecological sense (chrono-system) refers both to time in the individual life-course of a human being, and socio-cultural changes over time.

#### *2.4.3.1 'Time' in the life-course.*

The more evolved Bio-ecological model (2006) draws heavily on the work of Elder (e. g. Elder, Van Nguyen and Caspi, 1985) which showed that the impact of experiences was altered significantly based on when in the life-course they occurred. For example, the increasing freedoms available to women (in Western cultures at least) over time, would have

differential effects on young women and on their mothers (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). The Bio-ecological Model predicts that the age at which a person experiences a significant event, personal or historical, will influence developmental outcomes based on that event. This is consistent with Bourdieu's contention that advantages experienced in early childhood are likely to become cumulative over 'time'. Brooker (2015) gives the example that children from advantaged backgrounds tend to become literate early, and by the time children from disadvantaged backgrounds catch up, the skill of literacy is more commonplace and so less valued, rendering their achievement seemingly less impressive. "Bourdieu emphasises that cultural capital requires the longest possible time of acquisition, and it may be too late to catch up when children begin statutory schooling" (Brooker, 2015, p. 40).

This sociological work is supported by research in psychology on 'sensitive periods' for development. This refers to the idea that there are particular times early in a child's life that are vitally important to development, and if opportunities for enrichment are missed at these times, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to 'catch up' in developmental terms (Berk, 2009). Attachment Theory relies on such ideas, and there is extensive research evidence supporting the concept that early social and emotional development profoundly impacts later outcomes, as described above. However, much of the evidence for the idea of 'sensitive periods' stems from neuropsychological work dating back to the early research of Hubel and Wiesel (1970) – if kittens were denied visual stimulation after birth, the parts of their brains associated with vision (occipital lobe) atrophied and vision could never be restored. Many studies with children who have experienced significant deprivation in early childhood (such as the Romanian orphan studies) have noted similar findings on a variety of measures of developmental outcomes such as cognitive, social, emotional and behavioural indicators (e. g. Beckett et al., 2006; O'Connor et al., 2000; Rutter et al., 1998).

The idea of a sensitive period for development is also a central platform of the argument presented by nativists in the field of psycholinguistics (Chomsky, 1969; Pinker, 1994) – if language learning were based on environmental input such as reward and imitation as indicated by Behaviourists (Skinner, 1957) then it should not matter when that input is received, but research and the experiences of so-called 'feral children' such as the famous 'Genie' (Curtiss, 1977) would seem to show that indeed it does matter, and if a first language is not learned early in childhood, it may not be learned to any degree of complexity at all (Berk, 2009).

However, while granting the importance of early experiences, it may be that development is not set in stone, hence the increasingly preferred use of the term 'sensitive', rather than 'critical', period. For example, early disadvantage associated with coming from a home low in cultural capital, is likely to persist throughout a child's school career (Bourdieu, 1997; Brooker, 2015), but Reay (2010) reminds us that habituses are permeable and responsive to what is going on around them. Current circumstances are not just there to be acted upon, but are internalised and become yet another layer to add to those from earlier socialisations. There are also some dissenting voices in psychology to the idea of sensitive periods, most notably John Bruer (e. g. 1999), who refers to 'the myth of the first three years', and with regard to second language learning, Ellis (2012) indicates that overall the available evidence speaks against the idea. Even among those in favour of a sensitive period, there is no clear consensus in the literature on when the 'window of opportunity' closes (Ellis, 2012).

Nevertheless, there is a significant body of research to show that the synapses or brain connections that have been reinforced by virtue of repeated experience in early life tend to

become permanent; the synapses that were not used often enough in the early years are eliminated – in this way experiences (positive or negative) that children have in their early lives influence the ways their brains will be wired in adulthood (Shore, 1997). This phenomenon is known as 'synaptic pruning' (see Berk, 2009 for an overview) and it gives extensive support to the prediction of the Bio-ecological Model that the time in one's life that an experience happens holds considerable explanatory power in terms of the impact of that experience. However, Elder's work, which was influential in Bronfenbrenner's conceptualisation of the chrono-system, also recognises the impact of time in the socio-historical sense, and therefore, so does the Bio-ecological Model: "The lifecourse of individuals is embedded in and shaped by the historical times and events they experience over their lifetime" (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006, p. 821).

#### *2.4.3.2 Socio-historical 'time'.*

Elder et al. (1985) showed the important influence of times of economic recession on the development of individual children. Again, the impact of other elements within the Bio-ecological Model on 'proximal processes' is evident here, since O'Connor (2013) makes the point that parents trying to take care of their children in financially unstable times have the odds stacked against them regarding their capacity to respond consistently and supportively, and this can impact on security of attachment. The Bio-ecological Model indicates that the optimal environments for child development are stable and predictable across space and time (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006), and it is hard for parents to ensure this if, for example, they have lost their job and perhaps even their home as a result of an economic recession.

It is clear therefore, that 'time' plays a key role in a Bio-ecological conception of development, and it may even be that our theories on child development and human

experience are a function of the time in which they are developed. This is central to the work of Kenneth Gergen (1973). For example, the focus on empiricism and objective identification of universal laws that characterised psychology in the early part of the 20th century was, according to Gergen, a direct descendant of eighteenth century thought with regard to the physical sciences. Similar points are made by Erica Burman (2008) in arguing for a reconceptualisation of childhood beyond the views put forward by developmental psychology. Gergen (1973) argues that studying social psychology is in fact studying history, because even as we are reporting it, aspects of it are changing. He also maintains that the findings of social psychology can be used to change the 'contexts' in which children are developing (for example through educational approaches) so that social psychology to some extent influences ('constructs') the society it studies.

#### *2.4.3.3 'Zeitgeists' in policy-making.*

Downes (2014) analysis is very useful in identifying how such change can be facilitated or inhibited, through exploration of processes of 'system blockage'. This refers to the tendency for systems to instil inertia in those within them – things are done a certain way because they have always been done that way, and people within systems find it difficult to change approaches, for example towards parental involvement, on a practical level even where they agree in theory that change would be beneficial. This is particularly relevant to political and policy-based contexts at a specific point in 'time'. An understanding of the temporal dimensions of the Bio-ecological Model emphasises the importance of 'newly emerging' programmes and policy thrusts that may impact on the experiences of individual children and families through reverberations in the macro- and exo-systems that filter down to micro-systems (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). In fact, Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) go so far as to state that policy decisions can inadvertently lead to 'chaos' in the lives

of individual children, and to predict that some ongoing economic and social changes "could raise the degree of chaos to even higher and less psychologically (and biologically) tolerable levels" (p. 824). In Downes' (2014) terms, such policies can contribute to inertia within systems ('system blockage'), constricting possibilities for constructive change, and in an educational setting, constricting opportunities for education for liberation as advocated by Freire (1972).

Reminiscent of the work of both Bronfenbrenner and Elder, Goodson (2004) cautions that we are well served to identify where our practices fit within an international and historical perspective, because otherwise we can fall victim to the 'amnesia' that accompanies excitement about 'new' educational directions, sometimes leading to 'wilful disregard' of experiences (and pitfalls) of other nations and times. He maintains that educators should nurture their critical thinking skills to avoid being 'beguiled' by movements that are politically, rather than educationally, motivated. According to Gleeson (2004), the education system, through curriculum, can sometimes transmit the dominant cultural emphasis of the present 'time' as if it were unproblematic, resulting in support solely for a small number of high achievers who will create employment for themselves and others. This resonates strongly with Bourdieu's ideas on social reproduction, and Mayall (2015) emphasises the importance of temporal concerns, such as ideas on the nature of childhood that change over time, in a Bourdieusian perspective on education. She indicates that such changing conceptual norms can be highly influential in terms of policy development and structuring educational systems.

*2.4.3.3.1 Neo-liberalism in education.*

One of the most significant shifts in educational policy in the recent socio-historical time period has been a perceptible swing towards increasingly neo-liberal approaches internationally. Such approaches tend to use business models of 'accountability', and 'measurement', viewing schools and early education settings as factories, whose 'raison d'etre' involves producing future workers, and viewing educators as those in control of these factories, whose work must be monitored to ensure productivity (Sahlberg, 2014). A key feature of neo-liberal educational systems is a narrowing of curriculum (Cambridge Primary Review, 2010) primarily valuing only verbal/linguistic and logical/mathematical intelligences (Gardner,1985; 1993; 1999) so that children whose talents lie elsewhere may emerge from education with the erroneous assumption that they are somehow 'not clever'. In Bourdieu's terms, the cultural capital of our musicians, artists, athletes, etc is increasingly being devalued within education under comtemporary policy thrusts.

Some argue that if children fail to grasp basic literacy and numeracy skills, they are excluded from other forms of learning, and self-esteem, as well as academic achievement may be damaged as a result (DES, 2011), but this represents a simplistic analysis when one considers the wealth of evidence that sole concentration on linguistic and logical mathematical competencies simply does not work in the context of a broader understanding of education (Gardner 1985, 1993, 1999). For example, a focus on literacy and numeracy to the exclusion of other 'intelligences' undermines the self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1994) of children whose talents lie elsewhere. This may lead to the motivational 'vicious circle' identified above, whereby children with lower levels of self-efficacy beliefs shy away from difficult tasks, because they dwell on their personal deficiencies, the obstacles they will encounter, and so on. To put it simply, if a child, such as a struggling reader, only ever

experiences situations where they are unlikely to succeed, such as in classrooms focussed solely on literacy and numeracy, they tend to disengage from learning generally, and reduce effort accordingly (Bandura, 1994).

Equally damaging is the tendency within neo-liberal systems to measure achievement within these narrow areas using standardised forms of assessment. There is an increasing move at the current 'time' towards reliance on standardised testing as measures of 'quality' (Ó Breacháin and O'Toole, 2013; 2014). Many interventions that purport to support children and families are actually predicated on flawed notions of bringing people to the same arbitrary 'standard', regardless of their starting point, or the unstated value system behind the aimed-for standard (Brooker, 2015). Understanding the idea of 'multiple intelligences' (Gardner, 1985; 1993; 1999) through the lenses provided by Bronfenbrenner's Bio-ecological Model and Bourdieu's theories on cultural capital and social reproduction, leads to the unmistakable conclusion that expectation of standardised outcomes for children makes little sense. Often, children's first experiences of such standardisation and potential labelling as 'deficient' come with transitioning into formal schooling (Brooker, 2015), and so the impact of neo-liberal approaches on transition is explored in Chapter 3.

#### *2.4.3.4 Summary.*

In summary, synthesis of understandings of 'time' with the insights of a number of important theories, such as those of Bourdieu, Elder, Chomsky, Gergen and Downes, as well as consideration of the potential impact of policy changes over time (such as contemporary neo-liberal thrusts), supports two further Propositions of a Bio-ecological Framework:

**Proposition 7:** The impact of both relationships and contextual experience on development is strongly influenced by the time of life at which they occur. The socio-historical period during which a child develops also impacts on the course of that development. This interacts with 'time of life', so that historical events will have differential impacts based on what age a child was when he or she experienced them. **Responses to relationships and experiences change over time**. The developmental impact of early experiences is exponential as the child grows.

**Proposition 8:** It is vitally important that policy directions are decided upon with full cognisance of their historical contexts. 'Old' ideas can be re-packaged as 'new', and without critical awareness we may pursue policy directions that have been tried and failed in the past. Equally, policy shifts can be based on contemporary value systems that may not be made explicit, and **policy shifts based on 'zeitgeist' preoccupations and values can have significant (and not always positive) impacts on individual children.**

## 2.5 Conclusion

This chapter set out to explore the potential of Bronfenbrenner's Bio-ecological Model of Human Development as a powerful Framework within which to synthesise various theories from psychology, sociology and education. These theories included Bourdieu's social reproduction, cultural capital, field and embodiment, Attachment Theory, Baumrind's disciplinary styles, Rogers' Humanism, Gergen's Social Constructionism, Hayes' Nurturing Pedagogy, Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development, Vygotsky's Socio-cultural Theory as well more up-to-date iterations of Socio-cultural Theory, Bandura's Self-efficacy, Downes'

theory of inclusive systems vs system blockage, Freire's theories on education as liberation or oppression, the ideas of Thomas and Chess on 'temperament' and 'goodness of fit', as well as various conceptions of 'dispositions' from psychology, sociology and early childhood education, Rutter's concept of resilience through combinations of risk and protective factors, Elder's life-course psychology, and psychological and sociological analyses of holism vs neoliberalism in education. This array of ideas and concepts fit within, are enhanced by, and in turn enhance the Bio-ecological Model of Human Development. It is worth reiterating that this list of illuminating theories is not exhaustive, with potentially many other interesting perspectives on the human condition that could fit within this formidable Framework. In synthesising this range of theory within a Bio-ecological Framework, eight key Propositions have been developed:

**Proposition 1: Relationships (with 'objects and symbols' but more importantly with other people) are key to the development of human beings emotionally, socially and cognitively.**

**Proposition 2: There is a bi-directional, exponential synergy between the personal characteristics of the developing person, and the contexts in which they develop, mediated by the significant relationships they experience.**

Personal characteristics influence how the environment and other people within it respond to an individual. In turn, experience of the environment and other people within it is internalised and embodied by the developing person, and forms the basis of future personal characteristics. As such, traditional dichotomies of nature-vs-nurture are outmoded and irrelevant. A Bio-

ecological Framework foregrounds that nature and nurture are synergistic and mutually reinforcing in human development.

**Proposition 3:** **Diversity is a key feature of what it means to be human, so it is senseless to expect standardisation of outcomes for children or families, socially, emotionally, behaviourally or educationally.**

**Proposition 4:** **The course of human development is neither completely free nor completely pre-determined**. Human beings are active agents within a narrow range of choices, defined by complex interactions between personal characteristics and the environments and relationships in which they find themselves.

**Proposition 5:** **Children's development is inextricably linked with the context in which it occurs.**

**Proposition 6:** Less than optimal contexts can (to some extent) be overcome through the power of positive relationships, and contexts that on the surface appear to be supportive of development in fact lose their power in the absence of supportive relationships. **Resilience is best understood as reliant on a complex interaction of protective and risk factors in interaction with the personal characteristics of the child.**

**Proposition 7:** The impact of both relationships and contextual experience on development is strongly influenced by the time of life at which they occur.

The socio-historical period during which a child develops also impacts on the course of that development. This interacts with 'time of life', so that historical events will have differential impacts based on what age a child was when he or she experienced them. **Responses to relationships and experiences also change over time.** The developmental impact of early experiences is exponential as the child grows.

**Proposition 8:** It is vitally important that policy directions are decided upon with full cognisance of their historical contexts. 'Old' ideas can be re-packaged as 'new', and without critical awareness we may pursue policy directions that have been tried and failed in the past. Equally, policy shifts can be based on contemporary value systems that may not be made explicit, and **policy shifts based on 'zeitgeist' preoccupations and values can have significant (and not always positive) impacts on individual children.**

In the next chapters, these Propositions, and the synthesis of theory within the Bio-ecological Framework from which they are drawn, will be confronted with real-world data from research on educational transition, with a view to both illuminating and elucidating those findings, and to challenging the validity of the Propositions and the Bio-ecological Framework from which they are drawn.

# Chapter 3: Literature Review

## 3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter responded to Bronfenbrenner and Morris' (2006) statement that the Bio-ecological Model of Human Development is "an evolving theoretical system" (p. 793) by analysing where other important theories fit within its structure. This chapter responds to another 'call to action' from Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) - the testing of theory using data from real-world situations, with "explicit interest in applications to policies and programs pertinent to enhancing youth and family development" (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006, p. 794). It applies the Bio-ecological Framework developed in Chapter 2 to the study of educational transition, from pre-school to primary and from primary to secondary school in order to theorise these important areas of endeavour as advocated by Tobbell and O'Donnell (2005).

There is increasing national and international recognition of the importance of educational transitions for children and their families (Margetts and Kienig, 2013; O'Toole, Hayes and Mhic Mhathúna, 2014), including transition from pre-school to primary school (Mhic Mhathúna, 2011; Dunlop and Fabian, 2003), and primary school to secondary school (Downes, Maunsell and Ivers, 2007). Mhic Mhathúna (2011) draws on the traditional Irish proverb "Tús maith leath na h-oibre" ('a good start is half the work') in identifying the period of time around starting school as potentially crucial in underpinning future educational success. However, transition from pre-school to primary school is a particularly under-researched area – as Topping (2011) states, "There is a considerable research literature on the transition from school to work, less on the primary–secondary transition, and even less on the nursery–primary transition" (p 268). This point has been noted in the Irish setting also

(Hayes, 2004a; INTO, 2009; Walsh, 2003), although transition is certainly an emerging field of inquiry through the work of researchers such as Brooker (2002; 2006; 2008), Dockett and Perry (2004; 2005; 2007; 2013; Dockett, Perry and Kearney, 2012), Mhic Mhathúna (2011), O'Kane and Hayes (2006), and Ring et al. (2015).

In keeping with structure provided by the Bio-ecological Framework, the literature on these two transitions is structured in this chapter around the influences of 'process', 'person', 'context' and 'time' on experiences and outcomes (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). However, to reiterate the points made in Chapter 2, a key concept of the Bio-ecological Framework is that development is not linear and passive. On the contrary, factors influencing both developmental outcomes and experiential aspects of the educational journey are complex, intertwined and mutually influential. Many of the factors explored here with reference to educational transition are indeed interactive and work in non-linear and unpredictable ways (Tobbell and O'Donnell, 2005). Bidirectional effects and interactions between factors must be noted, and so the researcher attempting to stay true to a Process-Person-Context-Time framework is left with the near impossible task of separating out key factors in order to study them, while at the same time analysing and presenting them in all their complex inter-dependence.

In attempting to meet these conflicting needs, this chapter draws on Bronfenbrenner's more recent emphasis on 'process' as the key to understanding events across all levels of systems in an attempt to structure the literature. In spite of the fact that the effects of 'processes' or relationships may be more powerful than those of the 'contexts' in which they occur (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006), the majority of research on educational transition has focussed on contextual factors (Tobbell and O'Donnell, 2005). What international

research does exist on the 'process' dimension has supported a Bio-ecological interpretation, by identifying the central role of relationships in positive educational transitions, as well as opportunities for those involved to build and maintain these relationships (Dockett et al., 2011). Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) maintain that the explanatory power of a PPCT design is enhanced by including more than one 'proximal process' in the model, and this doctoral research incorporates the experiences of children, parents, teachers, schools and communities.

The literature is firstly presented regarding the potential impact of various factors on the quality of important relationships and 'processes' at times of educational transition. Specifically, factors related to children's 'processes' are considered first, followed by those of parents, and those related to teachers, schools and communities. Within the analysis of these 'processes', relevant intertwining and mutually influential 'person', 'context' and 'time' factors are explored. However, even within this approach, there remained some factors that were relevant to the perspectives of all 'processes', so that separating them would have led to false demarcation and stilted flow of logic. Therefore, following on from the initial analysis, this chapter explores specific influential factors emphasising diversity. These include language, religion and culture, socio-economics, disability and special educational needs (SEN), gender and family structure. Appendix 3 shows a visual representation of the organisation of this chapter.

## 3.2 Educational transition from the perspective of children

Experiences of educational transition do not represent discrete events in the lives of children, but can be viewed as processes that take place over time. For example, according to

Dockett et al. (2011), 'transition' into primary school begins well before children start school and extends to the point where children and families feel a sense of belonging at school, and when educators recognise this sense of belonging. Harvard Family Research Project (2014) defines transition as beginning with a child's pre-school enrolment and extending to the first three years of primary school. Equally, Brooker (2008) notes that young children experience many transitions in their lives, both horizontal (for example, from home, to pre-school in the morning, to a child-minder in the afternoon) and vertical (for example starting in a new child-care setting when a mother returns to work from maternity leave). This emphasis on 'multiple transitions' is echoed by O'Kane (2015). Transition should be viewed therefore, as part of an ongoing process, but there is merit in studying points of educational transition in particular.

There is much evidence that children can be particularly vulnerable at these times (Downes et al., 2007; Mackenzie, McMaugh and O'Sullivan, 2012; O'Kane, 2015). Even the most secure and confident children can experience challenge during transition (INTO, 2009). According to Dunlop and Fabian (2003), transition can be assumed to bring discontinuity, and therefore may cause social and emotional turmoil as well as discontinuities in learning. Equally, transition can bring many academic and social opportunities for children (Mackenzie et al., 2012; O'Toole, Hayes and Mhic Mhathúna, 2014), and positive experiences of transition tend to position children well for ongoing positivity of educational outcomes (Brooker, 2008; Smyth et al., 2004; Topping, 2011).

The extent to which children experience smooth educational transitions may have long-term implications for their future educational experiences (O'Kane and Hayes, 2006), and early school adjustment has important implications for later functioning (Belsky and MacKinnon, 2004; Kienig, 2000; Mackenzie et al., 2012). For example, according to Dockett

et al. (2011), when children have positive experiences transitioning to primary school, they are likely to regard school as an important place, and to have positive expectations of their ability to learn and succeed at school (Dockett & Perry, 2007; Dunlop and Fabian, 2007; Margetts, 2007; Peters, 2010). Such positive early experiences can also be influential in interrupting cycles of social and economic disadvantage and can contribute to resilience among young people (Brooker, 2008; Commonwealth of Australia, 2009; Dockett et al., 2011; Smart et al., 2008). Negative or traumatic experiences of transition on the other hand can have significant impacts on future self-efficacy beliefs, motivation and academic achievement (Mackenzie et al., 2012). This reinforces the importance of research identifying approaches to the creation of positive experiences of educational transition for children, and the cumulative nature of experiences over time: "Ensuring that each transition is successful is significant for children's emotional well-being and to their continuing cognitive achievements" (Dunlop and Fabian, 2003, p. 2).

Educational transition is a time of rapid change in a child's life, and this can be stressful (Margetts, 2000; O'Kane and Hayes, 2006; O'Toole et al., 2014). As such, transition "poses many challenges to children, and some will be more successful than others at meeting these challenges" (O'Kane and Hayes, 2006, p. 4). Transition to the first year of schooling is characterised by tensions, challenges and uncertainties, and it can be emotionally demanding for young children because of their new role as a school-going child (Dunlop, 2000; Griebel and Niesel, 2000; Margetts, 2003). Research highlights the turbulent feelings associated with educational transition for children, both when moving from pre-school to primary school and from primary to secondary school. Students often report feeling both nervous *and* excited (O'Brien, 2001; Smyth et al., 2004) - a mix of optimism *and* anxiety (Topping, 2011), perceptions of challenge *and* threat (Sirsch 2003; Mackenzie et al., 2012) or 'anxious

readiness' (Zeedyk et al., 2003). For example, Dockett and Perry (2007) describe how children starting primary school both celebrate 'getting big' and worry about what that might mean. Children going to secondary school may look forward to having more choices and making friends, but at the same time, they may be concerned about being teased by older children, having harder work, a longer school day, more teachers, getting lower grades, and getting lost in a larger, unfamiliar school (Mackenzie et al., 2012; Topping, 2011).

O'Kane and Hayes (2006) suggest that a significant minority of children experience difficulties in the transition from pre-school to primary school, indicating that some children may become disengaged from education from the very beginning as a result. This can also happen at the beginning of a secondary school career (Byrne and Smyth, 2010; Downes et al., 2007; Smyth et al., 2004). Educational transition can sometimes be linked with increased loneliness, stress and depression in children, as well as decreased interaction with peers (Barber and Olsen, 2004; Mackenzie et al., 2012). Topping's (2011) review of the literature on the primary-secondary transition found that it may be a problem for all children at first, but for many these problems are relatively short-lived and pupils integrate relatively quickly. However, a percentage continue to struggle on a more long-term basis (Topping, 2011).

In the context of transition from pre-school to primary school, Irish (O'Kane and Hayes, 2006; O'Kane, 2008; 2015; O'Toole et al., 2014) and international (Brooker, 2008; Fabian, 2000; Griebel and Niesel, 2000; Margetts, 2003) research identifies the stress of adjusting to a new setting that tends to be physically larger, with strange buildings and classrooms, and the challenge of a new teacher, new academic and behavioural expectations and a new, more diverse group of classmates. In the later transition to second level, many

children report missing their primary school, due in no small measure to the extensive changes in structure and pedagogical approaches in secondary school (Smyth et al., 2004).

Academic difficulties appear to be particularly pronounced in the transition from primary to secondary school. According to Topping (2011), there is strong evidence that after this transition, pupil attainment declines, recovering only after a year or two. This has also been noted in international (Mackenzie et al., 2012) and Irish contexts (INTO, 2009). For example, Tobbell (2005) identifies how, in the context of mathematics education, new practices and procedures at secondary level (such as the pen to use, the position of the date, the width of the margins, etc.) may deskill students causing their academic performance to diminish. Topping (2011) also identifies a dip in motivation as well as attainment in the first year of secondary school (Boyd, 2005; Barber and Olsen, 2004), particularly related to decreased self-concept as a learner and regarding individual subjects (Mullins and Irvin, 2000). In the context of transition from pre-school to primary school, Brooker (2008) describes such processes as children becoming 'disheartened', and gives poignant examples of how they can lose "enthusiasm, eagerness, confidence, competence or even courage" (p. 31) as they become socialised into the norms of formal schooling.

### 3.2.1 The power of 'process'.

However, Bronfenbrenner emphasises the potential power of 'process' to overcome difficulties caused by 'context', and international transitions research repeatedly foregrounds the importance of relationships (O'Kane, 2015).

#### *3.2.1.1 Children's Friendships.*

According to Ledger, Smith and Rich (2000), a Bio-ecological perspective emphasises the importance of children's friendships in the transition from pre-school to primary school. If children go to school with others that they know from pre-school, this strengthens 'linkages' in the meso-system through maintenance of common elements across settings. Ledger et al. (2000) found that the majority of friendships formed in pre-school did not survive the transition to primary school, since children depend on their parents for maintenance of friendships, and this is not always possible during changes in family circumstances, such as those necessitated by an educational transition. Equally, even when children who know each other from pre-school make the transition to the same primary school, teachers often separate friends with the aim of encouraging independence and facilitating the development of new friendships. Ledger et al. (2000) indicated that in some cases children who came to primary school not knowing anyone settled very well, whereas some children who had friends in the class struggled in the transition to primary school. However, extensive evidence from elsewhere (Brooker, 2002; Broström, 2002; Cosaro, 2003; Ladd, 1990; Ladd and Kochendorfer, 1996) would indicate that friends make the transition more easily together.

Transition to school is a social process, and children must engage in complex social interactions at school. The importance of friendships has been identified in the transition from primary to secondary school also (Mackenzie et al., 2012), and having friends from primary school is often a factor for children in school choice (Smyth et al., 2004) – they are more likely to opt for a particular school if their friends are going there too. Relationships with peers may provide protection to children at times of vulnerability such as transition (O'Brien, 2003; 2004), and it is often through friendships, particularly with older children, that

understanding of school culture is developed (Dockett and Perry, 2013). Smyth et al. (2004) found that having friends in secondary school significantly supported ease of transition from primary school, with many children describing their informal network of friends as the greatest source of support through the experience of transition. This 'buffer effect' is recognised in the international context (Mackenzie et al., 2012; Topping, 2011).

This later transition is certainly a time developmentally when children "turn their backs on adults and become immersed in the community of children" (Herbert, 2008, p. 157). Some of the potential difficulties experienced by children in transitioning between schools relate to disruption, alteration or even severance of pre-existing friendships (Mizelle and Irvin, 2000). Smyth et al. (2004) also reported that a significant proportion of first year students mentioned their student mentor, 'buddy' or prefect as potential sources of help, and Dockett and Perry (2013) noted a similar effect in the transition from pre-school to primary school. Again, this mirrors the outcomes of international research (Topping, 2011), and peer mentoring is often presented as an effective intervention to ease the process of educational transition (Dockett and Perry, 2013; Parsons et al., 2008).

*3.2.1.1.1 Bullying.*

The literature notes that having gone from being one of the biggest, most competent children in pre-school, children find themselves as one of the smallest, least knowledgeable children in the primary school (Brooker, 2008). Children moving from sixth class to first year have similar experiences, and there is, it seems, a certain vulnerability associated with this (Mackenzie et al., 2012; Smyth et al., 2004) – "children go from being a 'big fish in a little pond' (the BFLP effect) to minnows in an uncharted ocean" (Topping, 2011, p. 270). As a result, bullying may be a concern for children entering primary school (Brooker, 2008), and

entering secondary school (Mackenzie et al., 2012), particularly with informal rumours of the "first year beating" common-place at second level (Smyth et al., 2004). This appears to be an international phenomenon, with many children's expectations of secondary school greatly influenced by 'horror stories' communicated by their peers (Delamont, 1991).

According to O'Moore (2010), many children use aggressive and destructive behaviour to manage their relationships in school, and to meet psychological needs to control, dominate or gain attention. It could be predicted that such approaches may become more commonplace in times of emotional upheaval such as educational transition (Smyth et al., 2004), and certainly bullying behaviour and aggression do seem to increase with transition (Pellegrini and Long, 2002). As such, 'proximal processes' with other children can present either difficulties or supports at times of educational transition. However, in findings reinforcing the vital nature of 'process', positive child-parent relationships are considered a protective factor in terms of bullying at times of educational transition, particularly in that from primary to secondary school (Smyth et al., 2004).

#### *3.2.1.2 Relationships between children and parents.*

Children with strong relationships at home are more likely to talk to their parents if they experience bullying, and this is particularly important because research has shown that for most children, telling a teacher is not considered a viable option (O'Moore, 2010; Smyth et al., 2004). Positive responses from parents (and indeed teachers) are crucial in these circumstances, since it is especially when children seek help from adults but do not get it that they become particularly anxious, depressed and even suicidal (O'Moore, 2010).

O'Connor and Scott (2007) found extensive evidence that the parent–child relationship is connected to a wide variety of child outcomes: behavioural, emotional, psychological, social, and educational as well as to intellectual and physical health. Of course, the connections are not straightforward (Cullen et al., 2011), but children who report that their parents spend time interacting with them and listening to them tend to report liking school and liking their teachers, and tend to have higher academic self-concepts at times of educational transition than children whose parents do not spend time with them (Smyth et al., 2004). Equally, children with characteristically positive patterns of interaction with their parents are more likely to seek their involvement in education (for example through help with homework) than those children whose patterns of interaction are characteristically antagonistic (Ames, 1993). Furthermore, children with strong relationships with their parents are less likely to report feeling isolated during transition from primary to secondary school (Smyth et al., 2004).

Additionally, as explored in Chapter 2, Attachment Theory was identified by Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) as providing key insights into proximal processes between children and parents, and it may have particular relevance for children at times of educational transition. When children experience stress, as is perhaps inherent in any move between micro-systems, separation anxiety may be reignited, even in older children (Bahali, 2009). Separation anxiety has been noted in children starting primary school, as well as in their parents (INTO, 2009), and in extreme cases, separation anxiety has been linked with 'school refusal' (Bahali, 2009). In early work distinguishing school refusal from truancy, Berg, Nichols, and Pritchard (1969) noted that the former group shared a number of common features:

- severe difficulty in attending school, often resulting in prolonged absence,

- severe emotional upset, which may involve such symptoms as excessive fearfulness, temper tantrums, or complaints of feeling ill without obvious organic cause when faced with the prospect of going to school,
- during school hours, the child remains at home with the knowledge of parents,
- absence of significant antisocial disorders such as 'juvenile delinquency', disruptiveness, and sexual activity.

Refusal behaviours tend to peak at key transition times, at ages 5-7 (school entry) and 10-13 (when transferring to secondary school) (Bahali, 2009). These represent extreme behaviours and experiences for a minority of children, but most children will experience some form of separation anxiety at times of educational transition (INTO, 2009). In particular, children with insecure and disorganised attachments are often significantly impaired in their ability to form relationships in the school setting, and their behaviour may be influenced by defensive reactions such as hypervigilance, as well as internalising and externalising reactions to stressful experiences (Riley, 2011). Therefore, attachment style and its effects on children's ability to manage stress may be vital in determining the extent to which an individual child can cope with educational transition.

*3.2.1.3* ***Disciplinary interactions.***

Baumrind's (1971) ideas are also supported by the literature on parental involvement in education generally, and in educational transition specifically. 'Permissive' parenting can strongly impact on experiences of educational transition in that homework completion may not be enforced, bed-times may be erratic, nutrition may be inconsistent and television viewing may not be supervised. There is much empirical evidence to suggest that these factors may be vital in understanding children's experiences and success educationally,

particularly at times of transition. For example, Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2001) found that parental involvement with homework significantly impacted on children's educational outcomes. Equally, Bub, Buckhalt and El-Sheikh (2011) found strong links between children's cognitive performance and sleep difficulties, and Downes and Maunsell (2007) found that lack of sleep was a significant negative factor impacting on academic performance in Dublin schools. Sigman (2007) also describes extensive research linking excessive exposure to television with problematic early brain development, sleep difficulties, poor educational achievement and disorders such as ADHD.

Recent Irish research on parental involvement in education also found that low levels of parental monitoring were linked with poorer literacy achievement (Gileece, 2015). Gileece's research relied only on standardised testing (PIRLS – Progress in Reading Literacy Study) and measures of parental monitoring were somewhat limited (children having a television in their bedroom or their own smartphone), but the findings are interesting nonetheless. In particular, it is worth noting that informal measures of involvement (such as high academic expectations, and the number of books in a home) were identified as more influential than formal measures (such as serving on committees). Of course such evaluations of parenting must be treated with caution, since they are so emotionally and culturally loaded. For example, Brooker (2008) critiques measures such as the 'tick box' systems used in the UK to measure 'home learning environment' (similar to those used by Gileece, 2015). She gives the example of her own research with a family who, on the surface, met the criterion for a 'good' 'home learning environment' through availability of books in the home, but who on qualitative interview explained that the child would not be allowed to touch the books until she was able to read so that they would not be ruined. On the other hand, Brooker (2008) shows how some families who seemed not to meet the criterion of availability of books in the

home in fact provided their children with rich interaction with literacy through sacred texts, magazines, newspapers, etc.

Nevertheless, albeit with these cautions around culturally-sensitive measures of what *constitutes* permissive parenting in mind, it seems that such a parenting style may be correlated with impulsivity, disobedience and rebellion, demanding children who are dependent on adults, less persistence on tasks, poor academic achievement and anti-social behaviour (Baumrind, 1978). Such issues may affect children's experiences of educational transition, and teachers often identify children with behavioural difficulties as being at risk of a problematic transition from pre-school to primary school (INTO, 2009; O'Kane and Hayes, 2006). O'Kane and Hayes (2006) note that parents' expectations of their children can change as they progress through the educational system, supporting Bio-ecological ideas regarding the impact of 'time' on experiences. Parents may begin to place more emphasis on academic outcomes on transition from pre-school to primary school, and that this can pose difficulties for children (O'Kane, 2015).

Parents' attitudes to education certainly appear to impact on children in terms of development of their own attitudes and beliefs (Ames, 1993), enjoyment of educational tasks (Shumow, 1998), decisions about time and effort to be spent on education, and sense of personal responsibility for learning and persistence in task completion (Cooper, Lyndsay, Nye and Greathouse, 1998), all of which could be hypothesised to have an effect on experiences of educational transition. The behaviour of individual children may be to some extent a function of parenting style[5], since an 'authoritative' approach to parenting on the other hand has been linked with upbeat mood, self-control, task persistence, cooperativeness,

[5] Of course it should be noted that parenting style in itself is not a sole function of the 'person' factors of an individual parent, but rather emerges through complex interaction of factors including cultural norms, family stressors and supports, bidirectional relationships between parents and individual children, etc.

high self-esteem, responsiveness to parental views, social and moral maturity, favourable school performance and more pro-social behaviour (Baumrind, 1966; 1978). Such skills and dispositions may support the success of children in education generally and in times of educational transition specifically. In fact, INTO (2009) maintain that children who come from a family environment defined as 'democratic' are more likely to experience successful educational transitions due in large measure to higher self-esteem and greater ability to adjust to new school settings.

Therefore, the literature indicates that relationships between children and parents may mediate experiences of educational transition through their effects on children's behaviour, socio-emotional adjustment and academic competence, as predicted by the Bio-ecological Framework. However, parents are not the only important adult mediating children's experiences of educational transition, and Bronfenbrenner also notes teachers as a key component of a child's micro-system. A central aspect of the relationship between children and teachers is the practice of discipline, and there is much research to suggest changing disciplinary structures and behavioural expectations of children during educational transition leading to difficulties for children (Brooker, 2008; Downes et al., 2007; Smyth et al., 2004).

There are varying disciplinary structures and teaching styles in schools and pre-schools, from schools that demand behavioural conformity and compliance to those who emphasise independent decision-making and autonomy (Gregory et al., 2010). Some schools employ 'positive' discipline through reinforcement of 'good' behaviour and development of self-direction and positive relationships (Freiberg and Lambe, 2009). Others take a 'zero-tolerance' approach focusing on suspension and expulsion (Gregory et al., 2010). Equally, disciplinary approaches and behavioural expectations of individual teachers differ, even

within schools (Smyth et al., 2004), and the approaches taken to discipline can significantly impact on children's experiences of educational transition (Downes et al., 2007).

Mirroring the application of Baumrind's ideas to parenting styles at times of educational transition, approaches to discipline on a whole-school contextual level and at individual teacher level can be related to the concepts of 'authoritarian', 'authoritative' and 'permissive' styles (Gregory et al., 2010). Authoritarian practices may be highly ineffective for children at times of educational transition (Downes and Maunsell, 2007). In such circumstances, excessive strictness can elicit antagonistic responses from children, particularly those in transition from primary to secondary school who are entering adolescence, a developmental stage predisposed to challenge authority and seek autonomy (Mayer and Leone, 1999). Authoritarian teaching styles are linked with early school-leaving (Croninger and Lee, 2001; Downes and Maunsell, 2007; Pellerin, 2005), and also decreased academic performance (Gregory et al., 2010) – this may be informed by consideration of the neuro-physiological bases of learning: memory and emotion are strongly linked in the brain through the structure of the limbic system (Beaumont, 2008) so if children are frightened by their teachers, the 'fight-flight' instinct may be engaged, shutting down higher-level cognition and limiting the child's ability to learn.

Of course, permissive teaching styles may also limit learning, and similar to Baumrind's findings with parents, it may be that authoritative school and classroom climates are most conducive to positive educational, emotional and behavioural outcomes for children (Gregory et al., 2010), particularly in times of potential stress and vulnerability such as transition (Smyth et al., 2004). This is interesting in the light of research that identifies a negative correlation between behavioural difficulties and parental involvement in education

(Hornby and Lafaele, 2011), and between behavioural difficulties and smooth educational transitions (INTO, 2009). Pellerin (2005) also found that authoritative environments in schools led to less truancy and fewer dropouts, and this style is also consistent with the approaches identified by Bandura (1994) as promoting self-efficacy beliefs in children. As such, it may be that authoritative disciplinary styles employed by parents and teachers could be linked with positive experiences of transition for children.

#### *3.2.1.4 Changing relationships between children and teachers through educational transition.*

Unfortunately, however, there seems to be a move towards more authoritarian methods as children move through the educational system, and as they progress, children tend to perceive their teachers as less caring (Brooker, 2008). There appear to be massive shifts in behavioural expectations for children once they enter primary school (Dockett and Perry, 2004; 2005; Peters, 2007; O'Kane and Hayes, 2006), and the INTO characterised these expectations as 'overwhelming demands' on small children (INTO, 2009). They maintain that "the most experienced stakeholders in the transition process (the adults) [expect] the least experienced stakeholders (the children) to make all the changes" (INTO, 2009, p. 45).

The expectations of teachers may equally change in the move from primary to secondary school, as can the nature of some important relationships between teachers and students (Tonkin and Watt, 2003), and all of this can contribute to the "jolt in school climate" between primary and secondary schools identified by Downes et al. (2007, p. 413). They state that the openness of the primary school environment may create expectations in pupils of an emotionally supportive environment at second level that could lead to a heightened sense of disillusionment if this atmosphere is not sustained across the transition. INTO (2009) also

identify the shift from a ‘culture of care’ at primary school to an ‘academic and exam oriented culture’ at secondary school, and Wilson, Hall and Hall (2007) agree, finding that primary school teachers were more likely to embed pupil support into their concept of being teachers, whereas secondary teachers perceived it to be a separate, specialist function, which many were reluctant to undertake. As a result, child-teacher relationships have been shown to be greatly effected when transitioning between educational levels; for example Downes et al. (2007) found that the amount of students who indicated that they would tell a teacher about an academic problem was significantly lower in first year than sixth class, and the amount of students who indicated they were treated unfairly by teachers was significantly higher in first year than in sixth class. O’Brien (2003; 2004) also found a decrease in the quality of relationships between students and teachers in the first year of secondary school.

It is perhaps not entirely unexpected that relationships between children and teachers seem to become less supportive as children move up through the educational system, since at secondary level teachers are generally responsible to their subject rather than a particular class or child. This is unfortunate, however, since Mackenzie et al. (2012) identified the importance of accessible teachers for positive experiences and outcomes in transition to secondary school. In fact, it may be that the quality of relationships between children and teachers is the defining factor in perceptions of positive educational experiences by children (Rogers, 1995), and teacher dispositions and level of care for their children were key concerns of parents who participated in recent research on ‘school readiness’ by Ring et al. (2015). Having a trusted adult outside of the family that the child can talk to has been shown to be supportive of children’s resilience (Masten and Reed, 2002). Equally, positive interactions with teachers have been shown to raise student self-esteem and motivation (Downes et al., 2007; Smyth, 1999).

Where children do not have supportive relationships at home, they sometimes turn to teachers for emotional support if they have problems at times of educational transition, particularly year heads and class tutors (Smyth et al., 2004). Children who report that they do not like their teachers are more likely to indicate that they have no emotionally supportive adult to talk to (Smyth et al., 2004). Positive relationships with teachers have also been linked to school retention (Byrne and Smyth, 2010). For example, Croninger and Lee (2001) found that students were half as likely to drop out of school if they felt supported by their teachers, again confirming the vital nature of relationships for child outcomes. This may be linked to the effect of student-teacher relationships on students' perceptions of and attitudes to school; students who experience positive interaction with teachers are more likely to report liking school while the opposite is true for those who experience negative interaction (Smyth et al., 2004; Smyth and McCoy, 2011).

It has been found that positive teacher-child relationships are key to positive experiences of transition (Birch and Ladd, 1997), especially where children experience factors exposing them to risks of difficult transition (Burchinal, Peisner-Feinberg, Pianta and Howes, 2002) - those who are vulnerable in transition tend to benefit most from supportive relationships with teachers (Croninger and Lee, 2001). Unfortunately, there is extensive evidence that perceptions of transition on behalf of children and teachers can be very different. Topping's (2011) review of the literature relating to transition from primary to secondary school found that teachers were primarily concerned with academic issues, whereas children (and indeed parents) were more concerned with socio-emotional issues. This is important experientially for children, because many approaches to supporting transition from primary school to secondary school tend to focus largely on imparting information about procedures (Hargreaves and Galton, 2002). While schools tend to develop

administrative and organisational systems to ease the transition process with relation to academic problems, children and parents are typically more concerned with personal and social issues, and support for these issues is often less forthcoming (Jindal-Snape and Millar, 2008). Thus, the literature indicates that it is not enough for schools to pass on information about the official culture of the school (e. g. rules, timetabling, etc), they must also provide information about the unofficial culture of the school (Maunsell, Barret and Candon, 2007), and focus on developing relationships (Burchinal et al., 2002).

On the other hand, changes in relationships with teachers at times of transition are not always perceived as negative by children. For example, the respondents to Smyth et al.'s (2004) research indicated advantages to having more than one teacher in secondary school. If relationships were poor with the one teacher they had in primary school, they were 'stuck with it'; in secondary school "if you don't like the one teacher you have then it doesn't matter because you've got so many other ones" (p. 155).

#### *3.2.1.5 Summary*

Understanding of the literature on educational transition can be clarified using the Bio-ecological concept of 'process' and its power to overcome potential difficulties associated with 'person' and 'context' at this 'time'. Important relationships to be considered include those between children and their peers, with friendships supporting positive transition and bullying leading to vulnerability at these times. Equally, relationships with adults are highlighted, particularly those with parents and teachers. In this regard, disciplinary interactions may be key, and there is evidence that children experience a drift towards more authoritarian approaches as they proceed through the educational system, with the attendant difficulties associated with such styles. In general, children with warm, supportive

relationships with adults tend to be well positioned for positive experiences of educational transition.

Of course, this emphasis on relationships does not entirely negate the need to explore and understand the influences of 'person', 'context' and 'time' on experiences of educational transition. For example, as predicted within the Bio-ecological Framework depicting the child as an active agent, personal dispositions and skills possessed by individual children can have a profound influence on their experiences of educational transition.

### 3.2.2 'Person' factors and their interaction with 'process' and 'context' at 'times' of educational transition.

#### *3.2.2.1 Skills and dispositions for 'school readiness'.*

The idea of 'school readiness' is contested, and many authors note the importance of schools being ready for children, as well as children being ready for schools (Brooker, 2008; O'Kane, 2015; Ring et al., 2015). Nevertheless, the strong links between certain skills, and dispositions and positive outcomes through transition are well recognised (Fabian and Dunlop, 2002; O'Kane and Hayes, 2006). In particular social and emotional skills and dispositions are emphasised (O'Kane, 2015). Important terms recurring in the literature on educational transition are 'self-esteem' or "the degree to which one values oneself" (Reber, 1995, p. 98); 'self-concept' or "our thoughts, ideas and feelings about ourselves" (Minton, 2012, p. 33) and 'self-efficacy' or our "beliefs about [our] capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect [our] lives" (Bandura, 1994, p. 71). All participants in Ring et al.'s (2015) work regarded social and emotional skills as being 'important' or 'very important', and in prior research by O'Kane and Hayes (2006), both pre-school and primary-school teachers consistently identified children with low

self-esteem as being more at risk of experiencing a difficult transition from pre-school to primary school. According to Fabian (2002):

> Personal rather than intellectual ability is the key to giving children the best start to school. Social confidence and a sense of success play an important part in giving children self-esteem which will, in turn, help children to approach the start of school in a positive way (p. 63).

This is interesting since the process of transitioning into primary school can itself impact on self-esteem. As children move from pre-school to primary school, they go from a socially-focused learning environment to one in which they are judged and compared with each other (Brooker, 2008; INTO, 2009). This shift in focus can impact strongly on self-esteem and motivation. Gage and Berliner (1998) distinguish between 'autonomous motivation' – where children compare their performance against their own previous performances – and 'social motivation' – where they measure their performance against that of others. Autonomous achievement motivation is often exhibited by small children, but once children enter school they start to exhibit social motivation (Gage and Berliner, 1998); from early on, due to structures within the primary school setting (Brooker, 2008), children become more interested in competition with others than with striving to achieve self-determined standards, and this shift in emphasis may impact significantly on a child's self-esteem (Gage and Berliner, 1998).

Mackenzie et al. (2012) identify similar processes in the primary/secondary transition. Successful adaptation in transition to secondary school may depend on students remaining resilient and coping with change (Akos, 2004), whereas poor self-concept and social anxiety can be predictive of difficulties (Sirsch, 2003). The falling motivation levels in the early stages of secondary school noted above may be due to loss of self-esteem in a more

competitive learning environment, and O'Brien (2004) identifies self-esteem and confidence as key characteristics conducive to positive experience of transition.

Self-efficacy beliefs can also have enormous effects on children's experiences of education generally (Bandura, 1994) and on educational transition specifically (Smyth et al., 2004). Strong self-efficacy beliefs have been shown to reduce stress and lower vulnerability to depression (Bandura, 1994), and this may be particularly relevant at times of educational transition, when children are likely to experience heightened levels of anxiety (Smyth et al., 2004). To put it simply, if a child, due to poor self-efficacy beliefs, constantly thinks they are bound to fail, they are less likely try out anything new and take full advantage of the new opportunities provided by educational transition, and so they are less likely to have the opportunity to discover the abilities they do have. Equally, their confidence is more likely to be damaged by any difficulties adapting to the new and often challenging circumstances involved in educational transition. As such, low self-efficacy beliefs develop into a 'vicious cycle' reinforcing negative self-images (Bandura, 1994).

This is particularly important given evidence that academic self-efficacy beliefs are often shaped by experiences in times of educational transition (Berk, 2009; Mackenzie et al., 2012; Smyth et al., 2004). For example, Brooker (2008) shows how self-efficacy can decline on starting primary school, and links this to a 'dependency culture' whereby teachers in primary school do not trust children to direct the course of their own learning as much as they may have at pre-school level, and prefer them to follow the direction of adults. This becomes internalised by children, she maintains, and they come to see themselves as less competent. This relationship may also be reciprocal in that existing self-efficacy beliefs may influence children's perceptions and experiences of educational transition. In the transition from

primary to secondary school, Smyth et al. (2004) found that children who felt that they were at the bottom of the class in primary school were more likely to report negative feelings about the process of transition than those who felt they were at the top.

Returning briefly to the role of 'process' between parents and children, also relevant are findings that children whose parents are involved in their education tend to have higher self-perceptions of academic competence (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001). Among other factors, it may be that interactions during homework involvement allow parents to convey attitudes and ideas about competence that influence the child's subsequent sense of self-efficacy (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001). Such interactions can influence perceptions of personal competence, self-concept of ability and academic self-concept (Frome and Eccles, 1999), attributions about the causes of successful academic performance (Glasgow et al., 1997) and sense of mastery as well as tendency to trust one's own judgment (Ginsburg and Bronstein, 1993). All of these factors have been linked with school performance, and so parental involvement in education generally and educational transition specifically may be seen as a mediating factor in the reciprocal relationship between children's self-efficacy beliefs and their educational outcomes, particularly at times of educational transition.

*3.2.2.1.1 Specific skills:*

While beliefs, attitudes and experiences of children are influential, the literature also indicates that there are specific skills that individuals need to possess to make smooth transitions. In transition from pre-school to primary school, these include social skills, independence, language and communication skills and the ability to sit, listen and concentrate (Dockett and Perry, 2004; 2005; O'Kane and Hayes, 2006; Peters, 2007; Ring et al., 2015). Also important are cooperative play behaviours, non-disruptive group entry strategies, self-

reliance and determination, and problem-solving skills for dealing with the unknown (Fabian, 2000; Margetts; 2003). Equally, children who are successful in the transition to primary school tend to be able to follow direction, take responsibility for their belongings, wait and take turns, seek help when needed, and cope with frustration (Margetts, 2002; 2003).

Interestingly, these more social and independence-based skills are often seen as more important than pre-academic skills (O'Kane and Hayes, 2006; Ring et al., 2015). Difficulties tend to occur in times of transition for children who are non-compliant, disorganised, distractible or less sociable (Margetts, 2002), although it is worth noting that the idea of expecting four and five year-old children to sit still, listen and concentrate is characterised by INTO (2009) as 'contentious' (p. 45). They indicate that "play, movement and noise is an integral part of the learning environment of young children, not just sitting in a controlled or structured way in classrooms" (INTO, 2009, p. 73). The balance between sitting still and yet being independent must be a difficult dichotomy for small children to understand (INTO, 2009). This is important because as Ring et al. (2015) point out:

> A number of studies have suggested that active learning methodologies are not consistently used in pre-primary or infant classes in Ireland and that in some instances children engage in activities that require them to remain seated for extended periods of time (p. 2).

Teachers clearly value these skills in children in practical terms and for classroom management (INTO, 2009). As noted previously with regards to discipline, teachers (and often parents) expect children to adapt to significant changes on entering school, demonstrating greater levels of independence, responsibility and self regulation than ever experienced at home or in pre-school (Dockett and Perry, 2007). Teachers who responded to INTO's (2009) research on transitions indicated that children who have difficulty sitting still, listening and concentrating are among those most at risk of problematic transition to primary

school. O'Kane and Hayes (2006) summarise the literature thus: "Children with the ability to negotiate classroom life independently, equipped with good social skills and the ability to concentrate and listen for short periods of time, are more likely to be successful at primary level" (p. 10).

However, what is meant by these terms is not always clear, and the meanings imbued by teachers at different educational levels or by parents may not match, even though similar language is used. For example, Brooker (2008) notes that at pre-school, 'independence' tends to mean the child choosing his or her own activities, whereas at primary level, 'independence' tends to mean the ability to follow instruction and stay on-task (a task chosen by adults) without intervention. In some ways these skills are actually diametrically opposed, in spite of being given the same label of 'independence', and so it is little wonder that parents, pre-school teachers and teachers at later educational levels sometimes disagree on the skills required (Brooker, 2008; O'Kane, 2015).

#### *3.2.2.2 The importance of pre-school.*

Nevertheless, there does tend to be agreement that attendance at pre-school supports the development of skills conducive to positive transition to primary school. According to Belsky and MacKinnon (1994), we must understand prior experiences of non-parental care and education to grasp individual children's experiences of educational transition. Attendance at pre-school was associated by Margetts (2003) with benefits for children rgearding higher levels of cooperation, self-control and academic competence. Attendance at after-school care was also linked to lower levels of internalising behaviour. However, conversely, Margetts (2003) found that children who attended centre-based child-care, or who experienced extensive day-care in other settings such as with family, friends, neighbours, etc for four or

more days per week were at risk of lower measures of social skills and academic competence, and higher measures of behavioural difficulties in the transition to primary school. Before-school care in particular represented a problem for the children in her research, and was predictive of externalising behaviour, hyperactivity and summed problem behaviours. It may be that different types of child-care support development in different ways – for example in the Irish context Byrne and O'Toole (2015) found that parental care was correlated with stronger socio-emotional outcomes for children, relative care supported cognitive and linguistic development, and centre-based care led to more well developed fine and gross motor skills in children.

Children who have attended some form of pre-school prior to entering primary school may be less likely to suffer separation anxiety on the first day of school as they are more used to being with other adults, other children and making friends (INTO, 2009). It may be that attendance at pre-school influences how children experience primary school, preparing them for its routines and developing social skills such as sharing and taking turns (INTO, 2009). Brooker (2008) draws attentions to the work of Niesel and Griebel (2005) who state that, "Children cannot turn into resilient persons by themselves. They need significant support from their social systems" (p. 6). In the context of transition from pre-school to primary school, Brooker (2008) describes how resilience is not innate but can be strengthened and supported by adults and by positive pre-school experiences. When this happens, she maintains, children are more resilient through transition. According to INTO, children who have attended pre-school:

> Settle in better, adapt more quickly and are familiar with group situations. They are able to do jigsaws, colour and have a knowledge of counting. They can also sit, listen and pay attention when required. According to teachers, children that attend some form of pre-school are more independent, more confident and more mature, and therefore more ready to start school (2009, p. 54).

Therefore, pre-schools could be the ideal environment for children to learn the appropriate skills to ease their transition to primary school, so long as they are of high quality (OECD, 2015; O'Kane and Hayes, 2006). Of course, this assumes that the skills identified by INTO are the appropriate ones for 'school readiness' and that they are appropriate for all children, two assumptions that could be characterised as contentious. It should also be noted that it is not easy to define 'quality' with regards to pre-school provision, and systems intended to rate the quality of early education programs may not actually reflect impacts on learning (Sabol, Soliday Hong, Pianta and Burchinal, 2013). Equally, while positive pre-school experiences are important, good quality classroom contexts must be provided at primary level if gains are to be maintained as children grow (O'Kane, 2015). Nevertheless, experience of good quality pre-school is identified in the literature as supportive to positive transition to primary school and positivity of child outcomes generally (Pianta, Barnett, Burchinal and Thornburg, 2009). For example, the EPPE study in Britain (Sylva et al., 2004) found that children who did not go to pre-school scored lower on social, emotional and academic measures than those who did.

#### *3.2.2.3 'Person' factors in the move to secondary school.*

The types of skills needed for positive transition to secondary school are less well documented, but may be similar to those supporting transition to primary school. As well as self-esteem and self-confidence, the literature identifies a positive outlook, interest in learning and social skills, again indicating that these are more important than academic skills (O'Brien, 2004; Topping, 2011). Mackenzie et al. (2012) also identify the importance of individual styles of engagement with stress, noting that for those who perceive transition as a challenge rather than a threat, outcomes tend to be better. These authors also briefly mention the importance of good organisational skills for children transitioning to secondary school.

#### *3.2.2.4 Summary.*

The 'person' factors identified in the literature as supportive to positive educational transitions tend to emphasise dispositions (such as self-confidence and sociability) and skills (such as independence and self regulation). Academic ability emerges as a less significant factor during educational transition. However, it is important to acknowledge that such 'person' factors do not operate in isolation of 'context'. Many of the identified factors, such as self-efficacy beliefs and self-regulated behaviour are actually highly dependent on internalisation of experiences and relationships, as theorised in Chapter 2. Thus, there is a need to create optimal 'contexts' for positive experiences.

### 3.2.3 Structural and contextual considerations.

According to Tobbell and O'Donnell (2005, p. 3 / 5), "much transition research fails to acknowledge the contextual shifts in practice in which learning and relationships are embedded, the negotiation of which constitutes the major work of transition… Research which neglects context cannot fully address issues in transition". It may be that this criticism of the field is unwarranted however; most of the work on educational transition in the literature focuses on and acknowledges the key impact of the contexts in which such transitions take place (Margetts and Kienig, 2013; O'Kane, 2015). Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) note this common emphasis on the contexts in which children develop as a key achievement of their work, and certainly the existing body of research on educational transition appears to have been strongly influenced by the Bio-ecological emphasis on 'context'.

For example, the literature identifies the vital nature of formal structural and contextual considerations within schools for children and families transitioning from pre-

school to primary school (Dockett and Perry, 2013) and from primary to secondary school (Smyth et al., 2004). As Brooker (2008) puts it, we need not only ask are children 'ready' for school, but also "are schools ready for children?" (p. 116).

Margetts recommends extensive contact with primary schools by pre-school children before enrolment, along with comprehensive transition programmes (Margetts, 1997; 2003). In her research, children's participation in more transition activities reliably predicted higher levels of assertion, self-control, summed social skills and academic competence. Brooker (2008) also notes how familiarity with aspects of a new setting can facilitate positive transition. Other recommendations include encouraging independence in pre-school, the use of classroom-type rules such as standing in line, class discussion about starting primary school, devising a written transition plan, sending letters to and having meetings with parents before term starts, arranging for children to visit the school on one occasion before the term starts and ensuring strong communication between the pre-school and the primary school regarding curriculum and educational approaches, and individual child needs (INTO, 2009; Mhic Mhathúna, 2011; O'Kane and Hayes, 2006). INTO (2009) also note that whole-school policy is key to transition from pre-school to primary school, and responsibility should not rest solely with the junior infant teacher. Mhic Mhathúna (2011) makes a similar point regarding the move from 'naíonra' (Irish-medium pre-school) to 'Gaeilscoil' (Irish-medium primary school).

Mentoring systems whereby older, more experienced ('expert') children support younger children through their transition can also be very effective (Dockett, et al., 2012; Mhic Mhathúna, 2011). In particular, peer mentoring systems have been linked to more positive adjustment to school, positive feelings about school and reduced bullying (Dockett

and Perry, 2013). Dockett and Perry (2013) showed that such mentoring can benefit both the younger children who are starting school by providing personal connections in the new setting, and the older children acting as mentors through the promotion of leadership skills. Mentoring programmes have also been found to be useful in the move from primary to secondary school (Smyth et al., 2004). Equally, staff-student support systems such as year head and class tutor may be effective (Smyth et al., 2004).

The work of Smyth et al. (2004) showed some variation in the approaches of schools to student integration in the first year of secondary school, but almost all children who participated in their Irish research had some contact with the secondary school in the year before transition, through a visit to the new school and/or visits from a secondary-school teacher or principal to their primary school. This is consistent with practices identified by international research (Graham and Hill, 2003; Sirsch, 2003). Some students interviewed by Smyth et al. (2004) also mentioned Open Days, tours of the secondary school, introductions to key personnel, and demonstrations of subjects that would be new to them. It is noteworthy that only a small percentage (6%) of that sample reported no contact with the secondary school prior to transition. Unsurprisingly, those students with higher levels of pre-transition contact with the new school felt they had a better idea of what to expect, and were less likely to report negative feelings. In this transition, it may also be appropriate to allow first year students to start school before the return of the main student body, and for them to be allowed on break earlier than other students to avoid bullying from older students (Smyth et al., 2004). All schools in Smyth et al.'s research brought first year students into the school at least one day before the rest of the year groups returned from summer holidays.

#### *3.2.3.1 Streaming.*

One practice that the evidence would suggest hinders positivity of experience during transition and beyond is ability grouping or 'streaming'. In Ireland, streaming often takes place on entry into secondary school systems (INTO, 2009), and can result in very different educational and social experiences for students, even when attending the same school (Smyth and McCoy, 2011). There is extensive national and international evidence linking such practice to negative outcomes for children (Boaler, William and Brown, 2000; Devine, 1993; Hamilton and O'Hara, 2011; Ireson and Hallam, 1999; MacQueen, 2010) including lower academic demands on lower-streamed children and less emphasis on the kinds of discussion-based approaches which facilitate achievement (Applebee, Langer, Nystrand and Gamoran, 2003; Oakes, 2005). Also noted are early school leaving (Byrne and Smyth, 2010; Oakes, 2005), social distance from other students for those in the lower streams, lower teacher expectations and student alienation and disengagement (Rumberger, 1995; Smyth et al., 2004). The dangers of labelling children as failures at times of transition have been clearly identified regarding the development of fatalist mentalities, diminishing perceptions of self-efficacy and development of "fear-of-failure" responses (Devine, 1993; Downes et al., 2007; INTO, 2009; Kelleghan, Weir, Ó hUallacháin and Morgan, 1995). This is illustrated by one respondent to Katz, Buchanan and Bream's (2001) research: "Everyone thinks I can't do this, so why should I bother trying?" (p. 5).

Streaming can also have negative effects on perceptions of school climate by those in the lower streams (Lynch and Lodge, 2002; Smyth et al., 2004), and has been linked with development of anti-school culture (Smyth and McCoy, 2011). Children in the lower streams are also more likely to report feeling isolated in the process of educational transition than those in higher streams, and they are likely to make less academic progress (Smyth et al.,

2004). Streaming can also have negative effects on those in the higher streams in terms of increased academic pressure relative to that experienced at primary school, and as a result adjustment after transition may take longer (O'Brien, 2004). Overall, streaming would appear to reduce the performance of those in the lower streams, while failing to support any corresponding gains in the higher streams, meaning that average student performance falls (Smyth and McCoy, 2011). Considering the fact that streaming during transition to secondary school is usually based on entrance examinations that take place in pressurised conditions and measure a narrow range of abilities (Naughton, 2003), it is hard to justify the practice.

### 3.2.4 The importance of 'time'.

Another important influence on children's experiences of educational transition, relevant to both 'person' and 'time' is the point in the life-course, or the age, at which they take place. This resonates with Elder's (1998) work on which Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) rely heavily in their development of the concept of the chrono-system.

#### *3.2.4.1 School-starting age.*

Children's transitions have been shown internationally to be influenced by school-starting age (Margetts, 2003), and O'Kane and Hayes (2006) identify the relevance of age in the context of the transition from pre-school to primary school in Ireland. They note that although compulsory education begins in Ireland at the age of six, many children start primary school as young as four. They maintain that "the age at which the child starts formal education will influence the nature of that transition... [and] the kind of educational experiences that four-year-olds are receiving in Irish infant classrooms has been questioned" (O'Kane and Hayes, 2006, p. 5; O'Kane, 2015). According to Ring et al. (2015), the practice of transitioning to primary school at the age of four in Ireland is more a function of

"historical, socio-economic and political concerns that no longer prevail" (p. 2) than of any child-related concerns. This echoes the analysis of Brooker (2008) in the UK context, and she notes that since school-starting age is around six years in most countries, practice in Britain (and by extension, Ireland) is out of step with the rest of the world regarding school-starting age.

The age at which a child begins formal schooling also impacts on the age at which they transition from primary to secondary school. As Maunsell et al. (2007) point out, this particular transition takes place at a time when young people are experiencing many other changes in relation to the onset of adolescence – in Ireland, typically between the ages of eleven and thirteen years. It should be noted however, that Margetts (2003) identifies the relative insignificance of age in predicting children's early school adjustment when compared with other factors. She maintains that decisions about school-starting for individual children should be made within a broader framework of factors influencing children's adjustment to school, rather than simply determined by age. Similar points were made by Ring et al. (2015), whose participants reported mixed opinions on the appropriate age to start school. Age may however be a significant factor influencing the level of parental involvement in education. Young children tend to seek more involvement from their parents with their homework than older children (Dauber and Epstein, 1993), and parents tend to be more involved with primary schools than secondary schools (Eccles and Harrold, 1993; Hornby and Lafaele, 2011; Metso, 2004).

#### 3.2.5 Summary.

Research evidence suggests that positive proximal processes for children during educational transition can be supported through promoting friendships and preventing

bullying, developing a structured series of peer interactions with older students, supporting the development of positive relationships with teachers, ensuring familiarity with the new setting, and supporting students to manage its logistical demands. It is also important to avoid jarring cultural shifts in educational approaches and behavioural expectations, and abolish entrance exams and streaming to avoid labelling and its subsequent impact on student performance and academic self-efficacy. There are mixed findings regarding the impact of school-starting age. The literature on educational transition also emphasises involving families and communities, particularly parents, but research on 'parental involvement' requires significant deconstruction.

### 3.3 Educational transition from the perspective of parents

A key component of the Bio-ecological lens taken to educational transition is the understanding of transition within the meso-system, or links between two settings in which a child is involved. Bronfenbrenner proposes that a child's development will be enhanced if two settings in which he or she is involved are strongly linked, and this foregrounds the importance of including families, particularly parents, in research on educational transition (Brooker, 2008; O'Kane, 2015). For example, O'Kane's (2008) work on transition from pre-school to primary school in Ireland emphasises the inter-relatedness of the individual systems of school and home in which the child exists. Other research also highlights the importance of parental involvement for children's successful transitions, as it is they who are usually the stable factor for the child at such potentially unstable times (Dockett et al., 2011) and who provide the social, cultural and emotional supports needed by children at times of transition (Brooker, 2008; Dockett et al., 2012). A Bio-ecological perspective conceptualises transition as "embedded within social contexts and enacted through relationships and interactions" (Dockett et al., 2012, p. 58), acknowledging that one of the major aspects of continuity for

children at times of educational transition is their family experience (Ledger et al., 2000). One of the most important aspects of children's meso-systems may reside in the relationships with and between their parent(s) and their teacher or school (O'Toole, 2011) – as Dockett et al. (2012) put it, echoing Bronfenbrenner's emphasis on 'process', "Strong relationships form the basis of a successful transition to school" (p. 65).

### 3.3.1 The contested role of parents in educational transition.

The rhetoric in favour of parental involvement in children's education is high; in fact the importance of parental involvement is so well established that it stands as one of the most agreed-upon principles of good educational practice (Gileece, 2015; Kavanagh and Hickey, 2013). For instance, the literature draws strong links between parental involvement and improved behaviour and mental health of children (Gileece, 2015; Hornby and Lafaele, 2011). Behavioural outcomes may in some part be related to improved self-regulation in children whose parents are involved in their education (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001), and research has also indicated that parental involvement promotes positive academic outcomes (Hart, 2011; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001).

Numerous studies have identified parental involvement as one of the key variables associated with school effectiveness generally (INTO, 1997), and pupil attainment in particular (Flouri, 2006; Flouri and Buchanan, 2004; INTO, 1997). These findings may perhaps be influenced by the positive dispositions and attitudes towards education fostered through vicarious learning (Hart, 2011; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001), the development of learning processes and self awareness on behalf of children (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001) or the positive effect of parental involvement on children's motivation (Jaynes and Wlodowski, 1990). Many of these outcomes are mutually reinforcing. For example, better school

behaviour is logically linked to greater in-class attention and thereby to higher likelihood of educational success (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001).

Hoover-Dempsey and her colleagues suggest that these positive effects are achieved through parental modelling and reinforcement, and instruction of appropriate skills, knowledge and behaviours associated with successful school performance (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001; Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 1995). Hartas (2008) indicates that "Parental involvement works indirectly on school outcomes by helping the child build a pro-social, pro-learning self-concept and high educational aspirations" (p. 139). Parents may be particularly powerful models for children, since Bandura's work has shown that models are most influential when they are perceived by the child as similar to self, and when there is familiarity and shared history of context and experience (Bandura, 1969). Equally, parents are in a strong position to help children learn through reinforcement in the Behaviourist sense - certainly in a stronger position than teachers who may find it difficult to administer contingencies of reinforcement with sufficient frequency or consistency due to the need to work with groups of students (Skinner, 1989). Parents also know what rewards are likely to be successful with their individual child (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001), and in instructional terms, they are more likely to be in a position to respond to their own child's unique learning preferences and style (Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler and Burrow, 1995).

