



**NUI MAYNOOTH**

Ollscoil na hÉireann Má Nuad

**Rites of Passage in Rafoarty: Curriculum Continuity and  
Transition from Primary to Post-primary in an Irish  
Town.**

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## **Abstract**

Literature on student transition between primary and post-primary illustrates that how schools integrate students and choose to organize teaching and learning supports or contributes to transition difficulties for students. This qualitative study finds that despite statements in official documentation that curriculum continuity exists because it is built into curriculum design, it in fact does not exist in sixth class primary and first class post-primary teacher classroom practice. Local curriculum structures influence teacher classroom practise and affect the continuity of students' educational experience. The existence of a dominant curriculum orientation towards academic rationalism influences the patterns of relationships that exist between and within schools. It is a culture dominated by compliance with historical processes and educational cultural legitimacy between schools, teachers and students. The enquiry was undertaken as a qualitative case study using semi structured interviews with teachers and principals and focus groups with students.

While numerous Irish educational reports identify the importance of transition there are deficiencies in the directions they take to address the problems they have identified. The real issues around transition for students arise out of the failure of primary and post-primary schools to reorganize their structures in how they educate early adolescents. The structural processes of educating students in individual schools are influenced by the culture of the school, its notion of what curriculum is and whether education is understood and approached as a continuum. While primary and post-primary schools, in this study, have little shared sense of educational purpose the teaching of sixth class primary and first class post-primary contain similar instructional methods. This deficit of purpose and similarity of instruction is

due to how schools share in national 'socio-cultural-political processes that shape the content and orientation of curriculum, and legitimize what good teaching practices are, and to what ends' (Callan 2006, p.7). Students experience schooling problems rather than transitional problems in such educational environments.

## Table of Contents

<i>Abstract</i> .....	2
<i>List of Tables</i> .....	4
<i>Acknowledgements</i> .....	6
Introduction .....	7
1. Review of Irish Education from 1960 to date.....	10
2. A brief history of interface reform between primary and post primary in Ireland .....	38
3. Adolescent Development and Transition.....	53
4. Culture, Curriculum and Continuity .....	82
5. Methodology .....	135
6. Perceptions of primary and post-primary principals and teachers.....	157
7. Students Perceptions .....	216
8. Discussion of Findings.....	247
<i>Bibliography</i> .....	272
Appendix 1:	
Interview Schedule 1: Principals of Primary schools and teachers of sixth class.....	293
Interview Schedule 2: Principal / First Year Yearhead / key personnel involved in pupil transfer from primary to post-primary school.....	294
Interview Schedule 3: Teachers of first year post-primary.....	296
Interview schedule 4: Students that have transferred from Primary to post- primary school.....	297

Appendix 2:

Letters seeking parental guardian permission to interview student .....	299
School letter that accompanied letter seeking permission .....	301

Appendix 3:

Letter seeking interviewees reviewing types interviews .....	302
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List of Tables

1.1 Recommendation of the PCRB (1987).....	28
2.1 Structural challenges for student transition in White Paper (1995) .....	43
2.2 Tri facet liaison between Primary and post-primary schools .....	51
3.1 Age Profile of Year 1 Junior Certificate Students 2000/2001 .....	53
3.2 Relationship between student self esteem and teacher expectations .....	68
4.1 Competing perspectives of purposes of education .....	91
4.2 Conceptions of Learning .....	101
4.3 Curriculum orientation .....	115
4.4 Principles to guide the sequencing of curriculum content .....	122
4.5 Aspects of a structured curriculum .....	130
5.1 Profile of post-primary Schools .....	140
5.2 Profile of primary Schools .....	140
5.3 Number and Profile of volunteer interviewees .....	141
5.4 Possible meanings of the word 'generalization' .....	152

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## **Introduction**

This study identifies and describes how curriculum structures affect the continuity of students' educational experience as they transfer from primary to post-primary school. The formulation of the purpose of this study emerged out the development of a conceptual framework which focused on two interrelated factors: the importance of schools being aware of the aims and principles underlying both the Primary and Junior Cycle curriculum and that to enhance the quality of the teaching and learning experiences of transferring students schools have a duty to ensure that they do not undermine these aims and principles.