Parental involvement can have a motivating effect on teachers, leading them to attend to a child more (Grolnick and Slowiaczek, 1994). Parental involvement has been also linked to higher school retention rates (Malone and McCoy, 2003). These advantages and benefits have been documented nationally and internationally, and many studies have shown that schools in which pupils succeed (defined either by achievement or behaviour) are

characterised by good home-school relationships (Bastiani, 1993). Thus, there is evidence that parental involvement influences student learning and success (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001). As Munn (1993) succinctly expresses, "The more involved parents are with their children's schooling, the greater it seems are the chances of their children doing well" (p. 1).

Parental involvement can also have benefits for the school and teacher in terms of building bridges between home and school learning (Hart, 2011), as well as providing challenge to erroneous assumptions made by school staff, allowing for advocacy roles and ensuring appropriate provision for any special needs (Hartas, 2008). INTO (1997) argues that since parents are in a better position to impact on a child's educational development than any other agency (including the school), teachers would be foolhardy not to utilise to the full the parental potential that is available to them. Parental involvement in education has also been linked to improved parent-teacher relationships, teacher morale and school climate (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011). Equally, involvement in children's schooling can be beneficial for parents, with research showing increased parental confidence, satisfaction and interest in their own education (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011).

Of course there are dissenting voices in the research community, and Robinson and Harris (2014) maintain that the influence of parents on their children's education has been over-rated. Citing methodological and conceptual issues with existing research, these authors contend that the current policy focus internationally on involving parents in their children's education may be misguided. Robinson and Harris (2014) focus largely on standardised testing as a measure of student outcomes, indicating that measures of parental involvement fail to correlate with test scores. Such focus on standardised testing may represent limited interpretation of the objectives of education (Ó Breacháin and O'Toole, 2013; 2014), largely

ignoring the 'softer' outcomes such as motivation, attitudes towards and engagement with school, and stronger academic self-efficacy beliefs described elsewhere in the literature. For this reason, Kavanagh (2013) refers to this tendency to focus on correlations (or lack thereof) between parental involvement and test scores as "unwise and costly" (p. 25). The overwhelming consensus in educational research indicates that parents may be a vital factor in educational success for children, and this certainly has implications for policy. Studies have also specifically highlighted the importance of parental involvement for children's successful transitions, both from pre-school to primary school (Brooker, 2008; Dockett et al., 2011; Dockett and Perry, 2004; Margetts, 2002; Mhic Mhathúna, 2011) and from primary to secondary school (Anderson, Jacobs, Schramm and Splittherber, 2000).

In spite of this, there is limited information on how families interact with educational establishments at times of transition, what measures encourage positive engagement and partnership, how children and families experience transitions, and what the implications are for children's outcomes (CECDE, 2003; 2007; IIUSA, 2013; INTO, 2009; O'Brien, 2003, 2004; O'Kane and Hayes, 2006). What research does exist shows that, in fact, transition can be quite demanding for the whole family – INTO (2009) found that transition into primary school was regarded by parents as a significant milestone in a child's life that may be traumatic in some cases for the child, the parent or both. As Dockett et al. (2012) point out, parents experience significant changes in the move to primary school with altered schedules and changing expectations of parenting. These authors also indicate that becoming the parent of a school-going child can be anxiety-inducing for parents because of the potential for other adults, specifically teachers, to make judgments about their parenting skills. Therefore, educational transition can be challenging for parents (Brooker, 2008). In similar findings to the mixed emotions described by children, parents have reported feeling both a sense of

achievement as they reach the milestone of sending their children to school and a sense of loss as they begin to separate from their child (Dockett et al., 2012).

Supports for families at times of transition may be crucial. Transition may offer opportunities for parents to collaborate with schools to strengthen and support children's ongoing learning and development (Dockett et al., 2011), and parents' knowledge of individual children may have much to contribute to the school's understanding of how to facilitate their successful transition (Mhic Mhathúna, 2011). According to Dockett et al. (2012) 'family readiness' or the ability to support children at school is crucial to the development of 'school readiness' in children. Like Brooker (2008), recent Irish research on 'school readiness' by Ring et al. (2015) expands this idea even further, to indicate that not only do the child and family need to be 'ready' in order to promote positive experiences of transition, but the school needs to be 'ready', and that research also refers to 'community-readiness'. Certainly Topping (2011) found that difficulties for children in times of transition were exacerbated when parental encouragement was lacking, and according to McGee, Ward, Gibbons and Harlow (2004) family support is linked to achievement after transition and the influence of encouraging parents is cumulative. INTO (2009) identify the specific parental behaviours that may be supportive to children's transition into primary school such as promotion of children's independence, talking positively to children about their own school experiences, asking their child about their day in school, having good communications with the teacher and the school, and ensuring belongings are child-friendly. However, not all research is as clear in defining what exact behaviours are expected of parents, and there are many different, sometimes conflicting, definitions of 'parental involvement' in the literature (Kavanagh and Hickey, 2013; Kavanagh, 2013; Robinson and Harris, 2014).

#### *3.3.1.1 What does 'parental involvement' actually mean?*

'Parental involvement' can mean anything from sitting on a Board of Management, to attending a parent evening or open day, to ensuring attendance and homework completion, to actively helping in the classroom, with many points of reference in between (Munn, 1993; Dockett et al., 2012). Hegarty (1993) challenges the ideas of 'parental involvement' and 'partnership' because of inadequate analysis of what they actually mean, indicating that if they can mean anything from acting as school governor to receiving adult literacy tuition, then it becomes so all-encompassing as to be meaningless. There is still little consensus in the literature regarding how parents should be involved in their children's education, and what types of parental involvement improve outcomes for children (Kavanagh and Hickey, 2013; Kavanagh, 2013; Robinson and Harris, 2014).

For instance, researchers often distinguish between home-based parental involvement, like helping children with homework, or listening to them read, and school-based parental involvement, like attendance at parent-teacher meetings (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011; Robinson and Harris, 2014), and the effectiveness of both types has been widely supported in the literature (Jeynes, 2005; 2007; Pomerantz, Moorman and Litwack, 2007). However, Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2001) note that investigators seldom clearly define concepts such as 'homework involvement' and definitions in their meta-analysis ranged from checking a child's completed homework to complex patterns of attending to child understanding and scaffolding activities based on those observations. Interestingly, in the Irish context, Eivers et al. (2010) found a negative correlation between children's achievement and parents helping with homework.

Interactions between home and school are often based on disciplinary concerns (Lasky, 2000), and are sometimes built on pervasive attitudes towards education that may be flawed (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011). If 'education' is synonymous with 'schooling', then it would make sense that the teacher, as the person in possession of the expertise and knowledge, should dominate fora such as parent-teacher meetings, and the direction taken by measures that aim to ease transition, but if schooling is viewed as just part of a child's education in a more holistic sense, then we should see a shift of power and expertise towards parents (Munn, 1993). This more holistic understanding of 'education' is prominent in the literature. For example, INTO (1997) point out that 85% of children's waking time from birth to the end of compulsory education is spent outside the school, and while it might be assumed that the impact of schooling on education is greater than the 15% of waking time allocated to it[6] (Burke, 1992), parents should be accepted for what they are "in law and reality" (INTO, 1997, p. 18), the co-educators of their children. However, according to Robinson and Harris (2014), conceptual differences in understanding 'parental involvement' have led to some confusion regarding its impact and appropriate ways to support it.

Therefore, while the 'partnership model' is particularly pervasive in the literature around parental involvement in education, and seems to represent a particular 'zeitgeist' value at this point in time (Robinson and Harris, 2014), proclamations of partnership in the absence of practical changes may risk alienation of all involved through breakdown in mutual trust and respect (INTO, 1997). Bastiani (1993, p. 105) describes partnership with parents thus:

[6] It should be noted that some writers (e. g. McKeown, Haase and Pratschke, 2015) have used percentages such as these to argue for the relative unimportance of formal early educational experiences with regards to outcomes in comparison with experiences at home and in the community. However, acknowledgment of the important role of parents is not mutually exclusive with recognition of the potentially powerful influence of formal early educational experiences, as noted above with regards to the importance of pre-school.

- Sharing of power, responsibility and ownership
- A degree of mutuality, which begins with the process of listening to each other and incorporates responsive dialogue and 'give and take' on both sides
- Shared aims and goals, based on common ground but which also acknowledge important differences
- A commitment to joint action, in which parents, pupils and professionals work together to get things done

Such partnership would mean that liaison with parents is no longer an "optional extra, a favour to be bestowed on parents" (INTO, 1997, p. 12) but rather that a structured educational partnership is to some degree central to the concept of the teacher as a professional, and an integral part of professional practice for the effective school (INTO, 1997). However, Gileece (2015) notes that if parents are simply passive recipients of information rather than active participants in a partnership, then existing power relations may be reinforced. Hornby and Lafaele (2011) extensively critique the use of the term 'partnership', and maintain that "despite its 'feel-good' nature its use is problematic [because] the use of language such as partnership, sharing, mutuality, collaboration, reciprocity and participation, masks the inequalities that exist in reality in the practice of parental involvement" (p. 46).

These authors state that many models of parental involvement in education are based on premises of either the child or the parent as 'problem', and a 'partnership' based on such premises are "likely to be doomed to failure from the start" (p. 46). It may be that this is particularly the case in disadvantaged or culturally diverse communities, where parents are rarely considered 'partners' or afforded a role of expertise in relation to their children's education (Dockett et al., 2012), issues explored in detail below. Questioning of the concept of 'partnership' between parents and schools is not new. Even in 1993, Munn was describing situations that were termed 'partnerships' but where parents were still expected to uphold school values, through ensuring homework was done, or dress-codes were adhered to, but a

parental role in identifying the values the school would embody was rare. Parents who challenged school values were instead (like their children) perceived as 'problems', and this illustrates Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and cultural capital in real-world terms (Gileece, 2015). It may be that "there is still more rhetoric than reality about family and school working together as genuine partners" (Christenson and Sheridan, 2001, p. 18).

Therefore, the literature indicates that sometimes the importance of relationships ('process') is underestimated in real-world practice regarding educational transition. It may be that while the rhetoric supporting parental involvement in education is extensive, there is considerable variation in the reality of its practice (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011; O'Kane, 2007). Thus, while few writers at this point deny the need to involve parents in their children's education, the nature and extent of that involvement and the factors which may affect it are still unclear. Some teachers and educational researchers express concerns around the impact of parental involvement on the perceived professionalism of teachers. Warnock, (1985) articulates these concerns:

> A school is not a club or a society to be run by its keenest members [but] must make its own policies and set its own standards, not without regard to the wishes of parents, but not subject to changing parental whim… Even though educating the child is a joint enterprise, involving both home and school, parents should realise that they cannot have the last word. It is a question of collaboration, not partnership.

Although these sentiments were expressed in 1985, similar attitudes have emerged in more recent work that explores "the ideologies of professional status and identity that teachers often use to distance themselves from parents" (Lasky, 2000, p. 847). These issues tend to be particularly evident at times of educational transition, and according to Dockett et al. (2012, p. 58), "Positive home-school relations are important at all times, but particularly so at points of educational transition when families often seek specific input from educators and other professionals".

### 3.3.2 The power of 'process'.

Dockett et al. (2011) view educational transition as an opportunity for relationship-building between teachers and parents, giving families the opportunity to build links for their children between prior-to-school and school experiences. Educators also have the opportunity to build relationships with children, families and communities through sharing their own expertise, while recognising the expertise of others (Dockett et al., 2011). However, research shows that in many cases parents do not perceive schools to be as open and accessible as teachers believe themselves to be (Hall et al., 2008), and parental evaluations of transition arrangements are often considerably lower than those of professionals (Jindal-Snape et al., 2006). When parents believe that their involvement is not valued by teachers or schools, they are less likely to get involved (Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 1997; Kavanagh and Hickey, 2013). For example, parents are more likely to involve themselves with children's homework when they feel that teachers want and expect their involvement (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001).

Often parents believe that teachers are seeking only a superficial relationship, concerned with addressing problems rather than working towards solutions (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011). It may be necessary for teachers to be proactive in seeking and encouraging involvement from parents – Epstein's (2001) work showed that parents are most effectively involved when teachers actively promote their involvement. According to Dockett et al. (2012), "the responsiveness of teachers is a key element in promoting family engagement at school" (p. 58). This is important to note because parents' proactivity may be limited by feelings of intimidation (O'Toole, 2011).

Thus, international work has shown that parent-teacher interactions are often shaped by differing expectations and vested interests (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011) – as Reay (2010) puts it, the 'taken-for-granted' in each case is at variance. These findings have been confirmed in the Irish context, with O'Kane (2007) indicating that schools' expectations of parents are often not outlined as clearly as their expectations of children. NicCraith and Fay (2008) found that Irish parents often do not understand the importance of play at junior infant level, and sometimes expect the focus to shift to development of reading and writing skills immediately on transition to primary school. This is noted also by both Brooker (2008) and O'Kane (2015). There are often also significant differences between parents and teachers (as well as among them) in terms of attitudes and expectations for parental involvement in education (Bastiani, 1993). The IEA Pre-primary Project supports this, finding little agreement between parents and teachers on their expectations for four-year-olds, particularly in the Irish sample (Kernan and Hayes, 1999). This is an important point, considering the OECD's (2001) contention that for high quality, effective early education, it is vital that expectations are as similar as possible. This may also be true of later educational stages (Clark 1999), and there is evidence that communication between parents and schools diminishes further on transition to secondary level (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011; INTO, 2009; Smyth et al., 2009).

As such, it is important to research the concept of the parent as 'school-parent' through a variety of lenses. According to O'Kane (2007), a responsibility rests with the educational setting to ensure that parents clearly understand what is expected of them, and that policies and practices are well explained. They should also be aware of, and work towards a balance in power relations, and this may be particularly true for parents whose backgrounds differ from the dominant social, linguistic and cultural group, as explored in

detail below. Hornby and Lafaele (2011) maintain that schools often view parents as tools for increasing children's achievements, cost effective resources or methods of addressing cultural inequality and disadvantage, but parents' goals are more likely to be focused, naturally, on their particular child.

For example, there are often differing agendas for parent-teacher meetings. According to Hall et al. (2008), teachers in Ireland are clear and unanimous about the purpose of the annual parent-teacher meeting: to inform parents of their children's progress, communicate their learning strengths and weaknesses, and help identify ways of supporting their child's learning at home. While they are sensitive to the need to engage with what parents think is important, teachers generally operate this forum as one in which they are in 'telling and explanation' mode and parents are listening. However, parents may want to use parent-teacher meetings to discuss their concerns, and when teachers are not predisposed to listen, barriers to positive parental involvement can develop (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011). Such dynamics in parent-teacher meetings have also been shown in international research (Walker and McClure, 1999), and again suggest that sometimes the importance of relationship-building is underestimated in educational practice.

This perspective is echoed by INTO (2009) who maintain that transition is an adaptive process for children and families so it is necessary to involve all stakeholders in communication about the process. There is a difference between a 'string of episodic interactions' and a 'relationship' involving shared meaning and understanding (Lasky, 2000). Brooker (2005) recommends "a serious and respectful listening, and not…a home school dialogue that assumes the school is always right" (p. 128). However, notions of 'teacher-as-

expert' may also still be prevalent in practice, and this of course can impact on teachers' willingness to interact with parents as equals (Lasky, 2000).

In spite of the importance of good communication between parents and teachers for children's educational outcomes, O'Kane's (2007) study of the transition from pre-school to primary school reported a general lack of communication between parents and educational staff, and suggested that better home-school relationships would heighten parents' sense of involvement in their child's education. This resonates with the INTO's (1997) appeal for greater commitment from teachers to communicate their practices and procedures to parents on a regular basis. In fact, the issue of communication surfaces repeatedly in the literature, generally with emphasis on two-way communication that is available in a variety of ways and at all reasonable times (Bastiani, 1993; Hart, 2011; Hegarty, 1993; INTO, 1997). However, the impact of individual 'person' factors on the likelihood of such positive communication is often underestimated in research on parental involvement.

### 3.3.3 The impact of 'person' factors on parental involvement.

#### *3.3.3.1 Parental beliefs and attitudes.*

In findings similar to those regarding 'process' from the perspective of children, it would seem that self-efficacy beliefs may be a relevant 'person' factor for parents also. Hornby and Lafaele (2011) maintain that parents' belief that they have the ability to help their children succeed at school is crucial to positive involvement. They indicate that parents with low self-efficacy beliefs regarding education are likely to avoid contact with schools because they feel that their involvement will not bring about positive outcomes for their children. Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2001) also found that one of the strongest predictors of parents' involvement with their children's homework was whether parents believed that such

involvement would make a positive difference. Parents who report reasonable confidence in their ability to help with homework are more likely to be involved with it (Ames, 1993; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 1992), and those who help their children with their homework are more likely to believe that their help has a positive influence on their child's outcomes (Stevenson, Chen and Uttal, 1990).

Parents' own level of education may influence their self-efficacy beliefs about whether they have the necessary skills and knowledge to support their children's education (Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 2007). This in turn may impact on parental behaviour in seeking involvement in their child's education (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011), and their transitions. For example, a parent who did not complete secondary level education may be hesitant to offer support with homework once their child reaches secondary-school age (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011). Parents also sometimes feel ignorant of the curriculum and processes in school (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011), and there is evidence that parents in Ireland tend to be particularly concerned about their ability to support their children's homework in the subject areas of Mathematics and Gaeilge (Irish language) (INTO, 1997). This may be particularly evident where children take part in 'immersion education', learning through Irish, when their parents do not speak the language (Kavanagh and Hickey, 2013). These influences on parents are all the more unfortunate when one considers evidence that the ability to support children's learning does not require a high level of parental education (Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 1997; Hornby, 2000).

Equally, parents who believe that children's intelligence is fixed and academic achievement is based solely on ability are less likely to become involved in their children's education than those who believe that achievement depends as much on effort and other

factors as it does on ability (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011). This makes sense in the context of an understanding of the effects of self-efficacy beliefs; if parents' believe that children's innate ability sets limits on their achievement so that encouraging them to do their homework or attending parent-teacher meetings are a waste of time, then they are less likely to seek involvement in their child's education (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011).

One other influence on parents' self-efficacy beliefs in relation to education is obviously their own experience of school, and as Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2001) point out, parents' role-construction for involvement in their children's education is often based on personal experience. Räty (2007; 2010) has shown that parents with positive recollections of school tend to indicate higher levels of satisfaction with their children's education than those with negative recollections. Therefore, parents' own experiences could potentially impact on their interactions with schools, and this is particularly so at times of educational transition (Dockett et al, 2012). Räty (2010) explains this by pointing out that when a child starts school, the parents' own memories are likely to be activated and to function as a basis for their interactions. For example, Hornby and Lafaele (2011) indicate that parents who, in their own childhood, experienced learning or behavioural difficulties are likely to have less confidence in dealing with their children's schools and teachers. As Reay (2005) points out, parents' personal histories and own educational experiences can have huge influences on their involvement in their children's schooling, with those whose experiences of school were negative being less likely to be involved. Mulkerrins (2007) also found that some parents' lack of participation with their child's school was due to negative school experiences which shattered their confidence.

Such memories and beliefs may also influence the attitudes to education that parents transmit to their children, since the 'family habitus' (Brooker, 2008; Bourdieu, 1997), or dispositions to approach situations in certain ways, is often developed based on parents' experiences of school, or family stories that implicitly transmit certain views of starting school (Dockett et al., 2012). Equally, parents may have had negative experiences with a child's previous school, which influence their expectations and attitudes towards the current school and teacher (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011). As such, "parents' school recollections can be seen as one potential social-psychological link in the chain through which the meanings of education are transmitted from one generation to the next" (Räty, 2010, p. 581). Certainly, it can be difficult to separate children's anxieties from those of the adults around them at times of educational transition (Lucey and Reay, 2000).

Regardless of the origin of parents' attitudes to education, such attitudes and beliefs may play a crucial role in family experiences of educational transition. According to Hornby and Lafaele (2011), parents who believe that their only role in education is to get their child to the school gates at which point the teacher takes over are less likely to become involved in their child's education. In an extensive review of the literature on parental involvement with children's homework, Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2001) found that parents were more likely to involve themselves with their children's homework when they believed they should be involved, and that children and teachers wanted their involvement. As such, "parental-role construction for involvement in children's education reflects parents' expectations and beliefs about what they should do in relation to children's schooling" and what is "the norm" for parents (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001, p. 201).

According to Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2001, p. 201), several investigators have reported parents' beliefs that involvement in children's schooling is a "normal requirement and responsibility of parenting", as well as their beliefs about the importance of helping with homework, and their interest in learning more about effective homework helping strategies. It is important to note, however, that there is little consideration of social and cultural differences in the analysis put forward by Hoover-Dempsey and her colleagues, and their work appears to treat 'parents' as one homogeneous group. This is increasingly unacceptable, since culture can have such significant impacts on parents' attitudes to education and the development of norms in relation to parental involvement in education (Young, 1998). This is explored in detail below but is worth mentioning here also, since such limited understanding may lead to deficit models of parents who do not become actively involved in their children's education (O'Toole, 2011; Robinson and Harris, 2014).

#### *3.3.3.2 Personal circumstances.*

There are many other factors in terms of parents' personal circumstances that require consideration. For example, single parents or parents with young or large families may find it difficult to schedule involvement in their children's education due to their care-taking duties (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011). The INTO (1997) found that in most schools children are expected to stay at home while parent-teacher meetings take place. This could potentially lead to situations where parents with no child-care support would have to forgo the opportunity to meet with their child's teacher. Equally, employment status and work commitments inevitably impact on parental input (Kavanagh and Hickey, 2013). Those parents with stressful jobs may have less time available to them to support their children's education, particularly where employment structures allow little flexibility and both parents work (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011). Parents who work have less opportunity to avail of support

networks, such as connections with other parents, when their children start school (Dockett et al., 2012). Conversely, those parents who are unemployed may not be in a position to financially support their child's education or to pay for babysitters or transport to get to school meetings (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011). Parents with poor physical or mental health or with minimal social supports available to them may also find it difficult to engage actively with their child's educational transition (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011), and when families are already experiencing challenges, educational transition can represent a 'turning point', becoming "a time of both opportunity and additional vulnerability" (Dockett and Perry, 2012, p. 60). In Bourdieu's terms, some parents have less opportunity to develop the social and cultural capital to enable them to support their children as well as they might like to. Such issues clearly effect individual parents' abilities to relate to schools, and so Hegarty (1993) poses the question that if parents relate to schools in many different ways, in what sense are they all partners? This remains largely unresolved in the literature.

### 3.3.4 Structural and contextual considerations.

As with the experiences of children, the quality of parents' interaction with schools at times of educational transition can be significantly impacted by the structural and contextual supports provided to them. One 'context'-based consideration is whether a whole-school approach is taken, both to encouraging parental involvement in their children's education generally, and to supporting children and families to manage the process of transition. When schools are actively welcoming to parents and make it clear at whole-school level that they value parental involvement, they are more effective in developing home-school relationships than schools that do not appear inviting (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011).

School structures can sometimes limit the ability of individual teachers, however well-meaning, to liaise effectively with parents at times of educational transition and beyond. INTO (1997) note that the majority of Irish schools were not designed with parental involvement in mind, and many schools require discussions between parents and teachers to take place in corridors because of the lack of an appropriate space such as a parents' room. They maintain that while acknowledging the difficulties schools may have in terms of resources and space, teachers and parents must have a designated room in which to meet in relative privacy if schools are indeed to be transformed into welcoming places for parents. INTO (1997) sought submissions from teachers working in Irish primary schools on the topic of parental involvement in their own schools, and while there was great variation in the responses, a number of themes emerged:

- Often schools depended on a welcoming attitude to parents as opposed to formal structures to support parental involvement.
- Attitudes vary between teachers, even in the same schools, so that teachers who were actively working towards increased parental involvement felt limited by colleagues who felt threatened by such moves.
- Time was identified as a huge barrier. If a school day is entirely composed of class contact hours, teachers may find it difficult to devote more than a few minutes to parents who call to the school, and this can cause frustration to both parties.
- Information evenings were common features of attempts to form relationships with parents, but attendance varied, largely based on topic – the issue of transition to secondary school tended to draw strong attendance, with issues such as prevention of substance abuse engaging little interest.

- Home-school-community-liaison is highly valued but is only available in schools which are designated disadvantaged (this is explored in detail below under the heading 'socioeconomics').
- Parents tend to be involved in specific activities and projects in schools, for example paired reading, development of the school Code of Discipline or religious occasions such as celebration masses or preparation for sacraments (this is deconstructed below under the heading 'language, culture and religion').

### 3.3.5 The importance of 'time'.

#### *3.3.5.1 Pre-school to primary vs primary to secondary transition.*

One important point to be made with regard to 'time' is that the current research examines the experiences of children, parents and teachers at two critical transitions – pre-school to primary school and primary to secondary school - and experiences at the first transition may vary from those at the second. For example, the level of parental engagement expected or sought in transition from pre-school to primary school may be very different to that in transition from primary to secondary school. Parents are sometimes more intimidated by secondary schools than primary or pre-schools, viewing them as large, bureaucratic organisations that are not welcoming to parents (Eccles and Harrold, 1993). There may in fact be truth in this perception: Metso (2004) found that as children progress through schooling systems, contact with their families decreases, and as they reach the senior stages of education, schools tend to distance themselves from parents by contacting them less frequently. Parents tend to be more involved in their children's education at pre-school and primary level, but involvement decreases as children grow older, and is at its lowest level for children of secondary school age (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011). This is in spite of evidence that parental involvement is advantageous for children of all ages (Cox, 2005; Desforges and

Abouchaar, 2003; Hornby and Lafaele, 2011). It may also be that the wishes of children can be misinterpreted as they get older – while it is true that older children tend to want to become more independent of their parents, they may still desire and benefit from their parents' involvement in their education, particularly in terms of help with homework and subject choices (Deslandes and Cloutier, 2002).

#### *3.3.5.2 Changing norms around parental involvement over 'time'.*

Norms of parental involvement may also change over time in the socio-historical sense. Traditionally, models of parental involvement were largely used to support the (often taken-for-granted) value system of the school, and any collective action on behalf of parents was focussed on fund-raising rather than changing the school's way of doing things (Munn, 1993). This traditional model of teacher as expert and parent as passive may no longer be acceptable to the majority of parents (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011), and there is definite evidence of changing parental attitudes to and expectations of their children's schools (Bastiani, 1993). In recent times, parents are more likely to be viewed and to view themselves as 'consumers' or 'customers' of the school, and to expect a say in how their child's education is constructed (Bastiani, 1993). While critiques of such business models of education abound (Lynch, Grummel and Devine, 2012; Ó Breacháin and O'Toole, 2013), one positive outcome appears to be a shift away from passive attitudes of deference and helplessness on behalf of parents interacting with schools, and more recognition of their rights in terms of provision of information, some basic opportunities for access and even some input into formal decision-making (Bastiani, 1993).

Certainly from the perspective of legislation and policy-making, there has been a growing emphasis internationally on parental involvement in their children's education in

recent years, and that is certainly the case in Ireland. According to INTO (1997), modern Irish education has its roots in systems that depended on the interests of parents and the support provided by them. However, with independence and the subsequent dominance of Church and State in Irish education, the role of parents (and in fact the roles of teachers and children) in educational policy dwindled to little or nothing, and parents were effectively removed from centre stage to outside the school gates (Coolahan, 1988). For example, by the 1930's parents were excluded from any involvement in the management of schools by rules indicating that no lay-people could be involved in Boards of Management of schools (INTO, 1997). For many years, publicly stated policy recognised and upheld parental rights to be involved in the education, but practical barriers were continually erected against that involvement, so that "parental rights and involvement in education were little more than a flag of convenience to be embraced and discarded as opportunities arose" (INTO, 1997, p. 3).

This state of affairs began to change a little in keeping with the educational reforms of the late 1960's, although until well into the 1970's, the emphasis was on parents understanding the system rather than attempting to influence it (Griffin, 1991). Important changes occurred in 1975 when parental representation on Boards of Management was sanctioned, and in 1985 when the National Parents' Council was established with the aim of involving parents in the formation of educational policy making for primary and secondary schools, although it is noteworthy that no such national organisation exists at time of writing for parents of pre-school children. According to INTO (1997), from this point onwards, the development of parents' roles in education in Ireland became apparent on a local and national level. The potential role of parents, not just as consumers of a service but rather as interested partners in the education process began to be recognised in Ireland, and by 1991 the Department of Education was actively promoting partnership for parents in education as a

stated policy aim of government (INTO, 1997). In 1995 a White Paper was published which enunciated parental rights and responsibilities in the area of education, and increasingly educational policy in Ireland has "moved parents from the position of excluded and isolated spectators outside the school gates to a position where they are becoming centrally involved in the education of their children" (INTO, 1997, p. 11).

This culminated in a flurry of educational legislation in Ireland, much of which emphasised the involvement of parents in their children's education. The Education Act (1998) and the Education for Persons with Special Educational Need (EPSEN) Act (2004) both emphasise the involvement of parents in the education of their children. The National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (DES, 2011) also emphasises the critical role of parents in their children's education, referring to the similar emphasis on parental involvement in the National Children's Strategy (Department of Health and Children, 2000). Irish approaches are consistent with legislative and policy direction in many countries, and there is also evidence internationally that such legislative emphases may indeed have successfully trickled through to the level of practice - as Mallett (1997, p. 30) puts it,

> Over time there has been a progression from seeing parents as a potential hindrance to professionals (specialists who alone know what is best for the child) through considering them as a possible source of assistance to these 'experts', to realising they are central figures of responsibility in a child's life and therefore protagonists in the task of meeting their needs.

However, vestiges of approaches and structures (such as inflexible timetabling for example) that traditionally characterised educational settings may still remain today, and schools must be careful to match the reality of their practices to the rhetoric of their ideals (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011). Equally, while legislation espouses the importance of parental involvement in education, current economic pressures may be influencing the reality of

implementation of these ideals, as identified by the work of Elder (1998). Increasingly, schools are becoming dependent on parents in terms of practical support, financial contributions and fundraising (Bastiani, 1993) and home-school relationships may be dominated by such issues. The INTO's (1997) research into parental involvement in education in Ireland found that parents in some under-funded schools were loath to become involved in the life of the school because they believed that they would soon be asked to fundraise. It is worth noting that in 1997, when that research took place, Ireland's economy was in a significantly stronger position than it is currently, and so it could be hypothesised that such issues are even more pertinent now. In fact, in June 2013 a report of the Houses of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Social Protection on back-to-school costs indicated that so-called 'voluntary' financial contributions sought from parents were imposing prohibitive burdens on many families. This is also important because Gileece's (2015) work found that parental engagement with children's learning is what makes the difference, not activities like fundraising.

#### *3.3.5.3 Other policy considerations.*

There are also increasing demands for education to meet the perceived needs of the employment market, and educational practices, such as attempts to support parental involvement, may be in the position of having to justify their share of available funding through measures such as national tests of literacy and numeracy (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011). While educational funding in Ireland is not currently linked to literacy and numeracy scores in schools, this is clearly relevant to the shift towards more neo-liberal approaches, as the analysis in Chapter 2 outlines. Bastiani (1993) maintains that in such climates, programmes aimed at supporting parental involvement in their children's education may be disadvantaged because of their emphasis on long-term rather than short-term goals. He also

maintains that the growing financial dependence of schools on parents' contributions and fundraising exacerbates pre-existing inequalities of provision between schools and neighbourhoods. As such, researchers working on developing parental involvement in their children's educational transitions through a Bio-ecological model must consider the socio-cultural time in which their work is rooted and policy direction must equally take account of these issues.

### 3.3.6 Summary

One of the key messages that emerges from consideration of the literature on parental involvement in educational transition through a Bio-ecological lens is that it is not enough to mould parents to support the aims and agendas of schools. Instead, as Kelleghan, Sloane, Alvarez and Bloom (1993) maintain, we must recognise the categories of meaning that students bring with them into the classroom, since it is through these meanings that children produce and interpret knowledge. It may be that parents can provide the interpretive bridge (through the power of the meso-system) that allows schools and educationalists to access these meanings in times of transition. Gaps between the rhetoric of parental involvement and reality of practice come about because of complex interactions at the levels of parent and family, child, teacher and society, which may act as barriers to successful parental involvement (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011). As with children's experiences, 'person', 'context' and 'time' factors mutually interact to influence 'process' for parents and schools at times of educational transition.

There is extensive evidence supporting the importance of parental involvement in children's education, particularly at times of educational transition. However, the literature is yet to truly identify what exactly that means, and researchers refer to a wide range of

activities from turning up to parent-teacher meetings, to sitting on Boards of Management, although recent policy and legislative directions have emphasised increasingly active roles for parents. A significant flaw in the literature on parental involvement in educational transition and beyond is the tendency to treat all 'parents' as the same, and expect similar behaviours, attitudes and beliefs, regardless of individual and broader societal factors that impact on capacity to become involved in children's education. This has the potential to contribute to deficit models of specific groups and individuals, and this is further deconstructed later in this chapter. Nevertheless, the literature on parental involvement, particularly in educational transition, can be elucidated by the Bio-ecological Framework, not least by its emphasis on the importance of relationships for outcomes and experiences.

## 3.4 Educational transition from the perspectives of teachers, schools and communities.

According to Kavanagh (2013), few studies have sought the views of teachers on parental involvement. Certainly this is true regarding teachers' views of parental involvement in educational transition, and with regards to educational transition generally, although recent work by Ring et al. (2015) represents an exception to this in the Irish context. Key elements of 'process' within the meso-system for children are 'linkages' between educational levels and between schools and the wider community. The analysis to follow examines the perspectives of teachers and schools, located within their communities and the broader policy context in Ireland.

### 3.4.1 The power of 'process'.

Dockett et al. (2011) maintain that educational transition represents an opportunity for educators at different levels to work together and to draw support from each other, and Mhic

Mhathúna (2011) identifies good communication between staff at pre-school and primary school as facilitative to a satisfactory start at school for children, citing common aims, educational approaches and understandings. However, the cultures of pre-schools and primary schools in Ireland tend to be very different, perhaps because the two educational sectors have largely developed independently of each other in this country, and can vary widely in their objectives and approaches to education (INTO, 2009; O'Kane and Hayes, 2006; O'Kane, 2015). O'Kane and Hayes' (2006) research on transition from pre-school to primary school in Ireland found that communication between the two educational levels was low, with few teachers reporting that information was transferred between sectors. While both groups of teachers showed openness to greater communication, confirming international findings (Timperley, MacNaughton, Howie and Robinson, 2003), differences in language use and cultural expectations were also noted, along with distinctions in meaning between pre-school and primary school teachers (O'Kane and Hayes, 2006; Hayes, O'Flaherty and Kernan, 1997). The situation may not have improved in the intervening years, since Ring et al.'s (2015) work reported a similar gap in systematic or comprehensive communication between pre-school and primary school levels, and this is also noted by O'Kane (2015).

In Ireland, staff at the two levels attend different training programmes and work with different pedagogical approaches and methods (OECD, 2004). The knowledge of pre-school practitioners about primary school procedures is often vague, as is the understanding in primary schools of what happens in pre-schools (Fabian, 2002), so clearly quality of communication needs exploration as well as quantity (Ring et al., 2015). These gaps in understanding between educational levels have been confirmed internationally (Dunlop and Fabian, 2002), and Margetts (2003) also found little communication between primary schools and child-care centres about children's adjustment to school. This is important because it may

be that discontinuities at times of transition are emphasised for children when professionals do not hold mutual views on what is appropriate (Dunlop and Fabian, 2003), making poor communication and weak 'processes' between ECCE programmes and schools a barrier to successful transition for children (Pianta and Walsh, 1996; Margetts, 1999).

In the context of transition from primary to secondary school, Hargreaves and Galton (2002) report improvements in the transfer of information across levels. However, Capel, Zwozdiak-Myers and Lawrence (2004) found that few secondary school teachers use the information from primary school to plan for continuity and progression, and Evangelou et al. (2008) reported that secondary schools often do not 'trust' the data on children provided by primary schools, leading to re-testing of children in secondary. In the Irish context, research has repeatedly identified the need for greater communication between primary and secondary levels (Maunsell et al., 2007; O'Brien, 2003; 2004), and teachers who responded to INTO research on the topic of transition (2009) overwhelmingly indicated that the key to positive transitional experiences for children was good communication between primary and secondary levels.

It would seem that much progress remains to be made on this in Ireland and internationally. It is worth noting that this is a key area of focus for the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), and at time of writing (2015) their work is on-going in attempting to address perceived deficits in communication across the educational spectrum from early childhood settings, to primary school, to secondary school (Fitzpatrick, 2015). This is explored in more detail below with regards to relevant policy developments. While across-the-board policy measures to facilitate communication with families and across educational levels are undoubtedly important, the reality of such 'processes' in practice may

largely rely on the specific individuals involved. Such 'person' factors in this regard include individual teachers' beliefs and attitudes as well as the training they have received.

### 3.4.2 'Person' factors and their interaction with 'process' and 'context' at 'times' of educational transition.

#### *3.4.2.1 Teachers' beliefs and attitudes.*

When proactive engagement with parents does not happen in schools, it is often due to the fact that teachers bring a variety of attitudes and beliefs with them into the classroom, which may have little to do with any teacher education they have received, but rather may be deeply rooted within their own historical, educational, economic, class, gendered and ethnic experiences (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011; Ryan and O'Toole, 2014). These implicit assumptions may differ greatly from those of the children and parents with whom they interact. As with all human beings, teachers see the world through the prism of their own experiences, and INTO (2009) found that teachers often had significantly more to say about their own expectations of parents, children and the education system than any expectations parents might have of them. Sometimes teachers feel threatened by the idea of parental involvement in education, as they feel it encroaches on their professional domain (INTO, 1997; Lasky, 2000). Some teachers also maintain a deficit view of parents as 'problems' to be best kept out of schools (Hornby, 2000). This can clash with the ideas of the new, more empowered parent that they are likely to encounter (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011).

Many writers maintain that teachers are inadequately prepared by Initial Teacher Education (ITE) to interact in positive manners with the parents of the children they teach (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011; INTO, 1997). In many jurisdictions there is no requirement to include courses on working with parents in teacher education programmes, in spite of wide

recognition of the importance of such courses (Epstein, 2001). Therefore, the ability of individual teachers to support parental involvement in their children's educational transitions may depend on the level of training they have received in their preparatory programmes, which in turn may depend on the jurisdiction and indeed the particular college in which they trained. The focus on any particular aspect of professional life changes within Teacher Education over time, as evidenced by the 'reconfiguration' of ITE by the National Teaching Council of Ireland in 2011. This again brings the analysis to an awareness of the importance of 'context' and 'time', and these are as relevant for teachers, schools and communities as for children and parents.

### 3.4.3 Structural and contextual considerations.

#### *3.4.3.1 School and pre-school 'contexts'.*

The school or pre-school is obviously one of the central 'contexts' (or 'fields') for consideration in a PPCT exploration of educational transition, and there is extensive evidence that individual schools and pre-schools do indeed differ from each other in many important ways (Smyth, 1999). According to Byrne and Smyth (2010), school type and school structures can have significant impacts on outcomes for children. For example, the important consideration of class size varies significantly from school to school. In Ireland, child-adult ratios are much larger in primary schools than in pre-schools (O'Kane and Hayes, 2006; O'Kane, 2008; 2013; 2015), and this may present a difficulty to young children in the transition to primary school. In fact, teachers who responded to O'Kane and Hayes' (2006) research considered class sizes to be the greatest difficulty they faced, and this resonates with similar findings in Ireland (Hayes, 2004a; Ring et al., 2015) and internationally (Wesley and Buysee, 2003).

O'Kane and Hayes (2006) describe the different types of pre-school provision in Ireland, ranging from full-time services such as nurseries and crèches, to sessional services such as private or community play-groups, Montessori schools and 'naíonraí' or Irish-medium pre-schools. As is the case internationally, quality of provision may vary from pre-school to pre-school (INTO, 2009). Primary school settings in Ireland are somewhat more homogenous, with the majority falling under the patronage of the Catholic Church (Donnelly, 2011; Kitching, 2010), although some schools are run by other religious or non-denominational organisations such as Educate Together[7], Community National Schools[8] and Gaelscoileanna Teo[9]. There are also significant differences between school types at second level in Ireland, with attendant implications for outcomes for children (Byrne and Smyth, 2010). For example, in Ireland, voluntary sector schools consistently have the highest retention rates when compared to community, comprehensive and vocational schools (Byrne and Smyth, 2010). However, Byrne and Smyth (2010) note that differences in retention rates between school sectors are likely to reflect the composition of the student body rather than the impact of school context per se. They maintain that vocational schools have a disproportionate number of working-class students and those with lower academic ability levels, groups that are more likely to drop out of the school system. However, differences in retention rates across school types have been noted in international research (Rumberger, 1995 [US]; Cheng, 1995 [UK]). As well as differences within educational levels, there are also significant contextual changes to be negotiated by children moving between educational levels, not least in terms of teaching approaches and curriculum.

[7] Educate Together is an independent NGO (Non-Governmental Organisation) which runs 77 primary schools in Ireland with a focus on equality and cultural diversity. Their first secondary school opened in 2014 (www.educatetogether.ie).
[8] Community National Schools are patron of 11 schools in Ireland and are State supported non-denominational schools, again focussing on diversity and inclusion (www.cns.ie).
[9] Gaelscoileanna Teo is a national voluntary organisation supporting the development of Irish-medium schools at pre-school, primary and secondary level (www.gaelscoileanna.ie).

#### *3.4.3.2 Curriculum discontinuity.*

In the Irish context, O'Kane (2015) has noted changes in curriculum, from an informal, play-based approach in pre-school, guided by Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework, to the more academic Primary School Curriculum (DES, 1999). Teaching approaches may also change, with more verbal instruction in primary school and greater focus on literacy and numeracy (O'Kane, 2015; O'Kane and Hayes, 2006). On entering primary school, "the child is moving from a pre-school environment where the learning context is generally more informal and less focussed on the achievement of specific learning outcomes than primary school classrooms" (INTO, 2009, p. 45).

Similar experiences have been noted at secondary level (Topping, 2011). For many pupils, transition to secondary school is characterised by a shift from activity-based or experiential learning classrooms to a more didactic approach, informed by different pedagogical ideology (Midgley, Feldlaufer and Eccles, 1989), and when one compares the Irish Primary School Curriculum (DES, 1999) with the more subject-centred Junior[10] and Leaving Certificate curricula[11] in Ireland, one could certainly make the case that this is so. Certainly it was identified by Smyth et al.'s (2004) research on transition from primary to secondary school in Ireland, with only half of secondary school teachers reporting familiarity with the primary school curriculum, and less than one third reporting that the primary school curriculum was a good foundation for their subject. The problems of 'curricular discontinuity' and changes in educational practice from one educational 'context' to the next have been extensively documented (INTO, 2009), and they are frequently cited as a cause for

[10] At time of writing, both the Primary School Curriculum and the Junior Certificate in Ireland are undergoing a process of significant review, with the explicit aim of becoming more student-centred.

[11] The subject-centred nature of Irish secondary school curricula is illustrated by the difficulty of identifying an appropriate referencing system for it – unlike the Irish Primary School Curriculum (DES, 1999), there is no unifying document describing the existing Junior and Senior cycle (Halbert, 2011). Further information on curricula in Ireland can be found on the website of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, www.ncca.ie

concern both in the move from pre-school to primary school and from primary to secondary school, with an international trend away from child-centred methods and emphases towards subject-focused, exam-oriented approaches as the child progresses through the educational system (Smyth et al., 2004).

#### *3.4.3.3 Further 'context'-based considerations.*

Neuman (2000) also noted that cultural differences between educational levels are often exacerbated by systemic structures. For example, pre-schools and primary schools usually fall under different administrative auspices and adhere to different regulations and inspection processes. This is the case in Ireland (INTO, 2009), although it is worth noting that there have been extensive recent developments in 'quality' initiatives in the early childhood sector, through both the Department of Education and Skills and 'Túsla', the Child and Family Agency. According to Duignan and McSorley (2015), quality initiatives for early years' provision in Ireland consists of evaluation and monitoring (through revised statutory regulations and registration, specialist support for early years' services – 'Better Start' – and education-focused inspections of ECCE settings), curriculum reform, and workforce development (regulation of workforce qualifications and review of further and higher education programmes in ECCE).

Mhic Mhathúna (2011) recommends a number of 'context'-based measures to overcome barriers to communication across educational levels, such as establishment of common policies for transition across pre-schools and primary schools, meetings between pre-school and primary school teachers and the development of 'profile forms' to explore the specific needs and interests of the children who will be making the transition, visits to the pre-school by primary school staff and vice versa, and communication between the two levels

regarding curriculum and teaching methods. The Bio-ecological Framework would predict that such initiatives could have potentially important impacts on the development of 'inclusive systems' (Downes, 2014) and thus on the experiences of individual children and families. Whether this prediction will come to fruition in the Irish context remains to be seen, returning analysis to the issue of 'time'.

### 3.4.4 The importance of 'time'.

With regards to location of schools within the broader macro-system and chrono-system, one must consider other salient policy initiatives in Ireland at this 'time' that may influence individual experiences of educational transition.

#### *3.4.4.1 The impact of policy over 'time'.*

##### *3.4.4.1.1 Transitions policy over 'time'.*

Since the 1970's, the evident concerns around the impacts of educational transition on children and families have slowly gained recognition in Ireland, and policy has adapted accordingly with events of note including the 1978 Pupil Transfer Committee and its 1981 report, the publishing of the White Paper of 1995, 'Charting our Education Future' which also focussed on transition, and in 2009, the remit allocated to the NCCA of advising the Minister for Education regarding national policy on transitions.

Curricular continuity in particular is one of the key areas currently being addressed by the NCCA in their efforts to ensure stronger communication and smoother passage through the educational system as a whole in Ireland (Duignan and McSorley, 2015; Fitzpatrick, 2015). As part of this work, three commissioned research reports on curricula to bridge the pre-school and primary sectors were recently published (Ó Duibhir and Cummins, 2012;

Shiel, Cregan and McGough, 2012; Kennedy et al., 2012), leading to a new Language curriculum 3-8 years and a new Mathematics curriculum 3-8 years. The focus in the NCCA curricula on the ages of 3-8 as representing 'early childhood' may be problematic since children from 0-3 are increasingly becoming marginalised from policy focus, and rather than improving experiences of transition, it may just 'shift the goalposts' in terms of the timing of transition. Nevertheless, there is ongoing policy focus on transition in Ireland at present. Initiatives include the review of the Primary curriculum against Aistear, and transition tools for pre-school to primary school ('Primary On-line Database') and primary to secondary school ('Education Passport') (www.ncca.ie), with the aim of integrating purposes, curriculum specifications, propositions and contents across the early childhood, primary and secondary sectors in Ireland (Fitzpatrick, 2015).

*3.4.4.1.2 Síolta and Aistear.*

The introduction of Síolta (Early Years Quality Framework) and Aistear (Early Years Curriculum Framework) in Ireland have also presented some hope of resolution of curricular dissonance in the transition from pre-school to primary school, since both cover children from birth to 6 years and as such are relevant to both sectors (O'Kane, 2013; 2015). INTO (2009) expressed hope that their implementation would create more coherence across learning opportunities available to children in pre-schools and primary schools, although some barriers do exist. INTO (2009) indicated that the financial commitment necessary to implement the frameworks does not appear to be forthcoming, and concern has been expressed in the early childhood sector that training available for early childhood practitioners is limited when compared to the primary sector (Hayes, 2015; Ring et al., 2015). Nevertheless, it may be that while ECCE settings have been engaging with Aistear from the beginning, uptake is less apparent at primary level than at pre-school level and these factors

could impact on the potential effectiveness of Aistear as a tool for alignment between the sectors (O'Kane, 2015).

*3.4.4.1.3. The Free Pre-school Year.*

In 2010, a Free Pre-School Year (FPSY) was introduced in Ireland for children aged between three years three months and four years six months with the aim of both increasing access to early childhood education and supporting parents with child-care costs. It provides pre-school sessions for three hours per day, five days per week across thirty-eight weeks, and in 2015 this provision was increased to two free pre-school years. While some children still transition directly from home to primary school in Ireland, without attending any pre-school provision, more and more children in this country do attend some form of provision before primary school (INTO, 2009; O'Kane, 2008). With the advent of the free pre-school year, attendance is now estimated at 94% (www.des.ie).

While this development has been widely welcomed in the early childhood sector, concern has been noted regarding limited understandings and auditing of quality related to the FPSY (Hayes et al., 2015). For example, Kinsella (2015) writing on behalf of Early Childhood Ireland notes that the FPSY is underfunded, and quality provision is difficult to achieve at current capitation levels. This, he argues, has implications not only for parents and children, but also for early childhood operators, with margins so tight that any regulatory changes leave them extremely vulnerable. It also has staffing implications, with operators unable to afford to pay qualified staff, with the attendant impacts of this on quality of provision (Kinsella, 2015). Worryingly, a recent study purporting to be an evaluation of the FPSY (McKeown et al., 2015) found that children's skill levels remained unchanged before and after engagement with it, and that child and family factors, particularly socio-economic

status, are far more influential than pre-school access with regards to child outcomes. However, this study was in fact an evaluation of a small number of providers within the National Early Years Access Initiative (NEYAI), definitively not a representative sample of the FPSY in Ireland, or even of the eleven projects within NEYAI. Considering also that the measures used (Early Development Instrument) may be inappropriate for use over such a short time period, and the fact that there were no observations of practice, instead relying on self-assessment by services, no generalisations regarding the FPSY should be made from this study (Hayes et al., 2015). The representation of these findings as a negative evaluation of the FPSY (McKeown et al., 2015) could be politically damaging, and this reinforces the calls for urgent access to quality and audit data to plan for the future needs of the system (Hayes et al., 2015; Kinsella, 2015).

*3.4.4.1.4 A shift towards neo-liberalism, measurement and 'accountability'.*

With regards to the primary and secondary sectors, analysis was provided in Chapter 2 on the world-wide shift towards a narrow, measurement-based, neo-liberal idea of what constitutes good education. This highlighted the potential internalisation of messages regarding what knowledge, skills, and 'intelligences' are valuable, with attendant implications for self-efficacy beliefs and achievement (Ó Breacháin and O'Toole, 2013; 2014). These points are specifically relevant to how children and families may experience educational transition at this point in 'time' in Ireland.

The recent sea-change in direction from the holistic, democratic vision of education provided by the Primary School Curriculum (DES, 1999) to a more narrow curricular focus, with a neo-liberal agenda based on measurement and 'accountability' represented by the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (2011) has been noted by Ó Breacháin and

O'Toole (2013; 2014)[12]. The neo-liberalism inherent in this policy is epitomised by the reference to all learning beyond literacy and numeracy as "desirable but ultimately less important activities" (DES, 2011, p.15), increases in points of standardised testing for all children nationally, and the emphasis on increasing performance in international tests such as PISA in order to attract inward investment and increase employability (Ó Breacháin and O'Toole, 2013). This reflects an ongoing trend towards business models in education in Ireland (Lynch, et al., 2012). Of particular concern is the increase in points of standardised testing for children, because "the quality of education systems and the overall nature of the educational experiences for children can be sidelined in the pursuit of policy agenda based on accountability and escalation of standardised measurement of learning outcomes" (MacRuairc, 2009, p. 49).

In particular, MacRuairc (2009) has shown that the standardised tests used in Irish schools show significant bias against working-class children, perhaps explainable through Bourdieu and Thompson's (1991) concept of 'linguistic habitus' whereby the language of the home and that of the middle-class school system are incompatible. MacRuairc (2009) maintains that, while a number of national reports regarding reading attainment in Ireland have shown large gaps in achievement between children in disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged communities (Eivers, Shiel, and Shortt, 2004; Weir and Milis, 2001), and responses have been extensive through initiatives such as the DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) Scheme, "problematising the test itself in an effort to examine the

[12] This section draws heavily on work conducted for an article published as Ó Breacháin, A. and O'Toole, L. (2013). Pedagogy or politics?: Cyclical trends in literacy and numeracy in Ireland and beyond. *Irish Educational Studies*, *32* (4), 401-419. While care has been taken here to use only my own writing directly, with any contribution of my co-author acknowledged, this was a highly collaborative piece of work, and so I would like to acknowledge the contribution of my co-author, Annie Ó Breacháin, to shaping my thinking and supporting even those sections written individually by me.

potential therein for linguistic or cultural bias has never been part of the discussion" (MacRuairc 2009, p. 57).

Brooker (2015) makes a similar point in the context of early childhood education in the UK, noting that checklists such as the Foundation Stage Profile (DfE, 2012), which are used to determine whether a child is ready for school, tend to rely on culturally specific knowledge that may simply be outside the range of experience of certain children. She expresses concern about the impact of such early judgments on children's future educational and psychosocial experiences, and uses a Bourdieusian framework to argue that the system in the UK which focuses on testing children and assigning them to particular categories on transition to primary school may constitute a form of 'symbolic violence'. Brooker (2008) notes the barrier this presents to teachers who wish to cater to children's individual needs and abilities in the transition from pre-school to primary school:

> In practice, teachers in mainstream schooling are humane and sympathetic, and make every effort to treat children as individuals with different needs. But the system within which they work, with its standards and levels and accountability may oblige them to focus on meeting targets rather than on meeting needs and respecting children's right to learn in their own way and at their own pace. These systemic requirements, rather than the actual inclinations of teachers, contribute to the huge gulf that research has identified between children's pre-school experiences and their first experience of school (p. 29).

Brooker (2008) maintains that as soon as children enter formal schooling, they become aware of the hierarchies of achievements that count through the narrowing of focus from the holistic to the numerical. She indicates that "learning about your own place in that hierarchy may be one of the hardest lessons of successive transitions" (p. 120). Mackenzie et al. (2012) note similar processes in the move to secondary school, with increasing emphasis on evaluation and competition, and ability valued more than effort.

This is important in the Irish context within a Bio-ecological focus on temporal concerns, and 'disastrous' policy decisions leading to 'chaos' for individual children and families (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). While failing to address perceived difficulties with current performance in the educational system, in fact, the approaches arising out of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy are likely to contribute to a whole new set of problems related to narrowing of curriculum (Ó Breacháin and O'Toole, 2013). In similar analysis to that of Brooker (2008; 2015) regarding transition to primary school in the UK, Ó Breacháin and O'Toole (2013) have shown how on entering the formal school system in Ireland, the increased emphasis on verbal/linguistic and logical/mathematical skills since the introduction of the Strategy may very quickly present children with messages regarding their worth as learners (Olson and Bruner, 1996), even without the formal 'checklists' of school readiness in use in Britain. As previously established, this can have significant impact on academic self-efficacy beliefs and attendant achievement from the very beginning of an educational career, and it may be that children in Ireland at this point in time are more vulnerable to such effects on transitioning to school than ever before in this country, due to the current prevailing policy directions (Ó Breacháin and O'Toole, 2013).

This process may be exacerbated in the transition from primary to secondary school in Ireland, with a move to curricula that are entirely subject-centred. Also relevant are the increased use of high-stakes testing and ability grouping on transition to secondary school in Ireland. As such, it is clear that an examination of experiences of educational transition in Ireland can be illuminated by the theoretical concepts put forward by the Bio-ecological Framework regarding the impact of personal and socio-historical time and potential 'system blockages' caused by zeitgeist policy-making.

### 3.4.5 Summary.

It would seem that in spite of extensive emphasis on communication between educational levels in the literature, the practice of such is limited in Ireland and internationally, and the problem of curricular dissonance remains an issue for educational transition. At macro-level, in Ireland at present policy thrusts that may support positive transitional experiences include increased focus on transition by state bodies such as the NCCA, provision of curriculum frameworks relevant to pre-school and primary sectors, and provision of free pre-school education, although there is urgent need for research on the quality of this provision. Policy thrusts that may lead to increased difficulties at these times include narrowing of curriculum and increased emphasis on standardised testing potentially leading to alienation from the system from early in academic careers.

As such, like the literature on educational transition from the perspective of children and parents, the Bio-ecological Framework provides a structure that allows us to make sense of the literature from the the perspective of teachers, schools and communities. As noted in the introduction to this chapter, however, in spite of the attempt to integrate 'person', 'context' and 'time' factors within consideration of 'processes' for children, parents and teachers to reflect the fluid, interactive nature of the Bio-ecological Model, there remain some factors that are relevant to the perspectives of all three elements and experiences. Therefore, following on from the initial analysis of relevant 'processes', this chapter presents analysis of specific factors that may influence the quality of all of them.

In particular, a key element of a Bio-ecological perspective on educational transition is the recognition of the importance of a consideration of diversity. Interventions designed to support children and families through the process of educational transition that are based on

conceptions of individual children, families, teachers, schools and communities as largely the same or similar may, at best, be doomed to failure, or at worst exacerbate existing difficulties through the development of deficit models. Relevant factors identified in the literature include language, religion and culture, socio-economics, disability and SEN, gender and family structure.

## 3.5 Diversity: Specific factors influencing 'process' during educational transition

### 3.5.1 Language, culture and religion.

The challenge of educational transition can affect children, parents and teachers differently based on ethnicity, religion and language. This has been noted in transition from pre-school to primary school (Crnic and Lamberty, 1994; Margetts, 2003), and from primary to secondary school (Graham and Hill, 2002; Gutman and Midgley, 2000; Smyth et al., 2004; Topping, 2011). Adjustment to school can be particularly difficult for children from backgrounds outside the dominant culture with limited experiences outside the family (Katz, 1993b). Speaking a language in the home that is different from that spoken in the classroom is also predictive of adjustment difficulties on entry to primary school through an increased sense of dislocation (Margetts, 2003). Margetts also found that difficulties attributed to other factors, such as socio-economic status, gender, etc were ameliorated when children spoke the language of instruction as their first language. Children themselves identified barriers related to linguistic differences in the context of starting secondary school in Graham and Hill's (2002) research, and Hayes and Chodkiewicz (2006) found that in schools with high numbers of bilingual students, contacts between schools and communities about learning were difficult to negotiate and were heavily mediated by school principals.

Such issues have represented more significant challenges to Irish schools in recent decades (Machowska-Kosciak, 2013), since the relative cultural homogeneity prior to the 1990's left the educational system with little prior experience of cultural and linguistic diversity (Smyth et al., 2009), although it should be noted that the history of engagement with indigenous minority groups such as Travellers prior to this period left much to be desired (Ryan, 1998). Linguistic differences between home and school were identified as challenging by principals and teachers who responded to Smyth et al.'s (2009) Irish research with "marked consequences for the academic progress and social integration of newcomer students" (p. xv). However, aside from such linguistically-based difficulties, the principals and teachers in that research indicated that generally speaking, the academic achievement of 'newcomer' students is "at least as good as" Irish students.

In Smyth et al.'s (2004) research on transition from primary to secondary school, students from Traveller backgrounds and those from ethnic minorities expressed more negative feelings about the transition process and about their first day at secondary school. They also missed primary school more, and they were more likely to report feeling isolated on an on-going basis. This supports and somewhat explains findings that Traveller boys may be at risk of not making the transition to secondary school at all (Forkan, 2006). Relevant also are Gutman and Midgley's (2000) results in the American setting that children from minority ethnic groups were less likely to make successful transitions to Middle School.

Parents as well as children can also sometimes experience this 'clash of cultures' (O'Toole, 2011). Hornby and Lafaele (2011) outline examples of research illuminating the issue of culture with reference to parental involvement: Koki and Lee (1998) found that it was impossible to fully understand the relationships between parents in New Zealand who

have come from the Pacific Islands and their children's schools without thorough consideration of a tradition which emphasises lineage and culture as family domains, and education as the domain of schools. Young (1998) reported similar findings among Mexican-American parents, with cultural roles, expectations and values playing a pivotal role in how trust is perceived and developed. Equally, Tobin, Arzubiaga and Adair (2013) showed how parents of immigrants tended to have quite different expectations of pre-school than their children's pre-school teachers in the US context, and indicated that policy-makers and educators are still very much struggling with how best to serve a diverse population of children and parents.

The perspective of non-Irish parents is largely absent from the literature on educational transition in this country (Smyth et al., 2009), but some Irish work on linguistic and cultural considerations in education generally (Eriksson, 2013; Kraftsoff and Quinn, 2009) and the international work of Cummins (2000; 2001; 2005; Cummins et al., 2005; Ntelioglou, Fannin and Cummins, 2014) has identified some potential challenges. In particular, it can be difficult for parents to maintain their own sense of linguistic and cultural identity, while at the same time supporting their children to make a life for themselves and succeed at school in Ireland (Kraftsoff and Quinn, 2009). Edwards (2009) maintains that language and identity are inseparable, and Llamas and Watt (2010) agree:

> The connection between language and identity is a fundamental element of our experience of being human. Language not only reflects who we are but in some sense it *is* who we are, and its use defines us directly and indirectly (p. 1).

This begs the question, what are the implications when a child starts in a school where the language of instruction is not the same as that spoken at home? Kraftsoff and Quinn (2009) note that on starting school, children of minority groups often acculturate to the dominant culture at a faster rate than their parents, and Machowska-Kosciak (2013) indicates

that they can initially reject the home language and culture in favour of the dominant language and culture. This can be very emotional and even distressing for parents, given the importance placed by many parents on their children speaking their language with regards to cultural identity (Kraftsoff and Quinn, 2009). Siraj-Blatchford and Clarke (2000) indicate that educators need to work with the cultural and linguistic goals of parents because they are central to the identities of children, families and communities, and loss of first language can lead to loss of self-worth, breakdown of family relationships and inability to socialise into the family's culture.

There is some evidence however, that schools often fail to do so (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011) and it is little wonder, therefore that research indicates that minorities tend to be less involved in their children's education (Robinson and Harris, 2014), perhaps due to less access to the necessary resources as well as cultural and linguistic differences with the school (Brooker, 2008). As Hornby and Lafaele (2011) point out:

> Failure to understand the impact of ethnicity on [parental involvement] and to incorporate programmes that are genuinely inclusive of other cultures is probably another reason why the practice of involving parents in schools is typically less effective than it should be (p. 42).

Parents' lack of confidence in supporting their children's education can certainly be heightened if the language of instruction is not their first language, limiting communication between parents and teachers (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011). In the Irish context, the majority of principals in Smyth et al.'s (2009) work reported language-based challenges among 'nearly all' or 'more than half' of the parents of immigrant students. This was identified as a significant barrier to communication between parents and schools, as well as a factor that prevented parents from actively seeking contact. Kavanagh and Hickey (2013) indicated similar difficulties for Irish parents whose children attended Irish-medium immersion schools

if they had limited proficiency in the Irish language themselves. Parents in that research reported a sense of intimidation and low self-efficacy beliefs with regards to their ability to support their children's education through Irish, and one other interesting point related to the increasing number of non-Irish parents choosing Irish-medium immersion education for their children.

#### *3.5.1.1 Linguistic and cultural capital.*

Migrant families may be at significant disadvantage at times of educational transition because even where they occupy the middle classes, with all the cultural, social and economic capital that entails, they may not have first-hand knowledge of educational systems to support choice and proactivity during transition. Parents from some minority ethnic groups interviewed by Katz et al. (2001) indicated that they could not give their children essential parental support in relation to education because they did not understand the educational system. Equally, Brooker (2008) noted cultural differences in how families prepare children for transition from pre-school to primary school, and in their expectations of what would happen when they got there, with attendant implications for the cultural capital of children making the move.

Cultural capital related to religion may also have significant impact on access to education in Ireland as well as on systemic structures that may feed into segregation and even racism (Kitching, 2010). The extent to which Catholicism dominates patronage of Irish schools (Donnelly, 2011; Kitching, 2010; O'Kane and Hayes, 2006) has meant that in areas where school places are limited, arguments are increasingly made that Catholic parents should have 'first claim' on local Catholic schools, leading to the emergence of 'spill-over' primary schools where all students are of (Black) African origin (Kitching, 2010). Kitching

(2010) refers to this phenomenon as the re-racialisation of cultural Catholicism through the politics of school access. Thus, a child's language, culture and religion may impact on what school they go to, how they experience educational transition and how well they adjust, in processes relevant to Bio-ecological perspectives regarding diversity, context, socio-historical influences and the importance of understanding these issues in developing policy. This is particularly relevant to considerations of 'time', in that enrolment policies in Ireland are under significant review at present, in large measure to address these concerns about diversity, access and equality (Education [Admission to Schools] Bill, 2015).

Another important consideration in this regard is that parental contact with schools is often based around religious celebrations, and this could present potential barriers to the involvement of non-Catholic parents with their children's schools. For example, INTO (1997) in their survey of teachers in Irish schools on parental involvement describe opportunities for parental involvement in one school thus (p. 45):

> A number of special events involve parents in the life of the school.
> a) Opening of Year Mass: All parents are invited and come with their children. Committee members act as stewards / ushers. Parents who are already Eucharistic Ministers distribute Holy Communion.
> b) Carol Service: All parents are invited and come with their children. Committee members act as stewards / ushers.
> c) Parents prepare teas for parents of sixth class pupils after their Primary School Graduation Mass.
> d) Corpus Christi Procession: Parents are invited to help teachers with classes.
> e) A parent / nurse takes care of First Aid on Sports Day.
> f) Parents accompany teachers with all classes on school tours.

There is no acknowledgement in the INTO report that four of these six activities or 'special events' are potentially exclusive of parents of non-Catholic backgrounds. As such, the language, culture and religion of individual parents may impact on their capacity to support their children at times of educational transition.

#### *3.5.1.2* ***Structural and contextual considerations.***

There are some positive indications in Irish research that schools, and in particular home-school-community-liaison teachers, do in fact proactively focus on 'newcomer' families to promote relationships between home and school for this cohort (Smyth et al., 2009). Many schools hold events like Intercultural Days, and schools often develop educational classes for parents to encourage their involvement. Smyth et al, (2009) found that English-language classes were particularly useful in attracting newcomer parents to become involved with Irish schools, an important contextual factor supporting the development of good relationships.

However, some authors argue there is little evidence internationally of more than lip service to the ideals of 'partnership' with parents from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and support structures are sometimes based on 'socialisation' (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011). This means that schools attempt to shape parental attitudes and practices so that they facilitate schooling and meet the needs of the school or of the broader society (Adelman, 1992), rather than attempting to shape schooling to ensure the creation of a learning environment where everyone 'fits in'. This is central to the work of socio-linguists such as Cummins (2000; 2001; 2005; Cummins et al., 2005; Ntelioglou, Fannin and Cummins, 2014) who emphasise the need to draw on children's home culture and language as both a learning resource and an important repository for children's pre-existing knowledge. Approaches such as Intercultural Days are sometimes seen as tokenism and a sort of 'tourist' interculturalism (Murray and O'Doherty, 2001). Equally, Eriksson (2013) found that children often do not want attention drawn to their cultural and linguistic backgrounds, as it increases their sense of difference and 'otherness'.

Regarding supports for home-school communication, approaches such as language classes for parents may take a somewhat deficit approach, with parents seen as not having the skills to participate in their children's education, as opposed to drawing on the skills they do have (Kavanagh and Hickey, 2013). The literature recommends that initiatives such as asking parents to speak the language of the dominant culture in the home should be treated with caution, since maintenance of the primary language in their children may be essential to cultural identity and ethnic pride (Edwards, 2009; Kraftsoff and Quinn, 2009; Siraj-Blatchford and Clarke, 2000), and the potential for language loss is great when the parent chooses to, or is required to, predominantly speak the dominant language (Burck, 2005).

*3.5.1.2.1 Teacher Education.*

Unfortunately it can be difficult for educational staff to understand these processes, in large measure because international literature has documented the dominance of white middle-class students in Teacher Education (Pennington, 2007). This dominance certainly appears to be replicated in Ireland: According to Gilligan (2007), "there is little diversity in Colleges of Education and in the Teaching Profession in Ireland today" (p 44). The domination of Catholicism extends to Teacher Education; in some cases, Catholic arch-bishops even have the power to veto academic appointments in Irish Colleges of Education (Donnelly, 2011), and this may limit the ability of students from other religious backgrounds to pursue a career in teaching. Gilligan (2007) also links the lack of diversity in teaching and teacher education in the primary sector to the Irish language requirement for entry into Colleges of Education. Learning Irish is compulsory for all Irish children from primary level, but children who were not born in this country may be granted an exemption from this requirement, limiting the likelihood of children from diverse backgrounds accessing the primary teaching profession. Gilligan (2007) states:

> While few would contest the wisdom of attaining a high standard of Irish to teach in Irish [primary] schools, most who understand that equality can be achieved under conditions of difference would wonder why proficiency in the Irish language isn't a requirement at the end of the course on teacher training and not a condition of entry (p 44).

Teachers who qualify in other jurisdictions can make up the Irish language shortfall in their training, either by way of an Adaptation Period (OCG – Oiriúnú le hAghaidh Cáilíochta sa Ghaeilge) or an Aptitude Test (SCG – An Scrúdú le hAghaidh Cáilíochta sa Ghaeilge), but those who complete their teacher education for primary teaching in Ireland must have a C3 qualification in Leaving Certificate Irish (equivalent to a B2 under the Common European Framework of Reference) prior to beginning their course (Marino Institute of Education, 2014). Endeavours to encourage those from ethnic minorities to qualify and train as teachers are important when one considers the wealth of evidence that children need academic role models similar to themselves if they are to succeed academically (Bandura, 1969), meaning that if the majority of teachers in Ireland are female, white, Irish and middle-class, a significant number of their pupils will be disadvantaged before teaching even begins.

*3.5.1.2.2 Barriers to home-school 'process'.*

These concerns are equally important when one considers potential barriers to communication with parents imposed by differences between home and school in terms of language, culture and religion. Smyth et al. (2009) point out that while linguistic diversity is improving in publications explaining educational practices to parents in Ireland, such information is still not accessible to many parents. Equally, concerns about the ability to access parent-teacher meetings due to the stipulation in many schools that children stay at home may be particularly relevant to immigrant parents who have not yet developed a network of support in this country to facilitate childcare (O'Toole, 2011). Smyth et al. (2009) also identified concern around decreasing engagement with schools as children progressed

through the system as a particular factor in the involvement of 'newcomer' parents in Irish schools, with significantly more involvement at primary than at secondary level. Focussing on the everyday, lived experience of traditionally disempowered families, it may be that large structural changes are required before the idea of true 'partnership' could ever become a reality (Bastiani, 1993).

#### *3.5.1.3 Summary.*

Differences in language, culture and religion can contribute to disjuncture in the meso-system at times of educational transition, and as a result can be implicated in difficulties for children, parents and teachers alike. However, contextual factors can worsen or ameliorate these potential difficulties in 'proximal processes' and thus these considerations are important with regards to policy on educational transition through a Bio-ecological lens. This exploration of language, culture and religion highlights the fact that 'children', 'parents', and even 'teachers' and 'schools' are not homogeneous groupings, and these findings can be elucidated using the Bio-ecological Framework which shows how 'processes' during times of educational transition may be extensively impacted by 'person', 'context' and 'time' factors.

### 3.5.2 Socio-economics.

Socio-economic status (SES) may influence educational experiences and outcomes for children through the process of social reproduction, and through mis-matches between the 'habitus' of school and home (Bourdieu, 1973). This is particularly relevant at times of transition (Brooker, 2008), and different students may have different educational and transitional experiences, even within the same school or with the same teachers (Byrne and Smyth, 2010). Research has consistently indicated the existence of social class inequalities in educational attainment (Byrne and Smith, 2010), with Robinson and Harris (2014) referring

to “drastic differences in achievement by social class” (p. 7). There is also a long-standing body of research to indicate that educational aspirations may be influenced by social class (Riessman, 1953; Ritchie, Flouri and Buchanan, 2004), perhaps because the unequal opportunity structures of society “determine aspirations by determining the extent to which they can be satisfied” (Bourdieu, 1973, p. 83).

Socio-economic issues have been found to be influential in children’s experiences of educational transition specifically (Crnic and Lamberty, 1994; Gutman and Midgley, 2000; INTO, 2009; Margetts, 2003; Smyth et al., 2004). Topping (2011) found that difficulties during transition are exacerbated for children living in poverty, due to restrictions in access to resources and learning opportunities (Dockett et al., 2012), so the experiences of high poverty pupils at transition might be quite different, and often less positive, than those of their peers (Burgess et al., 2008; Evangelou et al., 2008).

Regarding transition from pre-school to primary school, Margetts (2003) found that children from higher SES backgrounds had higher levels of cooperation, assertion and social skills, as well as higher academic abilities and less behavioural difficulties. This is important given the value placed on these types of skills explored above. In the context of transition from primary to secondary school, Smyth et al. (2004) found that children from semi-/unskilled manual or non-employed backgrounds were more likely to report having little idea what lay ahead of them. Their research also found that such children were more likely to report negative feelings such as being ‘lost’, ‘scared’ and ‘confused’ on their first day of secondary school when compared with children from higher professional backgrounds, and they were more likely to report feeling isolated on a longer-term basis in secondary school.

Children from working-class backgrounds may also show lower academic self-efficacy beliefs than those from higher professional backgrounds (Smyth et al., 2004).

It is also worth noting that where ability grouping / streaming is used in schools, children from working class backgrounds tend to be over-represented in the lower streams, and once allocated to a certain stream, movement to other levels tends to be rare (INTO, 2009). As such, streaming at times of educational transition can reinforce prior differences in social class (Gamoran, Nystrand, Berends and LePore, 1995; Oakes, 1990, 2005; Smyth and McCoy, 2009), a prime example of Bourdieu's concept of social reproduction. Therefore, it is interesting to note that in the Irish context, while the practice of streaming has generally reduced, it is more highly concentrated in schools serving disadvantaged populations (Smyth et al., 2004).

In light of Bourdieu's (1973) theories on social reproduction, difficulties experienced by working class children within the school system at times of educational transition can be seen as stemming from a 'mismatch' between the cultures of school and home:

> Cultural resources, such as values, attitudes, language skills and styles of interaction, are acquired in school more quickly by children already familiar with them. School success is predicated on such cultural capital so that middle-class students who are more familiar with the dominant culture will fare better academically (Byrne and Smith, 2010, p. 27).

Interestingly, Smyth et al.'s (2004) research on transition from primary to secondary school did not find variation in children's reports of positive interactions with teachers based on socio-economic status, although reports of negative interactions did vary based on social background, with children from higher professional backgrounds less likely to report being 'given out to' by teachers than those from non-employed backgrounds. Thus, a child's

socioeconomic background, may impact significantly on how they experience and engage with educational transition and on the relationships developed at these times.

#### *3.5.2.1 Barriers to home-school 'process'.*

Of course socioeconomic issues are also relevant to how parents experience their children's educational transitions, and may impact on their capacity to contribute meaningfully to their child's educational transitions. In fact socioeconomic status has repeatedly been identified in the literature as a mediating factor in the relationship between parental involvement and children's achievement (Gileece, 2015; Robinson and Harris, 2014). Hegarty (1993) gives the following illustrative example:

> Mary Smith and John Jones are parents of pupils at Elm Vale Secondary School. Both pupils have special educational needs. Mary, a consultant paediatrician, sits on the school governing body and is an extremely articulate member. John is a long-term unemployed labourer who left school at fifteen and can barely read. To say that relations between home and school are likely to be very different in the two households is to state the blindingly obvious (p. 117).

In spite of this, much of the literature refers to 'parents' unproblematically (Robinson and Harris, 2014), and according to Hornby and Lafaele (2011), the rhetoric in the literature on parental involvement in education is filtered through a bias of white, middle-class values which emphasises the types of involvement favoured by this dominant group. Reay (1998) also presents an analysis of parental involvement in education whereby the cultural capital possessed by middle-class parents matches that generally valued by schools. Teachers often view poor families as under-valuing education, and being disinterested in their children's education (Robinson and Harris, 2014). They develop deficit models, characterising certain working-class parents as 'uninvolved' and apathetic (Mulkerrins, 2007).

However, according to Hornby and Lafaele (2011) the reality is that working-class parents are often aware of the difference between their cultural capital and that which is possessed and valued by schools and teachers. This can lead to feelings of intimidation for parents; working class parents, rather than choosing to be uninvolved, may be reluctant to visit the school because they do not feel confident in dealing with teachers (Mulkerrins, 2007). Hornby and Lafaele (2011) point out that parents who are without university degrees can sometimes be intimidated by teachers who they know are better academically qualified than them and therefore can be reluctant to work closely with them or to make suggestions.

It may be that the traditional Irish class structure feeds into these feelings of intimidation, with the school 'master' occupying a traditionally powerful position in Irish society. Irish working-class parents interviewed by Mulkerrins (2007) identified difficulties in developing comfortable and meaningful relationships with some teachers, indicating that teachers appeared to regard parents as being of inferior status, and not worth including as equal in their children's education: "They spoke of persistent unequal practices and attitudes. This sentiment was the general consensus: 'It makes us feel inferior when schools talk down to us, because we feel they still believe they are superior to us'" (p. 139). One working-class parent interviewed by Mulkerrins (2007) said, "I get scared still; I get sick when I know principals or teachers are talking down at me, dismissing me" (p. 138).

Reay (1998) presents a picture of parent-teacher relationships that for working-class parents are characterised by separateness but for middle-class parents are characterised by interconnectedness, a dynamic which shapes the attitudes and behaviour of both groups. Middle-class parents face fewer obstacles to becoming involved in their child's education – "they have the resources and power to enable them to continue to seek advantages for their

own children" (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011, p. 42). Hegarty (1993) maintains that unless there is a deliberate, sustained effort to bridge the two worlds (or in Bronfenbrenner's terms to create 'linkages' in the 'meso-system'), the likelihood is that the child's education will suffer. As Reay (2005) puts it, "Where children's class and cultural background bears little resemblance to that of their teachers, connections between home and school may be minimal and tenuous" (p. 26).

This is particularly relevant at times of educational transition, since a parent's social, cultural and economic capital can impact on their ability to mobilise resources in support of their child at time of transfer (INTO, 2009). School choice in particular appears to be effected by cultural, social and economic capital (Gerwitz, Ball and Bowe, 1994), with students from professional backgrounds less likely to go to their local school than those from manual backgrounds (Smyth et al., 2004). Working class parents may construe their children as the experts in making the choice (Reay and Ball, 1998), and this is particularly unfortunate since children in Smyth et al.'s (2004) research identified choice of school as an area in which parents could play a significant role. Difficulties are especially highlighted in transition from primary to secondary school, because when parents are less familiar with the more specialised and technical knowledge associated with second-level schooling as well as the culture and systems of the secondary school, their children may be disadvantaged (Bourdieu, 1986).

This emphasises the importance of avoiding a limited, uni-cultural approach to the promotion of parental involvement in educational transition, since traditional models of involvement based on middle-class values and structures could inadvertently maintain the current inequalities in the educational system, as well as the gap between rhetoric and reality

(Reay, 1998; Hornby and Lafaele, 2011). Such approaches can also lead to the development of deficit-based perceptions of certain groups of parents, because when a parent is unaware of the significance of certain institutional practices, they may appear to be less interested and become more distanced from the school (INTO, 2009).

Parental school memories may also vary based on the parent's social class (Räty, 2010), and such memories can be influential on how both parents and children experience transition. According to Gorman (1998), middle class parents tend to recall their own school days in positive terms, whereas working-class parents have more diverse experiences. It should be noted that in general working class parents of course care just as much as middle class parents about their child's education (Epstein, 2001), and so in spite of the potential difficulties for parents of lower SES in contributing to their children's education, it is important not to allow negative expectations to become self-fulfilling prophecies. As Hartas (2008) points out, "Parents, regardless of their socio-economic status and professional networks can influence their children's academic attainment and social and emotional adjustment" (p. 139). This is important, since factors such as teacher proactivity has been shown to be more influential on parents' involvement decisions than socio-economic class (Dauber and Epstein, 1993), illustrating the power of 'process' over 'person' and 'context' factors.

#### *3.5.2.2 Structural and contextual considerations.*

Nevertheless, one cannot disregard the importance of 'context', and its influence on how human beings relate to each other. One of the most important distinctions in the primary and secondary school context in Ireland is designation as 'educationally disadvantaged' under the 'DEIS' (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) scheme. Introduced in 2006 /

2007, the DEIS scheme provides for a standardised system for identifying and regularly reviewing levels of disadvantage, as well as an integrated approach to service provision, incorporating schemes such as Home-School-Community-Liaison (HSCL), School Completion Programme (SCP), Support Teacher Project, Giving Children an Even Break, Breaking the Cycle, Disadvantaged Area Scheme and Literacy and Numeracy Schemes. In addition to these targeted supports, DEIS schools benefit from reduced class sizes, with a maximum of twenty pupils in all junior classes (junior infants through second class), twenty-four in all senior classes (third class through sixth class), and eighteen in all secondary level classes (Weir and Denner, 2013).

A recent evaluation of the DEIS scheme (Weir and Denner, 2013) revealed lower absence rates, and overall improvements in reading and mathematics achievement at all grade levels since the introduction of DEIS, with year on year gains in evidence and a striking reduction in 'low-scorers' in spite of the deteriorating economic circumstances in Ireland in the intervening years. Mathematics achievement in DEIS schools is now approaching the norm group average, although reading performance in DEIS schools is still below that of the norm group average (Weir and Denner, 2013), and as Smyth and McCoy (2009) point out, the success of the DEIS programme in narrowing achievement gaps based on socio-economics may be limited by the fact that many children who may be educationally disadvantaged do not attend designated DEIS schools, and thus may not access the appropriate resources. The focus in the evaluation on standardised testing in a narrow range of academic areas may also limit our understanding of outcomes for children (Ó Breacháin and O'Toole, 2013; 2014), but the apparent gains in evidence for the most socio-economically disadvantaged children in Ireland as a result of the contextual interventions involved in the DEIS scheme are impressive nonetheless.

#### *3.5.2.3 Home-school-community-liaison.*

With regards to home-school relationships, one implication of DEIS funding for schools that has significant impact on parental involvement in educational transition is the appointment of a Home-School-Community-Liaison (HSCL) Coordinator. The HSCL scheme was established in 1990 (DES, www.education.ie), and according to Mulkerrins (2007), it is based on a Freirian approach to education and community development, emphasising genuine trust in people's creative power and supporting transformation through real dialogue and self-discovery. The central aim of HSCL is to "ensure that good communication and positive relations are fostered and developed between parents, teachers in the primary and post-primary schools and the community support services, with an emphasis on children at risk of educational failure" (INTO, 2009, p. 12).

The HSCL scheme also aims to raise awareness in parents of their own capacities to support their children's education (DES, www.education.ie), and to ensure that parents have a genuine voice in the exercise of power in the school, thus moving away from the preservation of the status quo, towards a more transformative experience for children and parents in working class communities (Mulkerrins, 2007). One of the roles of the HSCL Coordinator is often to develop and manage a transfer programme for children and families at times of educational transition. Such programmes may include (INTO, 2009, p. 12):

- Coordinating or facilitating workshops for parents to ease their concerns, fears or worries about school transfer
- Arranging for issues raised at consultative stage to be addressed, informing parents of the challenges their children may encounter on transferring to a new school
- Familiarising parents with the new school – its layout, significant personnel, the curriculum and timetables
- Consulting with parents and teachers and producing a Welcome Booklet containing all relevant information about the new school
- Ensuring through home visitation and parent workshops that specific concerns are identified and addressed.

It is noteworthy that although primary-secondary links are identified as important to this role, communication with pre-schools is not explicitly identified. Also, while the focus and much of the work of HSCL is admirable and effective (INTO, 2009), Mulkerrins (2007) has identified a rhetoric-reality gap in some cases. She cites Freire (1970, p. 43) in maintaining that "transformation is only relevant if it is carried out with the people, not for them". She notes that there is no evidence of consultation between DES and marginalised parents or community groups in the process of setting up HSCL, or even in some of the subsequent evaluations of the scheme (e. g. Archer and Shortt, 2003):

> The non-inclusion of representatives from working-class communities in any aspect of the design, organisation, planning, management or development of the HSCL scheme since its inception suggests that only inherent middle-class values may filter through in practice on the ground (Mulkerrins, 2007, p. 134).

This is illustrated by the fact that the majority of parents interviewed by Mulkerrins (2007) had not experienced involvement in any policy-level discussions or decision-making; when asked about policy one parent responded "Was that about keeping the rooms tidy?" (p. 138), implying a role for parents in service to the school, as opposed to true partnership with them. This echoes Hornby and Lafaele's (2011) cautions around the inappropriate use of the term 'partnership', and Bourdieu's concepts of how the cultural capital of working class parents may be devalued by middle class schools.

Nevertheless, while true transformation may be a slow process, there is evidence that many parents value the input of HSCL. Parents responding to Mulkerrins (2007) indicated that the HSCL Coordinator bridged the divide between parents and teachers, leading to a more equitable balance of power and impacting on perceptions of schools as more open and welcoming places. These parents also noted increased respect and recognition for individual children's learning needs, leading to a happier school life for both parents and children and

enhancement of parents' confidence and self-esteem through dispelling fears around schooling. Also noted were reduced feelings of intimidation on behalf of parents when dealing with schools and a sense of community developed through the work of HSCL programmes (Mulkerrins, 2007). It would seem that parents value HSCL at times of transition particularly, allaying fears and gaining a sense of being listened to (O'Brien, 2004; DES, 2007).

#### *3.5.2.4 Effects of SES on teacher behaviour.*

This is important, because issues related to socioeconomics have been shown to impact on teacher behaviours. In particular, teacher expectations of pupils whose backgrounds differ from their own have been consistently low (Robinson and Harris, 2014), and there is extensive research to show that teacher expectations can often become 'self-fulfilling prophecies', as shown by Rosenthal and Jacobson's (1968) classic work 'Pygmalion in the Classroom'. For example, Good (1987; 1993) and Brophy and Good (1986) found that once teachers were given a child's IQ score (not always accurately), they adjusted their teaching. With those of lower IQ, teachers waited a shorter time for them to answer questions, gave them the answers more frequently rather than giving them clues or chances to respond, praised them less frequently, smiled at them less often and demanded less work from them. These researchers also found that such teacher behaviours had a negative effect on the educational outcomes of such children. This is particularly true of groups that, for various reasons like cultural bias in testing and poorer educational and social opportunities, tend to score lower on IQ tests, such as those from lower SES backgrounds (MacRuairc, 2009).

Such expectations by teachers may also extend to their interactions with parents (Dockett et al., 2012), and there is extensive evidence of negative teacher stereotyping of working class parents (Robinson and Harris, 2014). On the other hand, there can be differences in teachers' attitudes both within schools and between schools, emphasising diversity within this group also. For example, O'Kane and Hayes (2006) found that primary school teachers were more likely than pre-school teachers to believe that socio-economic status put children at risk of a difficult transition from pre-school to primary school. It should also be noted that "most teachers are genuine in their desire to actually find solutions and engage meaningfully with parents, [often with] little or no training" in how to do so (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011, p. 46).

#### *3.5.2.5 Summary.*

A consideration of the experiences of children, parents, teachers, schools and communities at times of educational transition would not be complete without exploration of socioeconomic issues. Relevant factors include increased challenges at times of educational transition for working class children, potential barriers to communication between home and school based on differing cultural capital and norms, the availability of structural supports and policy initiatives, and the potential changes to teacher behaviour when interacting with working class children and families. These experiences can be explained with reference to Bio-ecological concepts of disjuncture in the meso-system, and are particularly elucidated by Bourdieu's theories on cultural capital and social reproduction.

### 3.5.3 Disability and Special Educational Needs (SEN).

Another important 'person' factor to consider is the experience of learning difficulties or disabilities by a child. These can impact on the form that parental involvement in their

education takes (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011) and on experiences of educational transition (Smyth et al., 2004; Maunsell et al., 2007). The conception of a disability as a sole function of the child (a 'deficit' or 'medical model') can be extensively criticised through the lens of a 'social model' which views disability in its socio-political and socio-cultural context, acknowledging the potentially disabling effect of the environment (attitudinal and physical) (Brewster, 2004). Such understanding is consistent with a Bio-ecological perspective on development in context.

Nevertheless, with specific reference to educational transition, Maunsell et al. (2007) found that students with SEN are often more alienated academically and socially at times of transition than their peers. INTO (2009) point out that while the majority of children adjust relatively quickly to the new demands placed on them at times of transition, adjustment for children with SEN may take significantly longer. Smyth et al. (2004) found that less academically able students were more likely to report negative feelings on their first day of secondary school when compared to those with higher test scores in reading and maths. They were more likely to report negative interactions with teachers, particularly regarding discipline. However, they were also more likely to report positive interactions with teachers. In other words, children with SEN were more likely to receive attention, both positive and negative, from teachers than their peers, and Smyth et al. (2004) hypothesise that this seeming contradiction may reflect teachers' strategies to encourage less able students. Whatever the cause, Smyth et al. maintain that "a significant minority of students have very negative feelings about [secondary] school from the outset and this group is disproportionately made up of students who have not experienced educational success at primary school" (p. 188).

Academic self-efficacy beliefs are also, obviously, influenced by prior educational success or failure (Bandura, 1994; Smyth et al., 2004), with all of the attendant outcomes described above. The influence of SEN on children's experiences can also be seen in cases where they are particularly gifted or talented (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011), and it is not uncommon for gifted children to underachieve due to boredom and frustration (Diezmann and Watters, 1997). Hornby and Lafaele (2011) point out that these difficulties may also be seen where children have a particular talent outside of the academic arena, for example in sports or musical abilities, in that time taken off school for practicing or competing can be difficult for a teacher to accept.

INTO (2009) note the importance of ensuring all necessary supports, such as Special Needs Assistants (SNA's), physical adaptations to the school, etc are in place for children in plenty of time to ensure smooth transition. They note the vital role that parents have to play in informing a new school of their child's needs, as well as systemic difficulties that families may face – for example, supports from primary school do not automatically follow a child to secondary school and parents need to be proactive during this transition in order to ensure availability of important educational resources for their children with SEN. Clearly there is room for policy change at the macro-level, although interestingly, Ring et al. (2015) reported positive communications and good results at micro- and meso-levels in this regard. Availability of such supports for children with special needs was a key concern of parents who participated in Ring et al.'s research.

#### *3.5.3.1 Home-school 'process'.*

A learning difficulty or disability can in some cases facilitate parental involvement in education in Ireland, since legislation such as the Education for Persons with Special

Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act (2004) requires parents to have the opportunity to contribute to the development and implementation of Individual Education Plans (IEP's). Interestingly, EPSEN also provides a legislative basis for support for students with special educational needs to make the transition from primary to secondary school (Maunsell et al., 2007). Also, bringing up a child with a disability can, however rewarding, sometimes be challenging too, and often parents of children with disabilities seek additional support from schools and teachers because they need it in their own right (Hegarty, 2003).

On the other hand, according to Seligman (2000), learning difficulties and disabilities can sometimes lead to conflict between parents and teachers, particularly where there is disagreement around academic ability, or where teachers want more support from parents in backing up their approaches at home. Equally, when children develop a reputation for the challenging behaviour that sometimes coincides with SEN, it can reduce their parents' willingness to go into schools "for fear of getting more bad news" (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011, p. 44). When schools use approaches such as suspension or expulsion, conflict with parents becomes almost inevitable (Parsons, 1999). This obviously impacts on the extent and nature of parents' involvements in their educational transitions.

In summary, disability and SEN can impact significantly on experiences of educational transition for children and families, and the literature highlights the importance of practical supports and good communication between home and school, showing how 'context' and 'proximal processes' can impact experiences.

### 3.5.4 Gender.

There is extensive research evidence that a child's gender can significantly affect their experiences of education generally (Harrop and Swinson, 2011), and (less extensively but still significantly) their experiences of educational transition specifically (INTO, 2009; Margetts, 2003; Smyth et al., 2004). One area of society where gender role stereotypes are often strictly enforced is in school, and according to Berk (2009), very shortly after entering primary school, children figure out which academic subjects are 'boys' subjects' and which are 'girls' subjects'. Reading, spelling, art and music are perceived as being 'for girls' and maths, athletics and anything mechanical or physical are seen as being 'for boys' (Jacob and Weisz, 1994). Even more damaging may be the stereotype that males are more 'intelligent' than females, and many young girls believe this in spite of the fact that girls have consistently higher grades than boys – Stetsenko et al. (2000) found that even when girls were aware of their better performance they still did not report stronger beliefs in their own abilities, and they discounted their talents when compared with boys. Boys, on the other hand, tend to have higher academic self-rating than girls, regardless of actual performance (Hannan et al., 1996; Smyth et al., 2004).

When teachers interact with girls, they tend to attribute any difficulties to a lack of ability on their behalf, whereas they attribute boys' difficulties to a lack of effort (Berk, 2009), attributions that have been shown to be influential in the formation of self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1994). These 'directive beliefs' in turn impact on experiences of educational transition, as explored above. Such gender issues are often propagated in the home, and so a child's gender has implications for parents' involvement in educational transition also. Eccles et al. (2000) found that mothers rated their sons as more competent than daughters at maths regardless of actual performance. Mothers' gender-typed judgments

in turn influenced children's self-perceptions of maths ability, the effort they devoted to maths and their later maths achievement (Eccles et al., 2000).

In spite of these perceived benefits for boys, they can experience difficulty in educational contexts also, and Margetts (2003) found that gender was a strong predictor of ease of transition to primary school, with girls exhibiting greater levels of cooperation, self-control and social skills, and boys showing greater levels of externalising behaviour, internalising behaviour, hyperactivity and summed problem behaviour. "Boys are more at risk than girls of deleterious adjustment outcomes in the first year of schooling" (Margetts, 2003, p. 12).

In fact, difficulties in relationships with teachers may be especially intense for male students during transition (O'Brien, 2004). Bailey (1993) conducted a review of research on gender dating back to the 1970's which found that in the vast majority of cases, teachers gave more attention to boys than to girls, and Harrop and Swinson (2011) report a wealth of evidence to support this contention in the intervening years: Howe (1997) found that contributions from boys dominate during classroom interaction; Jones and Dinda (2004) showed that teachers interact more with male pupils than with females; Mortimore et al. (1988) found more communication between teachers and boys; Davies (2008) indicated that both male and female primary school teachers give more attention to boys; Swinson and Harrop (2009) observed and rated primary school teachers on various categories of interaction and found that teachers interacted more with boys on all categories. In reviewing this evidence, Harrop and Swinson (2011) maintain that "there do seem to be differences in the ways the two genders are treated in schools. In the primary school, the vast majority of evidence shows teachers interacting more with boys than with girls" (p. 118).

However, male pupils consistently underperform in school when compared to girls (Harrop and Swinson, 2011). This may be related to the quality of the interaction between teachers and the boys they teach. Jones and Dinda (2004) found that teachers had more negative interactions with boys, but not more positive ones. Mortimore et al.'s (1988) work also showed that the boys received more criticism and neutral comments than girls – boys were given more supervision whereas girls got more praise. In Smyth et al.'s (2004) work on transition from primary school to secondary school, girls reported less negative interactions with teachers than boys. This may be linked to the fact that much of the research shows boys off-task much more often than girls (Swinson and Harrop, 2009).

Harrop and Swinson (2011) illustrate this in a gender-related study that is relevant to educational transition, by comparing gender-based interactions in primary schools with those in secondary schools. They found that in primary schools, boys were off-task significantly more often than girls, but that in secondary schools off-task behaviour became more consistent across the two genders: girls' off-task behaviour increased to the level of boys rather than any significant improvement in boys' behaviour. What is significant here is that while in primary schools the pattern of teachers showing more attention to boys was confirmed, in secondary schools attention levels were equal. In other words, it may be that boys are simply seen as more challenging for primary teachers to manage, and that is why more attention is given to them at primary level than to girls. Clearly transition to second level has impacts on the experiences of both boys and girls.

In classrooms, teachers tend to value obedience and discourage assertiveness, whereas outside of the classroom, the social training boys receive is the precise opposite, and this may promote discomfort for boys on starting school, (Berk, 2009). The potential impacts of this

can be explained by the concept of the meso-system, in that there may be disjuncture for boys in traversing different micro-systems. It may be even more harmful in the long-term for girls who willingly conform, perhaps damaging their sense of independence and self-esteem (Berk, 2009). Teachers praise boys for their knowledge and girls for their obedience (Berk, 2009), and their more frequent use of disapproval and controlling discipline with boys seems to result from an expectation that boys will misbehave more often than girls - something based partly on boys' actual behaviour and partly on gender stereotyping (Good and Brophy, 2003).

Smyth et al. (2004) also found some emotionally-based gender differences in children's experiences of transition from primary to secondary school. Girls were more likely to report feeling nervous, and international research has indicated the negative consequences for girls of the disruption of friendship groups involved in the transition to secondary school (Hargreaves and Galton, 2002; Smyth et al., 2004). Girls are more likely to feel isolated in the process of transition from primary to secondary school (Smyth et al., 2004), and it has also been reported that girls experience more anxiety in this transition than boys (Hargreaves and Galton, 2002; INTO, 2009; O'Brien, 2001). Of course, the majority of this research relies on self-report and so boys may have simply been conforming to societal pressures and stereotypes of 'strength' in reporting that they were less anxious in the move to a new school than their female counterparts. This point is also made by Tobbell and O'Donnell (2005) who maintain that research relying on "the answers to questionnaires which purport to 'measure' such a complex concept as self-esteem may reflect gender differences in the construction and reporting of feelings" (p. 4).

#### *3.5.4.1 Single-sex vs mixed-gender schooling.*

One solution that is sometimes proposed in response to difficulties experienced in education by both boys and girls is segregated, single-sex schooling. This is relevant to educational transition in Ireland as single-sex schools are more prevalent at secondary level, meaning that many children will transfer from mixed primary schools to single-sex secondary schools. However, the research-documented benefits of single-sex approaches are mixed at best (Johnson and Gastic, 2014). On the one hand, there is some evidence of academic benefits – Parker and Rennie (2002) found improved outcomes for both boys and girls based on single-sex science education. They equally linked single-sex education with protection against bullying, particularly for girls, and Johnson and Gastic (2014) confirmed this, particularly in the case of gender non-conforming girls. Else-Quest and Peterca (2015) also found that single-sex schooling led to achievement gains for girls in maths, science, reading and writing. However, they also found more negative attitudes to reading in single-sex education than in mixed-sex, and poorer achievement in reading and maths for boys.

In fact, Halpern et al. (2011) maintain that there is no compelling evidence that single-sex schooling supports achievement, and refer to research supporting it as 'pseudoscience'. They draw attention to large scale studies in Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand as well as data from the international PISA study which indicate little difference between academic outcomes in single-sex vs mixed-sex schools (Harker, 2000; Marsh and Rowe, 2006; Smithers and Robinson, 2006; Thomson and Ungerleider, 2004). Conversely, according to Halpern et al. (2011), it is well-documented that single-sex schooling increases gender-stereotyping and sexism, and liken the calls for single-sex schooling to protect against bullying to support for racially segregated schools to protect against racism. Even Parker and Rennie (2002) who identify academic gains in single-sex contexts caution that gender-based

segregation should be used sparingly or it could lead to deficit approaches, assuming that girls are less competent and need protection. Yet, Erarslan and Bruce (2013) found more egalitarian attitudes towards family life roles in single-sex schools, and no difference in attitudes towards work or social life roles. It seems that the potential benefits or flaws associated with single-sex and mixed-sex schooling have yet to be confirmed by international research.

#### *3.5.4.2 'Parental involvement' as a gendered concept.*

'Parental involvement' in educational transition is not a gender-neutral concept either (Vincent and Martin, 2005). Research has strongly identified a difference in parental involvement in children's education on the basis of gender; fathers tend to be less involved than mothers (Grolnick and Slowiaczek, 1994; Hart, 2011; Hornby and Lafaele, 2011; Metso, 2004; Vincent and Martin, 2005). Cullen et al. (2011) describe the weight of research evidence that stresses the important role that fathers have to play in their children's educational development, but note that there is a distinct absence of men involved in children's learning. As such, a Bio-ecological approach to identifying ways of empowering parents to support their children in times of educational transition needs to consider the issue of gender, and in particular, the involvement of fathers in their children's education.

There is evidence that this issue is not considered by professionals in educational settings – Hart's (2011) review of fathers' involvement in assessment of special educational needs found that even though it was rare for Educational Psychologists to consult fathers, their reports tended to refer to the views of 'parents'. As Hart remarks, "it appears that when it comes to involving parents or eliciting their views, mothers are considered synonymous with parents" (p. 163). This is a good example of unstated values impacting on policy and

practice. According to Hart (2011), much of the existing research on gender differences in parents' involvement in education has been from a feminist perspective, viewing increased involvement of mothers as evidence of women suffering an injustice, as opposed to recognising the disempowerment of men as fathers through their exclusion from educational processes. Hart maintains that while lingering structural and societal inequalities do contribute to the perception that women are more available for contributing to their child's education, we must also acknowledge the concern that fathers may not be in a position to exercise their rights and responsibilities as they may wish. As such, it is important to go beyond a surface level of analysis in determining why fathers may not be involved.

One possible barrier to paternal involvement in education could be the primarily female nature of many educational settings. Hart (2011) maintains that where a parent's gender is different to that of the majority of teachers and other school staff, as is commonly the case for fathers, difficulties may arise, and fathers may feel excluded, reminiscent of Bourdieu's concepts of clashing habitus'. This could certainly be the case in Ireland, where the feminisation of education in the pre-school (Doherty and Walshe, 2011) and primary school (McDonagh and O'Toole, 2011) sectors in particular is extensive.

Employment patterns may also provide a potential barrier to fathers' involvement in their children's education (Kahn, 2006). Goldman's (2005) review noted that the circumstances under which fathers were least likely to be involved in their children's education were when fathers were manual workers or worked in the evenings. The timing of meetings in schools often makes it more difficult for fathers to attend and be involved (Hart, 2011). In spite of extensive changes to societal structures in recent decades, there is a continuing likelihood of fathers being the primary 'bread-winner'; while couples today are far

less likely to rely solely on the male as the source of earned income, in many dual-earner couples, the female still assumes a secondary financial role, reflected in the relatively high incidence of part-time work among married women (Drago, Black and Wooden, 2005). This certainly appears to be the case in Ireland: according to the most recent figures available from the Central Statistics Office (CSO) on the issue, in 2011 married men worked longer hours in paid employment than married women, with 44.5% of married men working for 40 or more hours per week compared with 14.7% of married women. In contrast, 25.1% of married women worked for 20-29 hours per week compared with just 5.5% of married men. This may mean that mothers have more informal contact with schools "at the school gate" (Hart, 2011), and as such become the point of contact for schools and the conduit for information on children's schooling. This is particularly an issue for fathers who live apart from their children (Hart, 2011; Kahn, 2006).

Such practices sometimes mean that fathers feel excluded, or feel they have little to offer at times of educational transition and beyond (Hart, 2011). Schools sometimes develop assumptions indicating that paternal involvement is not expected and in such cases tacit assumptions can be embedded in the practices of schools (Hart, 2011). If fathers do not receive communication from schools, if meetings are arranged at inconvenient times, or if implicit messages about the lack of importance of a father's input are transmitted, it is less likely that fathers will play an active role in their child's education (Hart, 2011).

Hart (2011) found that the fathers who are more likely to be involved in their children's education are those who feel that there will be a benefit, those who feel that paternal involvement accords with their normative beliefs (i. e. that involvement in education is something that fathers do) and those who feel able to contribute in a meaningful way.

Fathers need to feel that there is a point to their involvement and that it will be of benefit (Hart, 2011). Goldman (2005) found that fathers within a two-parent family were more likely to be involved when mothers were too, but single-parent fathers tended to be more involved in schools than resident fathers in two-parent families. Cullen et al. (2011) found that fathers were more likely to be involved in their children's education when partnership with them was strategically planned, when fathers were consulted about what sort of support and activities they needed, and when the way in which they were approached was conscious and respectful of different masculinities and ways of being a father. This is particularly important when one considers intercultural differences in perceptions and norms around the role of father (Seward and Stanley-Stevens, 2014), again emphasising issues of diversity and the impact of relationships and contexts on personal choices.

Cullen et al. (2011) maintain that fatherhood roles themselves are in transition, and that attitudes among some working fathers are ahead of the reality of their work and care arrangements, reflecting the idea that individual behaviour must be understood in its socio-historical context. Hart (2011) reported similar findings, indicating that a number of fathers experience a state of internal conflict, wanting to occupy an active, involved role in their children's education, but adhering more closely to more traditional gender roles due to the reality of their life circumstances. An examination of the involvement of fathers in their children's educational transition is particularly important in the light of the dissonance between research on the benefits of positive father involvement with their children's learning and education, the policy imperatives of many governments internationally, and practitioner guidance to engage fathers, on the one hand, and the experience of father engagement on the other (Cullen et al., 2011). Hart (2011) recommends ensuring accurate records are kept of all persons with parental responsibility for a child, ensuring that non-resident parents are treated

equally, that information is shared with them and they are invited to participate in the same way as resident parents, giving parents greater control over when and where meetings are held, being aware that fathers may prefer informal, non school-based settings, and having a minimum expectation that staff will talk to both parents, unless there is a good reason why this cannot happen.

#### *3.5.4.3 Summary.*

An examination of the literature regarding gender and educational transition can be elucidated through a Bio-ecological framework emphasising the importance of relationships, the impact of context, internalisation of experience by children, the importance of a consideration of diversity, and the idea that individual choices are made within the confines of personal experience and opportunity. The literature also indicates that schools seeking to involve parents in the educational transitions of their children need to consider gender, support both boys and girls with their individual needs, and specifically target fathers in their systems of involvement. The findings are mixed regarding the impact of single-sex and mixed schooling.

### 3.5.5 Family structure.

Another key issue of diversity for consideration within a Bio-ecological Framework on educational transition is family structure. According to Berk (2009), "the family is the child's first and longest lasting context for development" (p. 563). Children stay longer with their families than any other species, and the influence of family life can last a life-time. The family has such a strong influence on children that most educators recognise parents as the primary and most important educator a child has.

#### *3.5.5.1 Diverse family structures.*

However, just like 'children', 'parents', 'teachers', 'schools' and 'communities', the concept of 'family' is open to a diversity of interpretations, and different parenting arrangements bring different challenges and benefits for the social and emotional development of children that may impact on children's experiences of educational transition. Experiences in the home influence preparation for educational transition, and resources provided at home, home routines and other aspects of the home environment can significantly impact on a child's experience of educational transition (Dockett et al., 2012; Tudge et al., 2003). Cullen et al. (2011) point out that rapidly changing family structures have led to substantial changes in the role of fathers and mothers, with uncertain implications for children. When parents re-marry or find new partners, there can be the potential for what is known as 'boundary ambiguity' – "the uncertainty in step-families of who is in or out of the family and who is performing or responsible for certain tasks in the family system" (Santrock, 2008, p. 312). For example, does a mother's new partner have the right to discipline her child, or insist that the child does her homework? What involvement does a child's father have in their education if he is no longer resident with the child? These are the questions that face many Irish families, and there is research to show that children can struggle to cope with new living arrangements - following the remarriage of a birth-parent, an emotional upheaval usually occurs in girls and boys often show increased aggression (Santrock, 2008). Families in which both parents bring children from a previous relationship may have the most difficulty in terms of behavioural problems (Santrock, 2008), and children who live with neither parent are the most likely to report feeling isolated in the process of educational transition (Smyth et al., 2004).

Of course while Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) make the point that an extensive body of research has shown the benefits of traditional family structures involving two parents, they also remind us that it is the relationships or 'process' within these family contexts that actually matter rather than who is a part of the family per se. They maintain that the presence of another adult who gives support and love to the primary caregiver is key to positive functioning within families, so that 'other adult' could be a same-sex partner, a grandparent or some other close individual, rather than explicitly the other biological parent of the child. As Bronfenbrenner and Morris put it, "it would seem that, in the family dance, it takes three to tango" (2006, p. 824). This prediction of the Bio-ecological Model has to some extent been supported by recent research showing that children of same-sex couples are in many cases happier and healthier than population samples (Crouch et al., 2014). This is important to remember with reference to an increasing culture of testing for 'school readiness' using checklists that impose a 'cultural arbitrary' on what constitutes 'good' parents and 'home learning environments', disregarding diversity in families (Brooker, 2015).

As such, any approach to supporting parental involvement in educational transition must be cogniscent of and sensitive to the needs of different types of families and different family contexts. As one teacher who responded to the INTO's research on transitions (2009) stated, "It is very easy to have this notion of a family in your head, but what is the family now?" (p. 32). Cullen et al. (2011) describe the increasing prominence of the agenda around divorced, separated and unmarried fathers' rights and responsibilities, but also the growing pressure from grandparents and step-parents for extended rights of contact after parental separation (Wasoff, 2009). The rights of same-sex couples are increasingly gaining recognition in Ireland with the passing of the Civil Partnership Act in 2010 followed by the

overwhelming ‘yes’ vote in support of equality of marriage rights for same-sex couples in 2015. This can be located within the context of legal recognition for same-sex partnerships in many Western countries and the granting of parenting rights, such as second parent adoption in same-sex couples, as well as greater recourse to surrogate parenthood (Millbank, 2008). This is particularly important to remember in the context of parental involvement in educational transition, since as Reay (1998) points out, those parents who tend to be involved in their children’s education and are often unfairly defined by teachers as “the good parents” are typically white, middle-class, married and heterosexual:

> In this context of changing and more complex family structures, initiatives designed to increase parental involvement with children’s education are potentially sensitive because they must engage with the lived experience of individual family lives, however these are constituted (Cullen et al. 2011, p. 488).

#### *3.5.5.2 Siblings.*

Of course, parents are not the only constituent members of families, and very often at times of educational transition the people towards whom children turn are in fact their siblings. According to Dockett and Perry (2013), sibling relationships are the longest and most enduring of our lives, and these relationships can entail both support (regarding development of social skills and receipt of advice and information) and challenge (managing conflict) that are relevant to children’s experiences of educational transition. Dockett and Perry (2013) identify two models of understanding the implications of having siblings at times of educational transition – the ‘resource dilution model’ which indicates that having more siblings in a family dilutes the amount of resources available to each individual child starting school, and the ‘resource model’ which sees siblings supporting the development of social, interpersonal and other skills. A Bio-ecological understanding of educational transition would tend towards this latter model, viewing siblings as cultural mediators for children in the meso-system between home and school (Dockett and Perry, 2013),

introducing them "to new languages and ways of interacting in familiar contexts, blending familiar and new" (Volk, 1999, p. 10). Either model supports the idea that relationships are key to development, with no assumption that either the relationship or the development will necessarily be positive.

Nevertheless, Dockett and Perry's (2013) research supports the 'resource model', finding extensive evidence that children depend on their siblings to provide advice, guidance, support and friendship in the transition from pre-school to primary school. This is confirmed by the findings of Ring et al. (2015) who showed that siblings could help to reduce the fears of young children starting school. Selection of school sometimes reflects earlier choices made about and by older siblings, and having an older sibling in the school was also identified by Smyth et al. (2004) as contributing to ease of transition from primary to secondary school. In spite of extensive formal measures to support transition, Smyth et al.'s (2004) work found that siblings appeared to be the main source of information for children, and the topics of interest tended to be things like discipline, sports facilities and teams and information on individual teachers. Such informal information sometimes fuelled anxiety, particularly in relation to the concept of "the first-year beating" (see also Delamont, 1991). Nevertheless, Smyth et al. (2004) also found that children who had older siblings in their new secondary school were more likely to report positive feelings at transition from primary school, confirming the predictions of the Bio-ecological Model that strong meso-systems support developmental outcomes for children.

## 3.6 Conclusion

As indicated by the analysis above, the Bio-ecological Framework facilitates exploration of issues of diversity and complexity at times of educational transition.

According to Tobbell and O'Donnell (2005), much of the existing literature provides rich descriptions of the experiences of those managing these transitions, but transition is generally under-theorised in research to date, leading to flawed meta-understanding and limited frameworks for intervention. This chapter has gone some way towards addressing that gap.

In summary, it would seem that in keeping with the predictions of the Bio-ecological Framework, 'process' or relationships may have the power to overcome potential impacts of 'person', 'context' and 'time' (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). Nevertheless, the 'person' characteristics of children, teachers and parents interact with and influence each other to determine quality of experiences for all three groups at times of educational transition, as also predicted by the Bio-ecological Framework. Again, it is important to note the interactive nature of many of these characteristics (Margetts, 2003). For example, Smyth et al. (2004) found that the children who had most difficulty 'settling in' during the transition from primary to secondary school were those who were less academic *and* attended designated disadvantaged schools; those who reported the highest levels of negative student-teacher interactions were assigned to the lower streams *and* were male.

Equally, while the Bio-ecological Framework recognises the active role of the child in shaping their environment and experiences, it also maintains that it is important to move beyond a narrow focus on the characteristics of the child or family in terms of educational experience, since personal choices are constrained by the contexts in which they are made. As Byrne and Smyth (2010) point out, approaches that emphasise young people's personal qualities in the context of educational outcomes can be criticised on the grounds that they may neglect the role of societal structures and contribute to a culture of 'blaming the victim'. Research on educational transition suggests that the entire context of a child's ability to adjust

to the demands of the new situation must be considered (Dunlop and Fabian, 2003), because children's transition and adjustment to schooling is influenced by a variety of personal and family characteristics, societal and family trends, contextual and life experiences (Margetts, 2003).

Analysis within the Bio-ecological framework leads to a conception of parental empowerment as opposed to mere involvement in educational transition, and (with a focus on equity and social justice) presents the following questions for analysis:

- What factors impact on positive experiences of educational transition for children, families and schools in the Irish context?
- What factors impact on the likelihood of positive parental involvement in educational transition in the Irish context?
- How can parents be empowered to contribute meaningfully to their children's positive experiences of educational transitions? How can we build capacity in those who traditionally have not had the 'cultural capital' to engage well with the education system, while also ensuring respect for individual customs, languages, traditions and approaches to supporting the development of children?
- How can schools and teachers work to create educational environments and experiences of transition where everyone 'fits in' without diluting the ethos of their own school or important aspects of curriculum?
- How can we design interventions to support parental involvement in educational transition that do not inadvertently reproduce social injustices and widen the gap between the 'haves' and 'have nots' through appealing only to the families of children who traditionally would have done well in our educational system anyway?

- What have children, parents and teachers experiencing educational transition in Ireland got to tell us about their experiences that may impact on and guide responses to these questions?
- How can all of these questions be theorised within the Bio-ecological Framework, and in turn, what have the findings got to tell us about the veracity of the key predictions of the model?

As Bastiani (1993) points out, questions such as these, providing for genuine home-school partnership, will not quietly evolve into solutions in their own good time, and individual children, parents, teachers and schools need support, imagination and commitment from researchers and policy-makers. The current research seeks to identify important factors related to development of meaningful involvement of parents in their children's educational transitions so that the very different contributions and capacities of individual homes and schools can work together in the interests of all children. This is achieved using the lens of the Bio-ecological Framework, to identify important factors under the banners of 'process', 'person', 'context' and 'time', while acknowledging the complex and mutually influencing nature of all four.

# Chapter 4: Methodology

## 4.1 Introduction

This research used qualitative methologies within a Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) (Bronfenbrenner, 1995) model to examine educational transition from the perspectives of parents, children, teachers and community workers associated with a case study primary school in Ireland, as well as its three 'feeder' pre-schools and the two secondary schools into which it feeds. Within the case study approach, methods used included interviews, focus groups, observation and text analysis. All participants were involved in educational transition, either from pre-school to primary school, or from primary to secondary school. They were interviewed either individually or in focus groups at two points in time: in May 2012 while they were preparing for transition, and again in October / November 2012 just after the transitions had taken place.

This chapter details the approaches used, including the underlying paradigms directing the research, the ethical considerations associated with it, the sample (both in terms of school and pre-school contexts and the people who took part), the specific methods used and the approach to data analysis employed.

## 4.2 Paradigms underlying educational research

Any exploration of methodology must begin with a deconstruction of the paradigm under which the research takes place. A 'paradigm' is a world-view that provides a lens on the topic being studied, in terms of both ontology (views of reality) and epistemology (views of knowledge). As Guba and Lincoln (1994, p. 105) put it, "Questions of method are secondary to questions of paradigm, which we define as the basic belief system or worldview

that guides the investigator, not only in choices of method but in ontologically and epistemologically fundamental ways". The literature on research methodology and the nature of science largely differentiates between three potential paradigms that may underpin educational research; the positivist paradigm, the interpretive paradigm and the critical paradigm (Blair, 2010).

### 4.2.1 The positivist paradigm.

The positivist paradigm draws on the methods and concepts of the physical sciences in valuing only what is objectively measurable and quantifiable, and in seeking to discover universal principles and 'truths' applicable to all people and situations (Mukherji and Albon, 2015). These methods dominated educational research for many years, as well as research in other disciplines within the field of social sciences such as psychology where, for example, Behaviourism was the dominant approach of the early part of the 20th century (Bartlett and Burton, 2012). However, in what has been described as a classic text (Giangreco and Taylor, 2003), Kuhn (1970) challenged conventional wisdom regarding positivist assumptions of scientific research on a number of basic points:

- Science has emotional and political as well as cognitive elements.
- Scientific knowledge is not objective or neutral.
- All paradigms have unconscious assumptions about reality.
- Language is never neutral.

Traditionally, positivist research has viewed children (and to a lesser extent their parents and teachers) as 'variables' rather than people, emphasising 'outcomes' rather than experiences or processes (Greene and Hill, 2005). However, practices and relationships within schools and pre-schools are of such a complex and diverse nature, that sole focus on

numerical data such as examination results or standardised test scores may provide a restricted reflection of the objects of education (Ó Breacháin and O'Toole, 2013). Walsh, Tobin and Graue (1993) maintain that:

> As researchers we have measured people but we have not listened well to them. We have gone into classrooms and come out with little but numbers, as though the day-to-day interactions of human beings who spend large portions of their waking hours in classrooms could be reduced to computations (p. 465).

While the idea of an 'external' truth existing outside of human experience may work well for researchers in the natural sciences, for social scientists the major flaw is that these 'scientific' approaches tend to disregard the interrelationships of people (Blair, 2010) – the 'processes' that are so key to a Bio-ecological perspective. This is important, because as Brooker (2015) points out, when governments and policy advisors rely on large-scale statistical data for evidence, they often misrepresent some of the less obvious, but perhaps vital, aspects of children's experience.

In fact, it may be that the idea of "the objective researcher is a myth" (Greene and Hill, 2005, p. 8). Silverman (2013) maintains that we can fool ourselves into accepting an illusion of positivist truth that is singular and static, or we can accept that our partial, situated and contextual knowledge is better than none at all. Bronfenbrenner (1995b) explains it thus:

> The ultimate paradox is that the more 'scientific' the study, the less we are likely to discover which human beings are subject to its results… Human beings, like all living creatures, are widely variable in their biopsychological characteristics, and as a result are differentially susceptible to external conditions and forces to which they are exposed throughout their life-time (p. 623).

The Bio-ecological Model is defined by its emphasis on interactions and bi-directional synergies, so it makes no sense to try to 'control' for individual variables as if they work in an isolated fashion in reality (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). Contexts and multiple factors need to be taken into consideration when studying children, not 'controlled

away' to meet positivist requirements. The debate on the nature of 'truth' continues into the present day, largely distilled down to two alternative perspectives, "truth as an objectively discovered answer, and truth as a subjectively created concept" (Blair, 2010, p. 350), but in recent years we have seen a move:

> Away from the binary of either qualitative or quantitative, with its fostering of 'my paradigm is bigger or better than yours' or 'real science' versus that which does not meet scientistic demarcation criteria. The move is, rather, toward a recognition that we all do our work within a crisis of authority and legitimization, proliferation and fragmentation of centers, and blurred genres (Lather, 2006, p. 47).

Nevertheless, increasingly neo-liberal educational politics in many countries, including Ireland (as noted in Chapters 2 and 3), are leading to a turn once again towards a legitimisation only of that which is objectively measurable (Ó Breacháin and O'Toole, 2013) through concepts such as 'evidence-based practice' and 'accountability' (Sahlberg, 2014). This risks a return to the reification of positivist paradigms above all others. Therefore, it is important to explore and defend the validity of approaches outside of positivist traditions, including interpretive and critical paradigms.

### 4.2.2 The interpretivist paradigm.

Mukherji and Albon (2015) define interpretivism as an approach which accepts that 'truth' varies based on the perspectives of those involved and the context in which research is being conducted. They note that interpretive work is more likely to rely on qualitative than quantitative methodologies, although both approaches may potentially be employed within an interpretive paradigm. Interpretive research methods have been used to investigate a range of diverse issues, and such approaches have important contributions to make to educational research (Bogdan and Biklen, 2003). As Greene and Hill (2005) point out, "without some kind of access to the context of a person's experience, we have a very incomplete account, from a scientific perspective, of what it is that causes any person, adult or child, to act as they

do" (p. 2). In interpretive research, behaviour is seen as context-dependent, relying on factors such as perspective, language, place in history, the values of the researcher and the values of the researched (Blair, 2010).

Interpretive methods are ideally suited to providing an understanding of context and how processes actually work (Giangreco and Taylor, 2003), and so are very compatible with a Bio-ecological world-view. Of course, a move away from a positivist perspective does not mean abandoning rigour in research. As Blair (2010, p. 349) points out, "If educational research is to be honest, robust and transferable, it must work within some generally agreed constraints" and while there may be debate regarding the make-up and level of importance of these constraints, any research which asks questions must address issues of reliability, validity and generalisability. Walsh, Tobin and Graue (1993, p. 472) ask the question, "How are rules and standards developed in a hands-off tradition to be applied to work that relies on the interaction between the researcher and the researched, that conceives of knowledge in a completely different way?"

Jacob (1998) answers this question to some extent, indicating there are three important attributes of good interpretive research. Firstly, research should be conducted in a natural setting. Thus, all field work in the current doctoral research was conducted within schools and pre-schools involved in the process of educational transition, or with parents whose children were involved in transition processes. Secondly, there should be an emphasis on understanding participants' perspectives, hence the use of qualitative interview-based methods which focused on experiences and personal meaning as well as objective contextual factors. Finally, questions and methods should evolve in the process of field work, emphasising the importance of working with participants both before and after transition.

In general, interpretive research does not attempt ‘generalisability’, but rather deep understanding of educational processes (Silverman, 2013). If enough description is available some application of results to other settings, or ‘transferability’, may be possible (Lagenbach, Vaughn, and Agaard, 1994), and readers of research can draw similarities between a study and their own social and educational contexts (Troudi, 2010). It may be that interpretive research does not so much prove anything, or provide ultimate truth, as reduce uncertainty through investigation of context and perspectives. The current doctoral research goes beyond an interpretive approach, however, in that it not only emphasises the importance of accessing the ‘internal frame of reference’ (Rogers, 1995) of its participants, it also engages with the social, cultural, political, relational and temporal contexts in which these perspectives are developed. It is rooted in an awareness of balances of power and social justice. This leads to a consideration of the critical paradigm.

### 4.2.3 The critical paradigm.

Grierson (2003) refers to critical approaches as those addressing “the cultural, social, economic and political practices which throw light on the ways power relations may be constituted, reproduced, or resisted as part of the social” (p. 3). Greenback (2003) identifies the complex interaction of the researcher’s moral, competency, personal and social value, maintaining that we should reject claims that research is able to uncover the ‘truth’ by adopting a value-neutral approach. As such, critical approaches to research are similar to interpretive approaches in that they reject all claims of objective ‘truth’, but the difference lies in how ‘truth’ is seen to be constructed.

Research within the critical paradigm views reality as constructed on the basis of issues of power, and ‘truth’ as a system of socio-political power (Lather, 2006). Mukherji and

Albon (2015) give the examples of anti-disablist research, 'queer' theory, critical race theory and feminism as frameworks within which critical research can be located. The critical paradigm argues that traditionally, the 'experts know best' mentality has been used by schools and organisations to discount the experiences and perspectives of those being researched: children and their families and teachers (Giangreco and Taylor, 2003). However, critical research methodologies focus on the subjective experiences, perspectives and views of those who have traditionally been the 'subjects' of research within a socio-political context (Giangreco and Taylor, 2003; Pellegrini and Bjorklund, 1998). Research located in the critical paradigm "hopefully helps us to better understand our world so that we can strive to improve it" (Giangreco and Taylor, 2003, p.134).

Important to a critical perspective is the idea that the researcher him or herself is a key part of the human equation making up the research situation (Mukherji and Albon, 2015). All research is rooted in the perspective of the researcher in socio-political, gendered, cultural and linguistic terms, and perhaps this is inevitable. As Gergen (1973, p. 312) puts it, "Perhaps our best option is to maintain as much sensitivity as possible to our biases and to communicate them as openly as possible. Value commitments may be unavoidable, but we can avoid masquerading them as objective reflections of truth". Bourdieu (1990b) refers to this as taking two steps back from the research process – the first is the step back to gain an overall understanding of circumstances, and the second is the step back from ourselves to gain an understanding of our part in the developing social situation.

If Margetts (2003, p. 5) believes that, "Children bring more to school than their backpacks", then it is equally true that 'researchers bring more to the research than their recording devices'! This is often viewed in the literature as problematic; the researcher's own

ethnography may interfere with their understanding of that of the participants, but involvement of the researcher as a real person need not have a negative impact on engagement with participants, and can in fact be beneficial in the right circumstances. As Rogers (1995) points out in the context of therapy and teaching, a genuine connection between congruent human beings can be very powerful indeed, and Connolly (2008) indicates that the research process is dependent on the relationships developed between the researcher and the research participants.

For example, in the current doctoral research, my status as a mother of two small children, one of whom would be making the transition from pre-school to primary school in the academic year after data collection was completed, was extremely conducive to the development of interpersonal connections with participants. Research was conducted with Hill's (2005, p. 63) emphasis on the interpersonal style of the researcher in mind: "researchers can seek to minimise the authority image they convey, for instance, by using informal language or sitting in a position and at a level comfortable for the child". In particular when conducting the focus groups with three, four and five-year-old children, my experience with my own four-year-old led to an ability to engage with and draw out interesting 'nuggets' of information from young children that may have been difficult for many researchers without such experience. For this reason, Barbour (2004, p. 1) refers to moderating focus groups as a "craft skill" influenced by the individual researcher.

Regarding power-relations, children in the current research were also given the position of 'expert' by asking them what advice they would give to my daughter on starting school, and what were the things they felt she should know about 'big school'. Brooker (2008) indicates that approaches such as asking children's advice can support a reversal of

the usual adult-child power relation. Equally, engagement with parents was facilitated by genuine interaction as a fellow parent with worries, concerns, joys and flaws of her own as a mother. This is important with regards to a balance of power relations between researcher and researched as required through the lens of a critical paradigm. Seeking the advice of parents on how to manage the future transition to be experienced by my daughter also put them in the position of being the 'expert' in the relationship.

On the other hand, the perspectives of teachers and twelve and thirteen-year-old children were less readily accessible to me, and their interviews and focus groups were more challenging. In particular, my position as a Lecturer in a College of Education in Ireland was a factor for consideration regarding teachers' perceptions of power differentials, requiring reliance on the skills of open-ended, non-directive questioning and probing within Rogers' (1995) framework of 'congruence', 'empathy' and 'unconditional positive regard' described in Chapter 2. This engagement with real-world problems and the lives of real people is key to a critical paradigm and is also a core aim of the Bio-ecological perspective as delineated by Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006).

### 4.3 The Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) approach

According to Bronfenbrenner's (1995) Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) model, in order to understand the complexity of a child's life, we must consider each of these factors and the complex ways in which they interact – the 'person' him or herself, the relationships and interactions ('process') he or she experiences, the 'context' in which these interactions take place, and the 'time' at which they take place both personally and socio-culturally. A potential criticism of Bronfenbrenner's work is that in spite of developing this impressive research design, and advocating the confrontation of theory with real-life data with a view to

both illuminating real-world phenomena and interrogating elements of the theory, much of his own writing remains largely theoretical. For example, the seminal Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) chapter interrogates the findings of other research studies through the lens of PPCT rather than developing a large scale study to explicitly test it. While the current work is not large-scale, and in fact relies on a case study approach, it aims to do what Bronfenbrenner did not – design a research project directed by PPCT to elucidate the topic of study, in this case educational transition, and in turn critically analyse the Bio-ecological Framework through confrontation with the data. The PPCT model has directed the design of the current research throughout, from provision of a structure for critical analysis of the literature on parental involvement and educational transition, to construction of the research instruments, to presentation of findings, to understandings and recommendations developed.

Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) indicated that at time of writing there was a gap in the literature regarding the developmental effects of dynamic 'person' characteristics on 'proximal processes' and their outcomes. It could be argued that this gap still exists, and the current research addresses this to some extent by examining the influence of factors like gender, disability, socio-economic background, personal skills and dispositions, etc, on experiences of educational transition. It also examines 'context' factors related to the specific schools and pre-schools involved, such as the supports provided to both parents and children during educational transition, as well as issues related to 'time' such as school-entry age and contemporary policy thrusts. However, in keeping with the most recent iteration of the Bio-ecological Model, and the synthesis of theory involved in the Bio-ecological Framework developed in Chapter 2, the current research design places most emphasis on 'processes' between the participants involved, and how these are key to experiences and outcomes.

### 4.3.1 Paradigms underpinning PPCT.

Criticism of positivist models is strongly evident within a Bio-ecological Framework, and so PPCT does not fit well within a positivist paradigm. Bronfenbrenner (1979, p. viii) states that "We are faced with the paradox of a successful science that tells us precious little about the concerns that beckon us to it" and "very few of the external influences significantly affecting human behaviour and development can be described solely in objective physical conditions and events" (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006, p. 797). Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998) identify the problem that the statistical models most widely used for the purpose of hypothesis-testing are quite often ill-suited to the task of understanding eco-systemic influences, particularly for developmental investigations. They indicate that positivist, statistically controlled research designs allow only for linear relationships among factors under investigation, whereas in ecological research, "the principal main effects are likely to be interactions" (Bronfenbrenner 1979, p. 38). As such, Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) indicate that research based on the Bio-ecological Model is more likely to be generative rather than confirmatory-versus-disconfirming as required by a positivist paradigm.

Clearly Bio-ecological research generally, and the current research specifically, do not fit within a positivist paradigm. However, it is difficult to find an "ontological and epistemological home" (Lather, 2006, p. 40) for the PPCT model solely within either an interpretive or a critical paradigm and in fact it would appear to draw on both. In Lather's terms, PPCT says "yes to the messiness, to that which interrupts and exceeds versus tidy categories" (p. 48). The 'context' and 'time' elements of the model resonate strongly with the interpretive emphasis on contextual factors and the understanding that few generalisations can be made from one situation or time to another (Pellegrini and Bjorklund, 1998). Equally,

the ‘person’ element tends to be clearly represented in an interpretive world view, through its emphasis on the ‘internal frame of reference’ (Rogers, 1995) of participants, and the meaning that they create within a given set of circumstances.

However, while earlier versions of the model (Brofenbrenner, 1979) were more focussed on ‘context’ and so were more interpretive, later versions (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006) have focussed more on relationships and so power differentials become a critical factor. Engagement with the impact of various ‘person’ factors (such as age, race, disability, gender) on individual experiences also brings with it a dawning awareness of the socio-political implications of these varying experiences, thus leading the way to a more critical paradigm. The ‘process’ element of the model clearly acknowledges the important consequences of power differentials on formation of relationships, for example those between parents and educational professionals (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011), leading to consideration of issues of social justice and potential social change over socio-historical ‘time’, again locating a PPCT approach firmly within a critical paradigm.

Therefore, the current research through its employment of PPCT research design, finds itself influenced and directed by both an interpretive and a critical worldview. This is interesting since developmental approaches have often been critiqued through the critical paradgimatic lens (Burman, 2008). The current research argues that rather than binary categories, synthesis of paradigms and theories is important for educational research (O’Toole and Hayes, 2015). This acknowledgement that real-life research often spans traditional borders of paradigms is in keeping with the work of Lather (2006, p. 36), who contests Kuhn’s (1970) framework for its linearity. She encourages researchers to “trouble tidy binaries”, and recognise “the slides of inside and outside that so characterize the

contemporary hybridity of positionalities and consequent knowledge forms", because "linear, structural models reduce and 'tame the wild profusion of existing things' (Foucault, 1970, p. xv). Dualistic categories are represented as pure breaks rather than as unstable oppositions that shift and collapse both within and between categories" (Lather, 2006, p. 36).

In interpretive terms, this research examines contextual factors influencing the potentially crucial impact of educational transition, and it does so by accessing the perspectives and experiences of those involved, children, teachers, parents and community workers. Within the critical paradigm, the research explores the influence of factors such as age, language, culture, religion, gender and (dis)ability on those experiences. It also deconstructs 'processes' or relationships between schools and families through exploration of potential barriers to those relationships posed by power-related structures such as socio-economics. Thus, it is underpinned by a strong ethic of social justice and provision of space for the voices of participants. The paradigm underpinning PPCT and the current doctoral research may therefore represent the 'shaky middle' between paradigms advocated by Spivak (1999, p.29) within the 'constellation of discourses' that Lather (2006 p. 42) suggests for educational research. This illuminates the power of the Bio-ecological Framework, operating to not only synthesise theory as suggested by Tzuo et al. (2011), but to even synthesise the paradigms underlying theory. Equally, working within a Framework with such awareness of issues of power and perspective leads to thorough consideration of research ethics.

## 4.4 Ethical considerations

Any research with human respondents requires a thorough consideration of ethics. Leedy (1997, p. 116) provides a concise treatise on this subject:

> The principles of ethical propriety… resolve into simple considerations of fairness, honesty, openness of intent, disclosure of methods, the ends for which the research is

> executed, a respect for the integrity of the individual, the obligation of the researcher to guarantee unequivocally individual privacy, and an informed willingness on the part of the subject to participate voluntarily in the research activity. Certainly no person should be asked to cooperate in any research that might result in a sense of self-denigration, embarrassment or a violation of ethical or moral standards or principles.

Ethical consideration was given in the current research to many aspects of academic convention and of engagement with research participants. Such consideration included maintenance of anonymity of participants, secure storage of taped materials, avoidance of plagiarism, and acknowledging support and help from various sources. However, the central ethical problem in this, as in most classroom-based research, centres on differences in world view, concerns, communication and power in our society and between academics and the people they study (Super and Harkness, 1986) within both interpretive and critical paradigms.

Ethical considerations are particularly relevant to research on children's subjective experiences in natural contexts (Hill, 2005; Mukherji and Albon, 2015; Smith, 2011). Traditionally, developmentally-based research may have devalued and patronised children while also minimising the impact of sociocultural factors (Grieshaber, 2008; Rogoff, 2003), but even very young children have the right and the ability to articulate their opinions and give insights into their lived experiences (Smith, 2011). In fact, it may be that difficulties in accessing children's perspectives that were previously attributed to children's capacities for understanding are in fact more realistically attributable to adults' failure to adapt to children's perspectives (Donaldson, 1978; Hill, 2005).

As appropriate within the Bio-ecological Framework, this study recognises children as active agents in their own world, and competent participants in the research process. As Greene and Hill (2005) point out, this conception of the role and status of children has ethical

implications because, simply, it recognises the 'personhood' of children. According to Christensen and Prout (2005), for research this necessitates new conceptual understandings, viewing children as autonomous social actors who influence their social circumstances as well as being influenced by them. Green and Hill (2005), however, identify schools as one area where children often have "little or no voice", and recommend giving children input into school-systems. The current research seeks the views of children at each educational stage, pre-school, primary school and secondary school. Like Christenson and Prout (2005), it argues for a perspective on childhood emphasising the current value of children's lives, experiences and relationships, rather than seeing them solely as potential adults and focusing on future outcomes. As Thorne (1987) states, children should be "the direct focus of analysis, rather than necessarily being seen through their link to other social institutions such as family and schooling" (p. 47).

For example, it may be that increased parental involvement in education has inadvertently led to a decline of participation of children in school governance through a process of 'familialisation' whereby children are increasingly seen as dependent on and contained within their families (Christenson and Prout, 2005). Certainly, as Hill (2005) points out, adult perceptions of what children think, do or need may differ substantially from what children themselves say. A Bio-ecological perspective emphasises the child in context, with both child and context viewed as equally important in understanding experience.