Until relatively recently very little published research on the issue of pupil / student transfer had been undertaken in Ireland. In 2002 a longitudinal study of students' experiences of curriculum in the first three years of their post-primary schooling was commissioned by the National Council of Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) to:

Address the gaps in Irish research on how post-primary schools can influence integration and learning of their students in first year.  
(Smyth *et al* 2004, p.16)

The aim of the research is to inform and advise the NCCA on the type of curriculum provision which ensures that students experience a high quality education. The findings of the first and middle years of this research were published in 2004 and 2006. Another study, (O'Brien 2004), gained a fuller understanding of the transfer process from the perspective of students, teachers and parents. O'Brien states that because of this broad research base there is a need for:

Focused studies... to target aspects of the transfer process in order to answer questions about the impact of transfer on students. (2004,*op cit*, p.86)

In seeking to contribute to this research area, it was judged that a distinct contribution would be made by exploring how curriculum structures affect the continuity of students' educational experience as they transfer from primary and post-primary schools in Raforaty. The enquirer formed the opinion that despite the statements in official documentation that curriculum continuity exists, because it is built into curriculum design, in fact it may not exist in practice and that local factors were being overlooked. The hypothesis is advanced that the real issues around transition for students arise out of the failure of primary and post-primary schools to reorganize their structures in how they educate early adolescents. The researcher also was of the opinion that Smyth *et al* (2004) and O'Brien (2004) overlooked how local policies and perspectives of schools and teachers in primary and post-primary may be contributing to this. The research attempts to illuminate how primary and post-primary schools interact with each other around student transition. To capture this perspective it was judged necessary to interview principals, teachers and students at post-primary and principals and sixth class teachers in primary. The research undertaken by Smyth *et al* (2004) can be interpreted as one dimensional in that it offers no insight into how children develop. For schools to be only concerned with their students as academic workers is an incomplete perspective of their developmental needs. It was decided because of the finite resources available to the researcher pupils of primary schools and parents would not be included in this research.



The thesis is presented in eight chapters. The first chapter is a brief review of Irish primary and post-primary education from 1960 to date. The second chapter briefly reviews the policies that have identified the importance of transition and the deficiencies of the directions of these policies. The hypothesis is advanced that the real issues around transition for students arise out of the failure of primary and post-primary schools to reorganize their structures in how they educate early adolescents. The relevant Legislation with regard to the keeping of records on pupils and the transfer of data between schools are also identified and explored. Chapter three states what pupil transfer is and develops gender and age profiles for Irish pupils. The chapter also identifies the problems and issues involved in student transition identified in research literature. Chapter four seeks to unpack the concepts of school culture, curriculum and continuity as these concepts encapsulate how schools engage in the process of educating students in individual schools. Chapter five discusses the research methodology adopted. Principals and teachers perceptions and students perceptions are presented in chapter six and seven respectively. The conclusions of the study and its recommendations are discussed in chapter eight.

## Chapter 1

Wittgenstein likened historical change to a thread made up of many fibres. The strength of the thread does not reside in the fact that some fibres run its entire length but in the fact that many fibres overlap. (Popkewitz 1997, p.134)

Since 1922, the State, has endeavoured to give financial provision and an impetus to the review and development of an education system for the Republic of Ireland. The educational focus of Ireland in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was an Irish traditionalism concerned with the transmission of a specific cultural heritage. A primary function of Ireland's traditionalism, was like other emerging countries, to lay the foundations of national self-awareness and national identity. The educational system was deemed suitable vehicle for such a policy of restoration:

Of an educational system based on the twin aims of developing a state that was both Gaelic and Christian, or perhaps, more accurately, Gaelic and predominately Roman Catholic in outlook and spirituality. (Farren 1976, p. 33)

It would be erroneous to suggest that between the foundation of the state and 1960 there were no calls for development within the Irish educational system. Despite the publishing of the *Plan for Education* (1947) and the *Report of the Council in Education* (1954) in which the latter clearly “extensively articulated both the deficiencies perceived in contemporary curriculum and the programmes which they proposed as replacements” (Hurley 1977, p.14), no changes were made. However the Department of Education in launching the pilot programme in 1968, for what was to become *Curaclam na Bunscoile* (1971) stated that:

For over forty years there has been no change in the old method of a subject-centred programme where knowledge was simply imparted to the child. O’Sullivan 1968 (cited in Oideas 1971, p.53)

The current Department of Education and Science is responsible for the administration of public education to include primary, post-primary and special education. In trying to understand the present context a brief review of the developments within Primary and Post-Primary education since 1960 to date was undertaken. This time frame was further subdivided into 1960 to 1983, 1984 to 1987 and 1987 to date. These dates are chosen because they coincide with initial educational organizational and curriculum reform, the setting up and disbandment of the Curriculum and Examinations Board, the forming of the NCCA and curriculum and assessment reform to date. The historical review was also undertaken to inform and expand the enquirer's knowledge and understanding of how the current educational context had evolved.

### **Developments from 1960 to 1983**

During the period 1960 to 1980 there was