In spite of this increasing emphasis on children's right to 'voice' in theory and research (largely stemming from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989), in every-day life the experience of children may be as subordinate to adults, particularly in educational settings, and children may find it difficult to disagree or express an

opinion other than that they think an adult wishes to hear (Greene and Hill, 2005; Hill, 2005). Child protection concerns in the context of the current doctoral research meant that consent for working with children at pre-school and primary school level was granted contingent on the presence of a teacher in the room at the time of interviews. While this was of course a valid stipulation on behalf of schools and parents, it could perhaps have limited the ability of children to express dissent, representing a potential limitation of the current work. Certainly, many children are unaccustomed to being asked their views or they may feel that their views are often disregarded by adults (Hill, 2005; Smith, 2011), and young children in particular may be vulnerable within research processes as a result (Mukherji and Albon, 2015).

Thus, while the ethical underpinnings of the current research direct a view of children as autonomous and capable of self-expression, it is important to acknowledge the differences between adults, young adolescents and children participating in research in terms of ability and power (Hill, 2005; Smith, 2011) within a critical paradigm. Eliciting the experiences and perceptions of children presents methodological and ethical concerns distinct from those to be considered when working with adults (Greene and Hogan, 2005). Greene and Hill (2005, p. 8) draw on the work of Hogan, Etz and Tudge (1999) in asking the question "How can information be obtained from children in developmentally appropriate ways?" This is an important consideration in the current work, because as recognised by Bronfenbrenner's concept of the chrono-system, the capacities and needs of children in pre-school, junior infants, sixth class and first year are likely to change significantly. This presents quite a challenge to a researcher whose ethical framework identifies children as active agents capable of expressing their experiences and ideas (O'Kane and Hayes, 2006). While infants, young children and teenagers cannot be treated identically in developmental terms, research instruments must both avoid underestimating or undervaluing children's contributions

(Greene and Hill, 2005) and ensure that power differentials and vulnerabilities are not overlooked (Smith, 2011).

This resonates with Lahman's (2008, p. 285) description of the "competent yet vulnerable child", deconstructed by Mukherji and Albon (2015) to highlight the potential of seeing children as partners in research while also maintaining awareness of the ethical requirement to protect them where necessary. As Smith (2011) points out, ethical research with children must take account of both their participation and protection rights. Differences in the verbal competence and capacity to understand and express abstract ideas and systematic interactions (Hill, 2005) are recognised in the current work, and reflected in the forms of engagement and analysis of data generated by younger and older children. Ethically speaking, it is vital that children are not pressurised into taking part in studies they do not fully understand, since they may be vulnerable to persuasion, adverse influence and even harm in the conduct of research (Hill, 2005). In theoretical terms, this means that Socio-cultural idealism is somewhat tempered by a Developmental awareness that children and their capacities do indeed change over time. The view of children underpinning the current research resonates with the work of Tzuo et al. (2011) in terms of integrating developmentally appropriate practice (DAP), child-centredness, reconceptualism and post-structuralism – engagement with children at their current level of capacity in developmental terms, and awareness of power differentials and potential vulnerability, does not negate understanding of individual and cultural diversity nor of the agency of children.

In fact, an understanding of diversity and the key role it plays in individual experiences is also core to the underlying ethical perspective of this work. As extensively deconstructed in Chapters 2 and 3, children, and indeed their parents and teachers, are not all

the same; as Frønes (1993, p. 1) puts it, "there is not one childhood, but many, formed at the intersection of different cultural, social and economic systems, natural and man-made physical environments. Different positions in society produce different experiences". Recognition of this fact is important in ethical as well as theoretical terms, because when researchers and educationalists insist on viewing all children, parents, teachers and schools as the same or similar, and educational interventions are designed based on this flawed perception, we run the risk of inadvertently reproducing the very inequalities we aim to address (O'Toole, 2011). As Hill (2005) points out, diversity has ethical as well as methodological concerns because sampling and method choices may exclude the viewpoints of certain groups. This ethical concern underlies the choice of a case study school in an area of ethnic, linguistic and socio-economic diversity, extensive efforts to ensure diversity of participants (described below) and the incorporation of questions around this diversity into interviews and focus groups.

As such, the ethical underpinnings of this research view the child as both autonomous and enmeshed in the culture, circumstances and time being studied, and this is the ultimate conclusion of Christenson and Prout's (p. 50) analysis also: "Individual development thus becomes embedded in children's collective weaving of their places in the webs of significance that constitute their culture. The social study of children and childhood must, therefore, acknowledge the interplay between adults' and children's perspectives". Therefore, the current research also extends the participative approach to include the voices of teachers, parents and community workers. All participants are viewed as partners in this project.

The issue of 'informed consent' is an important ethical consideration in this work (see Harcourt and Conroy, 2011). With adults, this involves, for example, taking account of

literacy issues through use of 'plain-language' materials (www.nala.ie), and emphasising the right to withdraw from the research at any point. The idea of consent becomes even more complex with children, because 'informed consent' requires that participants understand the purposes of the research, what precisely they are being asked to do (for example how long an interview will take), anonymity, their right to withdraw , how the data will be stored and what it will be used for (Mukherji and Albon, 2015).

Informed consent by children, adolescents and adults in this project was sought through language adapted to the linguistic understandings of each group of participants, including checks and repetition (Brodzinsky, Singer and Braff, 1984). Written consent was sought from parents and older children, whereas younger children were given the opportunity to verbally augment or rescind the written consent that parents had given on their behalves (commonly known as 'assent'). Consent was also negotiated on a 'moment-to-moment basis' (Mukhaji and Albon, 2015), particularly in the case of young children – any children who showed behavioural indications of discomfort with the process such as turning away, being quiet or refusing to take part in discussion were allowed to disengage with a minimum of fuss. This research recognises the rights of both children and adults to be informed about the nature, intentions and purpose of the research, to feel confident that the study is worthwhile, and to feel respected as they participate (Hill, 2005).

In summary, the ethical concerns of the current research move beyond traditional issues of anonymity, recognition of sources, etc, to a socio-political consideration of power balances and representation of a diverse range of people and backgrounds. The research was approved by the Dublin Institute of Technology Research Ethics Committee.

## 4.5 Sample

### 4.5.1 School and pre-school contexts.

Much of the literature on educational transition emphasises the importance of considering school and pre-school contexts (Margetts and Kienig, 2013). Due to the Bio-ecological nature of the current doctoral research, much of the data collection focussed on identification and analysis of 'contextual' factors that interact with 'process', 'person' and 'time' factors to influence experiences of transition. Therefore, detailed contextual information is provided in Chapter 5 (Data Analysis and Discussion), located within its relevance to both the literature and the experiences of participants. Nevertheless, it is appropriate at this juncture to provide some information on the school and pre-school contexts in which the research took place.

The current research was conducted in a case study primary school in Ireland, the three pre-schools that feed into it, and the two secondary schools into which it feeds. According to Mukherji and Albon (2011), case studies can be conducted with a single child, a group of children, an early years setting, or even a specific community, but they are generally undertaken in naturalistic settings and give information on relationships and processes. They are not generalisable, but generalisability is not a requirement of research outside of the positivist tradition, and case studies still represent "the bedrock of scientific investigation" (Mukherji and Albon, 2011, p. 82). The case study primary school was identified through advice from an expert source[13] whose extensive knowledge of and contact with primary schools throughout Ireland allowed selection of a school to meet certain criteria, facilitating examination of key issues raised in the literature on educational transition and in the Bio-ecological Framework. These criteria included:

[13] The case study primary school was identified with the kind support of Dr Patricia Slevin, Director of School Placement in Marino Institute of Education, an Associated College of Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland, and I am very grateful for her help and support. She has given her permission to be named.

- A mixed-gender school
- A 'vertical' school serving children from junior infants to sixth class (so that both transitions could be studied)
- A school serving a diverse population of children and parents, culturally, linguistically and socio-economically.
- A school with a willing and dynamic principal and staff team with an interest in both educational transition and parental involvement in education generally.

Pre-schools and secondary schools to be studied were then identified by the principal of the case study primary school, as those to which and from which their students transfer. As noted by O'Kane and Hayes (2006), pre-school provision is highly variable in Ireland, and this was evident in the three pre-schools in question. Pre-school 1 was a Montessori-based pre-school located in a purpose-built annex to a community sports complex. It had grown organically, and at the time of data collection comprised a relatively large service incorporating both pre-school and day-care services, with some full-time, some part-time and some sessional ('drop-in') attendees. Pre-school 2 was located in the pre-school teacher's home, and provided pre-school provision only (not day-care) structured around Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework. Pre-school 3 was located in a purpose-built annex attached to the home of the pre-school teacher. Like Pre-school 1, it also provided both day-care and pre-school services, although provision was less structured, identifying itself as a 'play-school' and not relying on Aistear, Montessori or any other external framework. All pre-schools were participants in the Free Pre-school Year.

The primary school was designated disadvantaged (DEIS Band 2), under Catholic patronage (as consistent with the denominational, predominantly Catholic nature of Irish

primary education), and located in a well-established, vibrant and diverse neighbourhood in a suburb of a large city. It provided primary education to both boys and girls from junior infants through to sixth class, and it had evolved and developed since it opened in the 1970's:

> It wasn't always DEIS. It would have been based on the number of people in public authority housing, and originally there wasn't that many, they were all privately owned around here, except for a few. Circumstances have changed with more estates being built over the intervening 34 years (Sixth class teacher).

Many parents who participated in the research had attended the school themselves, and this was also so for the two case-study secondary schools. Both secondary schools were single-sex, with most of the girls from the primary school going to one, and most of the boys going to the other. This illustrates the gendered nature of the Irish educational system. Both secondary schools were large schools serving children from the wider area, leading to a mixed cohort socio-economically and ethnically. In fact the published 'aims' and 'school ethos' of both schools refer to support for individual cultural, spiritual, religious and linguistic needs of students, as well as particular concern for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. They were both also under Catholic patronage, and according to many participants, were considered within the area to be the two more 'academic' schools with an emphasis on acting as 'feeder schools' to the universities (Girls' Secondary School Parents' Handbook). Both schools also emphasised the importance of the physical space in which children learn, with the girls' secondary school located in a purpose-built school building which was designed to provide optimal space for learning with regards to colour scheme and layout, and the boys' school incorporating outdoor space and nature.

### 4.5.2 Participants.

As with many qualitative approaches, identification of participants in this research was not randomised, but rather was chosen to meet a number of pre-specified criteria. Non-

randomised, purposive selection of participants is common in research outside of the positivist tradition (Barbour, 2008). Selection of participants in this research required the identification of children, parents and teachers involved in processes of educational transition, either from pre-school to primary school or from primary to secondary school. Participants (n=163) included:

- Principals of the primary school (n=1) and secondary schools (n=2)
- Teachers involved in transition: pre-school[14] (n=3); primary (n=9) secondary (n=9)
- Children involved in educational transition; pre-school to primary school (n=44), and primary school to secondary school (n=52)
- Parents of children involved in educational transition; pre-school to primary school (n=25 parents and 1 grandparent), and primary school to secondary school (n=13 parents and 1 grandparent)
- Community-based staff (n=3)

A variety of approaches were used to gain access to the participants who agreed to take part. Initially, once the case study schools and pre-schools were identified, all relevant teachers were invited to take part in the research, with permission and support from the Boards of Management, principals and pre-school owners. As such, in ethical terms, Boards of Management, principals and pre-school owners acted as 'gate-keepers' regarding access to participants. Explanatory letters and consent forms were given to all children involved in transition to bring home to their families. Younger children were given letters addressed to their parents (although as previously noted they were given the opportunity to verbally confirm or rescind permission given by their parents later), and older children were given two letters, one addressed to their parents and one addressed directly to children themselves.

[14] Note: All pre-school teachers were also the managers of their service.

Consent was sought from parents for their children to take part in the research, and parents were asked to include their own contact details if they were interested in taking part in the research themselves. In order to increase the likelihood of participation, parents were offered a choice of telephone interview, individual face-to-face interview, or participation in a focus group[15]. Contact was initially made with those who provided details by text message seeking a convenient time to speak, and arrangements were then made for interviews to take place.

This initial cohort of participants in the parent group, as predicted by Hornby and Lafaele (2011), largely fit the profile of those who traditionally engage in educational research – white, middle-class women, born in this country – and support was sought from 'gate-keepers', particularly the Home-School-Community-Liaison (HSCL) and Intercultural teachers, and the coordinator of the local Intercultural Centre to broaden that base, as recommended by Barbour (2008). One of the more successful initiatives in this was conducted by the HSCL teacher of the primary school who approached the participants of the parents' classes in the school, particularly the English language classes, in order to access the views of parents who were not Irish, and a focus group was arranged at a time convenient to them. The Intercultural teacher of the girls' secondary school also suggested making contact with the local Intercultural Centre, and with their help, another focus group was arranged through their Women's Group. With regards to gender balance, all female parents who took part were asked whether their partners (where relevant) would be interested in participating, and in one case both a child's mother and father contributed to the research. This is known as 'snow-balling' (Mukherji and Albon, 2011). Finally, participants included three further community-based personnel working in relevant areas.

[15] See Appendix 4 for copies of all letters to participants.

All of the teachers, pre-school teachers and principals who took part were Irish, and this was representative of the staff profile in these schools and pre-schools, reinforcing the points made by Donnelly (2011) regarding uniculturalism in Irish education. One of the principals, one of the primary school teachers and two of the secondary school teachers were male and all other educational staff (n=20) were female, a gender balance also representative of the Irish educational system as a whole (McDonagh and O'Toole, 2011). Contributing children and parents were a more ethnically diverse group, with nationalities represented including Irish, Nigerian, Vietnamese, Thai, South African, Lithuanian, Latvian, Polish, Romanian, Russian, Italian, Dutch and Phillipino. At pre-school level, nine girls and eleven boys took part; junior infants comprised ten girls and fourteen boys; there were seven sixth class girls and six sixth class boys; and at first year level twenty girls and nineteen boys took part. However, for parents the gender balance was far more skewed, similar to the teachers cohort, with only three fathers (two at primary level and one at secondary level) and one grandfather (at primary level) taking part. This bias in favour of a mother's perspective is consistent with the literature (Hart, 2011). This is in spite of extensive efforts to ensure gender balance including flexibility in timing and format of interviews (as recommended by Hart) and seeking support in recruiting fathers from both school staff and participant mothers.

In summary, participants in this research were children, parents, teachers and community workers involved in the process of educational transition from pre-school to primary school and primary to secondary school. Extensive efforts were made to ensure diversity of the sample, largely successfully, although the unicultural and feminised nature of the Irish educational system led to a representative group of participants in the educational staff cohort, and the parent group was also significantly skewed on gender grounds.

## 4.6 Research instruments

According to Mukherji and Albon (2011), a case study is not a method, but rather an approach within which a variety of data collection methods can be used. The data generated within this research was drawn from focus groups and interviews (telephone or face-to-face) as well as observation of settings and analysis of relevant artefacts such as documents and web-sites. These are well-established methods, often used within a case study approach (Mukherji and Albon, 2011) as well as within other qualitative methodologies (Patton, 2005). Participants were interviewed either individually or in focus groups at two points in time: in May 2012 while they were preparing for educational transition, and again in October / November 2012 just after the transitions had taken place.

In advance of conducting the interviews and focus groups, a semi-structured 'topic guide' (Barbour, 2008) was developed, drawing on the literature on educational transition to identify themes that may be experientially important for participants. According to Barbour (2008), this preparation is vital to get the most out of qualitative methods, and it particularly bears fruit on analysis of data, facilitating an interrogation and contextualisation of data rather than simply plucking out random themes from statements by participants. As recommended by Barbour (2008), the topic guides were piloted within my own social circle to identify any flaws or potential misunderstandings. Pilot interviews were held with my own daughter to access the perspective of a young child transitioning from pre-school to primary, with my cousin's daughter who was in first year, in order to access the perspective of a student moving from primary to secondary school, with two colleagues (Teacher Educators) with experience of teaching both junior infants and sixth class, and finally with two friends and my sister-in-law who, like me, were parents of children preparing for transition. The topic guides

were adapted based on these pilot interviews, and the final versions can be found in Appendix 5. Table 1 shows the themes within them.

All topic guides began with general 'ice-breaker' questions about participants (e. g. "tell me about the school") to ease them into the interview process, as recommended by Barbour (2008) and Mukherji and Albon (2011). While these topic guides were used to support participants in their explorations of educational transition and parental involvement in both the interviews and focus groups, this research was also guided by partipicants in identifying important topics for discussion. This approach is advocated by Barbour (2008) and Silverman (2013) who indicate that topic guides should be 'semi-structured', allowing participants to reflect upon issues relevant to them. Permission was sought from all

Table 1:

| *Guiding themes from the literature for semi-structured interview schedules* |
| --- |
| • Academics<br>• Choice of school<br>• Communication<br>• Culture<br>• Curriculum<br>• Demographics<br>• Discipline<br>• Family dynamics<br>• Gender<br>• Language<br>• Parents<br>• School-based supports<br>• School context<br>• School-starting age<br>• Skills and dispositions<br>• Transition<br>• Training |

participants to digitally audio-record interviews and focus groups, and all but one participant agreed. That participant allowed notes to be taken during her interview. All recordings were transcribed in full to support analysis of data. The choice of whether to use focus groups or individual interviews with specific participants was made based on a number of factors, including ethics and the preferences of participants.

### 4.6.1 Focus groups.

According to Barbour (2008) it is ethically appropriate to use focus groups in situations where respondents might find one-to-one interviews intimidating or where there are balance-of-power issues at stake. She particularly identifies children as a group for whom these approaches are appropriate. Focus groups were used with all children in the current research, due to both ethical and methodological concerns. Allowing children to discuss their experiences in groups allays some child protection concerns, and may also allow children to feel more comfortable expressing their views with the support of their friends (Mukherji and Albon, 2011). Among the benefits of using focus groups with children identified by Lancaster and Broadbent (2003) are new meanings and ideas generated through interaction, development of confidence and empowerment since children are positioned as experts, access to insights on shared understandings of children, and the fact that many children (including all those in this sample) are familiar with these types of approaches through experiences of 'circle time'.

Of course, children might find it difficult to express views opposing those of their colleagues, particularly during adolescence, a time of life geared towards conformity within the 'community of children' (Herbert, 2008), and certainly the sixth class participants were somewhat reticent in their contributions. This is identified by Barbour (2008) as a potential

limitation of focus groups in general, as there is always the danger of participants telling researchers what they want to hear, or simply conforming to the group norm. As such it is important for the researcher to establish a non-evaluative, non-threatening environment where participants feel free to express themselves, to emphasise that there are no 'right' or 'wrong' answers, that the research is seeking their opinions and experiences, and it is okay for participants to disagree with each other (Stewart and Shamdasani, 2014).

These were important concerns for all focus groups, and as well as children, focus groups were conducted with some parents and teachers based on their preferences. Interestingly, both of the parent focus groups (one in the primary school and one in the local Intercultural Centre) comprised parents from more culturally diverse backgrounds, and took place with the support of 'gate-keepers' (the HSCL teacher and the Coordinator of the Intercultural Centre). Barbour (2008) notes cross-cultural research and research with 'reluctant' or potentially vulnerable participants as an appropriate location for focus group methods, in order to avoid intimidation and increase confidence through a 'strength-in-numbers' approach. Callaghan (2005) uses the terminology of Bourdieu to indicate that in this way, focus groups can access not only individual habitus', but also the habitus' of the wider community.

Primary school teachers at both junior infant and sixth class level chose to take part in focus groups (two junior infant teacher focus groups and one sixth class teacher focus group). First year teachers in the boys' secondary school also opted to be interviewed in a focus group, whereas pre-school teachers, the HSCL teacher, the three principals and all of the first year teachers in the girls' secondary school felt that individual interviews would suit their schedules better. In all but two focus groups, the advice of Barbour (2008) to include no more

than eight participants and no less than three was heeded. The exceptions to this were the sixth class teachers' focus group in the primary school and the first year teachers' focus group in the boys' secondary school. In both cases, only two participants took part as they were the only teachers available and willing to do so. Table 2 shows the composition of all focus groups.

The style of focus group used in the current research adhered to the approach described by Barbour (2008) as 'focus group discussions', "relying on generating and analyzing interaction between participants, rather than asking the same question (or list of questions) to each group participant in turn" (p. 2). Following Barbour, this was a major advantage of the focus group methodology in the current research, and as she recommends, at times there was little need for me to speak, as participants controlled the flow of discussion, raising relevant topics and sparking thoughts and ideas in each other. As also pointed out by Barbour, the biggest challenge associated with the focus group methodology was logistical, making sure that all participants were available to be in the same place at the same time. This was overcome with children by holding focus groups during school hours and with adults by scheduling them at times when they would be on the premises and available anyway – for parents, just after school drop-off and for teachers during their free-periods.

The language and interaction style between the researcher and the researched was carefully adapted to the needs of participants, and in particular to the developmental needs of the children studied at each level. For example, a researcher conducting focus groups with children of three, four and five years of age needs to manage distractions. The room provided by the primary school in which to conduct the focus groups was in fact a play space, so the

Table 2: Composition of Focus Groups

| *Focus Group* | *Location* | *Participants* | *Male / Female* | *Nationalities* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Focus Group 1 | Pre-school 1 | 8 Pre-schoolers | 4 M / 4 F | Irish, Polish |
| Focus Group 2 | Pre-school 2 | 4 Pre-schoolers | 3 M / 1 F | Irish, Nigerian |
| Focus Group 3 | Pre-school 3 | 8 Pre-schoolers | 4 M / 4 F | Irish, Polish, Nigerian, Lithuanian |
| Focus Group 4 | Primary School | 8 Junior Infants | 4 M / 4 F | Irish (1 Irish-speaking) |
| Focus Group 5 | Primary School | 8 Junior Infants | 5 M / 3 F | Irish, Polish |
| Focus Group 6 | Primary School | 8 Junior Infants | 5 M / 3 F | Irish, Polish, Romanian |
| Focus Group 7 | Primary School | 7 Sixth Class | 4 M / 3 F | Irish, Polish |
| Focus Group 8 | Primary School | 6 Sixth Class | 2 M / 4 F | Irish, Latvian |
| Focus Group 9 | Boys' Secondary School | 5 First Years | 5 M / 0 F | Irish, Polish |
| Focus Group 10 | Boys' Secondary School | 5 First Years | 5 M / 0 F | Irish, Romanian |
| Focus Group 11 | Boys' Secondary School | 5 First Years | 5 M / 0 F | Irish, Dutch, Phillipino |
| Focus Group 12 | Boys' Secondary School | 4 First Years | 4 M / 0 F | Irish |
| Focus Group 13 | Girls' Secondary School | 5 First Years | 0 M / 5 F | Irish, Nigerian, Romanian |
| Focus Group 14 | Girls' Secondary School | 5 First Years | 0 M / 5 F | Irish, Nigerian |
| Focus Group 15 | Girls' Secondary School | 5 First Years | 0 M / 5 F | Irish, Polish |
| Focus Group 16 | Girls' Secondary School | 5 First Years | 0 M / 5 F | Irish, Lithuanian |
| Focus Group 17 | Primary School | 7 Parents, 1 Grandparent | 1 M / 7 F | Irish, Polish, Romanian, |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | South African |
| Focus Group 18 | Intercultural Centre | 2 Parents, 1 Grandparent | 0 M / 3 F | Irish, Vietnamese |
| Focus Group 19 | Primary School | 3 Junior Infant Teachers | 0 M / 3 F | Irish |
| Focus Group 20 | Primary School | 3 Junior Infant Teachers | 0 M / 3 F | Irish |
| Focus Group 21 | Primary School | 2 Sixth Class Teachers | 1 M / 1 F | Irish |
| Focus Group 22 | Boys' Secondary School | 2 First Year Teachers | 2 M / 0 F | Irish |

toys in the room represented a major challenge to children's self-regulatory skills. Therefore, I incorporated them into my questions, asking children to show me the toys and tell me whether they were similar or different to those in pre-school. Equally, the focus groups at both pre-school and junior infant level were interrupted by bathroom breaks on a number of occasions.

In working with small children, a researcher must also develop a high tolerance for topics that appear to be side-tracking, because it is often through discussion of seemingly irrelevant things that children allow one into their world, and once rapport is established the researcher can guide them back to the topic under consideration (Stewart and Shamdasani, 2014). Christenson (2004) also refers to this respect for children's culture of conversation, and both Connolly (2008) and Mayall (2008) have indicated that such informal approaches can provide important insights into children's knowledge and experiences. For example, as well as educational transition, the pre-school and junior infant focus groups touched on topics as diverse as dogs and other pets, favourite toys, a robber in a neighbour's house leading to the police being called, a recently born baby and a brother hiding a sister's toy car. This was also an opportunity to allow children to become comfortable with recording equipment, and I played back their voices to them to show them how it worked and what would be done with it

("to help me remember what you say"). They very much enjoyed listening back to their discussions and identifying who was speaking at any one time. Asking children if they had anything they would like to record about big school facilitated conversation because they seemed to enjoy the recording process.

In describing moderation of focus groups, Barbour (2008) echoes the points made by Hill (2005) regarding the interpersonal style of the researcher. She states (p. 49) that "the researcher's persona does impact on the form and content of data elicited using focus groups, as indeed it does with all other qualitative methods". In order to concretise the discussion as well as build interest and rapport, the children were also shown photographs of my daughter when asking them what advice they would give to her on starting school, and what were the things they felt she should know about 'big school'. Many children showed great interest in 'the girl in the photo', and had lots of questions about her. They also showed great willingness to think about the advice they might have for her. As a result, in spite of some initial shyness on behalf of some participants and a great talent for distraction in many more, overall the young participants in this research supported the notion of children as active agents, very capable of offering insights into their perspectives on the world.

Not only did the children's focus groups provide valuable data for this study, the positivity of experiences of focus groups for some young participants was also noteworthy. This echoes the work of Barbour (2008) and Crabtree, Yanoshik, Miller and O'Connor (1993) who indicate that focus group discussions can be cathartic for participants. One parent described how important the experience of participating in the research had been in her daughter's experience of transition to secondary school:

> She thought it was good to get to talk about it and then listen to other people as well and hear how they found it. She just thought she was in a little vacuum on her own.

> She didn't realise other people were going through the same stuff as her so it was good for her…. I think listening to other people, she wasn't the only one struggling but they weren't talking to each other about it. They didn't want to be the one that was not getting on or was not coping but once she heard that everyone else was... She's great now (Parent of first year girl).

### 4.6.2 Interviews.

Mukheri and Albon (2011) define an interview as "a method where one person asks questions of an individual or group of people with the expectation of getting answers to a particular question or an elaboration of their views on a particular topic" (p. 118). However, for the purposes of the current research, an 'interview' denotes one-to-one interaction as opposed to the focus group interactions explored above. As noted by Barbour (2008), some people are more comfortable with one-to-one interviews than speaking in group settings, and this was the case for many of the parents and teachers in this sample, for both personal and logistical reasons. It may be particularly appropriate to combine interview and focus groups methodologies when practical barriers mean that some participants cannot attend focus groups (Barbour, 2008), and this was relevant to parents in this sample who worked or had other children to take care of that were not in school, and to teachers who had work around their class schedules to support the research.

In accessing the views of adult participants (teachers, parents and community workers), it was felt that maximum flexibility should be provided with regards to format, timing and location in order to facilitate diversity in the sample as advocated by Hart (2011). Flexibility with regard to settings is also recommended by Barbour (2008), who notes that there is no ideal location, and participant preferences should be accommodated where possible. Interviews took place at times that suited participants – day-time, evenings or weekends – and in locations of their choice, including the schools, local cafés, participants' homes and, in one case, a local picnic area. This supports the points made by Barbour (2008)

regarding the appropriateness of locations in which participants feel comfortable. Where preferred, telephone interviews were also used, and the experience of this approach reinforced findings that telephone and face-to-face interviews can be equally effective in qualitative research (Sturges and Hanrahan, 2004), yielding data of similar quality (Carr and Worth, 2001). Mukherji and Albon (2011) suggest that this is because interpersonal engagement is the key to good interviewing, and that can be achieved using the telephone as well as in person.

One potential limitation of interviews is that there is no way to ensure that the information given by participants is 'truthful' (Silverman, 2013). This is the case to some extent with focus groups also, but within a group interview there is the possibility of contradiction from another participant, or of debate, whereas in an interview, the researcher has only the word of one participant (Barbour, 2008). However, this may not be a limitation at all once one moves beyond a positivist paradigm which demands objective facts. In research such as this, located within interpretive and critical paradigms, the descriptions by participants of the world *as they see it* is interesting in itself, whether or not it can be seen as objectively 'true' (Barbour, 2008; Silverman, 2013). Equally, a key advantage of interviews when compared, for example, with questionnaires is that "the interviewer can clarify what the interviewee is trying to say and can investigate areas of interest as they emerge, probing and teasing out strands of thought" (p. 120). Therefore, the topic guides were used for interviews in the same way as for focus groups – as cues to facilitate conversation, but with an open mind and willingness to incorporate issues identified as important by participants (Barbour, 2008; Silverman, 2013). Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes.

### 4.6.3 Observation and text analysis.

The final two methods of data collection, observation and text analysis, were supplementary to the main methods of focus groups and interviews. Traditionally, observation was employed within ethnographical studies, whereby anthropologists immersed themselves in a culture and engaged in extended periods of observations within settings, sometimes for years at a time (Mukherji and Albon, 2011; Silverman, 2013). Such ethnographic observation over a period of time in naturalistic, case-study settings may be particularly appropriate for capturing critical periods in children's experiences, such as transition (Mukherji and Albon, 2011). The observation conducted in the current study does not meet with these ethnographic standards. Instead, using Coolican's (2004) conceptualisation, observation was used *within* the overall research design rather than *as* the overall research design.

Within the case study settings, analysis of contextual factors was conducted, including observation of environments, practical issues and experiences. For example, appointments for interviews and focus groups were made at times that not only suited participants, but enabled observation of key processes during the school day, such as parents dropping children to school or collecting them, and children socialising at lunch time or accessing lockers. All schools and pre-schools also provided tours of their premises, allowing observation of relevant facilities such as parents' rooms and intercultural rooms, evidence of support systems such as the offices of year heads, personal tutors and guidance counsellors, and communication systems, such as parents accessing school offices, and on-line communications systems in use. Field notes were made immediately after all visits to ensure recollection that was as accurate as possible.

Equally, many settings provided relevant documents for analysis, and these included prospectuses for schools and pre-schools, policy documents on transition outlining key supports, parents' handbooks, and discipline policies. According to MacDonald (2008), analysis of documents and texts has a long research history, and is valid as a research method in its own right, as well as in conjunction with other methods. The documents accessed fit the description of 'texts' suitable for analysis in qualitative research provided by Silverman (2013) – relevant "words and images which have become recorded without the intervention of a researcher" (p. 51). There were also many relevant artefacts available on-line, including school websites (although none of the pre-schools had their own website, and so I had to rely on external websites about community resources to access further information on them), information on the services available to the schools through the DEIS scheme (including HSCL and the School Completion Programme), and information related to the community in which the schools and pre-schools were rooted. Such internet-based research is also identified by Silverman (2013) as appropriate within a qualitative approach.

## 4.7 Analysis of data

The data generated in this study were analysed using the NVivo computer programme, which allows codes to be assigned to data segments electronically (QSR International, 2013). According to Ring et al. (2015), the use of NVivo facilitates transparency, because "logging of data movements and coding patterns, and mapping of conceptual categories and thought progression render(s) all stages of the analytical process traceable" (p. 43). Barbour (2008) recommends NVivo for analysis of data drawn from focus groups, and Auld et al. (2007) indicate that NVivo can "enhance the qualitative research process, quickly process queries and expand analytical avenues" (p. 37). However, they note the importance of training, so I completed two full-day training sessions on the use of NVivo

for qualitative data analysis through DIT Training and Development Department in conjunction with the authors of the NVivo programme (QSR International), as well as three individualised interactive on-line sessions tailored to the analysis of my particular data-set directly with a trainer from QSR International.

Coding of data was conducted at five levels. Firstly, open codings were generated from the themes identified in the literature that were used to structure the semi-structured interview topic guides (see Table 1). Within NVivo, extracts from transcripts of interviews and focus groups, along with relevant field notes and sections of relevant documents and internet-based artefacts were allocated to each theme. This initial reading and coding of data led to identification of a number of broad descriptors and themes that had been explored by participants but not predicted ahead of time, and so the second level of coding incorporated these additional themes. Also, the themes of 'language' and 'culture' were synthesised, as they were largely inseparable in the responses of participants. This approach is recommended by Barbour (2008), who indicates that a coding framework should be flexible, and while a topic guide is a good starting point, themes introduced by participants should then be incorporated. The list of codes for the second round of thematic analysis is shown in Table 3.

The third round of coding then located each theme, and the data contained therein, within the Bio-ecological Framework by situating them within the categories of 'process', 'person', 'context' and 'time'. However, an initial attempt to elucidate the data based on these categorisations was unsuccessful, since as predicted by the Bio-ecological Framework, many of the factors interacted with each other or were relevant to more than one category. In fact, this was an ongoing difficulty, and unpicking categories through the lens of PPCT proved very challenging.

Table 3:

| *Guiding themes for round two of coding* |
| --- |
| • Absenteeism<br>• Academics<br>• Bullying<br>• Choice of school<br>• Communication<br>• Community-based supports<br>• Curriculum<br>• Demographics<br>• Disability<br>• Discipline<br>• Family dynamics<br>• Emotional support<br>• Extracurricular activities<br>• Financial costs<br>• Gender<br>• Grandparents<br>• Language and culture<br>• Methodology<br>• Organisational skills<br>• Parents<br>• Play<br>• School-based supports<br>• School context<br>• School-starting age<br>• Social interaction<br>• Socioeconomics<br>• Skills and dispositions<br>• Stress<br>• Training<br>• Transition<br>• Time |

This represents both a strength and a limitation of the Framework, in that while PPCT, and Bio-ecological theory generally, presents the experiences of children, families and schools in their complex interdependence, that very interdependence renders linear narrative difficult if not impossible. To use the metaphor of a ball of string, how can one untangle the string without losing its character as tangled, but if left tangled, how does one elucidate and examine the individual threads? Research on a single factor (for example the effect of gender

on educational transition) through the lens of PPCT would have been clear and concise but would only have given a glimpse of the 'messy' whole. The current research is more ambitious in providing the bigger, multifactorial, synergistic and Bio-ecological picture, and like the Framework, this represents the major limitation as well as the strength of the current work as a whole. The initial drafts of Chapter 5 (Data Analysis and Discussion) were lengthy and repetitive, as coding through PPCT required revisiting themes repeatedly in terms of their various impacts and interactions.

Therefore, the data were revisited for a fourth round of coding, and this mirrors Ring et al.'s (2015) use of writing itself as a tool to prompt deeper thinking about the data leading to additional findings and conclusions. Guided by the most recent iteration of Bio-ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006), this analysis foregrounded 'process'. Data were synthesised to show the impact of 'person', 'context' and 'time' factors on 'processes' for children, parents, teachers, schools and communities. However, even within this approach, there remained some factors that were relevant to the perspectives of all 'processes' and experiences, so that separating them led to false demarcation and stilted flow of logic. Therefore, some of the relevant data were recoded for a fifth and final time, exploring the impact of diversity. The themes within this final round of coding included language, religion and culture, socio-economics, disability and special educational needs (SEN), gender and family structure.

This analysis of 'process' for children, families, teachers, schools and communities, followed by consideration of diversity, provided the format for the theoretical framework and literature review chapters (Chapters 2 and 3), as well as for the next chapter, 'Data Analysis and Discussion' (Chapter 5) which outlines the findings generated, and locates them within

the insights of existing literature on educational transition. This attempt to examine the ‘threads’ while leaving the ‘ball of string’ entangled remains flawed, with some repetition still necessary, but it represents an effort to explicate the factors identified by participants without negating their interaction, and in this way mirrors the Bio-ecological Framework itself.

# Chapter 5: Data Analysis and Discussion

## 5.1 Introduction

This thesis has the dual aims of theorising the findings of research into educational transition from pre-school to primary and primary to secondary school in Ireland using a Bio-ecological Framework, and also in turn testing the key Propositions of the Framework against the real-world data generated. This Chapter addresses the transitions dimension, and mirrors the structure of Chapter 3[16], presenting the findings in terms of processes for children, parents, teachers, schools and communities, followed by a consideration of issues of diversity that may affect all groups. Throughout this chapter, the findings are critically analysed with reference to existing literature on both educational transition and parental involvement. Chapter 6 will explore whether the data supports or negates the key theoretical and conceptual Propositions identified in Chapter 2.

## 5.2 Educational transition from the perspective of children

Transition was clearly an important time in the lives of the children participating in this research. As predicted by the literature (Dockett and Perry, 2007; Mackenzie et al., 2012; Sirsch 2003; Smyth et al., 2004), many children experienced mixed emotions during the process. Three and four-year-old children preparing for transition to primary school described it as 'scary', but also 'happy', and children moving from primary to secondary school spoke about being shy, scared, "excited and kind of nervous" (Sixth class boy), and yet looking forward to new challenges. They noted differences between the two micro-systems. Pre-schoolers were excited by the prospect of getting new uniforms and books, and sixth class children were excited at the idea of changing classes and having new teachers. At the same

[16] See Appendix 3 for a visual representation of the structure of Chapters 3 and 5.

time, some sixth class children indicated that the idea of having lots of new teachers was somewhat intimidating because "you don't know if they are going to be good to you or not" (Sixth class girl).

Some pre-schoolers noted how many different classes there were in primary school, as opposed to one class in pre-school, and junior infants generally felt that primary school was quite 'different' to pre-school (supporting Brooker, 2008), although they found it hard to articulate why. They also found new routines, such as "walking to school" (Junior infant girl), and the fact that "in big school you can't be late" (Pre-school boy) challenging. Similarly, new routines around getting buses to school challenged first years, and also consistent with the literature, many children at both levels experienced the sense of being a 'big fish in a little pond' (Brooker, 2008; Topping, 2011), identifying the shock of going from being one of the biggest children in one school to being one of the smallest in the next: "It feels like you're walking beside giants!" (First year boy);

> When you're in sixth class you want to be a first year because you're bigger but when you come in here it's so different to what it seems like. It seems that you were at the top and then you're just straight back to the bottom (First year girl).

Negotiating the 'hustle and bustle' of the larger context represented challenging experiences, both for small children (O'Kane and Hayes, 2006): "It's really hard when you are in the big yard, because some people are playing games with balls and they kick you in the face sometimes" (Junior infant girl); and for those going into secondary school (Smyth et al., 2004; Topping, 2011): "When we came in you got pushed and shoved but that's because there were so many people there" (First year girl).

In similar findings to those of Mackenzie et al. (2012), Smyth et al. (2004) and Topping (2011), ahead of transition, both pre-schoolers and sixth class children looked

forward to new academic opportunities. Pre-schoolers looked forward to learning how to read: "You can read real books and you don't know how to read here" (Pre-school boy), and sixth class children looked forward to trying out new subjects such as woodwork, metalwork and home economics. They also anticipated exploring familiar subjects such as art and science in more depth, although there were fears about whether subjects like French would be very difficult.

After making the move, in general children felt that they were managing the academic challenges associated with moving contexts. Contrary to the findings of Brooker (2008) in the context of the pre-school/primary school transition, and Mackenzie et al. (2012) and Topping (2011) in the primary/secondary school transition regarding diminishing self-efficacy beliefs, when asked if they were 'good' at school, all children agreed that they were to a greater or lesser extent. Junior infants sometimes complained about the amount of "hard work, like colouring in" (Junior infant girl) they had to do, but largely they were enjoying the new academic challenges. They liked "having singsongs", "doing PE" and "doing our sounds" (Junior infant girls). While some pre-schoolers predicted big changes ahead of the move ("There are no toys in big school… Cos then we will be big" – Pre-school boy), many noted similarities with pre-school once they were in primary school with regards to playing with toys, making jigsaws and painting. On entering first year, the majority of students felt that the academic standards expected of them were reasonable, and while a minority did find the work more challenging (in one case significantly so), many actually found it easier than in sixth class, because often they were reviewing work already done. Many students expressed relief that they were performing well academically: "I always did well in maths, I like maths. I thought as soon as I came here that was all going to change but it didn't" (First year girl).

However, at both transitions, children expressed concerns about homework in the new setting. Many pre-schoolers worried about this ahead of time: "[The worst thing is] homework… when you come home. My brother hates it" (Pre-school boy). One pre-school gave children homework to prepare them for this aspect of primary school, and this was noted by both the children themselves and the pre-school teacher:

> We just give them a little bit of homework, the kids love it. They have big brothers and sisters and they love when they come in on a Monday and are asking 'oh am I getting homework today?' and they feel so big… Some of them are so enthusiastic, they bring it back in the next day and ask for more and you tell them 'ah no we'll give it to you on Monday' (Pre-school teacher).

On entering junior infants, children felt the homework was manageable, and they actually enjoyed it sometimes. Parents of junior infants were also satisfied:

> The homework is fine. She is getting the copy book with the letters that they have learned already, they have a picture to colour and a few little words to spell and draw a picture of and they have nursery rhymes that you have to read with her (Parent of junior infant).

Children in sixth class preparing for the move to secondary school were also worried about increased levels of homework and having to do homework on a Friday which did not happen in primary school. Their fears appeared well-founded, and for first year students this seemed to be a significant area of concern. Many struggled to manage the sheer quantity of homework, and many parents worried about the impact of all the additional homework on their first year children:

> I'd to take her books off her at 11.00 last night and she was sobbing. She said her teacher is going to be so angry today, and she only got the homework yesterday to be done for today. She was still crying going to school this morning (Parent of first year).

Nevertheless, the majority of children at both levels indicated that once they got to their new school everything was more manageable than they thought it would be. This opposes the research of Mackenzie et al. (2012) whose participants reported feeling more

positive prior to transition than they did afterwards. Some parents of junior infants described how their children had found the transition difficult to begin with, with some tears and 'acting out', but most felt that their children had settled in by the time of data collection (October / November, 2012). Equally, while many first year students described how stressful they had found it at the beginning - "On the first week I hated it, I went home every day and cried" (First year girl) - most were finding it easier by the time of data collection. In other words, while children in this sample generally found educational transition challenging for the first days, weeks and sometimes months, the majority very quickly developed coping strategies. Within a couple of months they were enjoying their new schools for the most part, and the vast majority of children indicated that they liked their schools. When junior infants were asked whether 'big school' got a 'thumbs up' or 'thumbs down', twenty two of twenty four gave thumbs up[17] and many first year students, both boys and girls made comments such as "It's a lovely school" (First year girl) and "It's a really good school" (First year boy).

This is important because, consistent with the literature (Brooker, 2008; Dockett and Perry, 2013; Mhic Mhathúna, 2011; O'Kane, 2015), respondents, particularly teachers, saw times of transition as vital to future educational success: "First year is the basis of it all" (First year teacher). In exploring the likelihood of positive outcomes, participants identified a number of key issues. The more recent iterations of the Bio-ecological perspective emphasise the power of relationships ('process') to potentially overcome challenging factors relating to 'person', 'context' or 'time', and this is confirmed by the current research.

[17] For the two children who gave primary school a 'thumbs down', their reasons related to bullying - "Sometimes people are bold and they hit you" and activities - "It's boring, we always have to do colouring".

### 5.2.1 The power of 'process'.

Participants in this research repeatedly echoed Bronfenbrenner's emphasis on the meso-system and the power of 'proximal processes'. In their own words, "There's a great connection between the kids and the teachers and then the teachers and the parents, so you just can't go wrong really" (Parent of junior infant); "Because they all impact, it's like a triangle of influence on the child, and I suppose if we see a problem in one area, it does definitely impact then on the child's education" (HSCL teacher); "The link is made because education happens in the school but it's about going out to the wider community as well so it's the parents, the teachers and the children and the wider community" (Principal primary school); "Life is so complicated and schools are such a social hub as well there is so much going on. All society's changes are reflected in the school. It's just so important that the networks are kept open" (First year teacher). Significant 'processes' identified included relationships between children and their peers, and between children and important adults such as parents and teachers.

#### *5.2.1.1 Children's friendships.*

Consistent with the literature (Brooker, 2008; Dockett and Perry, 2013; Mackenzie et al., 2012; Smyth et al., 2004), children, parents and teachers involved in both transitions identified having friends as one of the most important mediators of difficulties during transition: "He's a good kid, he gets on well, he makes friends easily… that makes life so much easier" (Parent of junior infant). "The settling in process would be facilitated by good communication and social skills" (Sixth class teacher); and making new friends as one of the most important benefits: "[The best thing about big school is] I get to play with my friends" (Junior infant girl). Ahead of transition to primary school, many pre-schoolers talked about which friends would be coming to 'big school' with them, and how they would play with

them when they got there - "Z. and L. and me are all going at the same time… that's good… [we'll] play with each other" (Pre-school boy). The majority of junior infants interviewed said that their favourite thing about big school was playing in the yard with their friends, but some were "sad" that their friends had gone to a different school (Junior infant girl); "I have a friend but he is in a different school" (Junior infant boy). Some parents also reported their children worrying ahead of time about who would sit beside them in big school:

> He thought he would be with his friends from playschool and when he went to the school in May and he went in to meet his teacher, he was asking why his friends weren't with him… We were trying to tell him that he'd make new friends. Then that day in the car he was asking who was going to sit beside him" (Parent of junior infant).

Nevertheless, parents noted that children tended to make new friends on starting primary school, so while having friends from pre-school was a support to children in the early days, those friendships were not necessarily maintained as children met new people to play with: "Funnily enough, he doesn't play with the kids he went to pre-school with any more, and I would ask him 'where's such and such, do you play with him?' and he'd say 'no, I play with…'" (Parent of junior infant). This confirms the findings of Ledger et al. (2000) around the difficulties of maintaining friendships across the pre-school / primary school transition.

Similar to the findings of Smyth et al. (2004), many of the sixth class and first year students interviewed said that a significant factor in choosing their secondary school was that their friends were going there. They were pleased when they could transfer with friends and, like their pre-school and junior infant counterparts, those whose closest friends were going to different secondary schools worried about that. It did make the move harder: "You're leaving behind some of your best friends. One of our mates is going to A. school" (Sixth class boy); Even when friends transferred together, they were sometimes put into different classes: "My best friend and me were in the same class and [before transition] we were worrying and

worrying that we wouldn't get in the same class and we wouldn't see each other as much" (First year girl). Nevertheless, sixth class students looked forward to making new friends too, and first years generally indicated that any worries they had on that front before the move were unfounded, with plenty of new friendships evident: "Nobody in my old class came to this school so it's harder to start but then I made loads of friends so I know everybody now" (First year girl);

> You go in and you think I won't be put in the same class as my friend and I'll be sitting in the class on my own, but it's not like that. You get to know everyone in your class. Maybe you won't like some people in your class but most of the time you will get along with everyone. Like, maybe the first few days will be awkward, but after that…" (First year girl).

This is in contrast to the work of Mackenzie et al. (2012) who reported children feeling lonelier after transition than they had predicted beforehand. Children advised, "Take support from your friends, they understand and you are understanding back. They could be having a harder time than you or it could be harder for you" (Sixth class girl). Some also noted the importance of the social atmosphere of a new school:

> On my first day I was walking around with another girl out of my primary school trying to find classes, and fourth years and fifth years who didn't even know us were asking us if we needed any help… That was really nice (First year girl).

Extracurricular activities were noted by parents, teachers and children as important for developing friendships at times of educational transition, because children might already know others in their new school through contact at sports clubs, dance classes, etc:

> For the whole socialisation I think the clubs are really good. Even just for having older students looking out for them, sometimes there would be a cross of first and second years going out here and fifth and sixth years coming in and they would be saying 'Hi' to one another because they would know each other from training and there is that kind of looking out for each other (First year teacher).

This was seen as important, because students who struggled with their social skills and with making friends were identified by parents and teachers as being at risk of experiencing difficulties at both transitions – "The outgoing ones will grasp it with both hands and the quieter ones might struggle a little" (Parent of first year), so that "for some it can be a lonely 'oul' experience initially" (Sixth class teacher). This supports the emphasis on social skills in the literature (O'Kane, 2015). The primary school and both secondary schools allowed children to visit before making the transition, and many parents, teachers and children noted the opportunities that these visits provided to begin the process of making new friends.

*5.2.1.1.1 Bullying.*

One aspect of social relationships that has been shown in the literature to be significant at times of educational transition is bullying (Pellegrini and Long, 2002; Smyth et al., 2004), and this tends to be feared by children ahead of moving to the next educational level (Brooker, 2008; Mackenzie et al., 2012). Before transition, both pre-school and sixth class children, and their parents in this sample reported worrying about potential bullying. Parents of both young children going into primary school and older children going into secondary school were concerned during the process of transition about how their children were treated by others, and perhaps how their children in turn treated others:

> One thing for me, as a parent, they are so young and small, would be the bullying thing. F. might come home some days and say that such and such a person hit her or said something and because of their age you don't know whether to look at it as a whole bullying thing or … how far do you let it go as kids being kids before you say [this isn't okay]…. S. has been in trouble a couple of times for hitting somebody so you wonder at what point does it become bullying? When do I know mine has become a bully or is being bullied? (Parent of junior infant).

When asked about anything they were not looking forward to in 'big school', like some of the children referred to by Brooker (2008), one three-year-old boy spoke of his fear

of being "punched by bigger ages". Another child described how in big school there would be "shouting... and being bold… they will hit… they say 'you're stupid'" (Pre-school girl). Children in sixth class described the 'urban legend' of 'first year beatings' (Smyth et al., 2004), and the fear that it instilled. They heard about such incidents from older siblings and friends: "My brother always scares me about it. He keeps saying 'oh I got first year beatings so you might get them'" (Sixth class boy). Many sixth class children had a sense that perhaps these 'legends' might not be true, and talked about how they knew there were CCTV cameras in the boys' school, so they felt that older children would not be likely to get away with assaulting the younger ones. Nevertheless, the sense of nervousness was palpable regarding this, as children really had no way to be sure if the rumours were true or not: "You don't really [believe it] but when you think of it you're like 'Oh God, I'm scared!'" (First year girl).

Some secondary school teachers noted the increase in cyberbullying in recent years (Minton, 2011), particularly among girls, and there were a number of children for whom some fears regarding bullying in general became reality on making the move to junior infants: "Sometimes people are bold and they hit you" (Junior infant girl); "[Worst thing about big school is] pushing down on the ground" (Junior infant girl); and to first year:

> Last week one of the girls threw water over her head… she was sobbing when she came home, and I was really angry to be honest. I said I'm ringing the school on Monday. She said Mam don't, but I said, no, that's not okay for that to happen! That's absolutely not okay! "But then she'll get a docket and they'll say it to her and I'll be in trouble", and I said they won't tell her but she said "They will they will!", so she doesn't even trust that... (Parent of first year).

For the majority of children, however, their worries about bullying were largely unfounded, with junior infants describing a context where "we are all good friends" (Junior infant girl), and first years speaking of how "[they say] you get first year beatings and all that, but you don't, they just say that… I think everyone just looks out for each other" (First year

girl). When asked about any advice they might have for other children making the transition to secondary school, many first years referred to this:

> Don't listen to rumours. When I was in sixth class I was told that I was going to get beat up but when you come in here they don't really care… Say when you were in sixth class and a junior infant came into your class, it's not like you are going to beat them up (First year girl).

Secondary school teachers agreed:

> All these things, first year beatings and all those myths, nine times out of ten, there is no such thing… The lads are too lazy to do it. They're like 'I'm having my lunch, I'm not doing anything' (First year teacher).

Of course, as pointed out by Minton (2010), teachers often underestimate the amount of bullying in their school, and for the minority of children who did experience it, the intensity of that experience means that it still warrants the attention of adults: "There was a boy that was getting bullied so much…. He nearly tried to kill himself" (First year boy). Anti-bullying policies were also identified by some parents as influential in attracting them to a particular school for their children, which is interesting in the light of the emphasis on anti-bullying policies in recent research by Ring et al. (2015). Another process-related factor that can help to prevent bullying is strong relationships between teachers and children. Consistent with the findings of O'Moore (2010), children noted that where relationships between children and teachers were good, bullying was less likely to happen, as children would tell their teachers when it did: "If something was wrong, the children could tell teachers or something like that. If there is bullying or something" (Sixth class boy); "You'd talk to your form teacher or the soundest teacher [because you'd trust them]" (First year boy).

#### *5.2.1.2 Relationships between children and teachers.*

Consistent with the literature, relationships between children and teachers were seen as important in supporting educational transition (Burchinal et al., 2002), but also with

regards to educational experiences generally (Rogers, 1974). Overall, teachers at all levels showed strong awareness of, and interest in, the emotional life of children:

> For the child, it might have been a very little thing but it has been sufficient to make them unhappy about coming to school. If they are unhappy coming to school, learning is compromised… I think with children who are sad, you need to get in there quickly and find out why is that? They are young, they should be happy, life is good. That is something to deal with when they're older, the woes of the world or whatever (Principal primary school).

Parents noted the emotional support given to children in the primary school, and the efforts teachers made to get to know their children:

> She just always… how she spoke to him even. She was just always reassuring him… she always encouraged him a lot… she taught him a lot about empathy… that would always bring him back a bit and he wouldn't be as upset when he was coming out at the end of the day… she really cares for him (Parent of junior infant).

However, the 'jolt in school climate' identified by Downes et al. (2007) was noted by some participants of this research in the move to secondary school:

> Certain school cultures. You have to remember that some of the kids go to primary school and they are taken care of and it's all about the welfare of the child. That's the way it should be and it's brilliant. That's the way they are seen in primary. Then they go to secondary school and it's such a leap… It wouldn't be the school's fault, they just aren't aware and they have a different way of approaching things (Community worker).

In contrast to this, the principal of the girls' secondary school noted the importance of relationship building with children:

> I see that as being very important, that my role is to be out and available to students, because if it just takes that they get a word from the principal and they get a little bit of TLC or they get a 'well done', that's a very important role for us to play. In a school of nine hundred and something, for the principal to say to them 'What's your name?' or to give them an answer, that's a big thing (Principal girls' secondary school).

One approach to building those relationships within the girls' secondary school was to ensure that each student had the same personal tutor throughout their time there, "so that they

develop their relationships through the years" (Principal of girls' secondary school). In opposition to some research findings (Mackenzie et al., 2012; O'Brien, 2003; 2004), many of the secondary school children interviewed felt that they had relationships with their teachers that were as good as, and in some cases better than, those at primary level, and in contrast to Downes et al.'s (2007) finding of a significant dip in support-seeking by children between sixth class and first year, in both the boys' and girls' schools, children felt they could ask for help if they were struggling academically:

> [In secondary school] they explain it a lot easier. [Maths] was one of my subjects that I was really confused with and then I asked her and when she explained it, it made a lot easier and it made sense but in primary you wouldn't really want to ask, you'd be afraid (First year girl).

Equally, many first year students, both boys and girls, indicated that they would speak to teachers, particularly year heads, counsellors and tutors (echoing Smyth et al., 2004), if they were struggling with a personal issue or if they were being bullied – "if you need help they will help you" (First year boy). Tutors were aware of this perception by students:

> Generally I think, especially first years, they look at you, not like a teacher but as their tutor so they see you in a different light and they would come to you and confide in you if they have any problems… they will say 'oh Miss can I talk to you about this' and they see me as someone to confide in. So I suppose that is the kind of role it is as well, if they have issues at home that we need to know about. That's the main role (First year teacher).

However, the limitations and boundaries of the student-teacher relationship were noted by some teachers:

> We can help to a certain extent but we are not allowed to hug kids and we are not allowed to get over emotional with children, you can't be going around rubbing their heads, so this is where parents have to take responsibility (First year teacher).

And by some children:

> Your mam and dad look after you and ask are you ok, whereas the teachers just give you your work. I feel that I have to just listen to the teacher and she's just a teacher and that's it but I don't feel like I could talk to her about stuff (First year girl).

Central to such consideration of relationships between children and adults was the issue of discipline.

#### *5.2.1.3 Disciplinary interactions.*

Consistent with the literature (Brooker, 2008; INTO, 2009; O'Kane and Hayes, 2006; Downes et al., 2007) a number of participants identified changing disciplinary structures, expectations and school climates from one educational level to another. Small children were fluent in portraying the new disciplinary context of primary school, describing the rules: "You do anything that you are told to do" (Pre-school girl); "No telling tales" (Pre-school girl); "If you were in the bigger yard and everyone was fighting then you would tell Mr M." (Junior infant boy). They also understood the consequences for not sticking to the rules based on the specific reward systems employed by their teachers: "[If you were fighting in the yard] you would get into trouble and then you would be in the cloud" (Junior infant girl). They described rewards for sticking to the rules: "Do you know what? One time I got a trophy… I was so good and then Teacher gave it to me" (Junior infant boy); "I got my name in the sun" (Junior infant girl); "I got two bonuses" (Junior infant boy).

Parents were also aware of these systems:

> They have a competition then, they have sunshine, and a white cloud and a grey cloud…. So if they get on the sun they have a chance at winning the trophy so they all try to work to get this. And I know, being a teacher myself, every child will get it once or twice throughout the year… It is to encourage them to do well and to do better… It's very positive… they have a little bell as well and they keep their hands at the table. We didn't have that growing up, we got a clip around the ear (Parent of junior infant).

Junior infant teachers also described how, in a minority of cases, there may be differing behavioural expectations as the child moves between the context of the home and

that of school, a finding important in understanding the structure of the meso-system for these children. Sometimes 'permissive' disciplinary styles (Baumrind, 1971) led to difficulty:

> Some of them are so much more lenient on the child. We would bring them out at home time; some of them are with the parents and are fine, other children are climbing the walls or the garden trees. We wouldn't let them do it. If we brought them for a walk or something and they did that they would be in trouble whereas the parents just seem to let them (Junior infant teacher).

However, parents were often very determined to let teachers know that disciplinary problems were being addressed at home, and were very conscious of instilling respect for teachers in their children:

> They would hear me say 'now B. you have no DS [game console] today for doing that'. Anything that the school addressed with me I would always deal with at home as well because I have to teach him that he can't behave like that (Parent of junior infant).

> I think it's very important that they show respect for the school and respect for the teachers so I think that has to come from the parents in advance. Some children still think it's all fun and games. You are there to learn and you have to show respect for the teachers as well and I think they need to be prepared for that when they go into school… I think all parents have to have their children prepared to show respect for their teachers and be obedient in the class (Parent of junior infant).

Sometimes, parents were even stricter and more 'authoritarian' (Baumrind, 1971) than teachers:

> The mam went through him because she said 'you were so rude just shouting at your teacher' but he didn't… I was just so surprised because I didn't feel he was rude at all. I just thought at least he is telling me who was collecting him. Whereas there are other parents and the child could be running amok and they'd be saying 'He's grand' and you're thinking 'no, he's not!' (Junior infant teacher)

In the primary school, approaches to discipline were framed within a relational, person-centred approach (Freiberg and Lamb, 2009; Rogers, 1995). For example, the issue of absenteeism was seen not as a disciplinary issue as such, but rather as "a barometer showing you that there's something wrong" (Sixth class teacher):

> A lot of my work would be attendance as well, if a child wasn't coming to school, I might have to give a little visit to the parents or have a chat. Not as the 'big bad wolf' but if there is anything I can do to help or find out what's happening… I try to make sure I am on their side because that's my role. They need to know that somebody in here is on their side. In fairness, nearly always there is a genuine reason and we can try to help out then (HSCL teacher).

Older children did however note the increasingly strict disciplinary context in moving from primary to secondary school, consistent with the findings of Downes et al. (2007) and Smyth et al. (2004). Sixth class children worried about it ahead of the move: "You might be scared if you get told off in the first year because then you have a bad reputation for your life in secondary school" (Sixth class boy). First year students and their teachers described the procedures in place, which were similar in both schools, with rewards ('green sheet' acknowledging positive behaviour to be brought home and signed by parents, and 'well done' cards) and punishments ('penalty sheets' and 'dockets' which when accumulated led to detention or suspension, and 'red cards' leading to immediate removal). In both secondary schools, teachers explicitly aimed to cultivate an 'authoritative' approach to teaching (Baumrind, 1971; Gregory et al., 2010): "Our teacher told us that he has a level of strictness and a level of fairness" (First year boy);

> I think you have to be approachable but yet you have to be stern as well. I think there is a happy medium, you just need to know which approach to use when and on what students as well… (It requires) huge skill as a teacher and gut instinct is a lot as well (First year teacher).

Both teachers and children acknowledged that there were individual differences between teachers in terms of disciplinary style, and how the rules were enforced. Many children indicated that their pre-transition worries about changing disciplinary climates (Downes et al., 2007; Topping, 2011) were valid. This was the case for most of the girls:

> The discipline is really strict here as well because say if you did something that was a bit wrong or you didn't know that was wrong to do you'd get a docket straight away and you'd be afraid to get a docket. But in primary school you wouldn't be afraid

> because some of the teachers are actually alright to you but in secondary school some of the teachers give out straight away (First year girl).

For the boys there were some mixed opinions. Some children felt that felt that primary school was stricter: "Hmmm, it depends. Here they give you a chance, they give you a few chances but in primary school if you got in trouble, that was it, you got loads of work" (First year boy). This is interesting in the light of the findings of Harrop and Swinson (2011) that boys experience more negative disciplinary interactions than girls at primary school, but not at secondary school. However, many of their colleagues strongly disagreed: "Secondary school teachers are much stricter!!!" (four first year boys, all speaking in unison). Adults tended to agree that secondary school was stricter than primary:

> Yes, I would (see a cultural difference between the two levels regarding discipline). The consequences are usually more serious in secondary and there is a wider peer group and a wider audience. I suppose it just has to be dealt with age appropriately so it's naturally going to be different (Community worker).

For the girls, the emphasis placed on the uniform was problematic. This was something they were not used to from primary school, and they felt this focus was excessive:

> They say you're representing the school but you shouldn't have to show that by what you are wearing, if you are a good person and you work hard and you know what you're doing, I don't think you should get into trouble if one day you forget your tie or your pin. I don't think that should be a punishment. You could be the best student during the year. It doesn't make you look scruffy if you don't have a tie (First year girl).

Some parents approved of the strict discipline:

> They're very strict in both (boys' and girls' secondary schools). That's good because... you see some girls going to school and you think, are you going to a nightclub or are you going to school? But there your skirt has to be down, your socks have to be up, you have to see your tie. In primary you could wear the uniform or the tracksuit, so they just always wore the tracksuits because that's what they want to wear, so that's a big change for them to wear a uniform. It is part of the discipline and (the boys' secondary school) is the same. If there's any messing you get penalty sheets, detention, and they don't seem to take any hassle (Parent of first year).

Other parents worried about it and spoke of the fear of 'getting in trouble' experienced by their children in the move to secondary school. For example, one parent described how her child was afraid to go to the toilet in case he was blamed for the smoking by sixth years (Parent of first year). One mother of a first year girl was particularly distressed: "T.'s afraid of her life to say she's struggling in case she'll get into trouble… this is driving me crazy, she's so terrified that if she gets a docket it'll be on her permanent record... It's huge pressure" (Parent of first year).

Parents of boys also worried:

> Some of the teachers are very strict. Now they have to be I suppose with a bunch of lads, I know how mad they can be! He did say that some of the teachers, when they first went in, really didn't give them a chance, they were saying 'Now this is what you do, this is what you do' (said in harsh tone). So he said it was a bit of a shock that they weren't eased in (Parent of first year).

Some teachers also identified the fears that first year children had about discipline: "With regards to first years they are petrified coming in. They don't know what to expect. It's the whole scenario of new school, new everything" (First year teacher). In spite of these difficulties, some children preferred the disciplinary climate at secondary school, because they felt that when there was order they could learn more, supporting Baumrind's (1971) concerns regarding permissive disciplinary styles: "We had a lot of bold kids in our class (in primary school). We were distracted so we couldn't learn Irish" (First year girl); "A lot of the time it would be a case of someone in your class acting up and causing attention to come to themselves. Here it's not as bad" (First year girl). Some children felt that the system was more equitable at secondary level, as illustrated by this discussion between first year girls in focus group 13:

First year girl A: Most of their attention (in primary school) went to people who weren't being good.
First year girl C: Then they'd give the attention to people who were really good. So if you

were really good or really bold you got the attention and you mightn't if you were in the middle…

First year girl A: It's better here because if you do something you get a docket or something straight away and you'd learn, but in primary school you'd get tables and everything.

First year girl D: In primary it would be a bigger deal if you get in trouble than here. Here you just get a docket but in primary the teacher would take you outside the door. Everyone would be looking at you.

Some boys felt that the 'rough and tumble' of male relationships were better understood at secondary level in an all-boys' school, as identified during focus group 10:

First year boy A: You are able to have a mess in yard, like have a mess fight with each other and the teachers don't do anything about it… They know you're messing, they just say 'don't hurt them or 'don't be too hard'…

First year boy B: 'Watch out, don't break his nose or anything' (all laughing).

Teachers in the boys' secondary schools also described an atmosphere of mutual respect between students and teachers. One teacher who attended the school himself when he was younger noted a change in school climate for the better:

> When I was here as a student, this place was mayhem in my opinion, but nowadays it's much calmer. The lads come in, they know they're doing a job and we're doing a job. It's that type of thing, we're working here to [mutual respect]. Once in a blue moon you will have some guy who doesn't want to do such and such a thing and then you'll have to deal with that (First year teacher).

Teachers in the girls' secondary school also identified a positive disciplinary climate: "In general no, I wouldn't think there would be many behavioural problems" (First year teacher).

In summary, disciplinary interactions were identified by these participants as an important influence on experiences of educational transition. Generally, participants confirmed the previously identified trend of increasingly strict approaches to discipline as children progressed through the system. However, albeit with some notable exceptions, most participants were relatively satisfied with disciplinary styles, which could broadly be located

within the 'authoritative' approach. Some differences in approaches to discipline were noted between home and school, particularly at primary level. While relationships between teachers and children at times of educational transition were seen by participants as important, the role of parents in providing emotional support for their children at these times became particularly evident.

#### *5.2.1.4 Relationships between children and parents.*

Confirming previous research findings (O'Connor and Scott, 2007; Smyth et al., 2004), participants stressed the importance of good relationships and strong communication between parents and their children during transition. While it was not within the scope of this research to measure security of attachment, many participants noted points consistent with Attachment Theory, such as the occurrence of separation anxiety in young children, particularly boys, starting primary school: "Boys are more clingy" (Parent of junior infant); "Boys are real 'hang on to their mammy', even though it doesn't look that way but they do" (Parent of junior infant); "Boys seem to be very much about their mammies… stuck to the apron strings. He's still be like that. It's him that would come running to the door" (Parent of junior infant). Also emphasised was the importance of knowing that the parent was there to talk to if needed: "If you are stressed about it, you can talk to your mam and dad about it, and they would understand because they went through it too. They had to move from primary to secondary too" (Sixth class girl). "Your parents can help you through it" (Sixth class boy). Thus, in the terminology of Attachment Theory, parents were seen as providing a 'secure base' at times of transition. This is consistent also with the work of Brooker (2008) and Dockett et al. (2012) who identified parents as key supports for children at these times.

Participants in this research repeatedly noted the importance of good communication between parents and children:

> These years are so important for her. To get her through these years. Sometimes I get so worried. You know I try to do my absolute best by them and have that open communication, because it's all about communication. Once they can talk to us... (Parent of first year).

This particular parent's daughter was struggling badly with transition to secondary school, and because she, the mother, worked with troubled teenagers, she was all too aware of the need for teenagers to get emotional support from their parents, and how badly things can go wrong when they do not receive it:

> They've got so many kids, but I'm worried about my child, and T.'s struggling in a swarm of other kids and she's just being missed at the minute. Now obviously I have that relationship with her and I'm not going to let that go, not for another day, but how many more kids are in her position and are struggling and saying nothing. And nobody knows about it. And I think really because of where I work... like the amount of kids that commit suicide… I'd be very mindful of all that stuff (Parent of first year).

Some parents noted the importance of being proactive in developing communication with children, particularly with those approaching puberty:

> If they'll talk to you. Especially kids of that age. You have to keep asking them questions and eventually they might tell you…. if you hear a story one day and it's forgotten about... but if there's a continual story coming home every day you know there's a problem then and you need to sort it out (Parent of first year).

Sixth class children identified the importance of communicating well with their parents as a protective factor against potential difficulties such as bullying at times of transition (Dockett et al., 2012; O'Moore, 2010): "If you are being bullied, your parents can sort it out if you tell them" (Sixth class boy); "If you are upset about moving, they could just tell you it's all right" (Sixth class girl). They also relied on parents to help with homework (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001). Parents of junior infants generally enjoyed doing homework

with their children, although echoing Hornby and Lafaele (2011), they sometimes found it harder to help as subjects became more complex in secondary school – "Maths is all changed since we went to school" (Parent of first year). Overall, consistent with the literature, a positive relationship with parents was seen as supportive to children's outcomes during transition.

#### *5.2.1.5 Summary.*

The data supported a Bio-ecological conception of transition, emphasising the importance of relationships for children, both with their peers and with important adults including parents and teachers. Children generally experienced discipline as becoming increasingly strict as they progressed through the educational system, although there were some exceptions to this. Overall, there were positive relationships reported, and the findings of the current research can be theorised, and hence elucidated, by the notion that 'process' can help to overcome potential challenges presented by 'person', 'context' and 'time' factors. Nevertheless, this does not negate the need to create optimal contextual circumstances for positive experiences, and a Bio-ecological framework necessitates consideration of 'process', 'person', 'context' and 'time'.

### 5.2.2 'Person' factors and their interaction with 'process' and 'context' at 'times' of educational transition.

#### *5.2.2.1 Skills and dispositions for 'school readiness'.*

There was remarkably strong agreement among the majority of participants on the skills and dispositions that facilitate positive transitions, in contrast to previous work identifying potential misunderstandings between parents, pre-school teachers and teachers at later educational levels (Brooker, 2008). The skills and dispositions noted were similar to

those identified in Irish and international literature (Dockett and Perry, 2004; 2005; O'Kane and Hayes, 2006; Ring et al., 2015). Many participants focussed on dispositions rather than skills with factors related to 'temperament' (Thomas and Chess, 1977) seen as key. For example, one parent whose first child struggled badly with the transition to primary school but whose second child experienced a very smooth transition put the differences largely down to the individual personalities of the two children:

> B. is a different child. He would be more frustrated and trying to make you see things his way, whereas M. is different, he would be more placid… I definitely think it is down to personalities and I think teachers need to be aware of each child's ways. The child might behave a certain way but it doesn't mean that they are a bold child (Parent of junior infant).

In particular, participants referred repeatedly to children's confidence and self-esteem (O'Kane and Hayes, 2006) as factors influencing whether transition is viewed as a threat or an enjoyable challenge (Mackenzie et al., 2012): "I just think it's the individual child. If a child is more confident going in they will maintain that but kids who are less confident it just takes them a while longer" (Parent of junior infant). Like Margetts (2002; 2003), many participants identified children's behaviour as an important factor. Two parents in particular identified their children's behaviour in the wake of family crises as challenging in this transition. Providing a good example of the interactive nature of relevant factors, and in particular how 'process' may be more influential than 'person', one of these parents noted how strong and positive communication with the pre-school had alleviated these difficulties:

> Myself and the kids' dad are separated, so at one point S. found it very difficult because there was no contact with his dad… He was having a really bad time in (pre)school. I was able to go in and explain… They asked, which was nice, they weren't just saying 'oh he's biting and he's kicking', they asked [was there something going on for him]... I was able to explain to them and felt ok about explaining to them (Parent of junior infant).

However, she was still in the process of building such a relationship with the primary school, and that exacerbated the problem:

> Yesterday I was asking S. how did school go and he said 'let's get out of here mammy' and I was thinking 'oh right, what's gone on here now?' Whereas at the [pre-school] I would have known because they would have been at the door asking could they talk to you for a second and they would let me know. I had to go back to the teacher yesterday… and ask if something had happened… now in her head they had dealt with it at school but I just wanted to know (Parent of junior infant).

For children in transition from pre-school to primary school, one of the skills that was seen as vital by both parents and teachers was the ability to sit still and concentrate, as identified in Ireland (INTO, 2009; O'Kane and Hayes, 2006; Ring et al., 2015), and internationally (Dockett and Perry, 2004; 2005). The expectation for young children to 'sit still' is 'contentious' (INTO, 2009), and junior infants themselves noted the challenge this presented, with a number indicating that waiting their turn was one of the hardest things about 'big school'. The principal of the primary school noted how difficult it can be for children to develop these skills in the modern world, with working parents feeling 'guilty' and thinking that they always have to entertain their children, rather than letting them play independently:

> That is vital. If they are not listening they can't learn. This is a hard thing nowadays, children with so much stimuli and so much going on in the outside world and even with parents they feel that the child has to be doing this and doing that and then they are bringing them here. There is no quiet time for the child and they are not able to deal with quiet time. They are jiggy, 'what's happening next?'… So that has become more difficult over the years in teaching children to listen, to be still, to focus (Principal primary school).

Junior infant teachers also emphasised fine motor skills, and recommended that parents and pre-schools focus on activities such as cutting and colouring rather than more academic pursuits such as letters and numbers (O'Kane and Hayes, 2006; Ring et al., 2015): "Use their hands, play dough and cutting and just using their hands more" (Junior infant teacher) .Expectations of children changed from pre-school to primary school in terms of 'independence', as identified by Dockett and Perry (2007), and parents, pre-school and

primary school teachers identified the need for young children to be more independent in looking after themselves and their belongings in primary school:

> They want them to be more socialising now, take their coats off, be able to open their lunch, that's what they want them to do before they go into primary school… independence and getting on with kids and sitting down and stuff like that (Pre-school teacher).

Interestingly, in opposition to Brooker (2008), parents, pre-school teachers and primary school teachers seemed to have similar definitions of what 'independence' meant, largely involving care of self and belongings:

> Putting on their coats, carrying their bags… Being able to go to the bathroom on their own, sit at the table and eat their lunch, sit at the table and talk to children beside them, being able to share, all of those things (Parent of junior infant).

They noted the difficulty that this can sometimes cause for small children:

> They are terrible at putting on coats. There are more and more of them not able to or pretending they are not able to because they are so used to having someone stepping in and helping them out… Or people putting their bags down for them and sorting everything, they have to do it in class themselves, get their lunches, take them out, we can't do that for them (Junior infant teacher).

Parents agreed:

> When they are four or five they should be able to do certain things on their own like dress themselves and go to the toilet. I know children that can't do that and that's a problem. It's hard for the teacher because the teacher can't go after each child and it's hard for them because they feel bad that they can't do it and that might make them feel that they don't want to be in the school (Parent of junior infant).

Teachers recommended that parents give children the opportunity to do things for themselves, but also had advice regarding practicalities such as providing shoes with Velcro rather than laces, coats that children can zip themselves, a larger bag so that children could fit in all their belongings without difficulty and a lunch bag that they can open and close themselves. Some parents were indeed taking these kinds of approaches: "Before he started playschool I was telling him he was going to have his lunch and showed him how to open his

lunchbox but it did definitely prepare him for school" (Parent of junior infant). However, one of the most important indicators of whether children develop such skills was identified by participants as pre-school attendance.

*5.2.2.1.1 The importance of pre-school.*

Regarding transition into primary school, and in support of the literature (INTO, 2009; Pianta et al., 2009; Sylva et al., 2004), participants repeatedly made reference to the importance of having attended pre-school in preparing children for the move. In Bio-ecological terms, experience of the 'context' of pre-school impacted on the skills developed by the individual 'person'. However, pre-school attendance per se was seen as insufficient, and quality of provision was identified as a factor in whether it supported transition or not (OECD, 2015; O'Kane and Hayes, 2006):

> He went to a pre-school but it wasn't as good as the one J. went to, so I could see the difference. It was just a playgroup, there were no structures in place. It wasn't as well run. When S. started [primary school] he had difficulty with staying in his place and sitting down (Parent of junior infant).

The variation in type and quality of pre-school settings was also noted by junior infant teachers:

> It does depend on what playschool they are in. It really does. Some of them I think they just bring them in and they colour and that's it. Whereas you know that [pre-school 2] has them cutting and playing and they are doing everything. Some of them aren't even playschools, I think they just call themselves playschools and kids go in, which isn't the parents fault. If it's called playschool they think they are going to a playschool and they don't realise (Junior infant teacher).

Nevertheless, experience of a good quality pre-school may be central to the experience of educational transition for individual children, because many of the 'person' factors such as skills and dispositions identified by participants as vital to a positive

experience of transition into primary school were seen to be facilitated and provided for by attendance at pre-school (O'Kane, 2015):

> I think probably the biggest things are the practical things, listening, sitting down on your chair, all those kinds of things. A bit of discipline I think. If they are at home and don't go to playschool or Montessori, when they go into that environment and for them, they get out there with loads of other kids and it's play time. I think they do realise if they have been to playschool that they do have to sit down and listen, they can play as well. I think it is more the practical side of it rather than knowing the alphabet (Parent of junior infant).

A good pre-school was seen as supportive to children's development of behavioural self-regulation, and also academic development and fostering love of learning:

> They can colour. Sometimes in the pre-school they would be learning letters and numbers. D. learned an awful lot that I didn't even think they did in pre-school… So by the time we came to junior infants, he was saying 'I'm bored in here' (pre-school), he couldn't wait to get to the next level. When he started primary school it's like a sponge, he couldn't take enough in (Parent of junior infant).

> They would have had the experience of books because that's so important for children. I'm not thinking in terms of reading, I'm thinking in terms of enjoyment, something that they are given for life, they will have until they're old and will engage with, the familiarity of the story and all of that. So much learning can go on and that's done in the playschools. The experience of the fun involved in doing little games, sharing, turn-taking (Principal primary school).

Pre-schools were also seen as supporting development of a good routine in children, as well as understanding of the rhythm of a school day, and the ability to share space with other children:

> That it's not all about them. That they are used to being in a group. They know how to be part of a group and work together with children, take turns. That kind of thing is huge for some of them. Even putting up your hand for something, they can't all just shout out at the same time. It's things like that. If they haven't been to playschool they don't understand that teacher can't listen to me all the time, whenever I want to tell her something (Junior infant teacher).

> They had rules. Routine I think because they had a break, play time, story time. I think that was the main thing. I imagine that would be a huge shock for a child, leaving the house and just arriving in school (Parent of junior infant).

Pre-schools were also seen as facilitating independence regarding self-care:

> I feel our playschools prepare them a lot in organisation, the little things of having the lunchbox, being able to put the coat on, now they are not always able to zip it but the mums are great, sometimes they get the Velcro runners. Little practical things like that (Principal primary school).

Unlike some of the findings of Ring et al. (2015) and Brooker (2008) regarding lack of shared understanding, pre-school and primary teachers in this research showed strong agreement on the skills that were valuable in junior infants, and pre-school teachers aimed to support development of these skills in children preparing for transition:

> We explain to them that in big school you have to sit in your chair and we talk about it… we try to give them a little bit of independence by putting their coats on, opening their lunchbox… because in primary school that's what the teachers will want, they have thirty kids… the teacher is not going to be able to go around all the kids opening lunchboxes and sandwiches so we try to encourage that the parents give them something that they are able to open… It's not that we have to have them sitting down, we are just trying to teach them. They don't have to sit down in the chair, we just say to them that this is what they will be doing in big school, trying to prepare them (Pre-school teacher).

#### *5.2.2.2 'Person' factors in the move to secondary school.*

Similar skills and dispositions were identified as important during transition from primary to secondary school. Like O'Brien (2004) and Topping (2011), some participants emphasised confidence, self-esteem, openness and willingness to learn in the new setting. Teachers, both at sixth class and first year levels, particularly noted such dispositional factors. One sixth class teacher described:

> A child who was very quiet, a 'sitting target' in terms of bullying, walking into a crowded canteen he'd sit by himself, I'd worry about that kind of kid, how to make friends and start a conversation, stand up for themselves and not draw attention to yourself for negative reasons (Sixth class teacher).

Some parents whose children were starting secondary school expressed similar worries regarding dispositions as their counterparts whose children were starting primary

school. For example, one parent described the differences for her two sons starting secondary school due to their differing personalities:

> He was so quiet I was afraid he would be picked on… I'll never forget it, I wanted to bring him and wait outside all day and not even say anything to him. It was terrible… [But with my second son] I was saying he won't be ignored because he won't allow himself to be ignored. When he's in the room, you know he's there! I knew that he would be ok (Parent of first year).

Some teachers adapted their teaching methods using approaches like group-work to support the development of self-esteem and self-efficacy beliefs in the children they taught, confirming the benefits of cooperative learning identified in the literature (Hmelo-Silver et al., 2013; Johnson and Johnson, 1990; 1999; O'Toole, 2014; Slavin, 1995). As noted by Mackenzie et al. (2012), many children, parents and teachers also described the ability to manage stress and adapt to new situations as skills that were vital in the transition from primary to secondary school:

> I suppose being adaptable is the first thing, some students at Primary level can be a little bit more needy with their teacher, you know in a good way, but I suppose being able to adapt is the key and I think that students who survive better with the transition are students that are very open minded (First year teacher).

One of the strongest findings in the current research related to limitations in organisational skills as a barrier to such adaptation and as a source of stress for children transitioning to secondary school:

> He has to get himself up and get organised so it's up to him now to be responsible and make sure he has everything. With the little ones I am making sure that their lunches are in their bags and their schoolbags are done. He has to do that himself because I can't be doing it all for him, so it's more responsibility. He has to make sure he has his PE gear, whereas in primary there is nothing like that. With my daughter, if she has Home Economics, it's up to her to say to me that she needs things for Home Economics. So they have to be a bit more responsible (Parent of first year).

> The change of the classrooms is the hardest thing for the kids. They are used to being in the one classroom the whole time and the teacher changes subjects as they go on but here they go to different classrooms for every subject that they have (First year teacher).

This is mentioned by some writers such as Mackenzie et al. (2012), O'Brien (2004) and Smyth et al. (2004), but it is a point generally underestimated in the literature. Almost all children in this transition spoke of difficulties with organisational skills in the new school. In the case-study primary school, as in most primary schools in Ireland, children had one teacher for every subject. They stayed in the same classroom all day, apart from when they were doing P.E or playing in the yard, and the level of organisational skills required of them was relatively minimal:

> Organisational skills are so important for the first years but some of them are only twelve years of age so it is a big deal. Especially in primary school a lot of the organisational stuff is done for them, their books are over there, it's all just done (First year teacher).

On entry to secondary level, this system changed dramatically. Students had a different teacher for each subject, and they moved from class to class in periods of 40 or 50 minutes. Books and other materials were kept in lockers, and children had to learn to read a timetable, negotiate unfamiliar corridors and school buildings, figure out what books and materials they needed from their locker in the time period before they would be able to return to it, and decide what to take home with them to complete their allocated homework:

> You have to remember what class you're going to, what class you're in, take the bag off your back, look at your journal, then put it back in your bag and go to your class, then 40 minutes later you have to do it all over again (First year girl).

These new skills represented extensive challenges to the majority of children, and many found this extremely distressing. Many indicated that it was a source of worry for them ahead of the move to secondary school, and when interviewed after making the transition, they reported that their fears were well-founded and it was causing them much upset.

> (In primary school) you wouldn't be carrying a load of books home for study and everything but when you get here and you have those subjects you're saying 'what did we have for homework' and someone would say we have this and this and I'm like 'What???? I forgot it!!! When did we have that?? (First year girl).

> It's very stressful as well. Because I was afraid that if I missed one class that I would get in trouble and even still you're afraid of getting a docket if you forget a book and you get very stressed out and you just overwhelm yourself with everything (First year girl).

Parents in particular described significant emotional turmoil for their children caused by the organisational demands of the new setting, and the worry and distress that this caused for parents in turn:

> The first few weeks she was bringing home the wrong copies, the wrong books. She cried for two weeks, she cried and cried… The first while was very stressful, and even now it's still stressful… I knew the transition into first year was going to be awful but her dad can't believe how bad she is. She's really struggling. I'm not shocked but he's absolutely heart-broken. He can't believe it. It's an awful lot, whereas some kids love the experience and thrive on learning new things whereas she just seems a bit overwhelmed… she's very stressed going into the school. She's crying. I don't want to see her going off to school crying every morning. Nobody wants to see their child crying like that (Parent of first year).

The use of lockers appeared to be particularly challenging, with children painting a vibrant picture of the chaos that ensued at break times. Some boys assumed that girls would not be experiencing the level of difficulty that they were in dealing with the lockers: "It's less rough in girls' schools. At the lockers people wouldn't be pushing people out of the way to get in to their locker and all that sort of stuff" (First year boy), but the girls gave a very different account, as vividly described in this discussion during focus group 13:

First year girl A: And when everyone's there it's like a big shoe sale!! Everyone just wants to get there so you are really pushed.
First year girl B: There's a couple of hundred of us so there's loads…
First year girl A: You're crouched in between them.
First year girl C: Yes, I got hit in the head by a bag and everything.
First year girl B: Yes, some people put their bags out in front of them to put their books in and I'm crouched in between them and they're saying watch your bag or watch your head off the door of my locker and they open the locker fully and you could smack your head off it.

Difficulties in managing lockers often led to situations where students were physically carrying far greater loads than perhaps they needed to, and were "exhausted" (Parent of first

year). Teachers did acknowledge the potential for problems around organisational skills, but some seemed unaware of the sheer extent of the experiential impact of these difficulties on children, and when children sought support they were sometimes seen as "needy" (First year teacher). In fact, students felt that some teachers were unfair in applying disciplinary penalties to them for being late due to getting lost in the unfamiliar school, or for forgetting books when they were not used to managing them. Their advice for teachers to make the transition easier for children included, "Don't be giving out to them because they're new to this, especially for the first few weeks because a lot of people didn't have books, you could have got mixed up with books moving from primary to secondary" (First year girl).

Some teachers acknowledged that a lack of organisational skills could be misinterpreted as misbehaviour, and they often felt that they were in fact "taking it easy" (First year teacher) on first years regarding their poor organisational skills: "The first thing is probably to be a bit lenient for the first two weeks, let them get the lay of the land, punctuality, we can ignore a couple of things, if they come five minutes late" (First year teacher). Some school staff also indicated that they felt that this lack of organisational skills was largely a result of parents' treatment of children rather than abilities of the students themselves: "I think maybe the 'Irish mammy' comes into it a bit in that a lot is done for them and I think that parents maybe could do them more of a favour by preparing them" (Community worker).

Some solutions to the difficulties presented by lockers were suggested by participants:

> The lockers, the way they are put together - put gaps in between all the lockers because they are too close and people are trying to get near their own lockers and telling other people to move (First year girl).

> I think we should get things like the iPad, that are all full of books, because then you won't even need lockers and you'd have more space (First year girl).

> There were some girls there that were in the school a couple of years, I think they were prefects, but they were giving their experiences of starting at school and a lot of them were saying the same things, that the lockers were a nightmare. I just said to her, the girls that are helping you, ask them what they did. I was asking S. and he said my locker is this shape, and she said no mine is tall and skinny so you can't try and separate it up some way. So she went and talked to the girls - I said that's what they're there for - and they gave her the idea of hardbacks, take two hardback note-books and make two shelves, so you've books at the bottom and copies at the top. So she did that and it made all the difference (Parent of first year).

> D.'s is colour coded. His books are all colour coded so he just has to look for colours now, he doesn't have to look for the name of the book… you just look in the door and know, right, I need a red book, you don't need to see the name, you just look for the red sticker… I think that should just be compulsory for all of them.... It does work, it's brilliant. I don't know why they don't do it. The schools maybe should suggest it because it just takes so much pressure off them when you've only got three seconds at the locker because someone is coming in on top of you. The stickers are all down the spines of the books so you just grab the sticker. He just knows he needs the yellow book, the green book whatever (Parent of first year).

Others, both children and parents, wondered why first years had to move around the school at all, and suggested that they should have 'base classes' whereby the students stayed in the same class and the teachers came to them:

> When I was in (the girls' secondary school) we had a classroom and your teacher came to you. We could eat our lunch in our classroom, that was our base. Now there's a communal area, a canteen. They don't have a base, they have to go out. If it's nice they can sit outside. They're often sitting outside in the cold eating their lunch… I think if they had a base classroom, just to make them feel that when they go in in the morning there's somewhere that if they're twenty minutes early and they have their books sorted that they can just sit down, get their heads together, maybe somewhere they can leave their coats, leave their PE bag so they don't have to be carting the stuff all around the school with them. I think it's absolutely ridiculous. The amount of worry it would prevent in the school, I think it's ridiculous (Parent of first year).

In spite of all of these difficulties, a minority of participants identified some benefits to the new regime of secondary school, with some children enjoying moving around rather than being in the same classroom all day:

> I like moving around because it goes quicker (First year girl).

> If you are in a class that's really warm you get to go to another class that's probably not as hot (First year girl).

> It would be boring, it's boring sitting in the same class all day and seeing the same teacher all the time, so it's better switching around (First year boy).

Like the participants in the work of Smyth et al. (2004) and O'Brien (2004), first year students also discussed having more than one teacher, and while some did find that challenging, many, particularly boys, indicated that for disciplinary reasons they preferred to have more than one teacher – if they got in trouble with a teacher, they only had to be in that class for 40-50 minutes, as opposed to primary school when they were with one teacher for the whole day: "Last year, we only had one teacher and me and my teacher were arch enemies!.. We never liked each other so it's hard. At least now you have loads of different teachers" (First year boy); "Say you don't like a teacher, the next class after you could have a teacher that you do like, it's just… I don't know… It's better" (First year boy).

As students got to know the school and the procedures, things started to become a little easier for them: "Loads of people say it's really hard to find your way around the school but when you are here for about two weeks it is actually easy. It's big but it's real easy to find your way around" (First year boy); "The lockers seem to be a big one alright. I think often though, by Christmas, they seem to have got the hang of it" (Community worker). Nevertheless, one of the strongest pieces of advice from all participants for students preparing for the move to secondary school was to work on their organisational skills ahead of time: "If you are very organised, everything else will follow" (First year teacher).

#### *5.2.2.3 Summary.*

In support of existing literature on educational transition at both levels studied, academic skills were seen by participants as quite low down on the list of important attributes for children at these times. For both transitions, dispositional factors such as confidence and the ability to manage stress were seen as more important, and at transition from pre-school to primary school, participants emphasised independence and self-care skills, fine motor skills, and the ability to sit still and concentrate. One of the strongest findings in this research was

that organisational skills are key in supporting a positive experience of transition from primary to secondary school. However, while 'person' factors impacted on 'process' at 'times' of educational transition, 'context' was seen as equally influential. In fact, participants identified the vital nature of structural and contextual considerations within schools for children and families transitioning from pre-school to primary school (Dockett and Perry, 2013) and from primary to secondary school (Smyth et al., 2004).

### 5.2.3 Structural and contextual considerations.

All of the schools involved had extensive support systems in place for children in transition. Participants noted the benefits associated with the DEIS designation, including book rental schemes, homework clubs, School Completion Programme (SCP), Home-School-Community Liaison (HSCL), and most significantly, smaller class sizes with an average of 25 children per class. This echoes international findings on the importance of class sizes for transition (Ring et al., 2015; Wesley and Buysee, 2003). There were transition programmes in place to support both the children moving to primary school and those transferring to secondary school. As part of these programmes, visits to their new schools ahead of transition were particularly enjoyed by children, with young children speaking of doing "stuff that was really fun" (Junior infant girl), like "colouring a space rocket" (Pre-school girl), "going to the yard to play, reading books in the library" (Pre-school girl) and "sitting on cushions" (Junior infant boy).

Older children benefitted from 'taster courses' in the subjects they would be studying in first year: "We had an open day and in the metalwork class we got to make key rings and we drilled a hole in it so we could put the chain in" (Sixth class boy); 'treasure hunts' to get to know the new school building, and 'bonding days' involving activities like quizzes and

sports. In turn, secondary school teachers and students visited the primary school to give information and support ahead of the move. Of particular value was the opportunity to address informal rumours previously identified, and supporting Smyth et al. (2004), participants noted how children tended to believe such information coming from peers more than from adults:

> They'd come in, the Principal, maybe the Deputy Principal, and maybe one or two teachers. Then they sometimes would bring in some past pupils of this school who are now in their school, which is great because the kids can then ask them questions, about what it's like, and do you get the 'first year batings' and all this kind of stuff! (Sixth class teacher)

Other supports included mentoring systems whereby older children (fifth year in secondary school or sixth class in primary school) could support the younger ones coming into their schools for the first time, as recommended by Dockett and Perry (2013), Mhic Mhathúna (2011) and Smyth et al. (2004). Children identified by schools as 'at risk' during the process of transition from primary to secondary also had access to a School Completion Programme (SCP) provided by the State. This SCP 'cluster' served eight schools in the area – the two case-study secondary schools, the case-study primary school and five other primary schools. The programme involved targeted supports for three girls and three boys from each of the two sixth classes, so twelve children in all, for five weekly sessions and a full day in the Easter holidays, with particular focus on self-esteem, social skills and organisational skills. This is interesting considering the emphasis placed on these by participants and the literature. If deemed necessary, the SCP Coordinator continued to work with individual students after the move to secondary school. The programme also employed an art therapist, and a Crisis Counsellor.

A key role of the SCP Coordinator was to monitor attendance since, as noted by teachers, absenteeism was seen as an indicator of a child in difficulty. The SCP Coordinator

worked with the HSCL teacher and the Education Officer of the National Education Welfare Board (NEWB) to address such problems with individual families and children, with a view to promoting school attendance and subsequent transfer to secondary school. There was also a Breakfast Club and a Lunch Club, to ensure children got at least two nutritious, healthy meals a day "to keep concentration and help meet the basic need of food" (Community worker), and to support the development of "a positive attachment to the school... as somewhere they are being provided for and cared for" (Community worker). Equally a Homework Club gave children support and a quiet space in which to do their homework. The decision on which children to include was based on multiple indicators such as:

> A history of poor attendance, a history in the family of poor attendance, of siblings or parents even at this stage. Socio-economic conditions, emotional problems, behavioural problems, educational special needs, the list of criteria is quite long (Community worker).

However, in order that children would not feel stigmatised by allocation to the SCP, teachers gave the impression that individual children were "the lucky names that came out of the hat" (Sixth class teacher) rather than being targeted or seen as 'at risk'. Such supports were available from the time children were in 4$^{th}$ class, "so certainly by the time they come into sixth class, at that stage they nearly all know where they're going" (Sixth class teacher). This reinforces the work of Smyth et al. (2004) in identifying the importance of preparation for transition with regards to children's outcomes. Once children started in school, there were also many logistical supports put in place for first years: "They put first years in with the seniors rather than the second and third years. So they are in the same yard as the Prefects. So that's a good thing" (First year teacher). However, the big gap in logistical supports identified in this research related to the area of lockers and support for development of organisational skills, as already noted.

### 5.2.4 The importance of 'time'.

#### *5.2.4.1 School-starting age.*

One 'time' factor that was seen as highly influential on processes of educational transition was school-starting age. In Ireland, children are usually aged either four or five when beginning primary school, and some participants supported the points made by O'Kane and Hayes (2006) in noting how young that still is:

> They are so small… The thing is, for us, when they are going to school we think they are big and we keep telling them that they are big, I don't think we should tell them that they are big… We say, you're a big boy and they are thinking well I wasn't a big boy yesterday and just because I have my uniform on doesn't make me a big boy now (Parent of junior infant).

Teachers in particular questioned the ability of four-year-olds to benefit from the structure of primary school:

> Their age is a big issue as well I think. If you have a child who is four in June or July or August, it is very, very young for them to be coming in… It means they struggle all the way up through the school so it's really hard on them because they just get a bad start. Everything is hard for them whereas if they were that year older they would find it that bit easier and they would cope all the way up… Even to be emotionally ready, some of them are not. Everything is such a big deal for them and they can't cope, the yard is massive and they don't make friends as easily as others or they don't join in as easily as others so that extra year seems to make an awful difference (Junior infant teacher).

Echoing Margetts (2003), some teachers did acknowledge that "it can depend on the child" (Junior infant teacher), and sometimes school-starting age interacted with other important 'person' influences such as gender: "The girls may get away with it but the boys struggle" (Junior infant teacher). However, there was a general consensus among teachers that, all other factors being equal, a child of five generally struggles less with transition to primary school than a child of four: "Definitely in general though, if I saw someone and didn't know them and they said their child was four, I would say not until they are five" (Junior infant teacher). This perspective was echoed by many parents: "I think they are very

young to be going to school if they are just turned four. That's just from personal experience. They still want their mammy" (Parent of junior infant).

However, many parents felt unsure about the best thing to do and debated whether to allow four-year-olds to start school or not. Many expressed fears about children being too advanced if they waited until the age of five to start school and as a result becoming bored and disengaged. On the other hand, they also grappled with concerns about children of four being able to cope in primary school. Parents described their thought processes in making the decision, and largely emphasised individual child factors and family circumstances rather than age per se, with the majority of parents indicating that it depends on the child in question:

> I think she would have been a little bit more shy going in. I actually think her age helped her because of the type of child she was. Now if M. was five it wouldn't have made a difference because she was confident about going anyway…. It's not necessarily that they are not open to learning the same kind of stuff or their brains aren't developed enough for what they are going to be taking in. I think it's the confidence and the age doesn't determine the confidence. But if they are on the end where they are shyer the age could help (Parent of junior infant).

This supports Margetts (2003) contention that school-starting age is relatively insignificant in predicting children's early school adjustment when compared with other factors. The Principal of the primary school strongly disagreed however:

> Even though parents say 'but look she's doing all of this and she's as bright as a button and she can talk and she can sit', but emotionally for her that extra year… It's massive, it really is. The difference when you have children of four starting school, who have just turned four … They are not ready. They are just not ready.

Many participants identified just how challenging it can be for young children to cope with the demands of primary school, and in particular the longer day "They are just ready to sleep at half past one. They are tired at that stage" (Primary school principal). One junior infant very eloquently illustrated the exhaustion of the very young child in such structured

settings – "You get tired, and you fall off chairs". Overall, the viewpoints expressed by participants reflected the lack of consensus in the literature (Ring et al., 2015) regarding school-starting age, ranging from those who strongly felt that four was too young to start school to those who felt that the decision should be made based on individual child factors and family circumstances. However, in another example of the interactive nature of various factors within a Bio-ecological Framework, decisions were sometimes made due to external issues like financial considerations:

> A lot of people can't afford the two years [in pre-school] now so I don't know how some people fare out. You can get the free pre-school year now so a lot of people are opting to just do the year (Parent of junior infant).

Of course, this will no longer be a consideration in Ireland in future, with the introduction in 2015 of a second FPSY. The findings of the current research would indicate that this may impact on the age of children transitioning into primary school in the future.

Some participants noted the importance of age during transition to secondary school also (Maunsell et al., 2007):

> You would notice the girls that would be eleven and then the girls who are thirteen. The majority of them would be twelve but you would notice the difference in terms of maturity. I think they should definitely be twelve starting anyway, even for later on, to be leaving school… it's just so young… even with regards to their college decisions, their parents don't want them going away from home (First year teacher).

However, the majority of participants felt that by the time children enter secondary school, differences based on age have largely diminished, indicating little difference between twelve and thirteen year-olds making the transition. One secondary school teacher indicated "It's [age] never crossed my mind", and another stated "I never find myself asking is he twelve or is he thirteen", contrasting with the views of junior infant teachers regarding the impact of age on transition. In a viewpoint similar to parents experiencing the pre-school to

primary school transition, and to the points made by Margetts (2003), participants at this later transition emphasised individual child factors rather than age. Boys noted physical size as a factor impacting on potential experiences, indicating that very small boys might find the transition more intimidating. Both boys and girls also emphasised maturity rather than age per se:

> I'd say it would be harder for people who are more immature, who aren't really ready for secondary school, they don't want to grow up really. I think secondary school makes you grow up more. If your friends are all real young and you don't want to be the oldest and the one that's grown up because they'll think you're less fun but I think if your friends are older people then you are more mature (First year girl).

Where age was deemed relevant in this later transition was regarding the onset of adolescence (Maunsell et al., 2007). Parents in particular worried about the impact of adolescence on their children's ability to cope with transition: "You know yourself, they have girlfriends and they're breaking up, you know at that age. All this had been going on. It was really stressful" (Parent of first year);

> She's thirteen, she's at an extremely vulnerable age, in her brain development, her hormones, she's quite emotional at the minute… There's too much pressure on her, she's only thirteen. The possibility of taking her out is quite high. I don't think I can do this to her every day. Especially with her age, it's a worry (Parent of first year).

Parents noted how their adolescent children were becoming more distant from them – "I think I'm an embarrassment at the moment!" (Parent of first year). They may in fact have been right to think this: "They can embarrass you when they drop you off!!" (Sixth class boy). This point was also made by teachers:

> Teenagers want to be cool and parents are now entering the time where they are no longer cool to their daughters… It's a big transition and it's also a time of transition to adolescence and all the other baggage that goes with that (First year teacher)

In fact, adolescents had mixed feelings regarding the need for support from parents – they wanted to be 'grown up' and independent but also still felt the need for parental support:

> Because you are getting older, you probably don't want your parents involved in your life or anything, you want to grow up but then if you don't really tell them what's wrong when you have a problem you are not going to be able to tell them. So it's better to have them involved from the beginning so then you have them when it gets really bad (Sixth class girl).

As such, there was a view that the influence of children's age on their experiences of transition is not clear-cut, and may interact with many other factors in its effects.

#### *5.2.4.2 Pre-school to primary vs primary to secondary transition.*

Another area of interest regarding 'time' is how children's experience of transition to primary school compares and contrasts to experiences during transition to secondary school, since educational experience may change as a child progresses through the system (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011). While some differences existed regarding the impact of specific factors such as age, what was most striking in the current research was the similarity between the worries (e. g. bullying) and the hopes (e. g. new friends, new academic experiences) of children at both levels. Of course, the ability to express those worries and hopes varied according to developmental stage. The ability of very young children to describe their experiences was impressive (Greene and Hogan, 2005), but there was a clear difference over time in children's ability to analyse those experiences (Piaget and Inhelder, 1969). Small children focussed on physical details – for example, when asked about the differences between pre-school and primary school, children's answers included "The walls", and "Two slides and one tunnel". When asked about similarities and differences between parents and teachers, one junior infant replied that they were different "because they have different faces… and they have different hair". In contrast, older children showed greater capacity for analysis of aspects of context such as school climate, and relationship factors such as the potential tension between wanting the support of their parents, and yet wanting to strike out on their own and develop their own independence.

### 5.2.5 Summary.

The findings of the current research largely support the literature in identifying transition as a crucial time for children, offering both opportunities and challenges. Participants indicated that outcomes at these crucial 'times' depended on many factors related to 'process', 'person' and 'context'. Important 'processes' noted were relationships between children and their peers (in particular how friendships could support positive transitions, and bullying and other social difficulties could hinder them) and relationships between children and important adults, including teachers and parents. Emotional support from adults was identified as vital to ensuring the success of educational transition, and certainly the changing nature of disciplinary expectations could be seen to impact on these relationships.

The data also support the literature regarding the importance of 'person' factors. Participants indicated that children need to develop 'soft' skills such as independence, pro-social behaviour and sociability rather than academic skills, and this work extends existing findings to emphasise the importance of organisational skills, particularly for children entering secondary school. However, consistent with the Bio-ecological Framework, these 'process' and 'person' factors were seen to be largely dependent on 'context'. Contextual and structural supports for smooth transition included transition programmes incorporating visits to the new school, open days, 'taster courses' and relational supports such as mentoring systems, tutor systems and talks by children who had experienced the transition the previous year. Additional supports for those seen as vulnerable in the process of transition to secondary school were also provided through the School Completion Programme.

As explained by the concept of the chronosystem, 'time' was also seen as important, with age on entry to primary school identified by many participants as crucial. However,

unexpectedly, 'time' was of less relevance according to these participants with regards to age on entry to secondary school and when comparing the earlier transition to the later one. Overall, the findings with regards to children can be theorised and elucidated with reference to the Bio-ecological conception of the central role of 'process' mutually interacting with 'person', 'context' and 'time' to determine outcomes.

Within this conceptualisation, Bronfenbrenner also notes the key role played by adults as components of the micro-systems of children. In particular, the Bio-ecological Framework emphasises relationships between home as school as a vital component of the meso-system, and so analysis now proceeds to consider these 'processes'.

## 5.3 Educational transition from the perspective of parents

The perspective of parents and families is largely missing from the literature on educational transition to date, and the participants of the current research identified many pertinent factors related to 'person', 'context' and 'time' effecting their experiences. However, as was the case with children, 'process' and relationships were seen as particularly important.

As identified by Brooker (2008), Dockett et al. (2012), and INTO (2009) many parents found transition very challenging: "I just found the whole experience for me and for her completely overwhelming" (Parent of first year);

> It was devastating… I wanted to bring him to school, collect him, now I didn't, but that's what I wanted to do. I was worried about how he was going to cope… I was thinking 'Oh God what if he's picked on?' Just the new school, the new teachers… (Parent of first year).

Many parents indicated that they were more upset by transition than their children, with some describing how hard it was not to cry in front of children for fear of making the transition more difficult for them. As Lucey and Reay (2000) note, it can be difficult to separate children's anxieties from those of the adults around them at times of educational transition. Even parents who were relatively relaxed about transition acknowledged its emotional impact: "I wasn't anxious, I was just aware that it was another step for him on the way to growing up [but] it was a little bit emotional" (Parent of junior infant);

> I was up for him to go to school but at the same time, as a parent, I was heartbroken that he was actually at that milestone. Because even before when it was playschool and pre-school, it was only half time, you know, it wasn't the big school (Parent of junior infant).

Both teachers and parents described difficulties around the changing role of parents as children progress through the education system (O'Kane and Hayes, 2006). The experiences of parents during transition to secondary school in particular confirmed existing literature (INTO, 2009) identifying the increasing formality of interactions at secondary level, and the increased alienation of parents (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011). Parents sometimes even felt alienated from their children as their independence developed and they needed their parents less. As one parent of a first year child plaintively articulated, "I feel like I'm losing her to the secondary school";

> I think it's like they're gone when they start in secondary school… She doesn't want any help with her homework, she just comes home, does whatever she has to do. Sometimes she has a long lunch break and gets the homework done for the morning. She just wants to get out as fast as she can. Sometimes it feels like I don't have that much contact with them any more (Parent of first year twins).

### 5.3.1 The contested role of parents in educational transition.

With regards to the appropriate roles to be played by parents at these times, there were some conflicting views expressed, mirroring the lack of clarity in the literature on what 'parental involvement' actually means (Kavanagh and Hickey, 2013; Robinson and Harris,

2014). For younger children entering primary school, as well as preparing them for the independence required of them as explored above, parents were advised by participants to constantly talk to their child about what to expect, to always maintain positivity about school, and to support children as proactively as possible:

> It's fine in school but at the end of the day there are so many pupils in a class, the teachers can do as much as they can do, even in circumstances where it is a really good school but I think if you got one or two people at home supporting as well, all the way up through your education that it would definitely stand to you… I think purely the parent's interest in it can just make all the difference (Parent of junior infant).

This reinforces Räty's (2010) work with regards to the transmission of the meanings of education from one generation to the next. While older children did note the importance of emotional support from parents in the move to first year as explored above regarding parent-child relationships during transition, they largely focussed on the practical supports provided: "They buy your books and uniform" (Sixth class girl). Many children, parents and teachers (echoing Smyth et al., 2004 and Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001) also mentioned help with homework and support with choosing subjects. Some participants indicated that parents had a vital role to play in the educational transitions of their children, and that they should aim to be very much involved: "Most definitely. If the parent isn't supportive then the transition is all on the teachers. I just think any transition for a child needs to be supported until they can manage themselves" (Parent of junior infant).

> It's really about parents knowing their kid, checking in with them, going through the options. Making sure if their child is going there because of their friends that they know their opportunities. I think a lot of work really needs to be done with the parents more than transition with the kids. It's a really big transition for the parent. They don't know what's going on (Community worker).

However, some participants indicated that parents should avoid becoming over-involved, as it could limit the ability of children to 'find their feet' on their own. This applied both to transition from pre-school to primary school: "The only thing I would say is that in September, the first day is fine but after that I don't think the parents should keep going in with them every day. It up-scuttles them" (Parent of junior infant); and particularly in

transition from primary to secondary school: "They should be less involved because you could get slagged over that!" (First year boy); "Just give them time to breathe" (First year girl);

> [Parents] were coming up to the locker, opening the locker 'now there's your books for today' closing the locker and dropping them to class. Sometimes you would see them in the evening coming back after lunch to make sure. I saw four parents doing that and thought 'what the hell?'… They had to be told to leave them at the gates, let them come in, let them grow up, be their own person because by the time he leaves here he is going to be a man (First year teacher).

> I feel he really just needs to get on with it, there's no point in pampering. Everything is going to be a first. Your first job, first day in college, please God, there are going to be a lot of firsts ahead. I don't think softening… now I wanted to make it as easy as possible for him but there are plenty of more things ahead that he needs to be ready for (Parent of first year).

Therefore, as posited by Brooker (2008) and Dockett et al. (2012) parents were presented as playing an important role in their children's educational transitions, but participants of this research largely suggested that this role should be relational and practical rather than direct involvement as such.

### 5.3.2 The power of 'process'.

Again strong relationships were seen to mediate any potential challenges, and some of the relationships noted included those with other parents and between home and school.

#### *5.3.2.1 Parents' friendships.*

Many parents noted the importance of knowing other parents who are going through similar experiences:

> I think one of the good things for me was right away, from playschool, I started to make friends with parents… I made friends and got to know a few names and N. had a few play dates with people and I still have friends from the playschool. I think that's good because you can hear each other's stories and you can attend the classes with

> people from the playschool… So for me, as a parent, that's important to be friends with other mothers who have kids the same age (Parent of junior infant).

This can provide challenges for parents at times of educational transition, because as noted by Dockett et al. (2012), parents often leave behind many of their social supports as their children progress to new settings, and some noted how hard it could be to make new friends at the new educational level:

> I think it's a big transition. You are getting used to a new environment as a parent and then you are trying to break into a group yourself. I remember on our first, my daughter didn't know anyone in the class. In Montessori you would have got to know a few of the parents and you had a little group, then when S. started [primary school], it's hard to chat to new parents (Parent of junior infant).

#### *5.3.2.2 Relationships between home and school.*

Participants also emphasised the vital nature of good communication and the formation of positive relationships between home and school, consistent with many other findings in the literature (Brooker, 2008; Dockett et al., 2012; Hornby and Lafaele, 2011; Mhic Mhathúna, 2011; Ring et al., 2015) as well as an understanding of educational transition within the meso-system of the child: "We can't survive as a school if we don't have the parents on board… You are always welcome. The door is always open to have a chat" (Principal primary school). Primary school children liked the idea of their teachers and parents communicating well. Ahead of transition, sixth class children wanted their parents to support teachers to see their full potential, and to help if they met with any difficulties: "If the teachers get to know you and then talk to the parents, the parents can tell them 'well she's not like that or he's not like that' and tell them more about what you are really like" (Sixth class girl);

> The parent should be able to come in and talk to the teacher if they think the child is better and the teacher is not saying it… Any day they should be allowed go in and talk to the teacher (Sixth class girl).

Parents also noted the importance of good communication, and in spite of Hornby and Lafaele's (2011) critique of the term 'partnership', this was often how parents viewed their relationships with their children's schools:

> We decided from the start that it was kind of a partnership we were entering into. We were the parents and the teachers are the teachers and we were all there together to get the child to the stage where they would be fulfilled in the educational process (Parent of junior infant).

> Well I think the most important thing is communication, between the teacher and yourself… I think if you are open you will always be able to say something to the teacher and she will be able to say something back to you. If you are open with them and honest with them, if you think your child is struggling, go in and tell them (Parent of junior infant).

A minority of parents reported difficult communication, particularly at secondary level, and at all levels some teachers reported feeling intimidated by 'aggressive' parents: "There are some parents, I'm not going to lie, that I am fearful of when I have to talk to them" (Junior infant teacher);

> I think no matter how long you're teaching if you know so and so is coming in to see you, you still... There's anxious moments … Because we are sitting ducks, you know, you're on your own (Sixth class teacher).

> The only issue that I ever really heard of is when a teacher is very strict in a parent's eyes. Parents are just very defensive. Some of them don't want their children to be reprimanded by other people, they don't feel that it is a teacher's thing to do so. I don't know how that can be improved on. It's kind of a culture. I didn't grow up like that myself, with my parents whatever the teacher said was right and that is not the attitude here at all. A lot of our parent's automatic response would be that the teacher is wrong, they love a fight sometimes (First year teacher).

However, many teachers, particularly the HSCL teacher in the primary school, emphasised the importance of proactive relationship building by schools (Dockett et al., 2012; Epstein, 2001; Hornby and Lafaele, 2011) and seeing things from the parent's 'internal frame of reference' (Rogers, 1995):

> Generally people, if they feel that you are on their side, they will open up, they will accept whatever kind of help that you can give them. But people are proud and sometimes don't want to ask for help. You can only go so far, it's an invitation and they can accept or they can decline (HSCL teacher).

The HSCL teacher showed strong awareness of 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1973) potentially limiting parents' capacity to build strong relationships:

> Parents normally would have felt that they can't be going up to the school, years ago let's say, if they were up in the school there must be a problem. So it's really breaking down all the barriers and saying 'this is your place', there is a space for parents and we value what you say (HSCL teacher).

Overall, respondents in this research painted a picture of very positive relationships between home and school, with warm, open communication and a sense of feeling supported and listened to. Teachers in the case study schools and pre-schools expressed strong recognition of the vital role of parents in their child's education. As a result, the majority of parents were happy with relationships at all educational levels. Many parents noted that communication at pre-school level was generally informal:

> If you had something to say you were never pushed. There was always a few minutes in the morning or a few minutes in the evening to say whatever you had to say. They spoke to you about what was going on, you were told if the kids were having a hard time (Parent of junior infant).

On the other hand, one pre-school had a system whereby parents dropped their children to the door and collected them from outside, rather than going in, and parents felt that this limited the opportunities for informal communication, emphasising the potentially negative impact of structural factors on positive outcomes (Downes, 2014):

> The parents used to wait outside. You dropped them off and then the kids would go in… They would come out with all the things they have done but you didn't actually get a chance to see the pre-school that much (Parent of junior infant).

In contrast to literature identifying a dip in communication after children leave pre-school (INTO, 2009), parents in this cohort spoke very positively, sometimes glowingly,

about their relationships with the primary school, and many indicated that the primary school made even more time for parents pre-schools did; "It's a great school and the teachers are brilliant, it's really homely almost" (Parent of junior infant);

> If there are any issues that I need to address, there is absolutely no problem. I am always able to do that. When the kids come out of school you are able to go back into the teacher when they have let all the other kids go. I have had to do that a couple of times so that I could talk to the teacher (Parent of junior infant).

Notwithstanding the exceptions noted above, the majority of teachers felt similarly about parents: "They are really good, the parents are lovely" (Junior infant teacher); "They are really nice" (Junior infant teacher). Children in sixth class also noted the trust that had built up between their parents and their teachers in the years they had been in primary school: "[My parents trust them] because we are here so long and they are so nice" (Sixth class girl). However, mirroring the pre-school experience, contextual factors impacted strongly on these relationships between home and school at primary level also. One barrier to communication between home and school that was identified by parents was the use of notes, because small children in junior infants often lost the notes, or forgot to give them to their parents: "They might give it to me two days later" (Parent of junior infant). This was a problem for teachers also:

> It's not fair to blame the kids if they don't bring a note back. You are thinking 'oh my God' but they are five so you can't really expect them to… You go looking for each one, day to day, someone will arrive up with another note or else they are all stuffed in together and you can't expect the child to know, these are important, they are vaccinations [for example], we need them in. So some things they need to be given to us personally and making sure we have them (Junior infant teacher).

In contrast to much of the literature (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011; INTO, 2009; Smyth et al., 2009), many participants indicated that communication and relationships between home and school also remained positive in the move to secondary school, and all of the first year girls indicated that their parents would feel comfortable to call to reception or make a

phone-call to the school if necessary: “It’s real helpful and my mam has gone to them before and she said it’s grand” (First year girl). “I can’t think of anything [to improve communication between home and school] because it’s so good” (First year girl).

All of the first year boys interviewed also felt that their secondary school was an open place for their parents: “[Parents] have their phone number and it’s only in walking distance for most people” (First year boy). Many parents agreed:

> They still say now, ‘if you ever have a problem just come in’… I rang his Form Teacher and said that I was a little bit worried. She stayed on the phone with me for nearly an hour… she said that she was going to keep an eye on him and have a chat with him if I didn’t mind. I said no I didn’t mind because he got on really well with her, she was great… she kept in touch with me all the time. Then when I went in for the Parent/Teacher meeting she said that he was grand again (Parent of first year).

However, participants did note some changes in relationships between home and school after transition to secondary school, largely due to the fact that children in secondary had a number of teachers rather than just one, and parents didn’t have the opportunity to get to know secondary teachers the way they would have known primary school teachers. For the minority of parents who reported difficulties in their relationships with the secondary schools, this seems to have been a significant contributory factor:

> I couldn’t tell you what any of her teachers look like, there’s no person that I could go to, or there’s no link that I have, that you could build up a relationship with in terms of your child. I’ve rang a couple of times. T. was sick a few weeks ago and I’d to go up and pick her up and I was trying to meet her tutor and it just wasn’t happening, everything is so busy, so there’s no one link if you’ve got concerns (Parent of first year).

It also took parents some time to get to know the communication procedures in the new school:

> There was one time I made a mistake. She was coming out of school early and I had written a note, but I wasn't clear that I had to ring the office as well, so the secretary was trying to ring me and couldn't get through to me, and my girl was upset by the time she got home (Parent of first year).

Some of these changes also related to developmental factors, with many participants indicating that parents did not need to be as directly involved with their children's schools as the children grew older and more independent. As a result, secondary school teachers acknowledged that they often only made contact with a child's parents when there was a disciplinary issue. Equally, echoing the experiences of children, 'person' factors sometimes interacted with 'context' to effect 'process' at these 'times'.

### 5.3.3 The impact of 'person' factors on parental involvement.

As indicated by Räty (2010), 'person' factors such as parents' previous experiences of education could impact on their perceptions of both transition and relationships with schools. Experience of pre-school was seen as an important support for parents with regards to the separation anxiety involved in sending their children to school – if they had experienced the separation for pre-school, it was considered easier to 'let go' when the child went to primary school. On the other hand, if parents had previous negative experiences with schools, this could lead to difficulties (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011): "Sometimes a breakdown in communication can be when the parent themselves have had a bad experience in school and they dislike teachers" (First year teacher); "For some people, school is incredibly scary to go back to. Some people dropped out early, they don't want to go back, they don't want to see old teachers because a lot of them are still there" (Community worker);

> Some of our parents would not have gone to college they would have had maybe a negative experience themselves possibly themselves in primary school so when we want to meet them for example at parent teacher meetings they are actually more afraid than the students themselves… sometime you can smell drink, you can sense that it is traumatic, so sometimes they don't come (First year teacher).

As identified by Hornby and Lafaele (2011) and Räty (2010), such memories can impact strongly on parents' self-efficacy beliefs, and hence behaviour, and involvement in their children's education:

> It would be their own idea of what a school is, and their own idea of inadequacy… the worry that 'I didn't have a good time myself in school, so I really don't want to be getting involved there'… or then it's 'Oh how could I help anyway?'. So they would be the two things that would keep parents away the most. But parents who have good self-esteem or have had a good experience themselves, they are the ones who are always there and are involved in everything… but the timid ones might say to you afterwards, 'I had a tough old time in school, I hated it' or 'school wasn't like this when I was a kid'. That's how you get the little insight that maybe that was what was holding them back (HSCL teacher).

The HSCL teacher in the primary school reinforced previous findings that the ability to support children's learning does not require a high level of parental education (Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 1997; Hornby, 2000), and that when schools are proactive in raising self-efficacy beliefs, the results can be powerful for both parents and children (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011):

> They put themselves down not realising that actually any little thing they do, has an extraordinary influence on their child… They are very shy and have great feelings of inadequacy that they wouldn't be able to do anything to help but if you give them any little bit of encouragement and show them what to do, of course they are more than well able to do it but they also grow in confidence then.

On the other hand, sometimes parents' poor educational and vocational experiences left them with a determination that life would be different for their children, and increased the likelihood of their involvement:

> I left school early… I worked on the building sites most of my life and as a result I am half crippled now with my back… That's why we kind of push our kids… I explain to them that I don't want them to go down and have a 'no man's job'. You have the brains, don't waste the opportunity… it's just my regret now at not studying at school and leaving school at an early age, I don't want my kids to go down that road. I want them to have a career (Parent of first year).

Working either part-time or full-time also obviously limited availability for parents to get involved in their children's school lives, as noted by Kavanagh and Hickey (2013): "If you are not in that position, my husband's sister, her kids are here and she works five days a week so she has never really had that opportunity to avail of different things" (Parent of

junior infant). Some other parental characteristics were noted by teachers as barriers to their involvement or to positive communication between home and school:

> For some it can be maturity as well. Some of the parents are very young… There could be parents at Junior Infant level who are twenty-one, twenty-two, or maybe coming from a bad background themselves, or single parent families where the father isn't on the scene or never was on the scene so things like that (Junior infant teacher).

Nevertheless, in similar findings to those regarding children, the potential impact of 'person' factors on the development of positive relationships was hugely influenced by the availability of 'contextual' support.

### 5.3.4 Structural and contextual considerations.

Regarding school-based supports for parental involvement in children's education, pre-schools depended on informal approaches to communication, but at primary level supports became more structured. Relationships with parents were high priority for the principal of the primary school, so significant time and effort were invested in building relationships with them. The school was very much a hub of the local community, and the warm, inclusive climate was palpable. In fact it was mentioned by many participants, parents and teachers alike:

> We opened in 1978, I was one of the first, we had a group of 12 and I think that ethos of friendliness started right from then. We do have a core group of teachers who have been here from the beginning so I think we are very conscious of making sure we keep that up. It's something that the school is known for (Principal primary school).

This was something that the principal was very conscious of fostering:

> That's very, very important to me. If I ever felt that was dropping in any way or that a parent felt that they weren't welcome for whatever reason, I would go out of my way to solve that. It's high priority. If you haven't got the environment right, if you haven't got that caring atmosphere there, where the children feel happy and safe, learning just does not happen (Principal primary school).

In similar findings to those of Mulkerrins (2007), parents also very much valued the role of the Home-School-Community-Liaison teacher:

> You know the way they have the liaison officer, Ms C? She's very good. If you need to go and talk to her she's there for anything and I feel that because they have such good communication and because they constantly have meetings to encourage parents to go in. There are a lot of schools where parents don't even go inside the door whereas they are constantly encouraging, days where you come and have a talk about your child. As I said, they do say if you want to talk in confidence, they will come to us. They are constantly emphasising that (Parent of junior infant).

The HSCL teacher was particularly active in creating opportunities for parents to become involved in the life of the school. At the beginning of the year a newsletter was distributed with information on the service and how to contact her. She also met with parents of all junior infants. A suggestion box was available for parents, and the parents' classes run in the primary school were positively noted by many, in opposition to concerns about deficit perspectives inherent in classes such approaches (Kavanagh and Hickey, 2013): "I think it is important, they actually started going to those classes and I think it's great. The classes are free as well" (Parent of junior infant). One grandparent, for example, described how much he enjoyed the cookery class and how it made him feel a part of the school – "otherwise she [teacher] would never have got to know me" (Grandparent of junior infant).

Educational classes developed parents' sense of self-efficacy, and consistent with the findings of Hornby and Lafaele (2011) the HSCL teacher noted that often as parents became more involved in their children's education, they became more confident and interested in their own education, often going on to complete further studies. The needs of parents and children were well coordinated with a 'Little Dinosaurs' club for children who needed support with behaviour and managing anger, and a 'parenting course' run in tandem based on the Incredible Years Programme. All schools held parent-teacher meetings to allow discussion of children's progress and needs. However, this was not practised at pre-school

level, and a number of parents indicated that they would value the opportunity to meet formally with their child's pre-school teacher to hear about how they were getting on, rather than relying on the more informal methods of parent support practiced at pre-school level.

The primary school also encouraged parental involvement in their children's learning external to the school setting. They presented parents with a 'literacy pack' at the initial parents' meeting for junior infants that contained a story book, crayons and a colouring book, to encourage them to read with their child. Some parents came into classrooms to support teachers with lessons on occasion through programmes called 'Maths for Fun' and 'Science for Fun'. Parents whose children's scores on the Middle Infant Screening Test led to concern were given the opportunity to take part in a 'Forward Together' programme teaching them literacy games and other approaches to supporting literacy with their children. The school also kept parents informed with newsletters, and information days on aspects of the curriculum such as 'Jolly Phonics'. This supported parents to help their children with homework.

Teachers also sent a journal home with children each day, with generalised information and instructions regarding homework, and there was also a text messaging system. However, the most important contextual facilitator of strong relationships between parents and the primary school appeared to be simply a welcoming attitude that was reflected in day-to-day practices: "The parents and the kids going to school together. It's more of a community. You are not just dropping at the door and then only seeing the teacher once a year. You are more involved" (Parent of junior infant). In many Irish primary schools, children line up outside in the morning to be brought to class by teachers, and parents never enter the school. As noted, this approach adopted by one of the case study pre-schools was

identified by parents as a barrier to communication. However, in this primary school, parents could take their children into their classroom, facilitating informal communication with teachers, and making parents feel like a welcome part of the school community:

> What I like is that they open the doors from 8:30am and the kids can wait in the hall between 8:30am and 8:45am. All the teachers seem to be in their classrooms from 8:45am. You can drop the kids in from 8:45am – 9am. You have an opportunity to talk to the teacher if you have any concerns, first thing in the morning because they are there. I know in some of the other schools locally, they are out in the yard and then are called in so you don't get the same opportunity, coming out in the afternoons they are coming out in their lines and the teachers are watching the lines and watch all the kids so it's not as easy to talk to them. Whereas in [case study primary school] you do have that opportunity to go and talk to the teachers in the morning, you will catch them at 8.45am (Parent of junior infant).

> You have more access to their education and more involvement. You get talking to more people as well. You can see, you're looking at the walls, the halls as you are walking by and the kids are saying 'I did that'. You are in there with them for their education. You are being told always to be involved and that you're the parent and you are the first person, the first educator. When you are leaving them outside in a yard every morning, it's hard to get the contact. You feel what's going on in the presence of the school but I think if you are walking in then it's your school too, you feel involved (Parent of junior infant).

The principal and HSCL teacher made a point of being in the lobby area of the school every morning to greet children and parents as they arrived, and a real sense of community was evident:

> They are extremely open… There is a Principal, a Vice Principal and a helper and they all stand around the reception every morning. They are there for 20 minutes, greeting, meeting people at the reception and then you can bring your child right up to the class… It's brilliant. It's just more homely (Parent of junior infant).

Some teachers did note the logistical difficulties that this practice sometimes caused, regarding speaking to parents informally while also watching out for children being collected or arriving, but many parents noted that as well as this informal opportunity to chat, they could also make an appointment to meet with their child's teacher if they had something more substantial to talk about. Almost all parents associated with the primary school noted how approachable the teachers were. The overall consensus was that

> It's formal and it's informal at the same time and it works! It seems to work because all the feedback from the parents who I know have their kids there is that they couldn't be happier. I have never heard anything negative about the school from anybody (Parent of junior infant).

The primary school and the two secondary schools held meetings ahead of time for parents, to inform them about how things would be for their children in junior infants or first year. These were identified as an excellent resource by many participants, going a long way to reassure anxious parents:

> At the Principal's talk in the Summer, you could actually feel people's relief in the room. And one of A.'s little friends, her mam was really anxious. She's not from the area and she didn't know a lot about the school and you could just feel people really chilling out after [the principal] spoke to them… There was some sort of statement made about how available they are. Let's not react to a problem, let's prevent it, we're here so let us know if you are worried about something before it becomes a problem (Parent of junior infant).

However, junior infant teachers noted that the meetings were attended by the principal and HSCL teacher only, and indicated that they would value the opportunity to contribute:

> We are the ones on the front line and we are the ones that build up a huge rapport especially if you have them for two years and you get to know the parents really well. So it would be good for us to be able to meet with them because some of those kinds of meetings, it's not us that have the same input whereas if we were standing out there as well saying this is what we need to happen from our point of view, not just someone who is not in the classroom teaching Junior Infants. Even if you are out of Junior Infants for three or four years, it has changed so much (Junior infant teacher).

Girls in first year also referred to proactive efforts by the school to build relationships with their parents:

> Do you know Ms K? She already had two meetings with the parents so she isn't just bringing us into the school and not making any contact with the parents. She has had a lot of contacts. We always get texts (First year girl).

The girls' secondary school had a Parents' Association, and there were two Parent Representatives on the Board of Management. There was also a parents' handbook as well as a system of text messaging to keep parents involved, and at the time of data collection (2012),

they were developing and trialling an on-line ‘e-portal’ system called ‘Edmodo’ whereby parents, teachers and children could log on and access information about progress, learning and behaviour. Importantly, the girls’ secondary school also had an allocated ‘parents’ room’, which not only facilitated the logistics of parental involvement, but also sent a powerful message about how welcome they were (INTO, 1997). Like the primary school, they also had a HSCL teacher who aimed to visit the homes of all first year students at least once. She also ran regular information nights on topics such as cyberbullying that all parents were welcome to attend, and there were some more ‘fun’ activities run by teachers, such as a film course and trips to the theatre. However, according to one first year teacher, the uptake of such events was low, and supporting Hornby and Lafaele (2011), the first year head noted that the parents they most wanted to reach often did not attend:

> When we are running nights like information nights or support nights or nights on cyberbullying and things like that, usually students with parents that mightn’t have the same support there, they might be the ones not to attend, and they are the ones you really want to attend (First year teacher).

The boys’ secondary school used an email and texting system to facilitate communication between teachers, parents and children, as well as an ‘e-book’ system that children indicated was “like Facebook” (First year boy). The boys’ secondary school also had an allocated ‘parents’ room’, with similar positive effects to those evident in the girls’ school. There was also a parents’ handbook that was specifically targeted at the parents of first year boys, to introduce them to school life at secondary level. It is noteworthy that many of the areas identified in the handbook for parents to be aware of are those that were raised by participants themselves, such as moving from being among the biggest children in primary school to being among the smallest in secondary, difficulties managing lockers and timetables, the challenges involved in having up to eight teachers rather than just one, and the potential emotional turmoil associated with all of these within a “healthy and indeed

necessary opportunity to grow" (p. 11). This shows awareness of the experiential impact of transition on children. The handbook also emphasises parental involvement, and gives examples of specific things that parents can do such as ensuring homework is done, help for children in interpreting timetables and getting organised, and ensuring that children get enough sleep. This is useful considering the lack of clarity in the literature on what parental involvement actually means (Kavanagh and Hickey, 2013; Robinson and Harris, 2014).

It is worth noting that while all of the schools, primary and post-primary, had websites to communicate important information to parents and children, none of the pre-schools had a website, although information about them was available on other websites pertaining to early childhood education in the area. Within a Bio-ecological Framework, the experiences of these children, families and schools must be rooted within the community from which they come, and the area in which these schools and pre-schools were located is a well-established, vibrant community, with a number of supports available to families that may impact on experiences of educational transition. Parents spoke repeatedly about the importance of 'word of mouth' from neighbours when the time came to choose a new school for their children, and the primary school had a strong reputation in the neighbourhood. Parents who originally came from outside the area or from other countries relied on 'word of mouth' through more formal community-based supports:

> The playgroup actually. I'm not from around here, I moved in about ten years ago so that was probably about seven years before anybody started going to school. The playgroup was over in the Community Centre so I would have met lots of mammies from there over the years and I suppose just from speaking to them and where their kids were going to school, which schools are good, the location as well, I can walk from here. There is a closer school, but I didn't speak to many people who had their kids there and I suppose the people that I was friendlier with, their kids were going to [the primary school]. I heard very good things about it (Parent of junior infant).

### 5.3.5 The importance of time.

#### *5.3.5.1 Changing norms around parental involvement over time.*

Social norms around parental involvement in education (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011), were identified as changing over time in Ireland (INTO, 1997), as illustrated by this conversation in focus group 17:

Parent G: Years ago I don't think they wanted the parents in school did they?
Parent E: Not when I was in school. You never saw a mammy at the yard or anything.
Parent G: Unless there was trouble.
Grandparent A: You never saw a male.
Parent E: Unless you were sick or in trouble or something.
Parent L: If you saw your mam or dad you would be asking why are they here but it was a different time.
Parent A: The rules change.

Another aspect of changing socio-cultural norms noted by many participants was the increasing involvement of grandparents in the school lives of their grandchildren (Wasoff, 2009). In many cases 'parental involvement' actually meant 'grandparental involvement'. Junior infant children, for instance, described how grandparents brought them to school and collected them, and this has been incorporated into the life of the primary school through initiatives such as 'Grandparents' Day'. One respondent who was a grandparent indicated how much this meant to him, and as a man of his generation who would not have been very involved in his own children's schooling, how much he valued the 'second chance' he was getting with his grand-daughter:

> When my four kids came here, I was working, so I never knew any of that. But because I have a grandchild now I am interacting more, whereas before even something like this [focus group], I never would have done it. There's just something about it now, when I saw the photographs [of grandparents' day], I thought, that's neat! (Grandparent of junior infant)

The grandparental role was seen as particularly important in situations where parents had difficulties, or did not have the capacity to support their children:

> All my classes are open to parents and grandparents because I know that when the child is being collected it's the grandparent that is collecting them, it's the grandparent getting them in, it's the grandparent sitting doing the homework and not necessarily because the parents are working, some of them are not working, they are maybe in bed or not able, for whatever reason. So the grandparents are hugely important (HSCL teacher).

#### *5.3.5.2 Recession.*

Another 'time'-related factor, the recession at time of data collection, was seen by some participants as adding to the stress of transition for families due to the costs involved in moving from one school to another, reflecting the concerns raised by the Joint Committee on Education and Social Protection (2013) and supporting the work of Elder (1998). First year students worried about the impact on their parents – "I don't think it's fair to get all the books because the books and the uniform are a lot of money" (First year girl), and parents also identifying the strain placed on them financially: "You are getting letters, upon letters, looking for money, money, money" (Parent of junior infant).

Therefore, regarding parental involvement in educational transition, 'time' factors were influential in terms of changing social norms and difficult economic circumstances.

### 5.3.6 Summary.

In summary, this research goes some way to addressing a significant gap in the literature on educational transition by accessing the perspectives of parents. It acknowledges how challenging transition can be for parents and families in emotional, practical, financial and social terms, but identifies how contextual supports and proactive relationship-building can ameliorate many potential difficulties. Participants largely advised balance in parental involvement, through offering both practical and emotional supports to children, without 'smothering' them or limiting their ability to thrive independently.

While relationships between home and school were seen as vital components of the meso-system for children, the Bio-ecological Framework portrays schools as rooted within their communities, and the literature outlined in Chapter 3 showed the importance of communication between educational levels at times of transition. Therefore, the analysis now proceeds to examine the 'process' of schools and communities.

## 5.4 Educational transition from the perspectives of teachers, schools and communities.

The current research also examined experiences of educational transition and parental involvement from the viewpoints of teachers, schools and communities. Again, 'person', 'context' and 'time'-related factors were seen by participants as highly important, but 'process' was seen as vital.

### 5.4.1 The power of 'process'.

#### *5.4.1.1 School-to-school communication.*

Consistent with the work of Dockett et al. (2011) and Mhic Mhathúna (2011), teachers in this sample emphasised the importance of school-to-school communication in supporting children through transitions. However, in reality, communication between pre-school and primary school levels was somewhat minimal as noted by O'Kane and Hayes (2006), O'Kane (2015) and Ring et al., (2015). This could cause difficulties at times: "I have had one child before, where nothing was told from the crèche and there was a major problem, then they left and we had to fight for an SNA" (Junior infant teacher). Parents also noted the lack of communication between pre-schools and primary schools, and suggested an increased role for pre-schools in providing information for parents ahead of transition to primary school:

> I think it could be a little bit more advertised, maybe in the pre-schools, a little bit more information about them. I have never seen them advertising schools. It's always just speaking to other parents and things like that. I have never seen any information booklets or things about each school so in that way there could be more (Parent of junior infant).

Sometimes, communication between pre-school and primary school was initiated or suggested by parents, particularly when problems arose for their children:

> I have one at the moment that I am trying to get assessed and the parents didn't tell me anything but when I spoke to them they asked me to ring the playschool teacher because she had these issues (Junior infant teacher).

In situations like this, it tended to be the principal who made contact with the pre-school as part of a more formalised process to initiate an assessment of needs, and junior infant teachers indicated that they would value more direct communication with pre-school teachers, even if it were only in written form:

> I think it would be nice if there was some sort of standardised, I don't know, whether it's a form or something… The only reports I have ever had in came from the Montessori schools, they gave a little report on the child and the difficulties that I saw in concentration and that was a problem there… I think it would be handy because with others you don't know… There is a big push on transition from primary into secondary but I think we should be given some information on how they have got on at pre-school. Because unless you go searching you don't know exactly, you are not being told (Junior infant teacher).

While teachers did feel they could phone the pre-schools if necessary, they felt that this was unlikely to happen unless there was something quite serious involved, and they indicated that they would very much value a more informal culture, where they could pick up the phone to find out about things like children's interests, so that they could build on them in their lessons. This is illustrated in the following exchange during focus group 20:

Junior infant teacher A: To be honest about it, [I would like to know] would it be ok to contact the playschool if needs be, just to see if they have the same problems, when you see someone who has very poor motor skills for example, to find out what have they done and were they experiencing the same problem.

Junior infant teacher B: Unless it is quite serious you are not really going to ring the pre-

school.

Junior infant teacher C: It would be nice to have just a general bit of information.

Junior infant teacher A: Yes, just to see whether they are good at certain things and if you can pick up on that as well and encourage them if they are good at it.

Teachers also indicated that they would value the opportunity to discuss with pre-school teachers the kinds of skills that children need to successfully navigate junior infants, and to explore with them how the development of such skills could be supported in the pre-school setting:

> I would find I have the sort of class where, mainly with the boys, there are very poor motor skills, quite immature, they seem to have never picked up a scissors and the crayon work is really poor so it would be handy to know what they were like and there is nothing coming in from playschools (Junior infant teacher).

It is worth noting, however, that teachers did not indicate how they felt such cultural changes could come about (whether they or the pre-school teachers would need to be proactive in making these changes) and in general, as indicated above, pre-school teachers in this sample did show good awareness of the kinds of skills valued by junior infant teachers.

Regarding 'processes' between primary and secondary levels, participants described strong communication, reflecting extensive policy focus on this transition in Ireland at present (NCCA, 2010a; 2010b; Fitzpatrick, 2015). In particular, communication between the primary school and the two secondary schools studied was well developed, and at time of data collection an 'induction / enrolment committee' was working on strengthening links even further. However, sixth class teachers did note that communication was not always as strong with other schools in the area, and while the majority of children went to these two schools, there were always some children going elsewhere. Nevertheless, communication and strong relationships between the two levels were a priority:

> The more links there are between primary and post-primary and natural links, the better. If the sixth class teachers are coming in and out of the building too, they are

> familiar and they also know and they can be giving the messages that look if you have a difficulty when you go to secondary school, talk to such and such. So I think that the primary school understand some of the systems that are in place but it's all around that good information flow and being open and for people to say look I've had sixth class teachers come in here and show them around (Principal girls' secondary school).

Communication between primary and secondary levels was in the process of being strengthened and formalised, with the newly instituted transfer of information relating to standardised testing as a result of NCCA initiatives ('Education Passport'). The limited nature of such information (Ó Breacháin and O'Toole, 2013) was noted by teachers however: "Is this reflective of the child's ability or is this just a bad day?" (Sixth class teacher), and communication also focused on holistic aspects of the child such as "family situation… the type of learner the student is… are they motivated about special interests or hobbies" (First year teacher). Information was also shared regarding any resource hours that the child had been receiving as well as psychological and any other external reports. However, the fact that it was generally the guidance counsellor rather than class teachers that linked with the primary school sometimes meant that important issues relating to students were not communicated to teachers: "I could be teaching students for a couple of months sometimes and then find out that they had a parent who died or something. You can get that kind of information very late on" (First year teacher).

#### *5.4.1.2 Links between school and community as a component of the meso-system.*

The Bio-ecological Framework also emphasises the importance of links between schools and the communities in which they are located as key to a strong meso-system for children and families. The case-study primary school in particular had numerous links and well-established communication with local community organisations. Some of the classes for parents in the primary school described above were run in partnership with the local VEC (Vocational Education Committee), and parents had opportunities to gain qualifications to

FETAC Level 3 as a result. Some classes were also delivered by the local area 'partnership', and additionally it funded various literacy and transition-related activities. There was also a developing partnership with the library, whereby a number of children and their parents met with the librarian and learned how to get the most out of sharing the written word together. The primary school also had links with Junior Achievement Ireland (Bí Gnóthach, Enterprise Ireland), whereby adults working in various industries volunteered their services to help children learn about science and maths. Children in sixth class also benefitted from sex education classes run by Accord, and team-building / self-esteem workshops run by the VEC.

All of this was coordinated by a local committee incorporating all the schools in the area and the various agencies whose remit related to children and families. This committee identified various themes that were relevant across the work of all stakeholders (e. g. healthy eating) with the aim of tackling various social issues together as a community. All of these partnerships and 'processes' fed into the complex web of support available to children and families in the catchment areas of these schools and pre-schools, at times of transition and beyond.

Unfortunately however, the majority of teachers interviewed felt that they would not have time to engage directly with local community groups:

> I just don't think we would have time. We are just so busy. Last week for example when I had to ring those three parents, that took me all class. I have one free class a day usually so if I had to bring in the Polish parent and bring the cultural group up I just wouldn't have time (First year teacher).

Community-based staff also identified logistical barriers to increased cooperation between schools and community-based services:

> I don't think they realise how effective they would be together, if they were working for parents… just from what I have been listening to and hearing over the years and I

> do feel that that's a bit of a loss. I haven't come up with a solution to be able to try to do something where we can bring the two together. The two timetables don't fit together either. The structures themselves don't suit for them to be able to work together… There are a number of barriers to collaboration there, timetables, funding, willingness I suppose, different structures in place, but if we could try to overcome these barriers… (Community worker).

Overall, there was a sense of untapped potential in the support that community organisations could give schools in reaching and supporting families.

### 5.4.2 'Person' factors and their interaction with 'process' and 'context' at 'times' of educational transition.

#### *5.4.2.1 Teacher education.*

While the literature notes the general lack of training teachers at pre-school, primary and secondary levels receive regarding interactions with parents (INTO, 2009), a number of teachers in this research identified an extra dimension to this, by noting the additional difficulties faced by younger and newly-qualified teachers – "Yes, and if they know you're a rookie, they can play on that as well" (Sixth class teacher), "Because they know straight away, young teacher, let's go" (Sixth class teacher).

> There are parents who take advantage if a teacher is new or if a teacher is young… They can be approaching somebody in a bullying kind of way and I have seen that happen where they come in the middle of class or come after school, two or three of them and it's intimidating for teachers (Junior infant teacher).

Many indicated that a lack of training for working with parents exacerbated this problem, and that there should be more focus on this in pre-service education and Continuing Professional Development (CPD), for the benefit of both newly-qualified and more experienced educators: "It's something that should be addressed because you really are just thrown in at the deep end, you're on your own, and I think parents know that as well" (Sixth class teacher); "I was trained as a teacher, not a social worker so sometimes you do feel

inadequate and that's being honest" (HSCL teacher). Educators at all levels, pre-school, primary and secondary, with the exception of two primary school teachers, indicated that they had received little or no training, either with regards to working with parents, or with regards to educational transition, either pre-service or since their graduation. These things were seen as being learned "on the job" through observation and experience (Principal girls' secondary school).

### 5.4.3 Structural and contextual considerations.

#### *5.4.3.1 Curricular discontinuity.*

The participants of this research also identified the problem of curricular discontinuity during educational transition that is prominent in the literature (INTO, 2009; NCCA, 2010a; O'Kane, 2015; O'Kane and Hayes, 2006; Smyth et al., 2004). Pre-school teachers reported knowing little about the primary school curriculum, and junior infant teachers reported either not knowing much about Aistear due to lack of training or not using it due to a perceived lack of time:

> No we haven't been trained [in Aistear]. We were saying we might do a bit, the only thing is we have so many other…as a DEIS school we have the Ready, Set, Go Maths and so many other things, we couldn't fit something else into a timetable but we are hoping to take over the playroom because it's become a dumping ground and develop different play areas with dress up and bring in some elements of it, that's the idea but at the moment we couldn't be trained in something else because we have first steps reading, writing or a language and even when we were planning for it we said it's taking a huge amount of time (Junior infant teacher).

Equally, sixth class teachers said they knew little about secondary school curricula, and secondary school teachers reported knowing little about the primary school curriculum upon which they were expected to build – "absolutely not at all!" (First year teacher); "not a dickey-bird!" (First year teacher); rather they were seen as "very separate" (First year

teacher). Teachers indicated that they accessed such information informally from children, by asking them what they already knew about a particular subject:

> I think a lot of teachers, rather than source it from the primary school, ask the students 'What have you covered? What do you know?' And that's kind of the starting point for the lesson so I think it's kind of done on an informal basis.

For example, "You would ask the higher order question, 'Who knows anything about the age of exploration?'" (First year teacher). Some teachers knew a little bit about the primary school curriculum due to their personal circumstances, such as having primary-aged children themselves or having friends or family who were primary school teachers: "Would you believe I only know from having my own children" (First year teacher);

> In actual fact I'm a bit different because my two sisters are primary school teachers so you might ask, but that's the only reason. My daughter is in sixth class, my son is in fifth class. I know what they're at (First year teacher).

Some secondary school teachers felt that the primary school curriculum did not prepare children well for the requirements of secondary school curricula in terms of content – "I can't see how they would to be honest with you" (First year teacher) - and that children often struggled as a result – "you're starting from scratch each year" (First year teacher) - although some teachers felt that lack of preparation might be due to the preferences of a specific primary school teacher. For example, some children, parents and secondary school teachers reported experiences of children starting secondary school lagging behind in Irish because their primary school teacher did not like the subject and so did not teach it often. This was also noted regarding maths:

> I just gather from first year maths class that some kids would be more proficient in different tools in comparison to other children so you are wondering is it their aptitude for maths or is it the school and teacher that they had (First year teacher).

Lack of coordination across levels was also noted as a barrier to addressing perceived educational difficulties at system level, supporting the points made by Fitzpatrick (2015) with

regards to the need for improvement in this area: "They are trying to change things in secondary school and not actually looking at what is happening back in primary school" (First year teacher). There was however, much positivity about potential for learning from each other. One secondary school teacher indicated, "I'd love to observe in a primary school and pick up some tips [on active methodologies]", and others noted how increased relationship building and communication with regards to curriculum could help with differentiation for the needs of individual students:

> When you think about it you should really be making links with the sixth class teacher. I know myself and from other teachers you are almost on auto pilot, this is what I did with my first years last year so this is what I will do again this year but you might have a totally different group of first years, they might be a stronger or weaker class than you had… They could have covered different things (First year teacher).

### 5.4.4 The importance of 'time'.

#### *5.4.4.1 Recession.*

Participants noted how the contemporary climate ('time') of budget cuts and uncertainty over funding was contributing to a lack of communication and cooperation between community and education services, because each service wanted to be seen to avoid duplication which would put them at risk of a reduction in funding. The drive to be seen as independent and 'necessary' was considered by one community worker to be overshadowing any potential benefits to be drawn from cooperation. There was also a perception that budget cuts were targeting the community sector much more harshly than the education sector, leading to wariness with regards to cooperation. It equally impacted on availability of supports for families and the willingness of various agencies to work together:

> The last couple of years everybody has been so cut and everybody is watching over everybody else's back and everyone's afraid that if somebody else takes over that they will be out of a job. Not even that they will be out of a job but their role or their agency will be looked at less, so if they can do it, why are you doing it? Then don't do it. There's a lot going on and a lot has happened and there have been different merges so…. I think there is a little bit of fear, yes. We're encouraged to be partners and we are encouraged to collaborate but at the same time we are informed not to duplicate so

> if I have to put in my figures and I say ten people turned up for a certain course, if another group are working with me and they have ten, who takes the numbers? (Community worker).

#### *5.4.4.2 The impact of policy.*

Regarding current educational policy, there was some discussion by participants of increasing neo-liberal approaches such as emphasis on high-stakes and standardised testing as children progress through the system. In contrast to some commentary in the literature (Ó Breacháin and O'Toole, 2013), participants expressed mixed opinions with regards to these approaches. Part of the procedure in transitioning from primary to secondary school for both the boys' and girls' schools involved completing an 'entrance exam' in English, Irish and Mathematics. The boys' school also ran a 'top 30 test' to identify the highest scorers in Maths and Science, with implications for placement in 'higher' or 'ordinary' level in these subjects for state exams. Some participants noted the limitations inherent in such testing (Boaler et al., 2000; Hamilton and O'Hara, 2011; Ireson and Hallam, 1999; MacQueen, 2010; MacRuairc, 2009) with regards to identifying true levels of ability: "There's one thing that still annoys me though, I was doing really well in my entrance exam and the person behind me was kicking my chair… Yes it did [affect my results]" (First year boy). Others opposed the literature, indicating that in their opinion such tests offered incentive to children to work hard and do well:

> Well it's only because it affected my son that I would bring this up. There was an entrance exam that all the students could sit and the top thirty resulting students had the chance to re-sit, to do a second exam that went through Mensa. There was this encouragement or enticement to do well, there was an offer of covering your books for a year, scholarship for two years, which they had never done before. A. did not win the overall (laughing) but he was in that final group of children (Parent of first year boy).

Of course the positive attitude of this parent towards such 'streaming' may have been coloured by the fact that her son emerged in the upper stream, when there is evidence that it

is those who are allocated to the lower streams that suffer most (Applebee, Langer, Nystrand and Gamoran, 2003; Devine, 1993; Oakes, 2005). In the girls' secondary school, a decision on whether to do 'higher' or 'ordinary' level for individual subjects for the Junior Certificate was postponed until second year, to give children a chance to experience the subjects first, and similarly in the boys' school that decision was not made until Christmas of first year. Children felt that this was a joint decision between themselves and their teachers. There were other mixed opinions on whether streaming was a good idea or not. One teacher noted the research evidence of negative outcomes. Equally, consistent with the literature (Devine, 1993), some children indicated that streaming could impact on self esteem and self-efficacy beliefs:

> I think mixed classes are good, if you were put into ordinary level, I'm not sure but they may feel like the higher level are better than them, but they are not really… I think it would be better if there wasn't higher than normal because you might feel a bit stupid if you were in ordinary level and everyone else was in the higher (First year girl).

There was awareness of the point made by Smyth et al. (2004) that children in lower streams rarely get the opportunity to move into the higher streams. Teachers noted that if a child did 'ordinary level' for Junior Certificate, they were not allowed to do 'higher level' for Leaving Certificate, and that on the rare occasion a child moved streams, "nine times out of ten they fall back down" (First year teacher). Some children were also aware of this dynamic: "Mixed [classes are better]… If people think you are not good at that subject, you could be but they think that you're not good at it, then you are able to show them that you are good at it" (First year girl). On the other hand, some children felt that streaming would give them the opportunity to achieve at their own level:

> [Streaming is better] because say if you're in a class with loads of other pupils and you are the only one who doesn't understand so it's better to be with people who understand the same amount so that you don't feel left out or anything (First year boy).

As with most Irish secondary schools, streaming only happened "for the three main subjects [Irish, English and Maths]" (First year teacher), with the implicit messages of less importance attached to other abilities (Ó Breacháin and O'Toole, 2013). This was particularly relevant at time of data collection (2012) with the introduction of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (2011) the previous year, highlighting the importance of temporal considerations.

In policy terms, however, participants largely focussed on changes and developments in the early childhood / pre-school sector, more so than in the later educational stages. A number of participants referred to the Free Pre-school Year as a positive move towards supporting parents and young children. It was noted that the vast majority of children in Ireland (including 100% of children in this sample) now go to pre-school as a result: "You can't even make a distinction between those who went to pre-school and those who didn't… (because) generally, they have nearly all gone to pre-school at this stage, there are very few who haven't" (HSCL teacher). However, for those working in the early childhood sector, particularly those running crèches and pre-schools, the FPSY along with a perceived increase in regulation in the sector generally, had brought some unexpected pressures (Kinsella, 2015). For example, in order to receive the FPSY grant, a certain level of training was required of staff (FETAC Level 6), and there were costs associated with attaining this training, albeit with some State support available for fees. Equally the grant was reliant on all early childhood settings being tax compliant, and there was also a perception on behalf of all of the pre-school owners interviewed that regulation was punitive without offering any positive supports to genuinely improve standards in the sector, echoing Kinsella (2015):

> I think the whole idea of it (FPSY) is brilliant but… there are just a lot of niggly things, they are always chipping away. The HSE come out, they are changing all the time… They want to see have you got the amount of children you say you have. To see have you got your tax clearance, to see have you got your courses up to date…

> You feel as if somebody is over you. Now I know it's all right and everything I have is right, but they were out last year and it was correct, you know what I mean?.. I am doing it because I really enjoy it but I tell you if they put any more goalposts in front of me…I will close down (Pre-school teacher).

This supports calls in the early childhood sector in Ireland for an urgent review of services provided to children through the FPSY (Hayes et al., 2015; Kinsella, 2015).

### 5.4.5 Summary.

The data showed that in spite of strong recognition of the importance of communication between educational levels, systems to support information-flow between pre-school and primary school were limited. Systems were more well-established between primary and secondary schools, and were in the process of being strengthened further. Regardless of formal information-sharing systems, teachers 'on-the-ground' at both primary and secondary levels sometimes felt that they had a dearth of direct information on the children they taught. Curricular dissonance also appears to be an ongoing problem in the Irish education system. Consistent with the literature, participants in the current research emphasised the importance of relationships at many levels in underpinning positive transitional experiences for children and their families, as well as the contextual supports required for the development of such relationships. The effect of the chrono-system was also evident with regards to current economic and policy-based concerns, particularly in terms of the recession at time of data collection, and a perception of the early childhood sector in Ireland as over-regulated but under-supported. There were mixed opinions reported on increasingly neo-liberal approaches in Ireland, including narrowing of curriculum, ability grouping and use of high-stakes and standardised testing.

## 5.5 Diversity: Specific factors influencing 'process' at times of educational transition

Some factors identified by participants as important during educational transition spanned all of the perspectives analysed above and incorporated elements of process, person, context *and* time. Therefore, while not ideal, the exploration of these factors is treated separately below for coherence of narrative, but it should be noted that they form part of the complex web of human and context-based interaction relevant to educational transition that intertwines and mutually interacts with many of the factors explored above.

### 5.5.1 Language, culture and religion.

The data confirmed the notion that language, culture and religion can all impact on transitional experiences of children, families, teachers, schools and communities (Kitching, 2010; Kraftsoff and Quinn, 2009; Machowska-Kosciak 2013; Smyth et al., 2009). Some children at both transitional points noted differences between home and school regarding language, with one Polish junior infant child indicating that parents and teachers are very different to each other because "they speak different" (Junior infant girl). While language differences are largely portrayed as challenges in the literature (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011; Smyth et al., 2009; Topping, 2011), some parents in the current research identified the ability to speak an additional language as beneficial to children starting primary school: "My husband is Italian so N. does speak two languages, so that might have helped him a bit because he is chatting in two languages" (Parent of junior infant).

One interesting finding was the level of interest that parents and children from non-Irish backgrounds had in the Irish language. While this has not previously been directly identified by research in Ireland, it supports to some extent the observation of Kavanagh and Hickey (2013) regarding the increasing number of non-Irish parents choosing Irish-medium

immersion education for their children. Many children and parents expressed interest in learning Irish: "I would love to (go to classes), for example there is Irish which would be perfect for me because they already learn a few words and I have no idea what she is saying" (Polish parent of junior infant); "My daughter is very good at Irish. She teaches our neighbour's daughter. She helps an Irish girl in the same class" (Vietnamese parent of first year – with great pride evident). Teachers also noted this interest, indicating that some children actively engage in Irish in class, in spite of their exemptions from the language requirement. Such children are unlikely to complete state exams in the subject however. This is significant, considering the implications of learning (or not learning) Irish for children's future ability to enter the teaching profession (Gilligan, 2007), and the effects of uniculturalism within the profession on engagement with children and parents from diverse backgrounds (Donnelly, 2011). For Irish parents, proficiency in the Irish language was a significant factor with regards to school choice, with many indicating that they would have liked to send their children to the local Gaelscoil (Irish-medium school), but that they decided against it because they felt their own level of Irish was not sufficient to allow them to support children with homework and other educational tasks as they grew. This is reflected in Kavanagh and Hickey's (2013) work on self-efficacy beliefs in parents of children attending Gaelscoileanna.

In spite of the potential benefits of bilingualism or multilingualism identified by some participants, speaking a language in the home that is different from that spoken in the classroom was seen by many participants as predictive of adjustment difficulties on entry to primary school through an increased sense of dislocation, as predicted by Margetts (2003):

> I was a little bit afraid before he started and worried about him because he is really shy. He went to play school. It was a really small group, six or seven people maybe. There was one Polish girl and one Polish boy so he felt better because he didn't speak English so it wasn't a problem for him to start with Polish kids. After that I thought it

> would be really good for him to start school after playschool but it was a problem at the beginning because it was really hard for him. The first day he sat with a Polish boy in school and the next day again and the third day he had to sit with an Irish boy because the teacher divided them and it was a big problem for him (Parent of junior infant).

Language was particularly identified by participants, in support of the literature (Topping, 2011; Smyth et al., 2009), as a barrier to making friends during transition for some children. Children, parents and teachers alike described the potential for isolation caused by linguistic barriers at both transitions:

> There is a girl in my class and she can't speak English very well. We tried to talk to her but she's very quiet and sits there and doesn't speak and the only thing she says is her name and that's it. You kind of feel bad for her because she's so quiet and no one can talk to her because she doesn't talk back (First year girl).

Difficulties were exacerbated for some during transition to secondary school by the impact of adolescence:

> Her (first year student's) transition from country to country to new school, I would imagine is very very very difficult. She's coming to a school where she can't speak the language, she doesn't have any new friends so she doesn't have that back-up. There may or may not be a separation in the background and we have no access to her past resources because we can't find anybody... so that child is really really struggling. She would be two years behind socially on other children… Language being the key. It's a very very precarious situation. They can't socialise. Teenagers need to socialise. It's their lives. She's losing three years here. Friendships will be formed. If she could speak English, she'd walk into her group and she'd hit the ground running. She'd be the new girl, she'd be exciting, but at that age definitely, it's too hard to change langauge and introduce a new language to live with… The language barrier is a killer for them. If they can't speak the language they are not making friends, they are bored in school, they just fall apart when they are not socialising (First year teacher).

Teachers at all three levels also identified problems in giving instruction to children who do not speak English well, and the potential challenge this creates for children navigating a new setting:

> I might have six with very little English and if there are other problems as well it makes it tough because you are not getting the feedback. They don't have the language and the normal activities that you are asking them to do they can't understand so they are finding that really tough (Junior infant teacher).

Some participants noted the changing demographics in Ireland in recent years ('time'), with increases in the numbers of children speaking English as an additional language:

> There is a big mix, I am finding between this year and last year There are a lot of new-comers or maybe children who have been here a while but wouldn't necessarily have the language and that makes it difficult (Junior infant teacher).

They identified the challenges that brought with regards to communication with both children and families (Farr and Moriarty, 2013; Smyth et al., 2009). Teachers and parents at all educational levels described potential barriers to communication between home and school when the first language of the home is not English, similar to the points raised by Hornby and Lafaele (2011):

> It definitely does (impact). There are three junior infant classes and there are eight children, Polish children, that's only Polish, without other nationalities, and I believe that I am the only one who can actually have a conversation in English. I see girls, some of them are working a little bit but they are working in a Polish environment so they don't speak English at all (Polish parent of junior infant).

One parent gave an illustrative example of communication difficulties when she described her upset at arriving for a 'non-uniform day' with her child dressed in full uniform, because her little girl lacked the linguistic skills to tell her about it, and another described her daughter missing out on a cake-sale because she, the mother, didn't understand that it was happening and so did not give her money for it:

> All the kids dressed for a non-uniform day and I came with her navy blue uniform, tie and everything and I was thinking 'oh my God'… she is not able to tell me things like that and she lost her note… Oh my God, I felt so sorry, I went home, took a few things, came back here and I changed her (Parent of junior infant).

> I had the same situation last year with muffins. Older kids sold muffins and bakes… I didn't leave money for my daughter… Usually I know everything about school because I really care but when she came back home she was so sad, she was crying because she told me everyone bought muffins and cakes and she didn't get money. She was angry at me because I forgot to leave any money for her. I was so upset because I cannot explain to her why I did this (Parent of junior infant).

The viewpoints of parents from various cultural backgrounds in this sample mirrored the work of authors such as Cummins et al., (2005), Eriksson, (2013) and Kraftsoff and Quinn (2009) regarding the challenges of maintaining linguistic and cultural identity, while at the same time supporting their children to make a life for themselves and succeed at school in Ireland. This is illustrated by an exchange during focus group 17:

Parent A: It is always hard for kids from other countries to start school if we speak our own language at home and they have to go….
Parent C: And integrate…
Parent F: This is the problem, all the dramas for the families coming from different countries. We love our languages, naturally… We have this language in our families but we have found for a year, between her and the other children, she is mixing up the languages… [We speak] Romanian. My husband is from Hungary but we will stay with Romanian because we all know that language. Of course she knows a good few words in English, I was reading her age books and things like that, but not like the other kids… It's a big difference at three years old from a different country starting playschool and an Irish child.

Similar to the work of Kraftsoff and Quinn (2009) and Machowska-Kosciak (2013), some children in this sample, appeared to acculturate to the dominant culture at a faster rate than their parents, and to some extent reject the home language and culture in favour of the dominant language and culture. They noted the loss of their parents' native languages as English became their own first language:

> They sometimes speak English and sometimes speak Romanian but I don't really get the language, I don't understand most of it. I understand a bit. They can manage. My dad is here for twelve years and myself, my mam and my brother came here seven years ago (First year boy).

This is unfortunate given the importance placed by many parents on their children speaking their language with regards to cultural identity (Kraftsoff and Quinn, 2009). Teachers expressed great empathy for parents who were trying to manage the conflicting needs of supporting their children to learn the majority language while maintaining their minority linguistic and cultural identity: "They are saying 'oh they are not speaking Polish as well as they did' and they are quite upset about that. So you don't want that either" (Junior

infant teacher). Nevertheless, teachers did indicate that having a parent willing to speak English with their child could be the key to supporting children to develop their English. This opposes literature which recommends that initiatives such as asking parents to speak the language of the dominant culture in the home should be treated with caution with regards to cultural identity (Edwards, 2009; Kraftsoff and Quinn, 2009; Siraj-Blatchford and Clarke, 2000), and the potential for language loss (Burck, 2005).

Some parents who brought children from outside Ireland were also fearful of the implications for their children of linguistic and cultural difficulties and this could impact on communication between home and school:

> We ask them what year they arrived in Ireland, if they have ever received language support. And I as the coordinator this year have just discovered that in some cases they don't give the truth on the application forms and I wonder myself is it a case of, if they think we think if they have poor English, that they're from another country, will we take them… some of them might be refugees and they don't want us to know that. Others might be just masking an aspect such as religion. They want to get the child in and then they'll deal with that issue then (Intercultural teacher).

Information regarding children with English as an Additional Language often came from the primary school if parents did not feel comfortable communicating with the secondary school:

> When they attend (language support class) it's usually from information we have received from the primary school about language difficulties. We have that information and we're expecting them coming in so we would have a plan in place… We ring them, we get the enrollment lists and then we follow that up person by person and we find out who has language support hours and who has learning support hours (Intercultural teacher).

However, where children came directly to secondary school from outside the country, particularly when they had additional educational needs, schools sometimes found it very difficult to access information about them, and primary schools could not always help.

In support of the work of Kitching (2010), some parents also noted the impact of a Catholic ethos in the primary school and a perceived lack of alternative choice:

> The choice you have, here I basically have two and it goes by your local church so to speak but in Holland it's much more varied. There were far more schools in my area, where we lived… I think Educate Together are going in the right direction because the days of Catholic Ireland are gone and I think they should step back from running schools. That's my opinion anyway… Not everybody attending this school now is Catholic… so I don't think it's fair to impose it (Parent of first year).

The admissions policies of all schools noted the right to refuse admission 'in the interests of protecting the ethos of the school' (Girls' secondary school parents' handbook). It is also worth noting that the Parents' Council in the girls' secondary school was affiliated with the CSPA (Catholic Secondary Schools Parents' Association) which could potentially impact on the likelihood of non-Catholic parents becoming involved. Therefore, very often, language was not the only barrier involved in navigating an unfamiliar school system.

#### *5.5.1.1 Linguistic and cultural capital.*

Parents from non-Irish backgrounds also identified the challenges inherent in not having come through the Irish school system themselves, reinforcing Katz et al. (2001). Even for those who spoke English, small nuances could be missed and concerns could arise:

> I don't know, I think if you are from a different country, my husband's here ten years, it's still never going to be your country... You will still miss some of the body language and things that are in a language that you just can't explain… It probably is a bit harder for him, he would say 'oh they said this' and I would say 'oh they just meant…' (Parent of junior infant).

Parents identified differences between school in Ireland and in the countries they came from:

> [In Vietnam] classes are bigger... Here it is smaller. Very different. All at one table for all children and there is the next, the next, the next. Here you have square tables, we have one line… In my country one subject one teacher (Grandparent of first year).

> [In Thailand] they had sleeping arrangements, everybody used to sleep for an hour and a half during the day from 11.30am to 1pm, every day. They would start at 8am and finish at 3.30pm. It was a very long day for a 3 year old (Parent of junior infant).

> In Poland they start school when they are seven. [Before that] there is Kindergarten. It's totally different from here because they are there from the age of three or four. In the last year, just before school they do learn something… It works totally different to here. They learn a different way as well. Not necessarily better I would say. I believe this way here is better (Parent of junior infant).

In similar findings to those of Smyth et al. (2009), disciplinary expectations were seen to vary across cultures also, and so there may be further disciplinary transitions to be made for children who are coming to new schools from different countries:

> Thailand is like Ireland was 30 or 40 years ago, show respect for adults no matter how old they are or who they are, you always show respect for adults… P. would be very easy to get on with and very respectful. He can speak to them in a nice manner and he is very polite. Pe. is the same because they are brought up that way and they are taught that way, to show respect for adults, teachers, anyone who is important in their lives (Parent of junior infant).

As a result of such differences, teachers indicated that there can be problems for non-Irish parents in understanding how the Irish school system works, particularly regarding norms around discipline:

> One problem that we would have had initially was with parents of an African origin, they have a different cultural system and they would find that it's ok to use corporal punishment with their children and we would find that it's not a good thing, especially in junior infants, they are only little babies. They mightn't get a stamp because they were acting out, another parent might say 'oh you can't be doing that' whereas we discovered that these children were actually getting a clatter so that's one of the kinds of things that we have to mention at the meeting. In the Irish system we don't use that and it's not acceptable and it's not acceptable off any parent in Ireland, it's against the law actually (HSCL teacher).

Culture can also impact on communication between teachers and parents in ways that do not involve language directly:

> You asked about things different in my country about teacher and family. In my country the teacher was Vietnamese and I know her well. She live where I live and sometimes I go to school a little early. Maybe 10.00 start, I come five minutes early or ten minutes early and I talk to the teacher. Sometimes I met her outside the market,

> we can talk more, but here I don't know... we never met the teacher outside, in the shop, something like that (Parent of first year).

In spite of these barriers based on linguistic and cultural capital, participants were generally positive and inclusive when discussing language and culture. They presented a number of creative strategies for overcoming any barriers that exist between home and school.

#### *5.5.1.2 Structural and contextual considerations.*

Strategies to encourage linguistic and cultural inclusion comprised use of on-line translating services, allowing children or friends to attend parent-teacher meetings to translate, and ensuring that handbooks and parent-guides were printed in a number of languages. Parents largely relied on their children to translate for them. However, this strategy was not always effective, and secondary school teachers noted the potential for a child receiving a less than glowing report to translate a more favourable version of what the teacher was saying to their parents, or to misrepresent parents' wishes to teachers. Parents also indicated that they would appreciate additional supports for parents who were not born in Ireland:

> I think it is important for all families from different countries to have more meetings with the teachers, even if it is for one minute after school, when you are collecting your child, they just double check with the parents. Even if they tell the children ten times, they will never be able to come back and explain it… The children understand more but they are not able to speak… they won't be able to translate so I won't have the message from her (Parent of junior infant).

It would seem that cultural awareness has improved in these schools since the INTO's (1997) description of parental involvement discussed in Chapter 3, and these schools do expend strong efforts to minimise linguistic and cultural barriers through various means. The primary school and girls' secondary school had a designated EAL (English as an Additional

Language) teacher and Intercultural teacher respectively. Additional English-language support was provided in the primary school for junior infants with little English, and this appeared to be quite effective:

> When (my son) started they put him on extra English lessons and he really came along very quickly. When he came he had very little English, he was mainly speaking Thai… A lot of children starting school are only four or five and if English is not their first language they find it a struggle for the first while. But the extra classes they have are just great (Parent of junior infant).

The primary school also provided language classes for parents, as well as courses for parents born elsewhere to inform them about the Irish educational system. In opposition to criticisms of such approaches as presenting deficit models (Kavanagh and Hickey, 2013), the language classes were particularly valued by the participants in this research:

> I try to learn here. I try to get together a lot of Polish women because Mrs M, she had a course for us in English. This is for free and I know a lot of Polish people in our community didn't want to do this because they think they can just put their kids in school and they will be fine because they are kids, they learn faster than we do. This is wrong thinking because this year we have a lot of Polish women on that course. It's great for us because we know each other and we can help each other (Parent of junior infant).

The schools also showed an awareness of the need to draw on children's home culture and language as both a learning resource and an important repository for children's pre-existing knowledge (Cummins et al., 2005). There were once-off events like Intercultural Days, and invitations to parents to come into classrooms and cook regional foods. There were also ongoing initiatives such as displays of 'welcome' signs and how to say 'hello' in many languages, as well as flags of many countries in classrooms and corridors, and teachers identified opportunities within lessons for children to introduce friends to their own language and culture. The girls' secondary school had a designated Intercultural room decorated with symbols of the countries from which the student population was drawn. If a student had an exemption from Irish, they could use the time to go to this room and work on their other

studies. It also aimed to communicate to students that their nationalities were valued, particularly during educational transition:

> Those flags would be really for first years. I think when a first year comes in and sees their flag they are not alone… Along the back we have the projects for most students so even for students who can't speak English, I would show it to them so they are identifying pictures. Just make them feel a little bit warmer, a little bit cosier, break down the barrier (Intercultural teacher).

However, representations of Traveller culture were not particularly visible. Also, one secondary school teacher identified how a teenager's acute sense of embarrassment could impact on the effectiveness of some approaches. She described how one girl did not want to wear traditional dress to an inter-cultural event for fear that other children would be looking at her:

> We had a little concert, a little show here because I want them to embrace their culture and their heritage which they try to hide and I had one student who is from Pakistan and I wanted her to wear her traditional clothes… She's a lovely kid, language is a major barrier, she is very isolated because of the language barrier… I asked her would she meet our Indian visitors here last week because she can speak the language so she feels so important, she's brilliant, she's very happy to do that but she does not want to dress in traditional clothes and I asked her why and she said because everyone will be looking at me. And I said do you not think they will be looking at you to see how beautiful you are, when I buy clothes I buy different clothes because I want everyone to look at me and she said no, I am different and everybody looks at me anyhow so I don't want them looking at me anymore (First year teacher).

This reinforces the work of Eriksson (2013) regarding the sense of difference and 'otherness' sometimes felt by children on the receiving end of such approaches. Equally, some supports developed for the general student and family population led to difficulties for children from non-Irish backgrounds:

> About the grandparents' day last year, I remember, because in Poland it is traditional celebration, every year we do this for the grandmothers and grandfathers, our children know about that celebration in Poland. When we had the celebration here last year, I remember she was a bit sad, the teacher said they could bring a photo of the grandparents but then they see a lot of other grandparents of their classmates at the school but they don't have their own grandparents and she asked me why her grandparents didn't come for that day in school and I had to explain everything again, because they live in Poland, they will come and visit you (Parent of junior infant).

Of course, in isolation, there is a risk that once-off events or displays can be seen as tokenism and 'tourist' interculturalism (Murray and O'Doherty, 2001), and participants felt that support for parents and children from diverse backgrounds was more about the intangible qualities of school climate. This was something that schools were very conscious of fostering proactively, as recommended by Hornby and Lafaele (2011), and it was repeatedly mentioned by parents and teachers alike at each educational level:

> I suppose coping with diversity is more to do with ethos of the school and it's not just dependant on the transition it can happen at any time during the school time. It's about how welcoming we are as a school to all groups and our ethos would be very strong on that we would consider ourselves quite strong here (First year teacher).

This community also offered extensive supports for international parents and children, coordinated through the local Intercultural centre, including (among many other services) a Saturday school for children and parents to learn English, and a women's group for women from diverse backgrounds to come and make friends, discuss relevant issues, and access support. The staff of community-based services that were interviewed offered practical, real-life examples of the potential of Bronfenbrenner's concept of the meso-system by identifying how such services could potentially play an increased role in bridging the gap between parents, particularly traditionally marginalised parents, and schools:

> If we had some kind of way that the schools were communicating this to the community groups and to ourselves maybe, that we could actually work together around what would suit best. How do we get that core that isn't coming to the school? They might come to a community centre if there is something fun going on. Then we could actually have a teacher involved in that as well… it's a lot more work to organise something like that but it might be a lot more effective (Community worker).

Some schools and teachers were indeed drawing on such supports: "We take the lady from the Intercultural Centre down. She knows their parents" (Intercultural teacher, girls' secondary school), but many felt that time constraints would present too many barriers to following such an approach, as described above.

#### *5.5.1.3 Summary.*

Participants painted a picture of a vibrant, linguistically and culturally diverse community, and schools who make every effort to embrace this. Nevertheless, it would seem that linguistic and cultural differences between home and school may erect barriers during educational transition in some circumstances, and concerns around language loss and identity were evident also.

### 5.5.2 Socio-economics.

From the perspective of respondents in this sample, socio-economic status did not in general appear to present the very significant barrier to positive experiences of educational transition or to communication between parents and schools that is predicted by the literature (Bourdieu, 1997; Hornby and Lafaele, 2011; Robinson and Harris, 2014). However, this may be reflective of the significant efforts made by the pre-schools and schools in question to overcome these issues. It could also be reflective of the sample itself, in that the parents who were more likely to be in close contact with the schools were also those who were more likely to take part in the current research (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011; Hart, 2011; Reay, 1998):

> The same parents, this is what the schools tell me, will turn up to everything. Then there are certain parents who will never turn up to anything or once in a while and that's it, when they have to (Community worker).

Nevertheless, the impact of socio-economic 'disjuncture' (Downes, 2014) was noted by some participants, particularly with regards to parents. In describing her own efforts to engage with parents in the area, one participant said, "We kind of struggle with it ourselves. We targeted, we promoted, we tried to get as many as we possibly could, we got numbers but they came from [x area] and [y area]. We still couldn't get certain areas" (Community worker). This respondent showed strong awareness Bourdieu's (1997) ideas on 'cultural

capital'- "It's very middle class/working class. We do things a certain way and we expect people to fit into our way of doing things," and regarding schools, "there's a huge fear and the school system hasn't changed a whole lot in terms of accessibility for certain people" (Community worker). The HSCL teacher from the primary school was also very aware of these issues in working with parents:

> There is a little bit of lack of self esteem and they do worry and I think that's just the nature of the type of school we are. There might be a lot of people unemployed, there might be a bit of history there so they would feel 'oh I only got as far as Junior Cert' or whatever so they do feel a little bit inadequate (HSCL teacher).

The Intercultural teacher from the girls' secondary school made a similar point to Mulkerrins (2007) about feelings of intimidation:

> You have to remember, it's something you can't disregard, some parents are quite intimidated by teachers. Now if I was working out in [a higher SES area], the parents have no problem approaching a teacher and keeping up to date with them. You also have to look at your socioeconomic area. Parents around here may or may not feel intimidated by teachers (Intercultural teacher).

Socioeconomics were noted regarding children's experiences also (Byrne and Smyth, 2010), and teachers at all levels noted the social and economic diversity in their schools and pre-schools. Sometimes socioeconomic factors influenced expectations for children:

> Because of this area there wouldn't be huge expectations, there wouldn't be huge transfer onto third level so the whole idea is to start at the earlier stage in primary school and get them thinking about occupations and get the vocabulary out there of the different colleges and just the different occupations because they might not get that from home. The adults might not be working. Maybe the only world they know of is social welfare (Community worker).

The literature also identifies the importance of school type with reference to socioeconomics (Smyth, 1999), and one parent supported this point. She felt that it was not only parents in lower SES areas who sometimes had lower expectations for children, but rather teachers and schools could also hold such attitudes, impacting on children's later achievement (Brophy and Good, 1986; Good, 1987; 1993; Rosenthal and Jacobsen, 1968):

> I don't know whether academically they're not pushed... My husband's niece goes to X school in ****town and she doesn't have to do any languages. All she has to do is Irish, so that in itself... a whole new language going into first year is challenging enough, so straight away they have a difficulty (Parent of first year).

A teacher from the girls' secondary school noted how this may be 'internalised' by children, impacting on their self-esteem, self-efficacy beliefs and expectations for themselves (Bourdieu 1973):

> Their teacher never did it so they feel like they're behind, they'll say 'oh Miss I never did that and she did so I must be the stupid one', or I was never good at it primary school so therefore I'm going to be bad at it, they will always say that 'oh Miss I was never good at Irish' (First year teacher).

This influenced a significant number of parents and children in their choice of secondary school. Both the boys' and girls' secondary schools were considered within the community as being of higher socio-economic standing than other secondary schools in the area, and participants made a link between this and higher academic standards, as well as lower incidence of social problems and higher behavioural expectations. They took these perceptions into account when deciding on which school to go to (Smyth et al., 2004):

> I said 'oh God now, what should I do?' There was no way I was going to let him go to X school anyway because I had just heard too many stories and it wasn't right so it was either that or Y school so I said I'd give it a go (Parent of first year).

> B. was always going to [boys' secondary school]. It was either there or Y school because there was no way I was going to send him to X school. I know a fella who was doing some course or something up there and he was saying the language out of the classrooms was unbelievable (Parent of first year).

Overall, participants reinforced the findings of Smyth (1999) that the contexts of individual schools (and pre-schools) do indeed matter, particularly at times of educational transition, and specifically with regards to socio-economics. However, again the responses of these participants supported Bronfenbrenner and Morris' (2006) contention that strong 'processes' (relationships) can overcome the impact of 'person' and 'context': "Mr B is

sound, he's not a posh teacher and he's not strict either… Well he is posh but he's just more sound!" (First year boy).

### 5.5.3 Disability and SEN.

Disability and special educational needs (SEN) were also identified as factors potentially impacting on the experiences of children, families and schools during transition. As noted by Maunsell et al. (2007), bullying was a particular concern for parents whose children had disabilities: "A lot of children in the area would have had a lot of social problems and I was afraid of N. being bullied due to her condition" (Parent of first year). Parents also, with similar emphasis to some of the literature (Dockett et al., 2012; Maunsell et al., 2007; Ring et al., 2015), identified concerns around whether equipment and supports would make the transition with their children:

> The anxiety came from, in the first instance because she had a visual disability. She had a lot of equipment in primary school that she wasn't sure if she was going to be able to use it in secondary school and how that was going to work out for her, so that was her biggest anxiety… My anxiety came from her disability as well, how she was going to manage, would it be too much for her, would she get the same support that she got in primary school? (Parent of first year).

Unlike some previous research findings (INTO, 2009; Maunsell et al., 2007), and in support of Ring et al. (2015), participants were generally very positive about the supports actually received during transition, and parents noted the efforts of schools to support children with SEN. At primary level especially, supports were extensive, both in terms of assessment:

> They are having him (friend's child) assessed to see if he has a minor or low level autism… I think it's fantastic… they are noticing and they are watching for that. The kids are only in the school less than two months and they are already picking up on that, I think it's brilliant (Parent of junior infant).

And regarding assistive technologies:

> The [primary] school were very supportive of N.'s equipment that she needed, because she was quite different to other kids. She had a laptop with a little camera on it to point at the board. They were always very supportive, gave her the time to use the equipment, took her out to give her extra little lessons on the laptop, typing skills and things like that (Parent of first year).

Secondary schools also were seen as very supportive, and initial fears regarding transfer of supports were often unfounded:

> It's very good because the Special Needs Teacher in (boys' secondary school), we met him a few times before he started. He's ringing me every few weeks. When he started he asked for photographs, he said he was going to put up a photograph in the classroom so all the teachers would know… I think its a really good idea (Parent of first year).

One parent also commended the boys' secondary school for their support of children who are exceptionally able, a finding often not replicated in the literature (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011). Nevertheless, some children did find that SEN impacted negatively on their experiences of educational transition, particularly in the move to secondary level (INTO, 2009; Maunsell et al., 2007). Often, these difficulties were not expressed directly by children themselves, but rather through their parents, with regards to specific stresses their children were experiencing related to their disabilities. For example, the difficulties faced by all first years regarding logistics and organisational skills were particularly intense for children with SEN.

Difficulties experienced by children were often first noticed at pre-school level:

> They were the ones who told me that his speech was not very good… When he was in pre-school they noticed it. So it was stop, slow and talk but he couldn't get any words out, all the words would come into his mouth and he just lost it (Parent of junior infant)

However, a number of participants identified the difficulties that may arise when special educational needs are not noted at pre-school level, or alternatively where they are,

but parents choose, for any number of reasons, not to address them, something not previously highlighted in the literature. Primary school teachers especially emphasised the importance of identification of SEN before starting primary school. They described the difficulties that they sometimes experience in accessing support for children with SEN and the negative impact that can have on children's experiences of starting school. It seems that this is a particular difficulty in the transition from pre-school to primary school which may alleviate as children progress through the primary school:

> That is the difficulty that you find in junior infants, the senior teachers probably don't realise it. There is a huge amount that you are dealing with and if it hasn't been diagnosed before, you are having all the problems in junior infants then you are passing them on when things are in place and the teachers aren't having the same difficulties with the child because there is some sort of support whereas in junior infants… it's really where you have all the problems if something isn't put in place beforehand or if it hasn't been said at playschool level (Junior infant teacher).

Secondary school teachers also noted that some children, particularly those who have completed primary school in other jurisdictions, can sometimes come through the primary system without recognition of their SEN, and this can lead to replication of difficulties accessing support during transition from primary to secondary school. While challenges with transition for children with SEN have been clearly identified in the literature (INTO, 2009; Maunsell et al., 2007), the issue of unidentified needs is under-reported.

Overall, participants emphasised the potential impact of disability and SEN on children's experiences of transition, but equally emphasised that appropriate supports can alleviate most complications, locating their conceptions of disability within a 'social model' (Brewster, 2004). They were also largely very positive about the supports received in their experience, so long as children's difficulties were acknowledged and addressed as early as possible, showing the interactive nature of 'person', 'context' and 'time'.

### 5.5.4 Gender.

Participants in the current research expressed mixed opinions on the impact of gender. In contrast to some previous findings (INTO 2009; Harrop and Swinson, 2011) many older children, parents and teachers portrayed little difference between the genders in their experiences of educational transition, emphasising dispositional factors more strongly. "I just think it's the individual child. If a child is more confident going in they will maintain that but kids who are less confident it just takes them a while longer" (Parent of junior infant). Some small children indicated that "everybody's the same" (Junior infant girl) – "I think they're all the best!" (Junior infant girl).

However, many small children, consistent with their level of cognitive development (Piaget and Inhelder, 1969), found it difficult to think beyond their own gender, with boys indicating that boys were "the best" (junior infant boy) and girls maintaining that girls were. Many other participants supported the literature in indicating that gender could be a significant factor in the transition from pre-school to primary school. Specifically, girls were seen to be more adaptable, better behaved and more perfectionist in their academic work than boys (Harrop and Swinson, 2011):

> Yes, huge! There is definitely a big difference. The girls want everything perfect and they want to be right and they want to do exactly what teacher says. Even today I was in for maths, I just go in and help out in junior infants, the girls were doing pattern work and it was immaculate patterns but the boys...(laughing). Now that's very general, obviously some boys are perfect as well, but there is definitely a difference. The girls want to do everything teacher says and they really would be very upset if teacher was even a little bit annoyed… Oh they don't like it all, they really want to do everything perfect for teacher. The boys are quite happy to, you know, 'that's grand' attitude (HSCL teacher).

Some parents felt that boys found it harder to settle than girls did, largely due to varying levels of socio-emotional maturity and confidence:

> I just think girls are more advanced at that age… Girls know how to 'make this work for me' and your girl is clever, she will talk to other girls and ask 'so what do you do?' I think boys are a little bit more shy (Parent of junior infant).

Boys were seen as more "active and talkative" (Parent of junior infant), supporting Margetts (2003). Teachers agreed, and in similar findings to those reported by INTO (2009) and O'Kane and Hayes (2006), emphasised independence, concentration and behaviour in the classroom:

> (Boys') attention span doesn't seem to be as long as the girls. The girls can sustain it, the boys lose concentration much quicker than the girls, definitely… There is definitely a difference, it's amazing and of course they are full of beans. There is definitely a delay, we'll say, with the boys in the concentration element kicking in! (laughing) (HSCL teacher).

Junior infant teachers also felt that girls' motor skills were sometimes more advanced. These teachers felt that many of the differences noted between boys and girls may not have been a function of their gender per se, but rather of differing treatment at home, with a perception that boys were 'spoiled' and 'let away with things' more often than girls (Junior infant teacher), as well as the perception that girls would have more practice with things like scissors and crayons, whereas boys would be more likely to be engaged in more physical activities like playing outdoors.

Unlike respondents in O'Brien's (2004) work, according to the participants of this research, gender differences were less noticeable during transition to secondary school, and the majority indicated little difference between the experiences of boys and girls at this level. However, there was some mirroring of the perception of boys as more dependent and girls as more independent and capable in this transition also:

> I think some of it is the boy/girl thing because talking to friends, they would say that their girls are more independent and get themselves ready for things. F. would be the same, whereas boys seem to be very much about their 'mammies'… Stuck to the apron strings! (Parent of first year).

On the other hand, consistent with the work of Hargreaves and Galton (2002) and Smyth et al. (2004), girls were sometimes seen as having more difficulties socially in moving to secondary school, with boys making friends more easily. It also seems that gender interacts with culture in its effects, and Traveller boys' were identified as 'at risk' during transition to secondary school (Forkan, 2006):

> With Traveller boys we have had difficulties in the transfer process… In most recent years I think we have had nearly 100% transfer [to secondary school] but the only exception of our target group would be with some Traveller boys… Just boys. We haven't experienced it with girls at all I don't think… There is more pressure on the boys on Traveller sites. They get a lot of teasing and slagging (about going to school)… Whereas the girls don't get that, or don't, at least until after Junior Cert. The boys would be open to it once they go into secondary (Community worker).

#### *5.5.4.1 Single-sex vs mixed-gender schooling.*

Contextual factors related to these specific schools also gave an interesting opportunity to explore the views of the participants on mixed-gender vs single-sex schooling: boys and girls learned alongside each other in the three pre-schools and the primary school, but when transitioning to secondary level entered a single-sex system where the boys went to one school and the girls went to another. Echoing the literature (Erarslan and Bruce, 2013; Halpern et al., 2011; Johnson and Gastic, 2014; Parker and Rennie, 2002; Else-Quest and Peterca, 2015), adolescent respondents expressed mixed views on this. Some were in favour of this move to a single-sex context. For example, one first year girl expressed an interesting view, similar to Harrop and Swinson (2011), that boys receive more attention and opportunities than girls do in a mixed setting, and that single-sex settings may allow girls to achieve to their potential as a result (Parker and Rennie, 2002; Else-Quest and Peterca, 2015). She opposed the suggestions of Halpern et al. (2011) that single-sex schooling leads to increased gender stereotyping and sexism:

> I'd rather be in an all girls' school because if it was a mixed school there would be male stereotypes. Some people think that boys can do better things than girls. It's not true, we all have the same equal amount of abilities (First year girl).

A primary school teacher confirmed the additional attention given to boys in mixed settings (Harrop and Swinson, 2011), and linked this to the earlier onset of adolescence in girls:

> The problem I had in fifth class was the girls wouldn't answer out. The boys took up all the attention. You had to physically say to yourself 'ask the girls', the girls become very shy, they don't want to be putting themselves forward, they are embarrassed. Oh it's actually sad. You are trying to say 'Come on girls' but the boys take over. The girls have become self-conscious already. The boys haven't even reached that stage (Sixth class teacher).

There were some opposing views, however, and some girls identified the loss they felt at being separated from the boys they went to school with at primary level:

> I think it would be fairer if they had more mixed secondary schools because you are leaving all your friends that were boys from primary school. Some girls could be best friends with boys, and they are leaving them because they are going to an all boys school (First year girl).

Some girls also noted that a single-sex setting does not mirror the make-up of society and so may provide limited preparation for real-life and the future:

> I think it would be better (to be in a mixed school) because if you are in an all girls school and then when you go out and you're in college with boys and they're in college with girls I think it will be weird then (First year girl).

The boys seemed to miss the girls a little less, and indicated that they still did get to see many of their female friends from primary school: "When you get on the bus in the morning there are always loads of girls from (the girls' secondary school) so it doesn't just feel like it's boys all the time" (First year boy). As such, these teenaged participants expressed mixed views on whether mixed or single-sex schooling is the better approach, and sometimes the choice was taken out of their hands by parents who wanted to ensure that their children were studying and not getting distracted by teenagers of the opposite sex: "I did want to go to a mixed school but my mam told me to come here because she wanted me to concentrate" (First year boy). Parents generally seemed to take the viewpoint that as

adolescents they would find it difficult to concentrate in a mixed setting, although one parent of a first year girl disagreed, linking single sex settings to bullying:

> Especially in an all girls' school as well. I think they'll have more problems. She was palling with some girl a couple of weeks ago and then the girl started calling her a lesbian… So in a mixed school she probably wouldn't have that hassle, but she'd probably have the hassle of boys so I don't know about a mixed class. But if anything for me it's more hassle in an all-girls' school (Parent of first year).

This perspective opposes research indicating that single sex schooling can be a protective factor against bullying, particularly for girls (Johnson and Gastic, 2014, Parker and Rennie, 2002).

#### *5.5.4.2 'Parental involvement' as a gendered concept.*

It is worth noting also that consistent with the literature (Hart, 2011; Hornby and Lafaele, 2011), parental participation in this research was strongly skewed regarding gender, with only three fathers and one grandfather participating, in spite of the extensive efforts, described in Chapter 4, to ensure diversity of the sample. However, in opposition to this trend, respondents indicated that fathers connected to these schools and pre-schools were generally as involved as mothers in the education of their children in reality: "They are playing an equal role really" (Junior infant teacher). The importance of consideration of socio-historical conditions and the chronosystem was again noted here with regards to changing norms around fathers' involvement in their children's lives generally and their education specifically (Biggart and O'Brien, 2009):

> Maybe it's just young parents today, but years ago, the grandparents and the parents, they were distanced and stand-off… you know the father was always the ruler in the house, he sits in his own chair, 'you don't go in near your father, he's in the room reading his paper'. Whereas kids today are completely different and 'hey dad, will we watch the match'… [In school] you never saw a male (Grandparent of junior infant).

Echoing the work of Elder (1998), one teacher also noted the impact of Ireland's recession at time of data collection (2012) on fathers' involvement:

> Less grandparents (are) collecting them because there are parents out of work whereas a few years ago it would have been a lot of grandparents and child-minders collecting. Now I find it is an awful lot of dads collecting because they are out of work (Junior infant teacher).

Nevertheless, it would seem that the involvement of fathers can sometimes be less visible in spite of its strength, through involvement in activities external to the school such as homework: "He has taken on the majority of homework… (Schools sometimes think) that the dads aren't involved… she prefers him doing the homework with her" (Parent of junior infant). This supports the distinction drawn in the literature between home-based parental involvement, such as helping children with their homework, or listening to them read, and school-based parental involvement, such as attendance at parent-teacher meetings (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011), and the importance of both types (Jeynes, 2005; 2007; Pomerantz, et al., 2007).

#### *5.5.4.3 Summary.*

While there were some participants who felt that gender was not particularly influential, in general, the participants of the current research have supported the literature (Margetts, 2003) in providing a picture of girls settling into primary school more quickly than boys due to greater independence and stronger concentration skills. However, in contrast to previous research findings (Smyth et al., 2004) the impact of gender seems less strong in the transition to secondary school. Participants also gave mixed views on single-sex schooling, with the majority of parents being in its favour, but varying opinions expressed by children. Unlike the consensus in other research (Cullen et al., 2011; Hart, 2011; Hornby and Lafaele, 2011), fathers in these settings appeared to be as involved with their children's educations as mothers, although they were underrepresented in the current research.

### 5.5.5 Family structure.

Respondents in this research confirmed the notion that any approach to supporting parental involvement in educational transition must be cognisant of and sensitive to the needs of different types of families (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011; INTO, 2009). This was identified by participants as relevant to the experiences of children and parents in educational transition, and as having impact on the expectations that teachers held for individual children and families.

#### *5.5.5.1 Diverse family structures.*

One of the parents interviewed identified the potential impact of adoption. She had adopted her three children from Russia, and she spoke extensively about the impact of adoption on educational transition:

> I think it made us very anxious when it was time for them to go to school. We were nervous if anything would be said in class that would upset them. If anything came up about birth mothers or adoption and if they got any negative vibes from other children who might not understand the story of adoption and we would try to be very positive about their stories (Parent of junior infant).

This parent felt that some of the approaches used by junior infant teachers to make other children feel comfortable and welcome, such as displaying baby pictures and discussion of family history, could actually cause difficulty for her children. However, the family had found ways of managing these difficulties during times of educational transition and they found the school and teacher to be very supportive: "They were very, very open. They really embraced the whole thing. Actually one of the teachers said that it had never come up as an issue that had to be dealt with". As a result, the fears of this parent around adoption as a factor impacting on her children's move to primary school were not realised.

Foster-care was also identified as a potential influence on experiences of educational transition. One secondary school teacher in particular noted the importance of understanding what was going on in the lives of children in order to inform decisions about how to respond to day-to-day incidents:

> If a problem arises in the class and the teacher is giving out for not having homework done, that child may have had issues such as being put into care over the weekend and her bag might be still in her own house which she is not allowed go to, so I think it is important not only at the start of the year that we are told this but that we are refreshed at the end of each term because things change, so we need to know is student X going home to her foster parents or is she going home to her parents? I suppose we have to be more compassionate, if they are going through these issues at home then the last thing they need is a teacher exploding at them because they forgot their copy, because that can make the student more anxious, frustrated and aggressive which would lead to more problems (First year teacher).

The needs of single-parent families were mentioned by some participants regarding the impact of separation and divorce on children's experiences, but it is worth noting that no reference was made by these participants of the needs of same-sex parents. While this specific form of diversity did not seem to apply to this cohort, family structure was identified as an influence on children's experiences of educational transition.

#### *5.5.5.2 Siblings.*

One of the strongest findings in the current research was that having a sibling who has already gone to the new school is hugely supportive for children during times of educational transition (Dockett and Perry, 2013), and it was a key factor identified regarding school choice – if an older sibling was already attending a primary or secondary school, younger siblings were more likely to be sent there also (Smyth et al., 2004). Many pre-school and junior infant children found it difficult to relay the information they had gotten from older siblings, with some indicating "he told me nothing" (Junior infant girl), but some with older siblings in 'big school' reported having familiarity with uniforms, teachers, the principal and

the school building because "I always go there when I collect my big sister" (Pre-school girl). Having siblings was also related by some participants to behaviour, with the perception that 'only' children would not be used to sharing with others and may be somewhat 'spoiled':

> If it's an only child, there may be things at home that they would have got away with and the structure may be a little different so you might have to do a bit of talking to the parents around that (Principal primary school).

Having a sibling in school was also seen as a mediating factor to the stress of transition at secondary level also, supporting Smyth et al. (2004):

> The number of siblings they have reflects their confidence. One of my first years has a sister in third year and she knows that she'll protect her. She can go to her if she is lost and they all help each other out. Some of my girls have cousins in older years and they are seen to help them as well (First year teacher).

Confirming the work of Dockett and Perry (2013), children indicated that they relied on their siblings socially, emotionally and academically, asking them for help with difficult homework, seeking advice about which subjects to choose, and finding out about various teachers:

> It's a lot easier as well if you have older siblings in the school because you can ask them 'do you really get first year beatings?', and they can say 'oh no, just try and stay away from this person' (First year girl).

It was noted that if a child had older siblings who had already attended the school, this made it easier for parents also. Parents at both transitions repeatedly noted how much harder it was for them with their first child, and teachers indicated that parents with older children "know the system" (Parent of junior infant) and so find it easier to cope:

> Whereas this time it was much, much easier. I found anyway, it was much easier [because we had been through it all before]… and we have one more now, our girl. Obviously she won't be going to [boys' secondary school], she'll be going to [girls' secondary school] and it will probably be less [difficult] again for us when she goes to secondary school (Parent of first year).

However, if an older sibling had difficulties in a school, this could impact negatively on the experiences of teachers, parents and children when the younger sibling went to the same school:

> Maybe parents, who are difficult to communicate with, they might have had a daughter that had a chequered past in the system and didn't have the lovely experience in school because they found school difficult and sometimes parents see that when their next daughter comes and they get a phone call they might have that block (First year teacher).

Unfortunately some parents developed a 'reputation' as a result of interactions regarding one sibling that coloured teachers' perceptions of them as subsequent siblings moved up through the school: "There will always be a few all the way up and you know from their previous teachers who to look out for, so you're ready for them when the time comes" (Sixth class teacher). Therefore, the findings of this research support the literature in identifying family context with regards to siblings as an important influence on experiences at times of educational transition. This can be theorised and elucidated by envisioning siblings as one form of 'linkage' between the micro-systems of home and school, strengthening the meso-system of individual children.

## 5.6 Conclusion

Many researchers indicate that a Bio-ecological perspective can cast light on experiences of educational transition, through providing an appropriate theoretical framework for analysis (Tobbell and O'Donnell, 2005; Margetts and Kienig, 2013; O'Toole, et al., 2014). This echoes Bronfenbrenner's call for the application of Bio-ecological theory to real-world situations and problems (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). In the current research, application of the expanded Bio-ecological Framework to this data on educational transition has yielded the findings that transitional experiences of children, parents and teachers vary based on factors related to 'process' (like relationships between children and their peers,

between schools and families, between children and their parents, between one educational setting and another, and between schools and the wider community); 'person' (like disability, language, culture, religion, socio-economics, gender, individual skills, dispositions and behaviour and pre-school attendance); 'context' (like family structure, school type, disciplinary structures, academic expectations, school climate, curricular discontinuity, streaming, school-based and community-based supports); and 'time' (such as school-starting age, changing social conditions and social norms, and policy thrusts within education at certain times).

More importantly, the research emphasises the complex interplay between these factors, and how examination of any of them in isolation may yield limited understanding of experiences at times of educational transition. Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) also suggest interrogation of Bio-ecological theory through testing its principles with real-world data, and Chapter 6 now deconstructs the findings of the current research in the context of support or challenge to the key Propositions of the Bio-ecological Framework developed in Chapter 2.

# Chapter 6: Testing the Framework

Analysis of the data from the current research supports a Bio-ecological conceptualisation of a child's world, characterised by complexity, synergisms, multi-factorial and multi-directional influences, all negotiated by active children and families with individual needs and strengths. The findings show how examination of any of the relevant factors in isolation may limit understanding of experiences at times of educational transition. Many of the factors identified by participants as important during transition spanned the perspectives of children, parents, teachers and others, and incorporated elements of 'process', 'person', 'context' *and* 'time', leading to significant difficulties in deconstructing them for coherence of narrative. The data highlight the web of human and context-based interaction relevant to educational transition that intertwine and mutually interact to influence outcomes. For example, participants identified particular difficulties for Traveller boys in making the transition to secondary school, illustrating the interaction between gender and culture. Equally, age, or specifically adolescence, influenced the likelihood of children from a variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds engaging with the supports available to them. Also, children transitioning to secondary school showed how 'person' factors like organisational skills and the ability to manage stress interacted with 'context' factors like new systems in secondary school during transition to affect experiences.

Therefore, the findings of the current research supported the Bio-ecological Framework developed in Chapter 2 regarding the mutually influential nature of key 'person', 'context' and 'time' factors, and the power of 'proximal processes' to help overcome potential difficulties. Consistent with the Bio-ecological Framework, the interaction of these

factors with experiences of transition is not straight-forward or linear. The data strongly support the Propositions of the Bio-ecological Framework outlined in Chapter 2.

Some of the strongest findings of the current research were in support of Propositions 1 and 6 regarding relationships and how they foster resilience in challenging times like transition. The data echo the literature in indicating a vital role for relationships in the development of smooth educational transitions for children and their families (Dockett et al., 2012). Responses of participants illustrated and supported the concept of the meso-system, and the importance of providing 'linkages' and continuity of experience for children at times of transition. Positive relationships between those involved (children, parents and teachers at each educational level) were seen as vital to achieving that. In particular, warm and emotionally supportive relationships between children and the adults in their lives were identified as crucial to positive outcomes, with examples including discipline within a relational, 'authoritative' approach (Baumrind, 1971). Surprisingly in many cases, primary school was seen by parents as more emotionally supportive than pre-school, a finding contradicting the literature on transition indicating decreasing emotional involvement and support as children travel up through the education system (Downes et al., 2007). This was perhaps reflective of the exceptionally caring and highly personalised atmosphere of the case-study primary school. Equally relevant to the foregrounding of relationships in the Bio-ecological Framework was the emphasis for schools and pre-schools on proactive relationship-building with families to prevent potential difficulties during transition (Dockett et al., 2012), and acknowledgment of the support that parents give their children in making transitions, albeit with recommendation of practical and emotional support rather than direct involvement at times.

The development of resilience through 'proximal processes' (Proposition 6) was illustrated by cases in which progress was made on behavioural difficulties through caring relationships between children and teachers, as well as mutually supportive relationships between teachers and parents (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011). Also relevant was the hugely valuable input that friends and siblings gave each other in traversing the move from one educational level to the next (Dockett and Perry, 2013) and participants' emphasis on adult support to counteract the effects of bullying (O'Moore, 2010). The emotionally supportive environments provided by the case-study schools and pre-schools, and the proactive approaches they used in relationship-building with families were highly valued by participants, and there was very explicit acknowledgement of the difference these relationships had made to the experiences of families and children. Equally, barriers to relationships, for example limited communication between pre-school and primary levels (O'Kane, 2015), and between educational and community-based supports, were identified as contributors to 'system blockage' (Downes, 2014). Overall, participants largely painted a picture of mutual respect between home and school supporting positive experiences of educational transition – a vibrant real-world illustration of 'proximal processes' in the meso-system. Therefore, the findings of the current research support the notion that 'process' can help to overcome potential challenges presented by 'person', 'context' and 'time' factors.

However, as predicted by Proposition 5, the development of relationships and the experiences of individual people in transition, were nevertheless strongly influenced by the 'contexts' in which they were rooted. Again the concept of the meso-system was illustrated by participants' awareness of how common experiences such as extracurricular activities could create 'linkages', and ease transition from one micro-system (home) to another (school). Also potential 'disjuncture' within the meso-system, was illustrated by the

differences between educational levels noted by participants in terms of systems, physical characteristics and climates. Regarding challenges involved in negotiating new 'contexts' at different educational levels, the difficulties faced by first year students regarding lockers and secondary level systems was one of the aspects of transition most emphasised by participants. Conversely, the importance of contextual supports for transition was strongly emphasised by many participants also, with extensive provision made by schools for both educational transition and parental involvement. This was very much appreciated by participants, and the strong relationships established may not have been so evident without the contextual supports through which they could flourish, confirming Proposition 5.

The data from the current research, like the Bio-ecological Framework, also emphasise the child as an active agent within the world, and an exploration of individual child characteristics (dispositions, resources and demand characteristics) as vital in understanding experiences. Relevant factors identified include gender, linguistic, socioeconomic and cultural background, disability, behaviour, specific skills and personality traits. However, the Bio-ecological Framework also emphasises that personal characteristics are not simply a function of an individual's development, but rather there is a bi-directional, exponential synergy between the characteristics of the developing 'person', and the 'contexts' in which they develop, mediated by 'process' and the significant relationships experienced (Proposition 2). In fact, the effects of positive relationships between children and teachers supported both the idea of relationships as key (Proposition 1) and the idea that traits such as 'self-esteem' and 'motivation' are not solely a function of individual 'person' factors, but rely also on internalisation of experiences and relationships (Proposition 2).

Participants emphasised how experience of a good quality pre-school (Pianta et al., 2009; Sylva et al., 2004) could influence whether a child was perceived by teachers as well-behaved, academically competent and 'school-ready' or immature, unable to concentrate and in possession of limited skills – in other words, these 'dispositions' were not seen solely as internal to children, but rather as a function of interaction between 'person' factors and the experiences they had of education to date. Equally, family circumstances such as marital breakdown or being taken into care were seen to impact on children's challenging behaviour, as opposed to identifying 'boldness' as a trait solely internal to a child.

In another real-world illustration of the meso-system and potential 'disjuncture' within it, participants also linked some behaviour difficulties for children to differing expectations between home and school, and the style of interaction between parents and children (Baumrind, 1971) in facilitating independence or alternatively inhibiting its development, particularly with regards to boys. Teachers showed strong awareness of how academic experiences could become incorporated into children's self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1994) and so predict future behaviour, noting how some primary school teachers had not emphasised certain subjects, leading children to believe they were 'no good' at those subjects. Interestingly, however, the majority of children reported strong academic self-efficacy beliefs that had survived the process of transition in opposition to the predictions of the literature (Mackenzie et al., 2012; Topping, 2011). The maintenance of self-esteem and self-efficacy beliefs during transition in the case of most children confirm that, as posited by Proposition 6, resilience relies on interaction between experience, positive relationships and personal characteristics, rather than residing solely within the individual child (Brooker, 2008; Guilfoyle, 2011). Thus, the data offer strong support for the Bio-ecological idea that the personal characteristics of the individual interact with the environments they experience,

and through processes of reciprocal determinism, children internalise those experiences, thereby feeding into the development of future characteristics (Proposition 2).

The Bio-ecological Framework would explain the positivity of children's experiences in this sample by noting the extensive 'contextual' supports (Proposition 5) and supportive relationships or 'processes' (Proposition 1) available to children in the case study schools and pre-schools, and how the resultant positive experiences of transition had been internalised by children, forming the basis of their self-efficacy beliefs which in turn influenced behaviour (Proposition 2). The 'other side of the coin' was shown within the data in the negative 'internalisation' of experience in parents' self-efficacy beliefs regarding education. Many participants supported the predictions of the Bio-ecological Framework (Proposition 2) linking socio-economic class and cultural capital, previous negative experiences of education, low self-efficacy beliefs and subsequent avoidance of parental involvement, due to intimidation, that could mistakenly be construed as lack of interest. In Bronfenbrenner and Morris' (2006) terms, this means that 'directive beliefs' forming 'person' characteristics of parents are highly influential at times of educational transition, offering support for the Framework.

Individual choices and behaviours, such as parents' (and indeed grandparents') decisions on whether to become involved with their children's schooling, were very much dependent on the 'contexts' in question (Proposition 5) and the relationships developed within them (Proposition 1). The parents' courses in the primary school, as well as other contextual supports for parental involvement, and supports to overcome potential linguistic and cultural barriers were repeatedly identified as facilitative to parents' and grandparents' decisions to become involved in children's education. In many cases participants were quite

clear that without these contextual supports and opportunities to get to know school staff, they would not have had the confidence to approach their children's teachers or to get involved in the life of the school.

The transformative effects of such experiences (Freire, 1972) were movingly underlined by parents who said they never felt competent to support their children to achieve their educational potential but now did, and by those cases in which parents actually went on to achieve qualifications themselves. These benefits to parents of involvement in their children's education are a good example of a key tenet of the exo-system – children are not just influenced by the world, but rather this influence is bi-directional (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). This also highlights the focus within Bio-ecological Framework on dynamic, potentially transformative systems, as opposed to the static image of the Bio-ecological approaches sometimes portrayed in the literature (Downes, 2014). Mediated by 'process', 'contexts' had strong influences on behaviour, and the data yield a picture of participants as active agents within a narrow range of choices, defined by complex interactions between personal characteristics and the environments and relationships in which they find themselves, supporting Proposition 4.

Equally, Proposition 3 of the Framework identifies diversity as a central aspect of what it means to be human. The data from the current research supports Margetts (2003) contention that children's adjustment to schooling is effected by their individual dispositions, experiences and backgrounds, and by children possessing the skills and knowledge to respond to the demands of new school settings. Such skills vary between children based on factors like experiences of parental discipline, and so an individual child's ability to negotiate educational transition successfully varied, again emphasising the importance of

understanding the interactive nature of various factors through a Bio-ecological lens. Each child's transition to school is unique (Margetts, 2003). Different children in this cohort experienced educational transition in different ways, and mismatches between a child's individual developmental maturity and the demands of a new environment during transition could lead to poor adjustment. Sometimes a child's individual personality was seen as the key factor in determining experiences. The literature also identifies a number of vulnerable groups for whom educational transition may present greater challenge, such as children with disabilities (Maunsell et al., 2007)**,** and the need to support such groups is reinforced by the current work.

Indeed parents were not a homogenous group either, with some coping very well and some struggling, and a wide range of opinions expressed. Parents' personal circumstances regarding work also impacted on their capacity to engage with their child's education since, as pointed out by Hornby and Lafaele (2011), parents who work full-time simply are not as available. Teachers also differed in their approaches and opinions regarding children and parents and how to manage the process of educational transition. In fact, the impact of diversity was one of the strongest results of the current research, with the data yielding extensive findings, deconstructed in Chapter 5, on the influence of language, culture, religion, socio-economic status, disability, gender and family structure. This is an important consideration for policy and for those aiming to improve practice.

The data also offer support for Proposition 7 and the concept of the chrono-system. Specifically, participants indicated that as predicted by the Bio-ecological Framework, experiences must be understood in relation to the point in the life-course in which they occur (Elder, 1998). School-starting age was seen by teachers as a predictor of how well children

settled in to primary school, with concerns raised about how well four-year-olds could manage the challenges involved, supporting O'Kane and Hayes (2006) and O'Kane (2015). This was also a good example of Bio-ecological synergisms in that school-starting age was seen as interactive with gender – participants felt that four-year-old girls might cope with transition but that four-year-old boys would tend to struggle. Interestingly however, school-starting age at second level was not seen as important, and along with the fact that there was little difference noted between experiences at the earlier transition and those at the later, these were the only findings that refuted any of the predictions of the Bio-ecological Framework. Nevertheless, the impact of adolescence on experiences of transition from primary to secondary school were noted, supporting the idea that the time within the life-course that experiences occur is important.

In further support for Proposition 7, the developmental impact of early experiences were portrayed as exponential as children grow. Participants pointed out the importance of early intervention for children with any difficulties, and also the long-reaching effects that experiences of transition can have on educational, social and emotional outcomes into the future (Brooker, 2008). Reactions to experiences were also seen to change over time. Consistent with the literature on educational transition (Dockett and Perry 2013; Topping, 2011), the majority of children and families found transition challenging to begin with, but as time passed most began to make sense of the new contexts and by the time of data collection in October and November 2012 the majority were coping well. Even the huge challenge of lockers and organisational skills was becoming easier for first year students as they began to understand what they needed to do. Equally, the data showed the role of the parent in children's education changing over time, both in terms of decreased involvement as children progress through the system, and also in terms of changing perspectives from a parent's first

experience of a child transitioning across educational levels to later experiences with second or subsequent children.

The data also illustrated the other aspect of Proposition 7, that individual experiences must be located within the socio-historical time in which they occur (Elder, 1998; Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). In particular, parents and grandparents noted how different education is now as compared to their childhood experiences, regarding behaviour management, academic approaches and relationships both between children and teachers and between home and school. They noted changing norms with regards to parental involvement in education (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011; INTO, 1997), indicating that schools now are much more open and proactive in engaging with parents than they were in the past, and that today's parents now expect to play a role in their child's education as a result. Equally, the increasing involvement of grandparents was a point of note, as were the changing demographics and increased diversity in Irish society over time.

Potential problems related to socio-historical circumstances in Ireland at the time of data-collection (recession, 2012), were also highlighted by participants (Elder, 1998), in terms of financial worries faced by parents when children start in a new school, and regarding availability of funding for support services that are important for children and families during transition. However, one unexpected positive side-effect of recession was the increased availability of fathers to become involved in their children's education due to unemployment.

Equally, participants repeatedly highlighted the provision of the Free Pre-school Year (FPSY). Parents indicated that sometimes the choice of whether to send a child to primary school at age four or five was made based on financial considerations, since they would have

to pay for a second year in pre-school and due to the impact of the recession, they would be unable to do so. This will be less of a consideration for Irish parents in future, with the introduction of a second FPSY in 2015. This may also reduce the likelihood of four-year-olds going to primary school. Therefore, while this is relevant to the chrono-system, the data also illustrate the impact that policy at any point in time can have significant impacts on individual experiences, supporting Proposition 8 of the Bio-ecological Framework. The impact of funding policies is highlighted in the data, in a positive sense regarding the supports provided by the DEIS scheme, and the fact that the FPSY led to 100% pre-school attendance in this sample. Equally, the extensive policy focus on educational transition in Ireland at time of writing appears to be making some headway, albeit with ongoing concerns around curriculum discontinuity.

Policy is also addressed by participants in a negative sense with depictions of a community that is working hard to coordinate responses and supports for children and families, but stymied by funding practices that limit possibilities for partnership. This is a clear example of the 'system blockage' highlighted by Downes (2014). The increased neo-liberal focus on narrow curricula and standardised testing in Ireland, and the ongoing use of ability grouping in the move to secondary school was noted by participants, but with more mixed opinions than the overwhelmingly negative view from the literature (Ó Breacháin and O'Toole, 2013; MacRuairc, 2009). Participants were also quite negative in their evaluation of policy with regards to measures of 'quality' in the early childhood sector (Sabol et al., 2013), with all pre-school teachers providing an image of a sector in Ireland that was over-regulated but under-supported (Kinsella, 2015). In particular, participants indicated that the focus within quality-based policy was misguided, emphasising structural issues such as whether a pre-school had a fridge, above things that participants considered far more important for

children, such as positive curriculum approaches and emotionally supportive relationships. In other words, quality initiatives in Ireland appear to emphasise 'context', whereas the participants of the current research support the Bio-ecological Framework in foregrounding 'process'.

In further recommendations for policy-makers, participants also felt it would be important for teachers at all levels to receive training on working with parents, and on managing educational transition. Relevant also to teacher education were the findings that many participants from diverse cultural backgrounds had huge interest in the Irish language, and this is noteworthy in policy terms due to the fact that one is unable to enter into the teaching profession in Ireland at primary level without proficiency in Irish, so that exemptions for children not born in Ireland – and this cohort would indicate unnecessary exemptions – may be impacting on diversity in the teaching profession in Ireland.

### 6.1 Summary.

The current doctoral research has provided strong support for many of the Propositions of the Bio-ecological Framework developed in Chapter 2, notably Proposition 1, that relationships (with 'objects and symbols' but more importantly with other people) are key to the development of human beings emotionally, socially and cognitively. Proposition 3 regarding the importance of understanding diversity was also confirmed by the emphasis from participants on individual personality traits and circumstances, cultural and linguistic considerations, socio-economics, disability, gender and family structure. However, the power of 'process' to overcome potential barriers imposed by 'person' and 'context' were highlighted, supporting Propositions 2 and 6 regarding internalisation of experience, and contextual influences on the development of resilience. Proposition 5, that children's

development is inextricably linked to the context in which it occurs, was illustrated by the value placed by participants on supports for both parental involvement and for educational transition. The participants also located experiences of educational transition within the chrono-system, regarding both ‘time’ in the life-course and ‘time’ in the socio-historical sense (Proposition 7). Therefore, the aim of testing the Framework against real-world data has been achieved, largely yielding strong support for its key Propositions.

# Chapter 7: Concluding Discussion and Recommendations

This thesis began with two clear aims: firstly, to test various predictions and the eight key Propositions of a newly synthesised Bio-ecological Framework through confrontation with real-world data, and secondly to use that Framework to elucidate seemingly disparate findings on educational transition through theorising them. The first aim of the thesis, testing the Bio-ecological Framework against real-world data, has been largely successful. Research evidence in the area of educational transition, including the current work, provides much support for the Framework, and future researchers may be interested in confirming the validity of its Propositions. Perhaps the strongest support from the literature and the data from this study, is for the idea that relationships matter in combatting 'system blockage'. Downes (2014) argues that systems tend to inculcate the mentality that 'it must be done this way because this is how it has always been done', and as classic work in psychology such as that of Milgram (1963) and Zimbardo (1971) has shown, it may be that the default position of human beings is to 'go along with' the status quo, regardless of moral or ethical concerns regarding institutional practice. In such circumstances individual accountability gets lost within the 'totality' of the system and nobody is responsible for systems failure. As a result, the adults most responsible for protecting children and ensuring their wellbeing could fail to meet those responsibilities through a sense that either 'nothing can be done' or 'it's not my job to do it'.

However, introducing Attachment Theory and a Rogerian element to the concept of 'proximal processes' may present a potential antidote to system blockage. If children are living 'linked lives' (Bronfenbrenner), 'securely attached' (Bowlby) through strong 'proximal processes' (Bronfenbrenner) with the adults that populate systems, then the 'capacity' of both

adults and children for positive action should be activated (Rogers). To put it simply, if the adults in a child's life are involved in caring, mutually supportive relationships with him or her, then they are more likely to be empowered to overcome the inertia inherent in 'systems blockage', and act in the child's best interest, regardless of institutional norms. Equally, if children are on the receiving end of caring, mutually supportive relationships, they are more likely to be empowered to object to unjust practices experienced, as evidenced for example by the literature on bullying (O'Moore, 2010).

Therefore, it may be that 'the relationship' or 'process' has the power to overcome inertia and systems blockage, acting as a catalyst for change and transformation in the Freirean sense, and leading to the development of 'inclusive systems' (Downes, 2014). As O'Connor (2013, p. xi) points out, in the list of questions 'good' parents are supposed to ask of their children's schools, rarely is "How well will they be loved?" on the list, but perhaps it should be. In this way the adults who care most about children, their parents and their teachers, can work together through strong connections in the 'meso-system', to ensure that educational transition provides the foundation for their future academic, social and emotional well-being.

While confrontation with this real-world data therefore supports Bio-ecological conceptions of the importance of relationships for development, it also supports the Bio-ecological perspective that relationships do not happen in a vacuum, and 'processes' are impacted by the 'person', 'context' and 'time' factors with which they interact. In meeting the second aim of the research, employment of the Bio-ecological Framework to theorise educational transition has proved useful, making sense of seemingly disparate findings on the importance of reciprocal, mutually reinforcing relationships between children, parents,

schools and communities, and the dynamics of how they may, or indeed may fail to, develop. The Framework offers contribution to the fields of psychology, sociology and education therefore, as it facilitated the generation of rich, descriptive, multi-layered pictures of participants' experiences of educational transition. In particular, it identified, and helped to address, a gap in current understanding by emphasising the role and experiences of parents and families. It may also represent a useful theoretical basis for studying other developmental, social and educational processes. However, other researchers should be aware of the potential limitation associated with the use of the Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) conceptualisation: it can prove unwieldy in terms of analysis and write-up of research, since its very strength (the emphasis on complexity and multi-directional influences) can lead to difficulty in developing a coherent, linear narrative.

Nevertheless, a PPCT approach within the Bio-ecological Framework helps to explain why we must understand issues of diversity if we are to understand individual behaviours, perceptions and outcomes. This insight is valuable to research as well as practice on a variety of topics within a range of disciplines. The example of educational transition showed that experiences and behaviour are influenced by factors such as socio-economic class, gender, disability, personal circumstances, etc. Thus it becomes clear that individual choices around issues like parental involvement in educational transition must be understood as stemming from a joint freedom-determinism base, as described in the Bio-ecological Framework. People make active choices, but only within the range of options they perceive to be available to them.

The Bio-ecological Framework provides a conceptual basis for looking beyond the individual 'person' to the 'context' in which they are developing, and the relationships

('processes') through which they do so. This may help to avoid a deficit narrative, whereby children and their families are thoughtlessly 'blamed' for any potential educational difficulties, or certain groups of parents are seen as 'not interested' in their children's education. It allows researchers, practitioners and policy-makers to draw together a comprehensive picture of how individual characteristics interact with, are influenced by, and impact on the educational system in which they find themselves. The Bio-ecological Framework recognises that no cog in the system moves in isolation, so that experiences of 'context' are influenced by the relationships or 'process' within them, the 'person' experiencing them, and the 'time' periods involved.

Thus, the synthesis of theory within the Bio-ecological Framework casts light on previously hard-to-explain phenomena. For example, classic research on the 'Pygmalion effect' (Rosenthal and Jacobsen, 1968) whereby low teacher expectations of working class children become self-fulfilling prophecies makes logical sense when viewed through this lens: Because the 'habitus' of the working class child differs from that of the middle class school (Bourdieu), the teacher interprets it as a 'disruptive demand characteristic' (Bronfenbrenner), infers (often with little accuracy) related 'resource characteristics' such as lower levels of 'intelligence' or 'motivation' (Bronfenbrenner), transmits these inferences to the child through the materials and learning opportunities provided to him or her (Socio-cultural Theory – mediated learning), as well as the quality of relationship with him or her (Bronfenbrenner, Rogers, Attachment Theory). This is in turn internalised by the child to form the basis of his or her own beliefs about academic ability (Bandura, Dweck). Through the process of reciprocal determinism between self-efficacy beliefs and achievement (Bandura), the child fails to expend the requisite effort to achieve and the prophecy is fulfilled. Such processes were evident in the experiences of working-class parents in this

sample, with some parents intimidated by their prior educational experiences, and nervous about engaging with schools due to the impact of their low self-efficacy beliefs.

The commonplace analysis that views socio-economic factors as solely a function of 'context', therefore, fails to take account of the internalisation of modes of being based on experience, and the 'process' by which the external 'context' becomes part of the internal 'person', as outlined by Bronfenbrenner, Bourdieu, and indeed Vygotsky, Bowlby and Bandura. Even some researchers using Bio-ecological approaches may underestimate these complex inter-influences between demand characteristics, resource characteristics, 'proximal processes' and environmental 'contexts' over 'time' to produce 'person' characteristics. For example, even eminent scholars of Bio-ecological theory such as Tudge et al. (2009, p. 201) may fall into the trap of misrepresenting this complexity in their observation that "two children may have equal resource characteristics but their developmental trajectories will be quite different if one is motivated to succeed and the other is not motivated and does not persist". This presents the 'disposition' of 'motivation' as solely internal to the child, without recognition of the cyclical process of internalisation inherent in the Bio-ecological exposition of how external experiences and internal characteristics are intertwined. It becomes untenable when further elucidated by Bandura's very similar ideas on self-efficacy beliefs and motivation. When one incorporates that interpretation of the Bio-ecological Model with the insights from Bourdieu's theories on social reproduction (as this current work does), one is left with a strong framework for analysis of power dimensions at both individual and societal levels. This contrasts with Downes' (2014) critique of an absence of understanding of power relations in Bio-ecological theory.

While this illustrates the explanatory power of the Bio-ecological Framework, it also emphasises the imperative to interrupt such processes if all children and families are to be given a fair chance in education and in life, reminiscent of the idea of 'scholar-activism'. While educational interventions, such as those that support children and parents during educational transition, cannot be presented as panaceas for every problem that confronts society as a whole or the more localised school community (INTO, 1997), it is no longer feasible for schools and education systems to deny their socio-political nature. Many new functions are expected of schools and pre-schools in modern societies, beyond simple transmission of knowledge and skills, including forming good citizens, promoting independent and creative thinkers, training for jobs, changing attitudes while maintaining cultural traditions, and promotion of equality and diversity (Kelleghan et al., 1993).

The current doctoral work is located within this socio-political context. It is underpinned by a clear socio-political agenda rooted in Freirian ideals of conscientisation, inclusion and social justice, and with no claim of the neutrality demanded by positivists but eschewed by thinkers from many disciplines such as Freire (1972), Bruner (1990), Kuhn (1970), Bourdieu (1973), Foucault (1977) and Bronfenbrenner (1994). This interpretation of the Bio-ecological paradigm highlights the fact that when educational interventions are designed based on a flawed expectation of homogeneity, we run the risk of inadvertently reproducing the very inequalities we aim to address. For example, if we disregard the interaction of 'person' factors with 'context' and expect all children and parents to be similarly 'motivated' regardless of aspects such as socio-economic status, gender, age, linguistic and cultural background, prior educational experiences, etc, deficit models result because we criticise those children and parents who, for whatever reason, do not show the

expected levels of motivation. Certain groups are then seen as 'not interested' in education, devaluing their habitus and limiting their cultural capital even further.

Since children's access to school is mediated through their parents, and some parents are not in a position to actively promote their children's interests (Adler, 1993), often based on a diversity of 'person' characteristics such as possession of differing levels of 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1973), or linguistic, cultural (Rong and Preissle, 1998) or socio-economic characteristics that may result in barriers to accessing information (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011), then it cannot be argued that educational interventions that depend on all parents to behave similarly will provide equitable outcomes for children (O'Toole, 2011). The reality of development and education for individual children, parents, teachers and schools is complex, so interventions must take account of diversity and its potential impact on capacity to benefit from them. On the other hand, educational interventions that allocate causality solely to individual 'person' characteristics in terms of whether they succeed in education or not can run the risk of the development of deficit models and a 'blame the victim' mentality also. As Downes (2014) points out, difficulties at times of transition are not just a matter of individuals and their problems in moving from one setting to another, but rather represent system-level challenges in reducing discontinuities between 'contexts'.

What is important to note here is that 'contexts' *can* be changed to support more healthy development, providing researchers and educationalists with a rationale, and in fact a moral imperative, to identify optimal environments for individual children and families. Bronfenbrenner's Bio-ecological Model of Human Development, along with Bourdieu's theories of habitus, field, social reproduction and cultural capital, provide the central theoretical and philosophical foundations to the current research. Both theories impose a

responsibility on educational researchers to acknowledge and act upon the importance of contextual knowledge, environmental factors, and 'processes' in relationships, while also taking account of the socio-cultural time in which development takes place, with a view to supporting the potential of children and families. This philosophy has informed and guided the research at each stage, from the choice of methodology, to the view of participants and the emphasis on their perceptions and their relationships, to the location of the research questions and findings in the broader context of Irish and international developments in education. It also underpins the core focus on educational transition as a potentially crucial time in defining whether education will be experienced by individual children and their families as transformative or reproductive. Both Bourdieu's and Bronfenbrenner's approaches allow for clarity of context, and rationale for action.

Therefore, the analysis presented here opposes an interpretation of the Bio-ecological Model (and indeed Bourdieu's work) that presents systems' functioning as static, immutable and deterministic (Downes, 2014). The most up-to-date version of the Bio-ecological Model certainly leaves much room for dynamic change within systems, given certain circumstances. In Bronfenbrenner and Morris' (2006) chapter, the idea of human beings, and particularly scientists and researchers, as potential change agents in their world is flagged from the very first paragraph:

> We are the only species that… has developed the capacity to engage successfully in scientific inquiry, and thereby, in many respects, has been able to change the nature of the world in which we live. As a result, within certain limits, we humans have altered the nature and course of our own development as a species… Our primary emphasis… is on the role of developmental processes and outcomes in producing large scale changes over time in the state and structure of the broader society over time, and the implications of those changes for the society's future (pp. 793-794; 796).

Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) provide an imperative for scientists and researchers to identify and implement optimal conditions for human development, and warn that otherwise children will not be free to reach their full potential to both their detriment and the detriment of society as a whole. This is similar to the Bourdieusian concept of a permeable habitus, open to either experiences of emancipation or reproduction (Reay, 2010). While allowing for Downes' (2014) point that systems tend to develop inertia and resistance to change in those who are a part of them (hence the qualification, 'within certain limits'), the Bio-ecological Model is not the 'conservative' theory supporting the status quo that is portrayed by many, and indeed Downes (2014) acknowledges that the Bio-ecological paradigm highlights research, policy and practice "committed to transforming experiments" (p. 37).

Equally, while Bourdieu has often been characterised as deterministic, with a view of habitus' that may change but fields that are unlikely to (or at least not quickly enough to have any impact on experiences of individual children), his later work such as "Acts of Resistance" (1998) expresses "a real solidarity with those who are now fighting to change society" (p. 27), and a belief that "it is possible to resist the [symbolic] violence that is exerted daily" (p. 22). Taking into account the idea of 'cultural arbitrary', if the basis of the value placed on certain ways of being above others can be made explicit, explored and challenged through the process referred to as 'conscientisation' by Freire (1972), then perhaps social justice can be achieved or at least attempted within a Bourdieusian (and Bio-ecological) framework.

Reay (2010) draws on Bourdieu's theories to show that the range of possibilities inscribed in a habitus can be envisaged as a continuum. At one end habitus can be replicated

through encountering an environment (or field) that reproduces its dispositions (social reproduction). At the other end of the continuum habitus can be transformed through a process that either raises or lowers an individual's expectations. This is vividly illustrated by the impact of the emotionally supportive environments in the case study schools on potentially vulnerable parents' self-efficacy beliefs and consequent engagement with their children's education.

As Mayall (2015) explains, "Bourdieu's interlinked concepts of field and habitus include the understanding that both may change in character and that, as interlinked, interrelated concepts, change in the one will lead to responsive change in the other" (p. 15). Individuals can acquire forms of capital through, for example education, that allow them to benefit from opportunities and changes within a field (Mayall, 2015). At the same time, Brooker (2015) cautions against approaches aimed at increasing the cultural capital of children while allowing "those social, economic and educational processes which construct children as deficient and needy before they start school" (p. 35) to remain unproblematised. To effect real change, both fields and capitals must be considered. This echoes Bronfenbrenner's emphasis on the synergy between 'person' and 'context', mediated by 'process' over 'time'.

Thus, the Bio-ecological Model has much in common with Bourdieu's ideas, which given certain circumstances, allow for education as an agent for transformation and the exercise of 'freedom' as envisaged by Freire (1972). Of course, education can also potentially represent "an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring conformity to it" (Schaull, 1972, p. 16) through the process of social reproduction as outlined by Bourdieu. The substantive work of

researchers and practitioners within this Framework may be to identify means of encouraging dynamism and overcoming inertia within different levels of systems and subsystems as part of system change (Downes, 2014). The understandings drawn from the current research yield some recommendations therefore, for policy, practice and research, for psychology, sociology and education generally, but particularly with regards to educational transition in Ireland. They are presented according to concerns for 'process' in the micro-system, followed by the meso-system, then exo- and macro-systems, while acknowledging that the temporal concerns of the chrono-system, and current experiences in Ireland, permeate all levels. Key ideas are then synthesised into bullet points in the 'summary' section.

## 7.1 'Process' in the micro-system

The use of the Bio-ecological Framework and its joint freedom-determinism base yields the strong recommendation that research in psychology, sociology and education must focus on investigating the creation of supportive contexts through which positive relationships can develop. With regards to educational transition specifically, and within the individual micro-systems of schools and pre-schools, initiatives aimed at supporting smooth transitions ought to focus strongly on relationship-building between children, parents, teachers and educational levels from pre-school onwards.While contextual supports are vital in ensuring smooth transition, these supports should be aimed at facilitating strong 'proximal processes', rather than 'tick-box' or politically motivated systems with false models of 'quality'. An ethos of care for children and families is vital for protection of potentially vulnerable children and adults, as well as support for agency and capacity, fostering positive social, emotional and educational outcomes. Such ethos can be hard to measure, and requires proactive effort by schools and pre-schools. As predicted by the Bio-ecological Framework,

this *can* be successful, however, and can make all the difference to individual experiences. This is evident in practice in the case-study settings of the current research.

Schools should be mindful of the changing atmospheres potentially experienced by children and parents as they move through the educational system. The need for emotional as well as academic support at all educational levels must be recognised, and this is especially noteworthy for secondary schools with regards to research, policy and practice. While schools tend to develop administrative and organisational systems to ease the transition process regarding academic problems, children and parents are typically more concerned with personal and social issues, and support for these issues is often less forthcoming (Jindal-Snape and Millar, 2008). In Bronfenbrenner's terms, this means that schools tend to focus on 'context', whereas what is important to children and families is 'process', and future research should further investigate these dynamics.

The importance of engaging with children and families as individuals with their own needs and strengths cannot be over-estimated. Brooker's (2005, p. 128) recommendation of "a serious and respectful listening, and not…a home school dialogue that assumes the school is always right" is relevant here. Schools must consider issues of diversity such as language, culture, religion, socio-economics, gender, disability and family structure in developing support systems for both educational transition and parental involvement in their children's education. Unicultural approaches may be doomed to failure, and may actually widen pre-existing gaps in experience and understanding, leading to damaging levels of disjuncture in the meso-systems of children. Equally, researchers investigating developmental, social and educational processes must embed diversity into their work, and not assume that one 'truth' exists for all human beings.

## 7.2 'Process' in the meso-system – creation of 'linkages'

The emphasis on relationships in the Bio-ecological Framework highlights the importance for research, policy and practice to consider interaction in the meso-system. With regards to educational transition, research suggests minimising differences between educational levels in order to support positive experiences (Brooker, 2008). This echoes Bronfenbrenner's ideas on 'linkages' in the meso-system so that children can 'drag' (Slesnik et al., 2007) their skills across settings. The findings of the current research yield the recommendation that in creating 'linkages' in practice, transition programmes should focus on 'soft skills' such as independence, concentration and organisational skills rather than academic skills in preparing children to move on to the next educational level. Pre-schools and primary schools could perhaps create 'linkages' by 'meeting in the middle' regarding expectations around 'independence' and what that actually means. An example of this in the current research was evident in the pre-school that gave children the opportunity to experience homework. Pre-schools could prioritise mastering the skills of looking after self and belongings, sitting still, concentrating, and following instruction, while primary schools could continue to develop their mindfulness of the developmental needs of young children for self-direction and play.

In sixth class, schools could try to support children in developing the organisational skills they need for secondary school, with simulated versions of lockers and timetables. Secondary schools also have a role to play, recognising the extent of the experiential impact of organisational issues. They could support children through providing base classes for first years so they do not have to traverse an unfamiliar school, and offering help in organising lockers through sticker systems or folders.

Another form of 'linkage' in the meso-system highlighted by this research was the power of extracurricular activities such as sports clubs, dance classes, etc, and how they helped children to make friends that supported transition. This is relevant to the Bio-ecological notion of rooting schools, and indeed children and families, within the communities in which they exist, an important consideration for educational research. While the schools in this sample did sometimes access community supports, particularly the Intercultural Centre, some participants identified potentially powerful untapped resources in this regards. As such, this research yields the recommendation that schools aiming to support children and families at times of educational transition should try to think beyond the confines of their own schools and pre-schools, and reach out into their communities for potential support.

In terms of meso-level recommendations however, one of the strongest findings of the current research relates to the importance of including and supporting parents and families at times of transition. Parental involvement was seen as mediating outcomes for children. As explained by the Bio-ecological Framework, outcomes such as 'behaviour' or 'motivation' are not solely a function of individual child factors, but result from complex interactions with contexts and relationships experienced. Parents can act as the interpretive bridge between home and school for children involved in transition (Dockett et al., 2012). Family support is linked to achievement after transition and the influence of encouraging parents is cumulative (McGee et al., 2004). Schools should also be aware of the potential benefits to parents of becoming involved in their children's education. It is vitally important that schools realise that expecting all parents and families to behave in the same way or hold the same values, beliefs and capacities regardless of background or personal circumstances may be futile, again foregrounding diversity. The onus is on schools and teachers to be proactive on these

issues, because previous experiences of education can leave some children and adults vulnerable to marginalisation and intimidation.

### 7.3 'Process' in the exo- and macro-systems

A number of recommendations also emerge from the data that are relevant for practice, research and policy-making at exo- and macro-levels. With regards to pre-service and in-service education for teachers at pre-school, primary and secondary levels, training on parental involvement and educational transition ought to be included as standard, to avoid circumstances where, like some participants of this research, teachers feel that they are learning "on the job", experiencing "anxious moments" and feeling like "sitting ducks". The majority of teachers do their best to form positive relationships with parents, but without the formal opportunity to deconstruct some of the issues related to socio-economics, gender, disability and cultural and linguistic heritage explored in the current work, they may resort to what Olson and Bruner (1996) call 'folk psychologies', bringing potentially naïve, incomplete or even erroneous understandings to their interactions with parents, based on their own educational, economic, class, gendered and ethnic experiences (Ryan and O'Toole, 2014). This may result in teachers mis-interpreting parental intimidation or reluctance to become involved as aggression or a lack of interest.

Regarding teacher education at primary level, if the desire to develop diversity within the profession is genuine, the Irish language requirement ahead of entry to Colleges of Education must be reviewed. One potential solution could lie within Gilligan's (2007) suggestion that proficiency in the Irish language become a requirement at the end of the course of teacher education and not a condition of entry. Another solution could lie in a policy-level review of seemingly automatic 'exemptions' for children from diverse

backgrounds in studying the Irish language at primary and secondary level regardless of their capacities or levels of interest. There is need for further research on the engagement of children from a diversity of ethnic and linguistic backgrounds with the Irish language, and on the attendant implications and opportunities for diversification of the teaching profession in Ireland. Those involved in education in Ireland at every level from research to policy-making to practice must recognise the impact of diversity, and incorporate this recognition into all initiatives. Development of 'one-size-fits-all' approaches can feed into the very problems we aim to address through the development of deficit models and alienation of traditionally marginalised groups.

The continued policy emphasis on educational transition in Ireland is highly appropriate and should continue. If the experiences of the case-study schools here are replicated at national level, it would seem that much progress has been made, largely through the work of the NCCA, as well as local on-the-ground initiatives, particularly in terms of communication between primary and secondary levels. Further research is required to establish if this is the case. Equally, if these experiences are replicated nationally, it would seem that in spite of this progress, much remains to be achieved, specifically regarding links between pre-school and primary school levels, and addressing the perennial problem of curriculum discontinuity. 'Joined-up thinking' is required by the various agencies supporting children and families at times of educational transition and beyond, but this must be facilitated by government departments and funding providers, so that organisations and people aiming to achieve similar outcomes are not put in the position of having to compete for funding, as identified by participants in the current research. This role could potentially be located within the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) rather than within the

Department of Education and Skills, in order to facilitate coordination across educational and community-based sectors.

The impact of policy and the possibility for systems change is apparent in the impressive gains in evidence for the most socio-economically disadvantaged children in Ireland as a result of the contextual interventions involved in the DEIS scheme (Weir and Denner, 2013). The participants of the current research highly valued the supports available to them and their schools through DEIS. For example, the role of the School Completion Programme (SCP) Coordinator and Home-School-Community-Liaison (HSCL) teacher were significant contributors to the positivity of relationships in this cohort, but they are only available to a limited number of children and families based on DEIS designation. This research yields the recommendation that all schools and communities could benefit from similar provision to support engagement with parents, albeit with recognition of the financial implications of this in the current economic climate.

In spite of financial pressures at national level, significant investment and support is also required in the Early Childhood sector in Ireland, as there appears to be a perception of regulation without support or improvement for those 'on-the-ground'. According to participants in this research, quality systems in early education in Ireland at present may be depending on 'crude indicators' of quality of provision (Brooker, 2015). Participants indicated that quality systems currently emphasise structural, contextual notes on a tick-box, like whether there is a fridge and bottled water, rather than asking more difficult questions regarding relationships and interactions ('process') between children and those who care for them. The introduction of the second FPSY is a positive development, but there is urgent need for research into the quality of provision in early education in Ireland, through

examination of genuine caring practices and ‘processes’ rather than simply examining ‘contexts’.

Thus, the development of the Bio-ecological Framework has contributed significantly to identifying potential future directions for research, policy and practice in Ireland, particularly regarding educational transition.

## 7.4 Summary and conclusions:

In summary, the current research has developed a Bio-ecological Framework through which to theorise research, policy and practice on a variety of topics within a range of disciplines. It has applied this Framework to data on the experiences of educational transition by children, parents, teachers and others in case study schools and pre-schools in Ireland. It also tested the predictions of the Framework using this data. The findings from the research on educational transition support the eight key Propositions of the Framework, and in turn the Framework helps to explain the findings. The potential contribution of the Framework would be further developed by future research testing its Propositions against data in alternative settings with alternative groups of participants. The recommendations yielded by the current research can be summarised thus:

- Those working in psychology, sociology and education (as well as other relevant disciplines) must recognise and respond to the understanding that positive relationships can change lives. The identification and development of supportive ‘contexts’ for positive ‘processes’ should be prioritised in research, policy and practice.

- Schools and pre-schools should be proactive in building relationships with parents and families at times of educational transition and beyond. Children's relationships (both with adults and with other children) should also be prioritised.
- Approaches to supporting both parental involvement and positive experiences of transition at micro-, meso-, exo- and macro-levels must take account of diversity in terms of language, culture, religion, socio-economics, disability, gender and family structure. Unicultural approaches may exacerbate pre-existing inequalities.
- Schools and pre-schools would benefit from formation of stronger 'linkages' both with educational settings at alternative levels (pre-school to primary school and primary to secondary school), particularly regarding curriculum, as well as with services in their communities that could support their engagement with parents and families.
- Measure of 'quality' at micro-, meso-, exo- and macro-levels should focus on 'process' rather than 'context', foregrounding loving relationships and positive interactions for children. Investigation of quality provision is particularly urgent in early education in Ireland.
- Those engaged in teacher education in Ireland need to examine their approaches with regards to training for parental involvement and educational transition, and at primary level, the structure of the Irish language requirement for teacher education is in need of review with reference to diversity within the profession.
- 'Joined-up thinking' is required with regards to funding that supports children and families at times of educational transition and beyond so that relevant agencies are not put in the position of competing for funding, but rather could work in partnership across settings.

Due to the complexity and depth involved in a Bio-ecological study, this research is neither large-scale nor positivistic in nature, and so these conclusions and recommendations are not easily generalisable across the board. Equally, one of the biggest challenges experienced in the development of the current research involved identifying a way to use the PPCT conceptualisation so as to emphasise the complexity of experiences, but also simplify them sufficiently to create a coherent narrative.

Nevertheless, this PhD 'stands on the shoulders of giants' in developing a new and innovative Bio-ecological Framework within which to synthesise theories and paradigms commonly represented as polarised. This Framework is supported by the data gathered, and would be useful in studying many other social, psychological and educational processes. Equally, the use of the Bio-ecological Framework to theorise these data in the context of existing literature on transition also allows for some transferability across contexts that may be valuable to others investigating transition. Many settings might aim to replicate the positivity of relationships within the case-study schools and pre-schools in this research. The thesis also offers some important insights into experiences at these times, and in particular provides space for the voices of parents, which are largely absent in the literature on educational transition to date.

Therefore, in spite of the limitations associated with small-scale qualitative work, this research has much to offer the fields of psychology, sociology and education. These issues are important to the kind of future we wish to create for children and families in Ireland, because as Bronfenbrenner (1979, p. 53) tells us, "no society can long sustain itself unless its members have learned the sensitivities, motivations and skills involved in assisting and caring for other human beings". Quite simply, relationships matter.

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# 9. Appendices

## 9.1 Appendix 1: Propositions of the Bio-Ecological Framework

**Proposition 1:** **Relationships (with 'objects and symbols' but more importantly with other people) are key to the development of human beings emotionally, socially and cognitively.**

**Proposition 2:** **There is a bi-directional, exponential synergy between the personal characteristics of the developing person, and the contexts in which they develop, mediated by the significant relationships they experience.** Personal characteristics influence how the environment and other people within it respond to an individual. In turn, experience of the environment and other people within it is internalised and embodied by the developing person, and forms the basis of future personal characteristics. As such, traditional dichotomies of nature-vs-nurture are outmoded and irrelevant. A Bio-ecological framework foregrounds that nature and nurture are synergistic and mutually reinforcing in human development.

**Proposition 3:** **Diversity is a key feature of what it means to be human, so it is senseless to expect standardisation of outcomes for children or families, socially, emotionally, behaviourally or educationally.**

**Proposition 4:** **The course of human development is neither completely free nor completely pre-determined.** Human beings are active agents within a narrow

range of choices, defined by complex interactions between personal characteristics and the environments and relationships in which they find themselves.

**Proposition 5:** **Children's development is inextricably linked with the context in which it occurs.**

**Proposition 6:** Less than optimal contexts can (to some extent) be overcome through the power of positive relationships, and contexts that on the surface appear to be supportive of development in fact lose their power in the absence of supportive relationships. **Resilience is best understood as reliant on a complex interaction of protective and risk factors in interaction with the personal characteristics of the child.**

**Proposition 7:** The impact of both relationships and contextual experience on development is strongly influenced by the time of life at which they occur. The socio-historical period during which a child develops also impacts on the course of that development. This interacts with 'time of life', so that historical events will have differential impacts based on what age a child was when he or she experienced them. **Responses to relationships and experiences change over time.** The developmental impact of early experiences is exponential as the child grows.

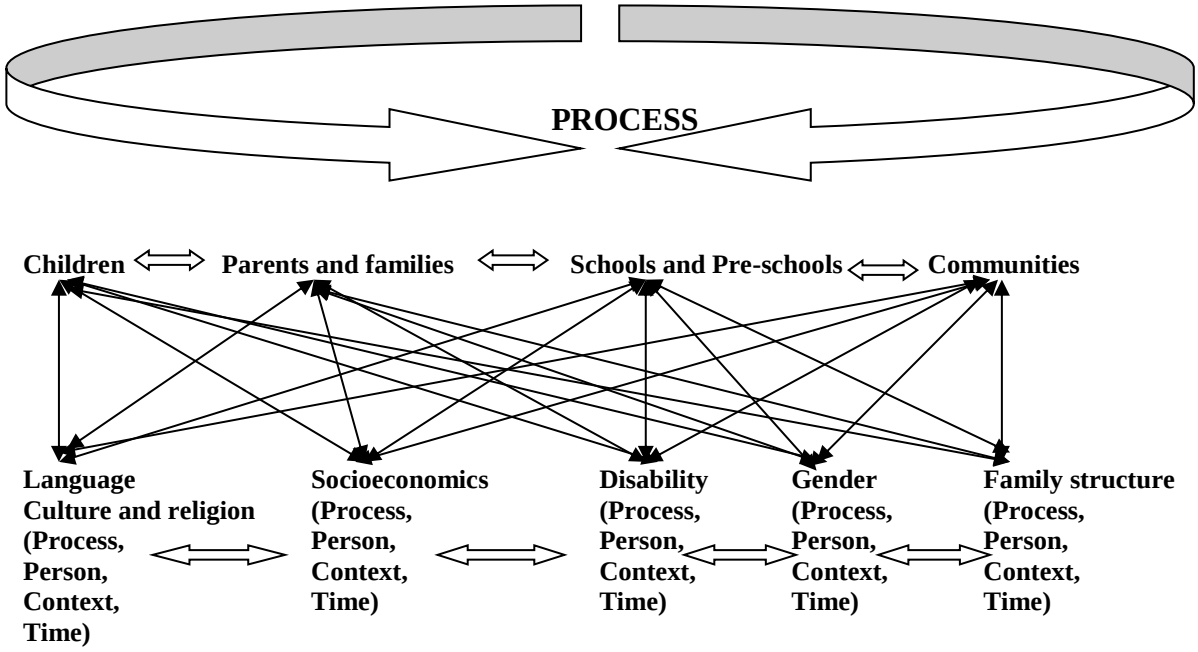
**Proposition 8:** It is vitally important that policy directions are decided upon with full cognisance of their historical contexts. 'Old' ideas can be re-packaged as

‘new’, and without critical awareness we may pursue policy directions that have been tried and failed in the past. Equally, policy shifts can be based on contemporary value systems that may not be made explicit, and **policy shifts based on ‘zeitgeist’ preoccupations and values can have significant (and not always positive) impacts on individual children.**

## 9.2 Appendix 2: Examples of 'dispositions' that are important for optimal functioning

| *Disposition* | *Author* |
|---|---|
| 'Educational competence' – dispositions to think, persist in tasks, give opinions, contribute ideas and work collaboratively. | Bronfenbrenner (1979) |
| Courage, curiosity, playfulness, perseverance, confidence and responsibility. | Carr (1999) |
| Resilience, playfulness and reciprocity. | Carr and Claxton (2002) |
| Confidence, curiosity, intentionality, self-control, relatedness, communication, cooperation. | Goleman (1996) |

## 9.3 Appendix 3: Visual representation of the organisation of Chapters 3 and 5



## 9.4 Appendix 4: Information letters and consent forms for participants

### 9.4.1 Children.

#### *9.4.1.1 Sixth class / First year children.*

**Dear 6th class / 1st year student,**

My name is Leah O'Toole and I am working on a research project to study the experiences and opinions of parents, teachers and students about moving from primary school to secondary school. Students who choose to take part will be interviewed in focus groups with the consent of their parents – a chance for them to chat about their thoughts and feelings on going to secondary school. All sessions will be audio-recorded (with consent) to help me remember what people say, but no video or photography will be used. It is hoped to conduct sessions in the first week of October, and they will take about 30 minutes. The information given by anyone taking part will be anonymous and confidential – this means that no-one else will know who gave the information, no-one else will hear any of the recordings, and the recordings will be stored on an encrypted laptop. The only times I would give information to anyone else would be if someone taking part was hurt or was in danger of being hurt.

Taking part in this research is completely voluntary – this means that you can decide not to take part if you don't want to, even if your parents give their consent. If you decide to take part but change your mind, you can stop at any time. If you are willing to be interviewed about your experience of moving to secondary school, I would be grateful if you would sign the enclosed consent form to be collected on the day of interviews. If you have any questions or need any further information, you can contact me by phone on 087 6312750 or by email at leah.otoole@mie.ie. This research is being done through Dublin Institute of Technology, and my supervisors are Dr Máire Mhic Mhathúna and Professor Nóirín Hayes. They can be

contacted in DIT on 01 4024204 or by email at mairemhicmhathuna@dit.ie / noirin.hayes@dit.ie. I am also very grateful to Principal [redacted] for his interest and support of this work.

Regards,

*Leah O'Toole*

## CONSENT FORM FOR 6TH CLASS / 1ST YEAR STUDENT

| Researcher's Name**:** | **Title:** |
|---|---|
| LEAH O'TOOLE | MS |
| Faculty/School/Department**:** | |
| SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE / FACULTY OF APPLIED ARTS | |
| Title of Study**:** | |
| PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN EDUCATIONAL TRANSITIONS OF CHILDREN | |
| **To be completed by the:** **Student (PLEASE CIRCLE / UNDERLINE THE ANSWER THAT APPLIES TO YOU – THERE ARE NO RIGHT OR WRONG ANSWERS, I AM SEEKING YOUR OPINION*)*** | |
| 3.1 Have you been fully informed about this study? **YES / NO**<br><br>3.2 Have you been told how you can ask questions or discuss this study? **YES / NO**<br><br>3.3. Are you satisfied with the answers to all your questions? **YES / NO / NO QUESTIONS**<br><br>3.4 Do you understand that you are free to withdraw from this study?<br>• at any time<br>• without giving a reason for withdrawing | |

- without affecting your future relationship with the school

**YES / NO**

3.5 Do you agree to take part in this study?
**YES / NO**

3.6 Do you agree to allow the interview to be recorded? (Audio-tape)
**YES / NO**

This consent form will be kept confidential by the researcher. All audio-recordings will be stored securely and confidentially, and information given by participants will only be used
- to write a PhD thesis
- to write journal articles

Signed_____
Date _____

Name in Block Letters

_____

Signature of Researcher _____
Date _____

***9.4.1.2 Pre-school / Junior infant children.***

**PARENTAL CONSENT FORM ON BEHALF OF PERSON UNDER 18**

| Researcher's Name**:** LEAH O'TOOLE | **Title:** MS |
|---|---|
| Faculty/School/Department**:** SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE / FACULTY OF APPLIED ARTS | |
| Title of Study**:** PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN EDUCATIONAL TRANSITIONS OF CHILDREN | |
| **To be completed by the Parent (PLEASE <u>CIRCLE</u> / <u>UNDERLINE</u> YOUR ANSWER – THERE ARE NO RIGHT OR WRONG ANSWERS, I AM SEEKING YOUR OPINION*)*** | |

3.1 Have you been fully informed about this study?
**YES / NO**

3.2 Have you been told how you can ask questions or discuss this study?
**YES / NO**

3.3. Have you received satisfactory answers to all your questions?
**YES / NO / NO QUESTIONS**

3.7 Do you understand that your child is free to withdraw from this study?

- at any time
- without giving a reason for withdrawing
- without affecting your future relationship with the school

**YES / NO**

3.8 Do you agree to allow your child to take part in this study?
**YES / NO**

3.9 Do you agree to allow the interview to be recorded? (Audio-tape)
**YES / NO**

3.10 Would you be willing to be interviewed yourself at a time that suits you?
**YES / NO**
If yes, would you prefer:

- Face-to-face interview individually [ ]
- Face-to-face interview in a group [ ]
- Telephone interview [ ]

Contact no: _____

This consent form will be kept confidential by the researcher. All audio-recordings will be stored securely and confidentially, and information given by participants will only be used
- to write a PhD thesis
- to write journal articles

Signed_____
Date _____

Name in Block Letters

_____

Signature of Researcher _____
Date _____

### 9.4.2 Parents.

**Dear Parent,**

My name is Leah O'Toole and I am working on a research project to study the experiences and opinions of parents, teachers and children about moving from [pre-school] primary school to [primary] secondary school. Parents and teachers who choose to take part in the research will be interviewed either in groups or on their own. Children who choose to take part will be interviewed in focus groups with the consent of their parents – a chance for them to chat about their thoughts and feelings on going to secondary school. All sessions will take about 30 minutes and will be audio-recorded (with consent) to help me remember what people say, but no video or photography will be used. It is hoped to conduct sessions in the first week of October at the convenience of the school and all involved, although parent interviews may be later if necessary – as a parent myself, I know how busy we tend to be!

The information given by anyone taking part will be anonymous and confidential – this means that no-one else will know who gave the information, no-one else will hear any of the recordings and the recordings will be stored on an encrypted laptop. The only times I would give information to anyone else would be if someone taking part was hurt or was in danger of being hurt.

Taking part in this research is completely voluntary – this means that you can decide not to take part if you don't want to. If you decide to take part but change your mind, you can stop at any time. If you are willing to allow your child to be interviewed, I would be grateful if you would sign the enclosed consent form and return it to the [pre]school to be collected on the day of interviews. If you would be willing to be interviewed yourself at a time and place that suits you, please include a contact number so I can get in touch to make arrangements. If

you are too busy to meet, even a telephone interview would be very much appreciated, as the voices of parents are rarely heard in research of this sort.

If you have any questions or need any further information, you can contact me by phone on 087 6312750 or by email at leah.otoole@mie.ie. This research is being done through Dublin Institute of Technology, and my supervisors are Dr Máire Mhic Mhathúna and Professor Nóirín Hayes. They can be contacted in DIT on 01 4024204 or by email at mairemhicmhathuna@dit.ie / noirin.hayes@dit.ie. I am also very grateful to Principal [redacted] for his interest and support of this work.

Regards,

*Leah O'Toole*

**CONSENT FORM FOR PARENTS**

| Researcher's Name**:**<br>LEAH O'TOOLE | **Title:**<br>MS |
|---|---|
| Faculty/School/Department**:**<br>SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE / FACULTY OF APPLIED ARTS | |
| Title of Study**:**<br>PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN EDUCATIONAL TRANSITIONS OF CHILDREN | |
| **To be completed by the Parent (PLEASE CIRCLE / UNDERLINE YOUR ANSWER – THERE ARE NO RIGHT OR WRONG ANSWERS, I AM SEEKING YOUR OPINION*)*** | |
| 3.1 Have you been fully informed about this study?<br>**YES / NO**<br><br>3.2 Have you been told how you can ask questions or discuss this study?<br>**YES / NO**<br><br>3.3. Have you received satisfactory answers to all your questions?<br>**YES / NO / NO QUESTIONS** | |

3.11 Do you understand that you are free to withdraw from this study?

- at any time
- without giving a reason for withdrawing
- without any consequences

**YES / NO**

3.12 Do you agree to take part in this study?

**YES / NO**

3.13 Do you agree to allow the interview to be recorded? (Audio-tape)

**YES / NO**

This consent form will be kept confidential by the researcher. All audio-recordings will be stored securely and confidentially, and information given by participants will only be used

- to write a PhD thesis
- to write journal articles

Signed_____

Date _____

Name in Block Letters

_____

Signature of Researcher _____

Date _____

### 9.4.3 Teachers.

**Dear Teacher,**

My name is Leah O'Toole and I am working on a research project to study the experiences and opinions of parents, teachers and children about moving from pre-school [primary] to primary [secondary] school. Parents and teachers who choose to take part in the research will be interviewed either in groups or on their own. Children who choose to take part will be interviewed in focus groups with the consent of their parents – a chance for them to chat about their thoughts and feelings on going to 'big school' [secondary school]. All sessions will take about 30 minutes and will be audio-recorded (with consent) to help me remember what people say, but no video or photography will be used. It is hoped to conduct sessions in the first week of October at the convenience of the school and all involved.

The information given by anyone taking part will be anonymous and confidential – this means that no-one else will know who gave the information, no-one else will hear any of the recordings and the recordings will be stored on an encrypted laptop. The only times I would give information to anyone else would be if someone taking part was hurt or was in danger of being hurt.

Taking part in this research is completely voluntary – this means that you can decide not to take part if you don't want to. If you decide to take part but change your mind, you can stop at any time. If you would be willing to help with this work, I would be grateful if you would sign the enclosed consent form to be collected on the day of interviews. I would also be very grateful if you would be willing to distribute letters to parents of junior infants, seeking their input and that of their children.

If you have any questions or need any further information, you can contact me by phone on 087 6312750 or by email at leah.otoole@mie.ie. This research is being done through Dublin Institute of Technology, and my supervisors are Dr Máire Mhic Mhathúna and Professor Nóirín Hayes. They can be contacted in DIT on 01 4024204 or by email at mairemhicmhathuna@dit.ie / noirin.hayes@dit.ie. I am also very grateful to Principal [redacted] for her interest and support of this work.

Regards,

*Leah O'Toole*

**CONSENT FORM FOR TEACHERS**

| Researcher's Name**:** LEAH O'TOOLE | **Title:** MS |
|---|---|
| Faculty/School/Department**:** SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE / FACULTY OF APPLIED ARTS | |
| Title of Study**:** PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN EDUCATIONAL TRANSITIONS OF CHILDREN | |
| **To be completed by the Teacher (PLEASE CIRCLE / UNDERLINE YOUR ANSWER – THERE ARE NO RIGHT OR WRONG ANSWERS, I AM SEEKING YOUR OPINION*)*** | |
| 3.1 Have you been fully informed about this study? **YES / NO**<br><br>3.2 Have you been told how you can ask questions or discuss this study? **YES / NO**<br><br>3.3. Have you received satisfactory answers to all your questions? **YES / NO / NO QUESTIONS**<br><br>3.14 Do you understand that you are free to withdraw from this study?<br>• at any time<br>• without giving a reason for withdrawing | |

- without any consequences

**YES / NO**

3.15 Do you agree to take part in this study?
**YES / NO**

3.16 Do you agree to allow the interview to be recorded? (Audio-tape)
**YES / NO**

This consent form will be kept confidential by the researcher. All audio-recordings will be stored securely and confidentially, and information given by participants will only be used
- to write a PhD thesis
- to write journal articles
- to develop a programme to help children who are moving from pre-school to primary school or from primary school to secondary school, and their families and schools

Signed_____
Date _____

Name in Block Letters

_____

Signature of Researcher _____
Date _____

## 9.5 Appendix 5: Topic Guides

### 9.5.1 Phase 1 Topic Guides: Data collection pre-transition (April / May, 2012).

**Contextual information and field notes:**

- Description of pre-school / school location, demographics and expressed ethos
- Content analysis of policy documents and whole-school approaches around parental involvement / educational transition (if exist)
- Web search regarding pre-school / school contexts
- General observations

**Pre-school children preparing for transition:**

1. General chat to establish relationship – favourite toys, pets, etc.
2. Introduction: Who is going to big school this year? I have a little girl called Katie and she is going to big school next year too. I was hoping you would tell me about it, so then I'll be able to understand how Katie feels.
3. Explore 'assent' – even if your teacher or your mammy or daddy said you can do this for me, you can decide not to. No right or wrong answers. Permission to record.
4. Katie is four years old – what age are you? How many people here are four? Is anybody five? Is anybody three?
5. Tell me about big school. What happens there?
6. Who has brothers and sisters? Do any of them go to big school? What did they tell you about big school?
7. What do you think the best thing about big school will be? Will there be anything happy or exciting?

8. What do you think the worst thing about big school will be? Will there be anything sad or scary?
9. Who else told you about big school? Did you get to visit?
10. What do mammy and daddy think about big school?
11. Is there anything else you want to tell me about big school?
12. Thanks, etc.

**Sixth class children preparing for transition:**

1. Introduction to research, confidentiality, right to withdraw, no right or wrong answers, permission to record.
2. Tell me a bit about yourself. Tell me about how your school prepares students for the move to secondary school.
3. Have you had any contact with the secondary school you will go to?
4. Generally speaking, do you feel that primary school prepared you for secondary school? Socially? Emotionally? Academically? How confident do you feel about the move? What are you worried about in the move? What are you looking forward to?
5. What kinds of things do you think make the move from primary to secondary go well for students?
6. What kinds of things do you think make children struggle with the move from primary school to secondary school?
7. Tell me about the types of involvement your parents have with your school generally?
8. Is there any specific involvement that parents have in relation to the move to secondary school?
9. Is it good to have parents involved? For the school? For the children? For the parents?

10. Are there any challenges / difficulties to having parents involved? For the school? For the children? For the parents?
11. How can we make sure that parents and schools communicate well with each other? Generally? At transition time?
12. If and when difficulties arise between parents and the school, what do you think causes that?
13. How can we make sure that parents and schools communicate well with each other? Generally? At transition time?
14. Does anybody speak a different language at home than they do in school?
15. Is there anything you would like to add?
16. Thanks etc.

**Pre-school teachers working with pre-transition children:**

1. Introduction to research, confidentiality, right to withdraw, no right or wrong answers, permission to record.
2. Tell me a bit about yourself. Have you worked here long? How did you get into working in the pre-school (training)?
3. Tell me about the pre-school. Is it open long? Tell me a bit about the children who come here. How many children are there?
4. Have you thought about the move to primary school? Is there any preparation for it while children are still at pre-school? What kinds of supports are in place for children? Before entry to primary school? After entry? For example do they get to visit ‘the big school’?
5. Are there any systems of communication in place with the primary school? Meetings? Letters? Forms? Do they request any information about children? What kind of

information do you think would be useful to primary schools about children when they transfer?

6. Are you aware of Aistear (Early Childhood Curriculum Framework)? Do you use it here? Generally speaking, do you think pre-school teachers have much awareness of the Irish Primary School Curriculum?
7. Is age a factor in successful transition to junior infants – do you see differences between four-year-olds and five-year-olds?
8. What about gender? Do boys and girls tend to experience transition differently?
9. Generally speaking, what do you think are the most important skills for children to have going into primary school? Do you feel that pre-school prepares children for primary school? What kinds of skills are the responsibility of the pre-school and what are the responsibility of the parents?
10. Tell me about the types of involvement parents have with your pre-school generally. Is there any specific involvement that parents have at transition time? Do parents bring up the move to primary school with you?
11. Are there any benefits to having parents involved? For the pre-school / school? For the children? For the parents?
12. Are there any challenges to having parents involved? For the pre-school / school? For the children? For the parents?
13. What do you think supports positive communication with parents? Generally? At transition time?
14. When either side struggles to communicate, what do you think are the factors involved?
15. Have you ever had any training or other support in working with parents?

16. When children have smooth transitions from pre-school to primary school, what kinds of factors do you think are involved?
17. When children struggle with the transition from pre-school to primary school, what kinds of factors do you think are involved?
18. Is there anything you would like to add on the topic of parental involvement in educational transition?
19. Thanks etc.

**Sixth class teachers working with pre-transition children:**

1. Introduction to research, confidentiality, right to withdraw, no right or wrong answers, permission to record.
2. Tell me a bit about yourself. Have you worked here long? How did you get into working in the senior end of the school (training)?
3. Tell me about the school. Is it open long? Tell me a bit about the children who come here. How many children are there? Is it similar or different to the kind of school you went to yourself? Have you experience of DEIS schools?
4. Tell me about how your school prepares children for the move to secondary school. What kinds of supports are in place for children? Before entry to secondary school? After entry?
5. Are there any systems of communication in place with the secondary schools they will go to?
6. What kind of information do you generally give to secondary schools about students when they transfer?
7. Generally speaking, do you think primary school teachers have much awareness of the secondary school curricula?

8. Generally speaking, what do you think are the most important skills for children to have going into secondary school? Do you feel that primary school prepares children for secondary school? Socially ? Emotionally? Academically?
9. When children have smooth transitions from primary school to secondary school, what kinds of factors do you think are involved?
10. When children struggle with the transition from primary school to secondary school, what kinds of factors do you think are involved?
11. Is age a factor in successful transition to first year?
12. What about gender? Do boys and girls tend to experience transition differently?
13. Tell me about the types of involvement parents have with your school generally?
14. Is there any specific involvement that parents have at transition time?
15. Are there any benefits to having parents involved? For the school? For the children? For the parents?
16. Are there any challenges to having parents involved? For the school? For the children? For the parents?
17. What do you think supports positive communication with parents? Generally? At transition time?
18. If and when difficulties arise between parents and the school, what do you think are the factors involved?
19. Have you ever had any training or other support in working with parents? ITE? CPD?
20. Is there anything you would like to add on the topic of parental involvement in educational transition?
21. Thanks etc.

### 9.5.2 Phase 2 Topic Guides: Data collection post-transition (October / November, 2012).

**Contextual information and field notes:**

- Description of school location, demographics and expressed ethos
- Content analysis of policy documents and whole-school approaches around parental involvement / educational transition (if exist)
- Web search regarding school contexts
- General observations

**Junior Infants:**

1. Introduction: I have a little girl called Katie and she is going to big school next year. You know all about big school now so I was hoping you would tell me about it, and I'll then be able to tell Katie and other boys and girls what to expect.
2. Explore 'assent' – even if your teacher or your mammy or daddy said you can do this for me, you can decide not to. No right or wrong answers. Permission to record.
3. Katie is four years old – what age are you? How many people here are four? Is anybody five?
4. Who has brothers and sisters? Do any of them come to school here? What did they tell you about big school before you came?
5. Did anybody here go to pre-school / crèche / Montessori / naoínra / playschool before you came to big school? Was that the same as big school or was it different? Do you miss pre-school / crèche / Montessori / naoínra?
6. What do you do in big school?

7. Do you like big school? What is the best thing about big school? Is there anything about big school that you don't like? Does big school get a thumbs up or a thumbs down?
8. When you have a problem in big school are you able to solve it? Who helps you?
9. Tell me about your teacher, what do teachers do?
10. The grown-ups you know the most are your teacher and mammy and daddy – are teachers the same as mammys and daddys or are they different?
11. Do you read books with mammy and daddy? Do you get homework? Do mammy and daddy help you with it or do you do it yourself?
12. In school you speak English and now you're learning Irish. Does anybody speak Irish at home? Does anybody speak a different language at home? What language do you speak?
13. Do mammy and daddy talk to the teacher at all? Who brings you to school and who collects you?
14. Tell me about your friends in big school. Who do you play with in the yard? Are children nice to each other here?
15. Are boys or girls better at doing their work in big school or are they the same? Do boys or girls get in trouble more or are they the same?
16. If somebody is bold in big school do they get in trouble? What happens? If somebody is really good what happens?
17. Is there anything else I should tell Katie about big school? If she were here now what would you tell her?
18. Thanks etc.

**First years:**

1. Introduction to research, confidentiality, right to withdraw, no right or wrong answers, permission to record.
2. Tell me a bit about the school – how many classes are there? What subjects do you do? How did you pick your subjects? How did you decide to come to school here?
3. What did you know about the school before you started? How did you find out about it? Did you get to visit? Tell me about the first time you were in the school.
4. Who has brothers and sisters? Do any of them come to school here? Any other family? What did you hear from them about the school?
5. Was primary school the same as secondary school or was it different? Do you miss primary school? What was the best thing about primary school? Is there anything about primary school that you didn't like?
6. Do you like secondary school? What is the best thing about secondary school? Is there anything about secondary school that you don't like?
7. When you have a problem in school are you able to solve it? (Give examples of types of problems to illustrate). Who helps you?
8. Do you feel like you're good at school-work? Is it harder or easier than in primary school or just the same?
9. Is there streaming in this school? Are there high classes and lower classes or are all the classes mixed ability?
10. Tell me about your teachers, what's it like having lots of different teachers instead of just one like in primary school?
11. If someone breaks the rules here what happens? Are there any rewards if you do really well or behave well?

12. The adults you know the most are probably your teachers and your parents – are teachers and parents alike or are they different?
13. In school you speak English. Are you learning any other languages? Does anybody speak Irish at home? Does anybody speak a different language at home? What language do you speak?
14. Do your parents talk to the teachers at all? If they had questions or something they wanted the school to know about you, what do you think they'd do?
15. Generally speaking, if parents and teachers don't communicate well, what do you think causes that? Is there anything that you think would make it easier for your parents to communicate with your teachers?
16. Were your parents involved in your move to secondary school? For example did they help you to choose your school or did they get to go to any information days with you or did they give you emotional support, etc? Do your parents help you with your homework or would you tend to do it yourself? Do your parents drop you to school? Have your parents got any involvement with the school, for example with sports, parents' associations etc.
17. Tell me about your friends in secondary school. Are people nice to each other here? Has going to secondary school affected your friendships? Do you miss your friends from primary school?
18. Do you think boys or girls do better at their school-work in secondary school or do they do the same? Do you think boys or girls settle in more easily or are they the same in your opinion? Do you like going to a single sex school – what are the benefits, what would be better or worse in a mixed school do you think?

19. Do you think age matters when you're going to secondary school? Some people are only eleven or twelve, whereas some people are thirteen when they go into first year – do you think that makes a difference to how hard or easy they find it?
20. If you had all the power, would there be anything about first year / this school you would change?
21. Is there anything else you would like to say about moving from primary school to secondary school? Imagine you were asked to give advice on how to make it as good as possible. What advice would you give to students? To teachers and schools? To parents?
22. Thanks, etc.

**Parents of junior infants and first years:**

1. Introduction to research, confidentiality, right to withdraw, no right or wrong answers, permission to record.
2. Tell me a bit about yourself. Tell me about your child. How is he /she getting on in primary / secondary school?
3. How did you decide to send your child to (name school)?
4. What did you know about the school before your child started? How did you find out about it? Did you get to visit? Do you have any other children in the school?
5. Was there any preparation in the pre-school / primary school that helped you and your child in getting ready for the move to primary / secondary school?
6. Do you think age matters when going to primary / secondary school? Some children are only four / eleven, whereas some children are five / twelve or even six / thirteen

when they go into junior infants / first year – do you think that makes a difference to how hard or easy they find it?

7. Do you think gender matters? Is it easier or harder for boys or girls or is it the same?
8. Has your child been getting (much) homework? Would he / she tend to ask for help with homework or does he / she do it him / herself?
9. Tell me about your relationship with your child's pre-school / primary school – did you know your child's teacher / pre-school staff well? Would you have had much involvement with the pre-school / primary school – parents' groups, school tours, fundraising, informal visits?
10. Is your relationship with the primary / secondary school similar or is it very different?
11. Do you drop your child to school or does someone else? Do you have any opportunity for talking informally to school staff / teachers? If you had a concern or news to share what would you do?
12. Do parents have enough opportunity to **get** information about the move to primary / secondary school in your opinion?
13. Do parents have enough opportunity to **give** information about their children to the primary / secondary school in the move (For example, letting the school know about any special needs, preferences or anything that would help a child to settle into the new school... these are just examples, I am looking for your opinion)
14. What do you think supports good communication between a school and parents? Generally? At the time of moving to primary / secondary school?
15. If difficulties arise between parents and the school, what do you think causes that?
16. Do you speak a language other than English at home? Is language a barrier to your communication with the school in any way? Is there anything the school could do to

help with that? Are you involved with any cultural groups in the area? Do they link with the school?

17. What do you think are the most important things for a child to be able to do going into primary / secondary school? (For example get on with other children, have mastered specific academic skills, manage their time and belongings... these are just examples, I am looking for your opinion). Are there any attitudes or knowledge you think they need to have?
18. When the move from pre-school / primary to primary / secondary school goes very well for children, what kinds of things do you think help with that?
19. When children struggle with moving to primary / secondary school what kinds of things do you think cause that?
20. In your opinion are there any benefits to having parents involved in the move to primary / secondary school? For the school? For the children? For the parents?
21. In your opinion are there any challenges to having parents involved in the move to primary / secondary school? For the school? For the children? For the parents?
22. Is there anything you would like to add on the topic of parental involvement in the move from pre-school / primary to primary / secondary school? Imagine you were asked to give advice on how to make the transition as smooth as possible. What advice would you give to teachers and schools? To other parents?
23. Thanks etc.

**Junior infant teachers:**

1. Introduction to research, confidentiality, right to withdraw, no right or wrong answers, permission to record.

2. Tell me a bit about yourself. Have you worked here long? Are you from the area? Have you worked anywhere else?
3. Tell me about the school. Tell me a bit about the children who come here. How many children are there in your class? Is it similar or different to the kind of school you went to yourself? Have you experience of DEIS schools?
4. Tell me about how you prepare for the new junior infants. Do children get to visit beforehand? What happens on the first day? What kind of information do you generally have about students when they enter (case-study primary school)? Where do you get the information? Pre-school? Parents? Elsewhere? Is the information useful?
5. Generally speaking, what do you think are the most important skills for children to have going into primary school? What about dispositions or knowledge? Do you feel that pre-school prepares children for primary school? Do you use the early childhood curriculum Aistear at all – if so do you find it compatible with the primary school curriculum?
6. Is age a factor in successful transition to junior infants – do you see differences between four-year-olds and five-year-olds?
7. What about gender? Do boys and girls tend to experience transition differently?
8. Managing behaviour tends to be something teachers worry about sometimes. Is this particularly relevant to junior infants? How do you manage behaviour?
9. What kinds of skills are the responsibility of the pre-school and what are the responsibility of the parents?
10. Tell me about the types of involvement parents have with your school generally? Is there any specific involvement that parents have at transition time?
11. Are there any benefits to having parents involved? For the school? For the children? For the parents?

12. Are there any challenges to having parents involved? For the school? For the children? For the parents?
13. What do you think supports positive communication with parents? Generally? At transition time?
14. When either side struggles to communicate, what do you think are the factors involved? Are there ever language / cultural barriers between home and school? How do you cope with these? Do you have any contact with local community / cultural groups?
15. Have you ever had any training or other support in working with parents?
16. Tell me about Home-School-Community-Liaison – is it helpful?
17. When children have smooth transitions from pre-school to primary school, what kinds of factors do you think are involved?
18. When children struggle with the transition from pre-school to primary school, what kinds of factors do you think are involved?
19. Is there anything you would like to add on the topic of parental involvement in educational transition? Imagine if you were writing guidelines for parents and teachers of junior infants – what would you advise parents to do to ease the transition? What would you advise teachers to do? Is there a role for communities?
20. Thanks etc.

**First year teachers:**

1. Introduction to research, confidentiality, right to withdraw, no right or wrong answers, permission to record.

2. Tell me a bit about yourself. Have you worked here long? Are you from the area? Have you worked anywhere else?
3. Tell me about the school. Tell me a bit about the children who come here. How many children are there in your class? Is it similar or different to the kind of school you went to yourself?
4. Tell me about how your school prepares for incoming first years. What kinds of supports are in place for new students? Before entry? After entry? For example do they visit the school before starting? How do they find out about the school? What happens on the first day? What kind of information do you generally have about students when they enter first year? Where do you get the information? Primary school? Parents? Other sources? Is the information useful?
5. Generally speaking, what do you think are the most important skills for children to have going into secondary school? What about dispositions or knowledge? Do you feel that primary school prepares children for secondary school?
6. Would secondary school teachers get to know much about the primary school curriculum? Do you think it prepares children for your subject?
7. Is age a factor in making a positive transition into secondary school? Do you see a difference between the younger and the older students?
8. What about gender? Do boys and girls tend to experience transition differently?
9. Managing behaviour tends to be something teachers worry about sometimes. Is this particularly relevant to first years? How do you manage behaviour?
10. What kinds of skills are the responsibility of the primary school and what are the responsibility of the parents?

11. Tell me about the types of involvement parents have with your school generally? Is there any specific involvement that parents have at transition time? Are there meetings for parents before their children start secondary school?
12. Are there any benefits to having parents involved? For the school? For the children? For the parents?
13. Are there any challenges to having parents involved? For the school? For the children? For the parents?
14. What do you think supports positive communication with parents? Generally? At transition time?
15. If and when difficulties arise between parents and the school, what do you think are the factors involved? Are there ever language / cultural barriers between home and school? How do you cope with these? Are there any cultural groups in the area? Do they ever link with the school?
16. Have you ever had any training or other support in working with parents?
17. When children have smooth transitions from primary school to secondary school, what kinds of factors do you think are involved?
18. When children struggle with the transition from primary school to secondary school, what kinds of factors do you think are involved?
19. Does your school stream children / use ability grouping on entry to first year? If so, how is it decided in which stream an individual child will be placed? Is the placement permanent or can children move streams?
20. Is there anything you would like to add on the topic of parental involvement in educational transition? Imagine if you were writing guidelines for parents and teachers of first years – what would you advise parents to do to ease the transition? What would you advise teachers to do? Is there a role for communities?

21. Thanks etc.

## 9.6 Appendix 6: Sample Transcripts

### 9.6.1 Sample Focus Group (Focus Group 17: Parents of junior infants)

**Introduction and Interview**

**(P = Parent / GP = Grandparent / LOT = Leah O'Toole)**

LOT: This is just for me to listen to so I won't have to write notes while we talk. Will I tell you a little bit about the project before we start? Basically it's for a PhD so its research about moving into primary school and then I am looking on the other side at sixth class into first year but obviously we won't be talking about that today.

So what I am looking at are the opinions of parents, of teachers, of kids themselves and trying to get a full view of how things work. If you read a lot of the stuff about starting school, it seems to be of the view point of the teachers and the schools, some bits about what the kids go through, but there is very little there on us as parents. It can be such a big deal for us, as parents, sending our babies off to school.

So there are no right or wrong answers and I am not looking for solid information, just your opinions and your experiences and what you think makes this go smoothly. Does that make sense?

All Ps: Yes

LOT: Ok then, just to get us started, would you mind telling me a little bit about yourselves, each person, you were saying you are Polish, is that right?

P1: Yes we are Polish.

LOT: You are both Polish?

P1 & P2: Yes.

LOT: Are you here long?

P1: I live here almost seven years. It will be seven years in January. I try to be a part of the community, especially for my daughter because she lives here. We would like to stay here, she was born here. Anyway, maybe I will tell something about the first day??

LOT: Yes, brilliant.

P1: On her first day, she started in the crèche. I didn't worry about her first day in that school because she had a lot of practice from crèche and she was in the early start also. So the first month was hard because she had a different teacher, different kids around her but after that first month she was great. She feels punished when we have a weekend and she cannot go to school!

LOT: Yes, ok so she doesn't like Saturdays and Sundays.

P1: Yes, she feels bored and she asks me 'when are we going back to school again?'

LOT: Anybody else? How are the kids settling in? Is it a boy or a girl you have?

P2: It's a boy yes. I was a little bit afraid before he started and worried about him because he is really shy. He went to play school. It was a really small group, 6 or 7 people maybe. There was one Polish girl and one Polish boy so he felt better because he didn't speak English so it wasn't a problem for him to start with Polish kids. After that I thought it would be really good for him to start school after playschool but it was a problem at the beginning because it was really hard for him. The first day he sat with a Polish boy in school and the next day again and the third day he had to sit with an Irish boy because the teacher divided them and it was a big problem for him.

LOT: He found that hard.

P2: Before I think he maybe felt safe with that boy.

P3: Comfort.

P2: Yes, exactly and after that he was (struggle to find words in English) sad in the class?

P1: He was crying.

P2: He tried to hit me.

P1: He was really nervous.

P2: And when I looked at him I thought 'oh not my son'.

LOT: Yes, it's your baby.

P2: And after that day I tried to talk to him and ask him why, what happened?

LOT: Yes, why do you feel this way?

P2: Yes and explained that the teacher is for him and would like to help him and it's a good time for him to learn English and to get to know Irish kids. I tried to explain everything to him. The next day I was afraid again for him but it

was better. He said to me 'yes I will go there again because I really like it' and now it's really good.

LOT: Ok so even though it was so tough for him at the beginning, he has started to settle in.

P2: Now he has Irish friends and he is really happy. I am happy because….

LOT: Yes, obviously it's easier for you if he is happy.

P1: It is always hard for kids from other countries to start school if we speak our own language at home and they have to go….

P3: And integrate…

P2: But your daughter she is ….

P1: She is very open.

(another parent enters the room so LOT goes over introduction again)

LOT: So we were talking about the first day and you were saying you think it's tough for kids when English isn't their first language.

P2: Yes.

P1: It wasn't for my daughter actually because like I said she is….

P2: Different to my son….

P1: She is much more open.

P3: The girls are though, aren't they?

P1: I think it is because she had contact with Irish kids from the first few months, I think this is the reason because I tried to steer her to the Irish kids not the Polish.

LOT: And that's interesting that you say that it's easier for the girls.

P3: I just think girls are more advanced at that age.

P4: Boys are more clingy.

LOT: Do you think so?

P4: Oh absolutely.

P3: Yes, girls know how to 'make this work for me' and your girl is clever, she will talk to other girls and ask 'so what do you do', I think boys are a little bit more shy.

P4: They are more outgoing, girls.

P3: But when they get older then, it's the reverse.

P1: Yes it will change in another few years.

P5: I think it depends on the child. My eldest now she is gone into fifth class. She is very shy, there are other issues there but in Junior Infants, the Teacher had to actually had to bend down on all fours for her to actually hear what she was saying. She didn't utter a word for weeks unless the teacher directly asked her. Now she's in fifth class now. As I said she is after developing traits of Asperger's now but she is naturally shy. I have four kids in the school and have seen the four of them going in. My third little one, she went in the first day and said 'Hi my name is K. and my mam's name is…' and God knows what she was telling people.

(All laughing)

Compared to the older two! L. went in and he was a bit ….but he knew the teacher, M. had had her for two years which helped but he did not know anyone else in that class. On the first day he was a bit…'don't leave me'…so I left him at the door the next day and said 'bye' and I found not going into the class after the first day was great – for him.

LOT: That worked best for him yes.

P5: Yes because he was getting a bit….he didn't want his dad, it was me so I would just tell him I would be back in a minute, nod at the helper and she intervened and I just legged it! He didn't cry. He was fine then. He would come out and say 'oh that was boring' but yet he is running up to go to school every morning. Now he has to maintain he doesn't like it but he actually does.

LOT: So you don't think it's the difference between boys and girls, it's the individual personalities?

P5: I just think it's the individual child. If a child is more confident going in they will maintain that but kids who are less confident it just takes them a while longer. The teacher said to me on day 5, 'oh my…', now she was after having M. who was non-stop talking, 'he hasn't spoken to me, I actually had to ask him things'. And I said 'leave him, he'll be fine'. By the end of the first full week she was saying that he was coming in and telling her a few little things.

LOT: He was starting to come out of himself.

P5: It took him 7 – 9 days to approach her.

LOT: Yes.

P5: It's just different kids.

LOT: I know yes.

P3: It's a different comparison I suppose, that's your first child starting school?

P2: Yes.

P3: Whereas you have four children going here.

P5: Yes

(All chatting/laughing)

P1: It's about our feelings. It's much easier to put another one into school but we have only one. For us it was a tragedy, I was crying.

LOT: Were you like that with your first.

P5: No.

P1: I was crying when she went to the crèche.

P5: No I wasn't crying.

P1: She was fine! I was so worried.

LOT: Have you a boy or a girl here?

P6: I have a little girl, she is four. She started here in Junior Infants. I also gave her a little push, when she was only two and a half, I remember she used to have ????…. and I just let her go to playschool. I paid for that year, it was just part-time, I let her join the group because I knew it was going to help her. It was from 9am to 12pm, just three days a week and that was very important for her. So now her start was great. She loves to socialise.

LOT: Yes and is English her first language as well?

P6: This is the problem, all the dramas for the families coming from different countries. We love our languages, naturally…

LOT: Of course yes.

P6: We have this language in our families but we have found for a year, between her and the other children, she is mixing up the languages.

LOT: What language do you speak?

P6: Romanian. My husband is from Hungary but we will stay with Romanian because we all know that language. Of course she knows a good few words in English, I was reading her age books and things like that, but not like the other kids.

LOT: Sure yes.

P6: It's a big difference at 3 years old from a different country starting playschool and an Irish child.

LOT: Of course yes.

P6: It's a big, big difference. Huge. Even now, if I don't get the letter from the teacher telling me something, I'm from a different planet, I live here and all the kids dressed for a non-uniform day and I came with her navy blue uniform, tie and everything and I was thinking 'oh my God'…

LOT: What's going on here?

P6: Yes, she is not able to tell me things like that and she lost her note.

LOT: Ok and she doesn't understand how to tell you?

P5: That happens to the Irish kids as well!!!

(All laughing)

P6: Oh my God, I felt so sorry, I went home, took a few things, came back here and I changed her.

LOT: Yes so she wouldn't feel different.

P6: It was my fault as well, because I know English and I can speak English with her in the house, it's just not natural.

P1: I had the same situation last year with muffins. Older kids sold muffins and bakes.

P4: Cake sale.

P1: I didn't leave money for my daughter.

LOT: Because you didn't know.

P1: Usually I know everything about school because I really care but when she came back home she was so sad, she was crying because she told me everyone bought muffins and cakes and she didn't get money. She was angry at me because I forgot to leave any money for her. I was so upset because I cannot explain to her why I did this.

LOT: Yes, they are so small still, they can't understand.

P1: Sometimes it's a horrible situation for them.

P6: It's so important to them. They were told to bring a note home and get it signed by their parents and bring it back in and they will get a lollipop. She didn't have my signature and she was so upset. I never thought it was so important, to have it back on time, the next day. That's the problem, it's difficult because you suffer.

LOT: Can you think of anything the schools could do to support families or has anybody any ideas?

P6: I think its important for all families from different countries to have more meetings with the teachers, even if it is for one minute after school, when you are collecting your child, they just double check with the parents, just tell the parents. Even if they tell the children 10 times, they will never be able to come back and explain it.

LOT: Is that because of the language barrier?

P6: Yes. The children understand more but they are not able to speak.

LOT: Of course yes. So they can take in what's being said …..

P6: Yes but they won't be able to translate so I won't have the message from her.

LOT: So what you're saying, I think, is if there was that extra minute in the morning or the evening time….

P7: They do give notes, I know my youngest fella, he comes out with the note in his hand and he's waving it like this! Some of the teachers tell them to put it in their school bag. My other kids might give it to me two days later.

LOT: Yes, it's discovered at the bottom of the bag.

P6: I think they should have a little notebook with a monthly calendar just to write the different things on.

P5: I think when you are a first parent and you're just dealing with the school for the first time, it is a big transition. I remember that on our first but ….

P6: Yes, it's like old news for you now.

LOT: I have come across a few different things then, there's the language thing between home and school, boys versus girls, and that's another thing, whether it's your first, talk to me a bit more about that.

P6: I think it's a big transition. You are getting used to a new environment as a parent and then you are trying to break into a group yourself. I remember on

our first, my daughter didn't know anyone in the class. In Montessori you would have got to know a few of the parents and you had a little group, then with S. started, it's hard to chat to new parents. When they had them doing the introduction to the sounds, on that day I got chatting to a group and I have since got to know three mothers and as it happens they also have children who started in N., my second child's class so I had that connection.

But I must say on the first, it is a big transition I think.

LOT: And tell me about this about the phonics, did you do that as well?

P5: Yes you just go to a meeting for all the parents so you know what they are doing. I didn't realise, you don't have the meeting until about three weeks in, and he was obviously after starting it because he was saying 'aa aa aa' and I thought there was something wrong with him.

(All agreeing and laughing)

I was thinking 'oh my God he is after getting the stutters since he started school' so it was about three weeks in and they brought us in for 'Jolly Phonics' so I learned that it was all about the different sounds and it was good because at least you know they were actually doing the homework. I would have been thinking 'what is going on here, is he not saying his S's properly?' because he would be saying 'Sssssssssssssssssss'.

P7: They focus on the sounds more.

P5: It is brilliant.

LOT: So then put the sounds together.

P7: Eventually yes they do the sounds.

P5: But it's not ABCs the way we learned. There are 40 different sounds or whatever it is, so it's great.

LOT: It was also a chance for you to come into the school and maybe get to know one another.

P4: The kids were given a pack.

P5: You got a great reader pack.

(all agree)

P5: They got a colouring book, a reading book, crayons and stuff and its all sponsored by the library. So they all got that to take home and they loved it because it came from the school. Very important, you know, 'they are the school crayons'.

LOT: Do you have a boy or a girl here.

GP1: I have a granddaughter here. Just to go back to your first question about the interaction with teachers. I just saw a good thing around at Ms C.'s room, the pictures on the wall were showing grandparents and parents involved in children. That was the first I saw, I didn't know there was any of that going on.

(all agree)

LOT: Yes that's brilliant.

P3: Yes that's the first I heard of it in schools. Grandparents day. It's always 'invite the grandparents to the concert'.

GP1: Not even that, it's the parents as well. When my four kids came here, I was working, so I never knew any of that. But because I have a grandchild now I am interacting more, whereas before even something like this, I never would have done it. There's just something about it now, when I saw the photographs, I thought, that's neat!

P4: They do quite a lot.

P7: They do in fairness.

P5: There are an awful lot of grandparents involved in the kids lives now, they collect them from school and bring them to the school, so they are the drop off or the collection point so the grandparents should be involved.

P1: About the grandparents' day last year, I remember, because in Poland it is traditional celebration, every year we do this for the grandmothers and grandfathers, our children know about that celebration in Poland. When we had the celebration here last year, I remember she was a bit sad, the teacher said they could bring a photo of the grandparents but then the see a lot of other grandparents of their classmates at the school but they don't have their own grandparents and she asked me why her grandparents didn't come for that day in school and I had to explain everything again, because the live in Poland, they will come and visit you.

P7: That's hard on the kids.

P1: Especially for the small kids because they find it hard to understand why.

LOT: Yes, why the situation is. I know in some schools, they do things, I see here we are all girls….

(all laughing)

And one male!! But I notice that they are trying to get more male parents involved, the dads and the grandparents too, but then that's an issue as well,

maybe they struggle with kids who aren't in a position to bring along a male relative and how hard that can be for them.

GP1: There are a lot of one parent families now and first of all there is no male figure, well maybe there's no female figure.

LOT: Different dynamics, different family situations. You said when your children were young, you weren't coming to school meetings or parent/teacher meetings.

GP1: Well I maybe went to a Christmas one.

LOT: Yes, it was just a different time.

GP1: What that lady was saying about the different languages with her daughter, does your daughter have to learn Irish or what's the story there?

P6: She is just in Junior Infants.

GP1: No, what I mean is …..

P7: They do yes, but they do English classes as well for you, don't they?

P1: They give extra time for English.

P7: And for the parents if they want to.

P1: I try to learn here. I try to get together a lot of Polish women because Mrs C., she had a course for us in English. This is for free and I know a lot of Polish people in our community didn't want to do this because they think they can just put their kids in school and they will be fine because they are kids, they learn faster than we do. This is wrong thinking because this year we have a lot of Polish women on that course. It's great for us because we know each other and we can help each other.

LOT: Yes.

P1: We have to do something with this. We have to start to learn English if we want to make a better life for our kids here.

P5: And also to help with the homework.

P1: Yes, of course because I remember three years ago, for example, when she was going to the crèche, I would teach her 'I would like to pee', 'I would like a drink' and that's all. Now she feels much more comfortable when she can come home and speak with me. I know my English is still wrong..

LOT: No you are doing great.

P1: Sometimes she corrects me.

(all laughing)

P7: She's getting confident.

P1: She feels that she can speak with me sometimes about things in English.

P5: That's good.

LOT: It seems from what you are saying there that different parents have different thoughts on what they should be doing with kids in the classroom, or what part they play in their child's education. Have you any thoughts on that?

P4: My husband is doing the Irish course here, I have three boys in the school now, my youngest started this year. So for him it was a different experience he was saying 'oh I'm going to school now with the lads' 'I'm too cool for this'. He loves doing it, the boys are nearly laughing at him when he says something.

P5: You get a bit of homework as well and the kids think this is great, mammy and daddy doing homework.

P4: Yes and he would ask the lads if they would help him but they tell him no he has to do his homework himself. So the school is really good with the courses they put on. They have great craic now with their daddy doing the Irish homework. They just think it's hilarious that he has to do his homework so it's the little things like that. That has brought another element in to it that he is part of the school.

LOT: In [primary school] there are the Irish classes, the English classes, cooking classes….

P4: Healthy eating..

GP1: I just started a cookery course here.

LOT: Oh very good.

(lots of banter – indistinct)

GP1: Yes it's great, straight away I have a recipe already.

P5: I did that last year. You get a lovely cookbook at the end of it and a certificate.

LOT: Do you think those things would affect the way you would relate then to your kids' or your grandkids' teachers?

P5: I think so, because if you are in the school doing courses yourself, you're more familiar with the teachers, you know Ms C., you feel you can approach

someone in the school because you are doing the courses. Not only that, the kids see you coming out, it's sort of open door policy.

P7: They love seeing you in the school.

P5: The parents and the kids going to school together. It's more of a community. You are not just dropping at the door and then only seeing the teacher once a year. You are more involved.

P1: This is great for us too. For example when I go to school with my daughter I know almost everyone here.

All P's: Yes.

P1: She sees this so she knows she has a friend in school and mammy also has a friend in school.

LOT: So it's all part of the community, brilliant. It sounds like you have all had really positive experiences of communicating with the school, sometimes with schools and parents communication breaks down, have you any thoughts on why that can happen?

GP1: I think it's just that – a lack of communication. That's the key thing. I mean the way Ms C. sets about her stuff, only for I was at the cookery class she probably would never have stopped me in the hall. She actually said to me 'can I see you later on?' and I though 'oh holy God'….

LOT: Yes, you're in trouble.

P5: Yes, does she want to see you about one of the kids.

GP1: Yes and I said to myself I'm going to tell her this is nothing to do with me, it's her mam.

LOT: Yes, whatever she did it wasn't my fault!

GP1: Yes I was thinking did I not bring cookery stuff around or what did I do wrong. So when I did see her at 1.30pm she asked me would I do this thing on Tuesday, but otherwise she would never have got to know me.

LOT: That's it. So it's the informal thing, nipping in and out, that helps with the supports you think?

Some Ps: Yes.

P7: I work part-time so for the two days I don't work I love to take any chance I can get to be involved.

P5: The kids love seeing you as well.

P6: They are proud as well. They say 'I'll put my mam's name down', whether I can do it or not!

P7: If you are not in that position, my husband's sister, her kids are here and she works five days a week so she has never really had that opportunity to avail of different things.

LOT: And traditionally maybe that would have been that dads!

P7: Yes, so I think they dynamics have changed a lot as well. If you have two parents that have to work five days per week, that, I think, does affect as a parent how you can get involved. You can maybe break into a little group and organise your play dates and all that which I think helps the child in the long run.

LOT: Of course yes.

GP1: You have only to see the nights of the Christmas plays. The place is packed to the rafters. The interaction from when the small little kids come out onto the stage, the junior ones, the mammies and daddies are nearly crying beside you. The teachers are all lined up which is a good idea because you can actually see their teachers and the effort that they are after putting in and the joy that they are getting.

LOT: I know yes…

GP1: As much as we are!

LOT: Yes so it's a community.

P7: Even for yourself, this will be a big eye opener, this first Christmas because you have never seen that.

P6: Yes.

P7: So I think when it's the first time…

P5: Oh you don't know what you're like, your heart is in your mouth, will the child even make it out on the stage!! Well that was with my eldest! The Teacher just said if she doesn't want to do it, she doesn't have to…..

(All talking together – indistinct)

LOT: He refused did he?

P5: Well it hasn't come up yet, but I have heard him over the last few weeks saying 'I'm not doing the concert'. Every night I get this 'I'm not doing the play' so I keep telling him 'you don't have to do it, just stop talking about it.'

LOT: Yes.

P5: I ask him 'why don't you want to do it?' I don't understand because I would probably be the first one out in the middle of the stage in the leading role…

(All laughing)

LOT: It's probably just different personalities is it?

P5: I don't know, he just says 'I don't want to do it', when he started school, we couldn't talk for the whole Summer about starting school because there was this big issue 'I'm not starting school, I want to go back to pre-school'. He doesn't like change. Then when he started here he just said 'Bye' and I was thinking 'oh my God' I'm after having two months of this and he was grand! He sailed in the first day and everything was going great. It's only since Halloween, I don't know what happened before Halloween.

P4: Was it after the break?

P5: No, the Halloween party, you know the dress up one?

P7: Yes on the Friday.

P5: I had him from the Monday night crying, saying 'I'm not going in', 'I'm not dressing up'. So I told him he didn't have to dress up. I dragged him around on the Friday morning, I probably did the wrong thing, not dressed up and then he went hysterical in the classroom.

LOT: Because he wasn't dressed up?

P5: No, he just didn't want to be in the classroom.

P1: It's just the change.

P5: Yes it's the change, I don't know, at home he goes around as Spiderman all the time.

GP1: He's such an outgoing kid.

P5: Yes, he is so outgoing, he's chatty to everybody, and even Ms O'B., I would say in the first few weeks he had her gone mad, because he would say 'Hiya Ms O'B., how are you?'

GP1: Yes, I had to put his name down on my hand because he used to say to me 'Howya D.', he'd shout from miles away 'Howya D.'.

P5: Oh my God, embarrass me! He would talk to people I'd never talk to!

P3: I think they love that, calling people by their first names.

GP1: Yes, it's great but then I'd say 'I have to remember this young fella's name' and then I have to start remembering his mam's name.

(All laughing, banter etc.)
LOT: Then you're really in trouble!

GP1: When you are working you would never see anyone. T. maybe, I might have seen her….

P5: We live in the same estate, I would have grown up with his kids.

GP1: But that's what I'm saying when you are working you don't see. I'm 33 years in my estate, I wouldn't even see people when I was working. Now I say 'That man lives in that estate' or 'that woman drives through that estate' because now that I'm there all the time…..

LOT: Yes, you see them all.

P7: Now you have turned into a nosy neighbour!!

(All laughing)

GP1: I even know who the neighbourhood watch is! But going back to the point earlier on more interacting, maybe it's just me or maybe it's just young parents today, but years ago, the grandparents and the parents, they were distanced and stand off. I remember my grandfather, you couldn't even go up near his house, even as kids, my uncles would say about their father, he is dead now, that he only mellowed when he got to his seventies/eighties. So there was a lot more stand off, you know the father was always the ruler in the house, he sits in his own chair, 'you don't go in near your father, he's in the room reading his paper'. Whereas kids today are completely different and 'hey dad, will we watch the match' 'Did you see D. there dressing up at Halloween?'

(All laughing)

So it's different.

LOT: Times change.

P1: We're the big boss now!

(All laughing)

LOT: I want to go back now, a few of you mentioned about playschool and pre-school, do you think that prepared the kids well?

All P's: Mixed answers**

P5: Now I had a bad start to pre-school. This is just so odd, he is so outgoing in his own comfort zone but when he started pre-school he cried for three days,

so much so that they nearly had to ask would I take him out but he settled and after that it was the best thing since sliced bread, he couldn't get enough of it. When he was leaving in June he wanted to go back there. I was telling him that he wasn't going back that he was starting in big school. I was saying 'you are going to go to the school where mammy went' but he said 'no'. Nobody could speak about it over the whole Summer and then he ran over here and was saying 'Hiya' and there were three of four kids in his class who he knew from pre-school.

LOT: So that would help with the social stuff.

P5: Yes I was out the door like lightening. Once he didn't start crying, I was gone! Now it was good that there were a few kids in the class that he knew. H. is in his class, she was in the pre-school as well, that's D.'s grandchild. Ms O Brien moved them all around so that they weren't sitting with each other because I was asking him 'who were you sitting beside today?' and he'd say such and such person. That didn't go down to well with a few of the kids. He was sitting in one seat on the Thursday, but on the Friday, she hadn't moved him but another little boy had sat in his seat and although I left him at the door I was peeking, I was trying to get her attention because he stood as the table as if to say to the boy 'get out of my seat'.

(All laughing)

Now she just said 'Come on over here L., that's ok'. But he was walking over like this and stopped. He would not ask her where to sit but she copped him and then on the Monday the same thing happened again so she said she was going to move the whole class because there were some of them too familiar with each other and not mixing with anyone so she uprooted the whole lot of them.

LOT: So it's a good thing to have the kids from pre-school to settle in but maybe for meeting new people….

P5: Oh for the first few days yes, you need to know someone.

P5: But funnily enough, he doesn't play with the kids he went to pre-school with anymore and I would ask him 'oh where's such and such, do you play with him?' and he'd say 'no, I play with …' and then he started this, he used to play with all the girls because there are a lot of girls on the road but then he started saying 'I don't play with any of the girls at lunchtime because boys don't play with girls'. I'd say to him 'you can play with everyone'. Now our neighbour, A., she sits beside him in school and he says 'I like A. mam and I'll play with her at home but not in school' so it's not good reputation wise!

P7: My little fella is the opposite, he plays with A. and whoever today and he would say different names tomorrow and then he might say other kids names from different classes that he went to playschool with, he'd often say 'oh I saw them in yard and we were talking', then by the fourth day he would be back playing with A. Now it took him a while to do that, he didn't interact with

anyone from that class, it took a couple of weeks, he was playing with the ones he knew out in the yard. It takes them a while.

GP1: Do you remember the age old thing when the mothers had to drag the kids in on their first day and then the mothers were going home stressed out as much as the poor child, imagine what it was like for the child. But today with this pre-school thing now, it's that whole year that they are given, it's deadly.

P5: They are so ready for school.

GP1: There are no more screaming kids in the yard, now you might get one or two which is understandable, they are being taken away from their mother or father. Do you see the way I'm bringing in the father all the time!!!

(All laughing)

I don't see it too much now. Is it still going on?

LOT: Yes, it seems to be that the playschools are….

P5: Well I was very surprised on the first day in school there was nobody crying in the classroom, in Ms O'B.'s class. I think the teachers were actually surprised as well. I do think that hour in June with the parents meeting and the kids meet their teacher, that is just brilliant. They go in and they think this is great. They have six class kids playing with them and the teacher is going around saying 'hello, I'm your new teacher'. They are in there for half an hour to an hour, it's up to yourself, and at least then in September it's not a total shock. Now it's still a shock to the system with them going in.

P4: Well it's three hours and they are coming home on the first week exhausted.

LOT: That's the big challenge is it?

P4: Well no they had to listen whereas at pre-school it was more about playing but they had to listen for three hours, you could really see it, they were exhausted after the first week. It went from two hours, then three and then a full day.

GP1: But isn't it clever that playschool was for three hours and then when we started here was it three hours?

Some Ps: Well two hours to start with.

P6: In the Montessori that our kids have gone to, they run it the proper Montessori way so they would have had it from 9am to 2pm.

Some Ps: Oh God!!!

P6: So we were thinking that, especially N., that she would be well able for the longer day but she was wrecked.

LOT: Yes she was wiped.

P6: Absolutely wiped.

P5: I think they are overloaded with information in the first few weeks.

P7: I think regardless of how much you have them prepared, nothing prepares them at the same time. It's like yourself, if you were starting a new job or something like that.

LOT: You try to prepare but you don't know what's going to meet you until you are there.

P7: Yes it's always going to be that 'new girl' or 'new boy' feeling.

LOT: So then in terms of the Montessori, it prepares them to some extent you think but maybe they have to go in at the deep end is it?

P7: I think so.

P1: The Early Start, it prepares kids because they have to sit for 45 minutes for example. They break for lunch.

LOT: And it's that structure.

P1: She knows what will happen in school when she starts.

P7: I think it makes it easier then for the teacher when kids are prepared and they are able to sit at a table.

P5: They can colour. Sometimes in the pre-school they would be learning letters and numbers. D. learned an awful lot that I didn't even think they did in pre-school.

LOT: Sure.

P5: So by the time we came to Junior Infants, he was saying 'I'm bored in here', he couldn't wait to get to the next level. So when he started primary school it's like a sponge, he couldn't take enough in, he was saying things to me in Irish thinking I didn't know them and when I'd say I know them he'd say 'How do you know that?'. I did go to school once upon a time!

(All laughing)

I think they are ready for the school then and they want to learn more. They learn an awful lot. Even from September to the Halloween break, with all the homework they were getting and everything, they seem to be doing so much, so quickly, but they loved it, it wasn't as if it was a struggle.

LOT: So they are ready to learn. So the things we have said then that help them settle in, you know they way for some kids they sail through it and for some kids it's quite a struggle, but we have talked about the boys versus the girls, whether they went to pre-school, language…

P7: Having siblings in school as well does help.

LOT: Yes having siblings…

P7: Obviously the first one is tough I think, you don't know anyone and they don't know what's going on but when there are stepping stones and they are following each other in….

LOT: Yes and there are older siblings going in…

P7: I think that helps definitely.

LOT: What about age, the four versus five thing?

P7: Yes, I have three boys, in March, April and then July. So my middle guy when he started school he was just gone four, I was himming and hawing about it but when he went to playschool, A. was crying starting playschool, the first day, crying because he had to go in and C. was crying because he wasn't allowed go in, there are 15 months between them. So he did a year of playgroup and then playschool and I spoke to the teacher and she said he was well able for school. Socially and mentally he was fine but he was very small for his age, so looking at his class, one of his friends, J., he is up to here on me, and C. is only here so height wise there was a difference and I was thinking maybe I should have kept him back for another year, you don't know what to do.

LOT: It's a hard to know.

P5: There are two sides to it I think, when I started school I was only gone four as well and I was well able for school but that said it wasn't an issue because I was thrown out for the next one to be made. All the way up I was well able for school, it was only when I got to secondary school that they wanted me to stay back, not at home, the school wanted me to stay back and I said no, I was well able for it.

Now my son, he'll be five next month so there's a difference. He was well able for school. If he had have been born lets say in the Summer and I thought he was four going into school, I would have seen how he was maybe. I think it depends on your personal situation. Some kids are able for it at that age, some kids need to be five or five and a half.

LOT: So it's the same as what we said about boys and girls, it really depends on the child rather than age.

P5: It really does, if they are able to or if they want to start themselves.

P7: With two of mine, I had no choice, their birthdays are early September.

LOT: That's great though, it takes it out of your hands.

P5: My little one was in on the 1st and she turned 5 on the 5th and L. turned 5 on the 9th. But if they were born in July, especially the eldest, I wouldn't have sent her, I would have waited because there is no way on this earth …

P7: But that's your first as well….

P5: Yes, she would have been quite tall….

P7: I know my first guy was very quiet, whereas C. would be a little chancer and a charmer and D. the baby is real 'give it to me, I'll do it!'

P1: Depends on what your child feels. For my daughter, probably because she was going to the crèche and Early Start, I remember when she started here she was wondering…..she started when she was four, her birthday is in January….she was asking me why everyone in the classroom was older than her, why am I four and they are all five. I explained it all to her and she didn't have a problem.

P7: Normally what they try to do is put children who have their birthdays around the same time in the same class. You said L. is gone five, you will see that most of them in that class will be five by the end of January.

P5: There are a few of them already gone five and a few going on five.

P1: She has a lot of older kids in her class actually, maybe because a lot of kids Irish and Polish are from X area and they know each other from the playground. So they try to, especially with a Polish kid, put them in the different classrooms so they only spend time together in the playground. Obviously because they have to learn English, not Polish. If they were all in the one classroom, they would speak Polish.

LOT: Of course they would, naturally. So they take all that into account? That's very interesting to hear that. That was very interesting hearing how they divide up the classes, so it's a ratio of boys and girls, then their ages, where they are from, what playschool they have come from as well so they know what level they are at.

GP1: It's very cleverly done. It's not random at all, it's well thought out.

P5: I suppose they don't want all five year olds in one class either. They have so many and then there is some in each class.

P6: Yes and then if there is special needs in one class and they know there is going to be an SNA in there, they give them the bigger classrooms and only put 26 kids in that room whereas the next class might have 28. You don't realise what goes into the logistics of it, so I think it starts back in January when the applications come in and by June they know where you are so by September it's all ready.

P5: They also take in to account, they did say at the meeting, if you are not happy with the class or if your child is on your own, go speak to Principal and they will try, they may not be able to accommodate you but…

LOT: They'll try.

P5: Yes, because they may have to move someone else but you can go and talk to them.
I didn't care that he was on his own because I knew the teacher and I was saying that's grand, she's good.

LOT: Oh you knew the teacher so that helped.

P5: I was thinking he would be better off on his own, he will manage. He'll come across like that, he is a little bit shy but ….

LOT: I remember L., he's a smiler!

P5: He is yes but another mammy said to me 'would you not move him?' but I thought no, he is staying where he is, he'll be grand. He was after meeting the teacher in the June so imagine if I had have moved him?

LOT: Yes it would have been an upheaval.

P5: He would have had to meet a new teacher in September, oh God no, it wasn't worth it.

LOT: And how is he getting on now? Grand?

P5: Not a bother on him! He still says he hates school but he doesn't.

P1: One minute they hate school and one minute they love school.

LOT: Yes, so it changes day to day.

P5: They are like sponges, the other day I asked him 'Where is your purple crayon?' and he said 'I can't hear you', and I said 'purple'…

P7: You have to say it in Irish.

P5: So I said 'Where's the corcra crayon?' and he said 'now I can hear you' and he gets the purple crayon. He wouldn't answer me because they are learning their colours.

P7: I'm the same, all the colours have to be in Irish.

P5: Yes, and then if you can't think of it, if you're looking for green, I'm saying 'I think it's glas' get it we're in a rush!!

LOT: Yes, so that's a challenge for you guys.

Some Ps: Absolutely.

P1: Yes, that's what I'm thinking, in the next couple of years I will need an Irish course!

LOT: Yes, that's your next step.

P1: Yes, for example, it's a little word – Slán (goodbye) and I didn't get what they were saying and I asked her what they said and she couldn't explain it in Polish.

P7: So she was trying to translate it from Irish, into English, into Polish?

P1: So I am only learning English….

P6: It's those little things, the Teachers would all say slan to the kids and their parents. It's only a little Irish for Junior Infants but they are like sponges they want to take it all in.

P1: But we shouldn't worry about this because they will have a big challenge with Spanish and French, any language really.

P7: Your children have an advantage already because they have a language, ours just speak English.

P6: And that's all we need!

(all laughing)

P1: Yes, English is fine.

LOT: I won't keep you much longer because I know everybody has a day to get through but just a final question, you are the experts now, you have gone through all this, if you were Principal for a day or you were giving advice to the school to make this transition easiest for kids, for families, what would you tell them?

P1: Pre-school.

LOT: Pre-school.

P1: Pre-school, crèche.

P5: I think that day in June was brilliant, it familiarised them with their classroom, their teacher and they were taken away for the hour so it was kind of like a 'meet and greet' really.

LOT: And that helped?

P6: Yes, that helped because for the whole Summer they had that idea in their head, they knew where everything was.

P7: I think the school is well established. I think its thirty odd years now the school is here.

P5: Yes, I went to it!

P7: Yes I think they have it down to a T now, they have worked on it and worked on it and worked on it over the years so I think they have it very good.

P5: They only thing I would say is that in September, the first day is fine but after that I don't think the parents should keep going in with them every day.

P6: I think that as well.

P5: It up scuttles them because they are getting familiar with the mammy walking in and then it's all of a sudden no you are not allowed in and that upsets the children.
Mine, they were gone anyway, going themselves nearly but some kids aren't like that.

P3: Yes, remember they had everyone collecting them from the hall and there were loads of parents in the hall. It is much more organised if you collect them from the yard. They are coming out themselves as far as the yard.

P7: You see they do that for security but the teachers don't know the parents, they don't know who's collecting them. If you are collecting them Monday to Friday and just say your Dad is collecting them one day, they like you to ring the school that morning and say 'Granddad is collecting today'. That is one of the reasons they got the small gate closed, because the teachers are still familiarising themselves with who is collecting the children.

P1: For the people from other countries, I think some advice is that we have to start be more open for people in a new community and kids will see that we are open and they will be open to.

LOT: Yes, so that's advice for parents, has anybody any other advice for parents, my little one is starting school next September, tell me expert advice here!

GP1: Don't worry! Don't over think it. She will be alright.

P3: Just go with your child.

GP1: If she does have a bad first day….

P6: She'll get over it.

GP1: It's only one day, the second day will be a little bit easier and the third day will be fine.

P5: You will be laughing at this at their 21st then!

P7: It's funny, you are worrying about her already starting in September and she's probably going to walk in and not even say goodbye.

P5: I have four of them and I find the first six weeks, it takes that long to get into this routine, then you have the hassle of the mid-term and them going back after the mid-term, that's another struggle. I have heard other parents saying that they had an awful Monday morning there and they didn't want to go to school so little things like that.
But if they have a bad first day it will get better. Now your stomach will be gone and you'll feel like crying but try not let them see you are upset or anxious because they pick up those vibes.

P5: I couldn't wait for it.

LOT: Really?

P5: Yes (laughing), I was saying 'Come on now'.

P7: I work full time so De. was collecting them and when D. started school in September, he is delighted with his life, 'I've got my life back' he says. He is doing the Irish Course now and he gets out for a game of golf but he does the homework with them and the majority of stuff. He's here with all the mammies and he tells me 'Do you know such and such's mammy' and I say 'no' and he says 'you know she drives the black car' and I'm still saying no because I would only know a handful of mammies just from….

P5: You'd know them to see but you wouldn't know their names. I wave to people and I don't know their names.

P7: They get into their own little groups. Do you find that now? They would be with five or six, I was only talking to one of the other mammies about it because I have third class and second class and they are literally in their little group of four or five?

P5: The mammies are?

P7: No the kids, the quieter kids hang around together, they might say to me 'do you know Ben' and I don't because he is in a different year but they find each other and hang around in their little groups. Do you find that with your kids?

P5: Well I'm available, so over the years, if I can help out with anything I will and my kids love that, whereas some kids are 'Don't help in my class', mine are the opposite. I did maths for fun. I could be walking up that corridor and the kids could be saying 'Hiya S.' and I would say 'Hiya' and then 'who is that child'. They are in one of my children's classes but I wouldn't know them. Then at some stage the classes might be made bigger and you wouldn't know some of the kids until they are joined. The kids love to see the mammies, daddies and grandparents going in to help at these things.

P1: I remember when we sold the books, my daughter was so proud because Mammy had done this.

P7: Years ago I don't think they wanted the parents in school did they?

P5: Not when I was in school.

P5: You never saw a mammy at the yard or anything.

P7: Unless there was trouble.

GP1: You never saw a male.

P5: Unless you were sick or in trouble or something.

P24: If you saw your mam or dad you would be asking why are they here but it was a different time.

P1: The rules change.

P5: We used to get out at 12 o clock for our break and stroll home for half an hour and stroll back and you were just given that free way. Now obviously it was up to yourself to get back at 12.30 but you did, but they were different times.

P7: They are so security conscious and I know you have to be now, even the little guys know 'that's a stranger' and the way they learn things in school. Whereas when we were in school, not that it wasn't there in the big bad world, but we just didn't know about it.

P5: It wasn't as much, it wasn't really, it wasn't that localised where you would have the fear of God in you.

P7: Yes and I suppose that's another thing that we would have to worry about now as parents, whereas 30 years ago it was different, you were out on the road until it was dark, you walked home at lunch, from primary school, I'm laughing at that because I never heard of it.

P5: Yes we used to walk at 12 and come back at 12:30, they used to open the back gate and you could walk to the chipper if you wanted a bag of chips and come back.

P7: Ah stop, imagine trying to do that now?

P5: That's the way it was. None of the parents ever walked anyone to school. If someone was outside to collect you, you would be saying 'get away from the railings'. It was just different ways and times.

LOT: So as I said here earlier I have a four month old at home and I am half dead so I know I am going to leave here without asking something so before I go is there anything really important about starting school from parents and grandparents perspectives that we haven't touched on or have we covered most of it do you think?

P5: Well I think the most important thing is communication, between the teacher and yourself and the school and yourself. I know you get loads of notes in the first few weeks but it is just to let you know that things are going on and courses are going on but also I had this issue, he doesn't like wearing badges, you know with their name, he doesn't like to be labelled and I had told Ms O'B. that in June and she always remembered him from then and she said he was the only one who won't wear a label. But now he puts the label on for her!

P5: I think they do more for their teachers, teachers are God.

P1: So I think if you are open you will always be able to say something to the Teacher and she will be able to say something back to you.

P5: If you are open with them and honest with them, if you think your child is struggling, go in and tell them. For example I knew Z. is 11 and I approached the teacher and said she is extremely shy, she might talk to you and she might not, I don't know and the teacher said thanks very much for letting her know. We were very honest but some parents mightn't be, they might be embarrassed I don't know but personally I just think go with the flow of your child, they will get through it, they have to. It might take six weeks, six days, six hours, they will get used to it.

GP1: What age is your own child?

LOT: She is four and the youngest is four months.

GP1: You could bring her to the school play and just stay for the half hour that the little ones are on and then you could talk about it between this and September, isn't it a great school around the corner, is it this school she is going to?

LOT: No, its XX school over in Z area but I'm sure they have the same.

P5: I brought my eldest up here just to show her the yard and the kids were out in the yard. I didn't bring her right up because I didn't want to frighten her. But that day in June helped so if you have one of them you should go, some people don't because of holidays.

GP1: Does she go to preschool?

LOT: Yes.

GP1: Yes so just bring her up past XX school some day after pre-school.

LOT: Yes when we drive by now she says that's my school when I'm five.

Thank you so much. You are brilliant.

### 9.6.2 Sample Interview (First Year Head Teacher, Girls' Secondary School)

**Introduction and Interview:**

LOT: Just to make sure you feel informed, you know this is confidential and this is between us and the only reason I would break that is obviously if somebody was hurt or in danger.

T1: Yes.

LOT: The other thing is that, as you know, it is for the PhD. It's around the experiences of transition of parents, teachers, children of that move from Primary into Secondary.
Is there anything you want to ask me about before we start?

T1: No.

LOT: That all sounds ok?

T1: Absolutely.

LOT: Great.
Tell me a little bit about yourself. Have you worked here long? Year Head is that right?

T1: My name is J. I have been teaching for eleven years now. I was in a different school in YY area for one year, so for the last 10 years I have been a subject teacher, History and Geography. For the past four to five years I have been the Leaving Cert Applied Co-Ordinator but last year an Assistant Principal position came up and I went for that and I got it and I'm Year Head now. So just from September I have become a Year Head so it's new to me.

LOT: Ok so you're finding your feet with all this first year stuff as well. Tell me a little bit about the girls that come here and the kind of students that you have.

T1: They are very mixed background really. Academically we would have very, very strong students in one cohort and then there are students from more

disadvantaged backgrounds that mightn't have the same family support and they might struggle a little bit more as a result. So we have very mixed students academically. Socially and economically it's very mixed and very varied. Some students would bring in an awful lot of baggage from home and some would have very, very supportive backgrounds and home situations. So it's quite mixed.

LOT: So do you find that that makes a difference in how the school can relate to families or how the communication happens?

T1: Yes, absolutely. I suppose sometimes when you are dealing with a weaker student who doesn't have the same family support, when you are dealing with that family you will have the same issue in trying to communicate with them as you would with the student. When we are running nights like information nights or support nights or nights on cyberbullying and things like that usually the students with parents that mightn't have the same support there, they might be the ones not to attend and they are the ones you really want to attend, like the Parent/Teacher meetings so yes sometimes that would cross over a little.

LOT: It's interesting, I'm finding myself because I am really interested in talking to the parents who maybe don't traditionally engage with schools and yet of course they are the ones who aren't going to engage with research either.

T1: It's not a priority.

LOT: That's it exactly. What kind of involvement would parents usually have with the school?

T1: So far, for example, just prior to them coming into first year they would have met with A. who you are going to be interviewing, so they would have all met with her, most of them would have met with her.

LOT: Individually?

T1: Individually yes on a one to one. There would be a select number that didn't engage in that but most would have. Then the second point of contact apart from their admissions and filling out their applications would have been when we had an information night for first years so all first year parents were invited and I think there was a 74% attendance on that night. Again some of the parents that we would have liked to show up, didn't. That was a night where we explained the entire system of the schooling and how its different, the transition from Primary into Secondary, everything about the school, what the school has to offer and the supports that are in place, from Pastoral, Guidance, Rainbows, extra curricular teaching, everything. A letter would have went home in advance to come and then any parents that didn't come there would have been a follow up letter and then other letters would go home to them because the students themselves had a bonding day and a pre-bonding day and different things like that so we would have had some letters going to and from home already.

LOT: So they have had a few opportunities to get information at that point. What kind of information do the students get before they start?

T1: Well before they start, when they are still in sixth class, I know the team of Guidance here go out to the schools and give information on the school. Then the students who apply to come to the school have a handbook, there's a parents' handbook, a very comprehensive one.

LOT: Do you think I would be able to access that?

T1: Absolutely, I can give you a copy. They would have that, it's just everything about the school and also when they come into apply, along with the information in the handbooks they can also go on to the website. That's the information they get at that early stage and the students themselves, then when they come to the school, they are given assemblies every week for the first month on different things and teachers are called for different assemblies. They would have been brought to a first year mass across the way so it all had to be explained to them so they are given assemblies for the first time they do things. So it's little drip feeding information along the way. And their mentoring system, they have been introduced to their mentors.

LOT: Ok are the mentors other students?

T1: Yes, the fifth year students are mentors to first years so they would have all met their mentors and the mentors come in at Tutor time which is a 10 minute role call with their Tutor and their Tutor looks after their pastoral needs. The Tutor is a teacher and then the mentors come in during that time for the first couple of weeks and then they come in intermittently at different times and they run different things with the students. Of course all students are encouraged to become involved in Student Council and different things like that as well. Then I, as part of my role as Year Head have to carry out a survey with them also which is how are they settling in? So I will have an evaluation on that as well.

LOT: Fantastic and what kind of results did you find?

T1: Well the surveys are actually still coming in. I have only one more group to get so I have to now compile that. So it's basically questions like 'Have they used the Reception yet?, have they used their mentors?, how do they find their teachers? Are they approachable? What was the scariest thing you thought would be about coming to school?' Is that worry still there? and then there were a few questions put in about bullying as well. We are also going to also have extended Tutor time which is a 40 class, five times a year and then we have certain things we have to cover with bullying, homework and things like that.

LOT: I know obviously you would have data protection and confidentiality issues but if you would be able to give me access to some of the results of your work that would be so interesting because it is a very similar kind of topic.

T1: Absolutely and I'll just check with the management first and if it's ok then I will of course absolutely.

LOT: Thanks so much and obviously if you are not able to that's absolutely fine. So I would imagine the first day here is bedlam is it?

T1: Yes, it is and it isn't. They are all called to the General Purpose Area, the GPA and basically they are met and greeted by the Principal who chats to them and eases them into it and does the Pastoral side of it, then the Deputy Principal will step in and talk a little bit about discipline, then the next speaker, there are a number of speakers that day, The Guidance team, the Pastoral team, the Learning Support, the Multicultural, they will all step in and just remind the students of what their role is and how they can come to them. Then I step in, I explain what my job is, I introduce the six Tutors and then they are divided up into six different groups so the 174 of them are divided into six different groups, then they go off with their Tutors and the Tutors give them out their journals and they are given their lockers and go through the code of conduct.

LOT: So it's all very structured?

T1: Yes it's very structured.

LOT: Yes it's all very interesting and the multicultural side of things, I would love to be introduced that person if possible?

T1: Yes I will get their names, it's a really vibrant Department, amazing.

LOT: Yes I would love to talk to them, I would be really interested in that.

Ok so generally you know the way for some kids transition goes really, really smoothly and there are no problems but for some kids they really struggle with it. What do you think is the key? What makes a difference for them?

T1: I think there are loads of different areas but for example one student might be struggling because they can't cope with the organisation of nine periods a day. Usually what we do is, even though it is probably an incorrect term, but they are put on a conduct sheet to assist them with their organisational skills. So I just dealt with a student there now, lovely girl who is working well but struggling because she just can't make that connection of not being in with the one Teacher all day so we now have a system in place and I've gone through it with her and her mentors are going to help her and another Special Needs Assistant is going to come in and just help her to organise. At the end of every class the teacher will sign the sheet to say so and so had all her books for history and then I check it during the week and it's just a guide to help her.

For other students it might be a thing that they are just anxious and they are really high on anxiety levels. There mightn't be any reason but it could be because they are a little quieter. Maybe the factors are that they find it very

difficult to find friends because they are on the move and a lot of students, I know one of the parents rang me recently and she feels that all of her friends have gone to different Secondary Schools, she feels anxious, she feels that she doesn't know people but she is performing very well and is doing very well but she is very unhappy. What we do then is we link in again with all the mentors, we let the teachers know and I spoke to the student individually herself, I am linking in with the parent on that to put her mind at ease because it is a thing just not to abstain from school just throw herself into it, so that's the quieter student.

Then there are other students who find it difficult that the teacher doesn't know them as well as their old teacher. The primary teacher knew how good there were at maths, how good they were at spelling, they knew they got a new puppy at the weekend. I might have 200 students a day so it's very surface and some students vie for attention and find that they can't get it enough and they struggle in that way so I suppose it is kind of loads of different areas.

LOT: And different factors?

T1: Yes and different factors.

LOT: I'm interested in parents picking up the phone to you and saying I'm worried about my daughter because of this reason, would you find that happens a lot? That informal stuff as opposed to the meetings and the information packs?

T1: Yes, it doesn't come as often through phone calls. What will happen is their first point of call will usually be to the Tutors, the six Tutors before me because it's more of a pastoral issue. That parent didn't ring the Tutor, they just went straight to me but I happened to be free so I dealt with it, that's how I am aware of that one. This could be happening unknown to me as a Year Head but for me I have only received two phone calls of that nature, informally. But it would go to the Tutors because that's a formal way of doing it through the Tutor system. If it's discipline it would go to me.

LOT: I understand, would that be the time you have most contact with parents over discipline?

T1: Yes.

LOT: How do you find that?

T1: Yes ok, that's the busier because one small case could take up to ten classes in a week and it could drag on and it depends on the nature and the follow up and it's difficult because you could be in the middle of a class when something happens so from that point of view it could be difficult but so far so good with the first years.

LOT: Great. So the communication again between school and home, sometimes it's really easy and it goes smoothly, sometimes it can be a really tough job so again what do you think are the main factors there?

T1: I don't really know what the main factors are. I suppose sometimes the parents, if they have students who have been in the school beforehand, then they would be easier to communicate with because they know the system. Some parents don't come to the talks because they feel well I've had a child in the school and I know the system, but maybe one daughter is very different to another daughter and they might be meeting different elements of our system depending what type of a student she is.

So sometimes if there is a history of other children or if the parents themselves have been in the school, that can be an influencing factor on how they communicate with you but maybe parents, who are difficult to communicate with, they might have had a daughter that had a chequered or coloured past in the system and didn't have the lovely experience in school because they found school difficult and sometimes parents see that when their next daughter comes and they get a phone call they might have that block. So that might be one issue.

But generally the parents are so lovely to deal with and so easy to talk to, you might get one or two and they are just adverse to the institution of school and might not have had a good experience with school themselves and then they might not be forthcoming. But usually they are very open and very lovely to talk to.

LOT: Do you feel there is a specific role for them in this transition or not?

T1: Yes huge. I think huge, for them to be attending all the meetings, to be checking the student's journal every evening, to be checking that they have their homework done because it's so much of a bigger organisation than it was in primary, their role is absolutely crucial for the first month or two, to be checking that journal, to be checking if they have any notes, to be asking them how they are getting on, constantly talking with them. I do think they need to have a really hands on role as well in the early stages of them moving into school.

LOT: What are the kinds of skills that the kids need, what do they need to be able to do when they are coming into first year?

T1: I suppose adaptation is the first thing, some students at the primary level can be a little bit more needy with their teacher, you know in a good way, but I suppose adaptation is the key and I think that students who survive better with the transition are students that are very open minded.

LOT: So in a lot of cases more dispositions? Attitudes rather than physically being able to do things?

T1: Yes. Physically being able to read a timetable and physically being able to navigate through a big huge building like this is important but apart from that it's how the actually participate in a class, how they relate to a teacher, but also, more importantly, how they relate with their peers, that they don't immediately get into a click, because if that click doesn't work, then you will

find a fall out and then a student becomes very isolated and bullying is one of the bigger issues for a first year group than any other group in the school. So you will find that students who make new friends, lots of friends, and keep a wide group of friends and get involved in a lot of extra-curricular activities and become quite independent, you will find that they are the kids who can cope better.

LOT: And thrive better?

T1: And thrive better to any sort of change from primary to secondary school, I think.

LOT: So we have looked at what the secondary school does to prepare kids, we have looked at the parents' role. What about the primary school? Would you have much communication with the primary schools feeding in or what way does that work?

T1: I personally don't but probably because I am new to this role, I will probably be saying something very different next year. When you interview A., she is our person who does that. That's her role. She links with all of the entrants. She does all of the entrance exams. She deals with all the feeder schools and that side of things.

LOT: So she would be able to tell me a lot about the kind of information that comes from primary schools?

T1: That's her total area.

LOT: Do you think, generally, secondary school teachers, subject teachers, would know much about what has happens in primary school or the curriculum or anything like that?

T1: Probably not as much as we should. I know a couple of years ago it was brought to our attention to look at what the curriculum is and what teachers do and as part of the Subject Department meetings that we have as teachers, we all had to look at what is covered in Geography or History.

LOT: In the primary school curriculum?

T1: Yes, so what should they know, because it is always good to start with what you know when you are introducing a new topic so it's not scary with the transition. I think with a lot of teachers, rather than source it from the primary school, ask the students what have you covered? What do you know? And that's kind of the starting point for the lesson so I think it is kind of done on an informal basis.

LOT: Did you ever get any kind of training around working with parents or anything like that? Or do you think it would be useful?

T1: It would be very useful actually but I suppose we are really, really lucky in this school that our Principal and our Deputy are really interested in CPD days, continuing professional development days and we have had so many different speakers in over the last 10 years or 5 years that they would have talked relentlessly. There would have been in service days with different snippets of how to deal with a child and their parents. Also the Learning Support Department, a lady called S., who has a degree in psychology and is working in that area, she deals with the learning support students here, she would talk to us about different students, their learning needs and how to approach them in the classroom but also how to approach the parents of those students.

LOT: So it's integral to other training you have been doing along the way.

T1: Yes and then different Tutors at different talks will talk to us about their experience of dealing with parents of different students and we would learn from that as well. It is kind of in an informal way, there was no official training on how to deal with parents but we have received a huge amount of information on a monthly basis through different in-services, it would be drip fed through different in-services all the time and through word of mouth.

LOT: Is there a Home School Community Liaison or is that just at Primary?

T1: No, there is, we have a link person here, G.

LOT: Ok so you have that bit of support there as well?

T1: I can give you her name as well.

LOT: Yes, I was chatting to her briefly there and she seemed kind of a bit reluctant to chat to me so I won't put her under too much pressure, but maybe I can write to her again rather than you talk to her because I don't want her to feel that I am forcing her or anything.

Just the final questions, ability grouping, is that something that's used here?

T1: No, it's not anymore, it was a number of years ago but we don't stream the students anymore because it's not recommended by the Department of Education, so the students are, when they are brought into first year, they are divided up equally into the six groups. It may happen that there might be one or two groups that are a little bit stronger than the other groups and the other groups we support a little more the way they are divided up but generally speaking no they are not streamed according to ability because the research shows that if you do, then that middle group are almost left and they perform better when it is mixed ability. For certain subjects, they might be divided into higher and ordinary, as a Tutor base goes, they are divided on mixed ability and therefore the majority of their subjects would be mixed ability, apart from a couple, maybe maths.

LOT: That's interesting, that's what the research is showing you and it's filtering through so it's nice to see it like that.

T1: It took two years to do that, so it is very important that teachers make sure they are teaching with AFL (Assessment for Learning) in mind and that they are doing all levels in the group.

LOT: It's interesting to see changes on the ground isn't it?

T1: Yes.

LOT: Ok my final question, if you, in your experience with first year, having gone through this whole month now and you were writing out guidelines etc. What kind of advice would you give to parents, teachers and kids? First of all to parents, what would be the advice that you would give to parents?

T1: I think maybe tell their daughters in the months leading up, because some of them were quite anxious, it's very important on the first day as Year Head that you are not the big bad wolf either, coming from the discipline end. It's nice for them to see us smile. They are scared. I suppose from the parents' point of view, there will be students that are anxious no matter what, no matter how much at ease you put them but they can reiterate to their child that it is going to be a scary experience, it is going to be different, you are going to be moving around, you will be worried that you don't know the rules or you are afraid you are going to get into trouble, it is ok. They are there for them.

We did have a case that a student got a penalty sheet the other day and she was very, very upset for what her mother might say. I know that could be a totally different thing but for the parents to reinforce that you can only do your best, to listen, to read everything and that the teachers are reasonable people and not to panic.

LOT: So just that emotional support from the parents.

T1: Yes the emotional support.

LOT: What kind of advice would you give to other teachers?

T1: We have a system in place that students aren't supposed to get any dockets for the first two to three weeks of school, no matter what unless it's a serious case of behaviour because this is the 'ease in' period and that is explained to students. They are not really supposed to ask you 'can I go to the toilet?'. or go their locker during the class but they are allowed for the first couple of weeks, so I suppose it is to reiterate to teachers to go easy on them but not to wrap them in cotton wool either, because then you are just delaying the inevitable.

All teachers know that the 'ease in' period for students is very important, coming from primary to secondary.

LOT: And to the students themselves. What kind of advice would you give them?

T1: Organisation. If you are very organised, everything else will follow. After your homework at night, spend five minutes looking at your journal saying right I have these three subjects in the morning' 'Am I ok for this?' Because I think that's sometimes where the main sense of where things spin out of control, the children are not organised and they are going to their lockers, then they are getting frustrated, then they are upset, then they get in trouble and it's kind of a domino effect. Just to keep calm and keep organised. If they don't understand something, just ask the teacher, keep asking.

LOT: Keep asking the questions.

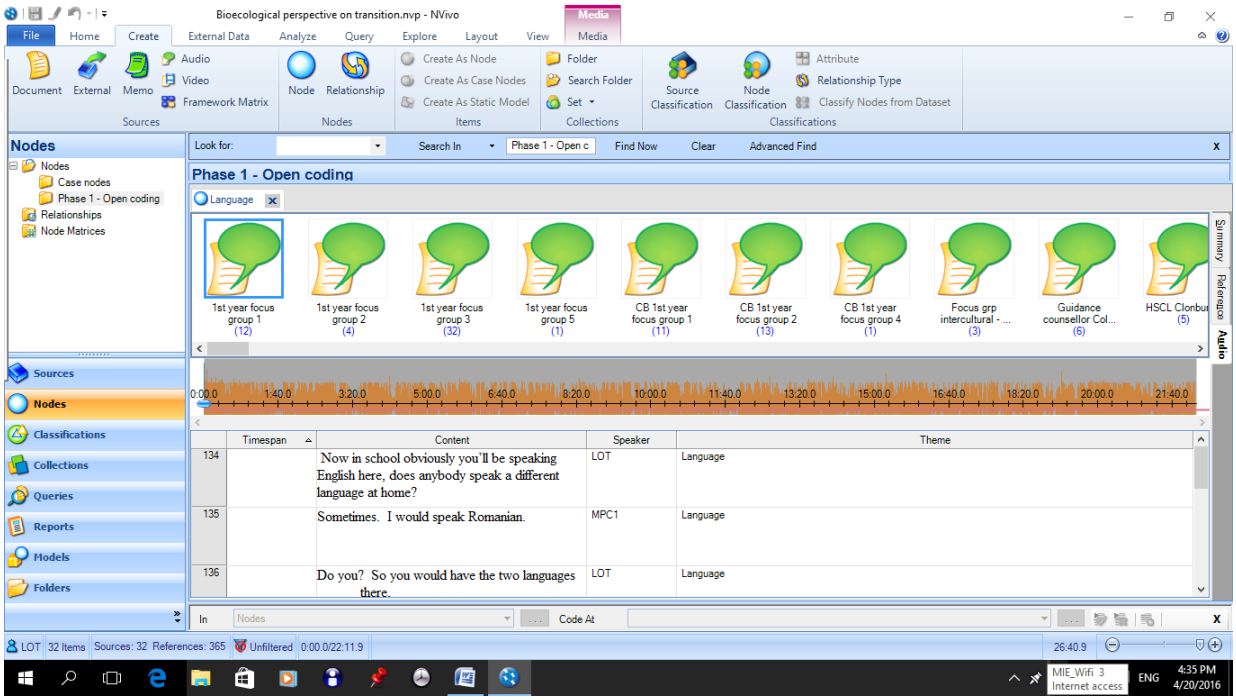
T1: Yes.

LOT: So is there anything else I should know about the school specifically or about the idea of transition in general?

T1: No, not really, I just think that we do have very good supports in place here. I do think personally that the first years have settled in very well this year and so far there has been nothing that has reared its ugly head. So, so far the supports that are in place for them have been working. They have been settling in, any parents that I have been talking to seem happy. I don't think there is anything at this stage of the year, but ask me in six months time.

LOT: Thank you so much.

## 9.7 Appendix 7: Sample NVivo Page



# 10. List of Publications

## 10.1 Journal Articles

Ó Breacháin, A. and O'Toole, L. (2013). Pedagogy or politics?: Cyclical Trends in Literacy and Numeracy in Ireland and Beyond. *Irish Educational Studies, 32* (4), 401-419.

Ó Breacháin, A. and O'Toole, L. (2014). Literacy and Numeracy: Are we on the right track? *In Touch, Jan / Feb, 2014*, 54-55.

O'Toole, L., Hayes, N. and Mhic Mhathúna, M. (2014). A Bio-ecological Perspective on Educational Transition. *Procedia – Social and Behavioural Sciences, 140,*121-127.

## 10.2 Conference Presentations

O'Toole, L. and Hayes, N. (2015). The baby and the bathwater: Integrating theoretical stances to enhance children's experiences of educational transitions. Proceedings from *RECE International Conference, 'Narratives of Difference: Translations, Transgressions and Transformations',* 27th-31st October, 2015. Blanchardstown Institute of Technology, Dublin, Ireland.

O'Toole, L. and Hayes, N. (2015). Educational transition in bio-ecological perspective: The key role of relationships. Proceedings from *ESAI National Conference, 'Educational Research and Practice in Times of Transition: Looking to the Future',* 9th – 11th April, 2015. Carton House and Maynooth University, Kildare, Ireland.

O'Toole, L. (2013). A Bio-ecological Perspective on Educational Transition. Proceedings from *World Conference on Psychology and Sociology,* 27th – 29th November, 2013. Chat D'Ouisseau, Brussels, Belgium.

O'Toole, L. (2011). "Parents speak with many voices": The complexity of diversity in parental involvement in their children's education in Ireland. Proceedings from *DICE*

*Annual Conference: 'You, Me and Diversity'* 25th and 26th November, 2011. St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra.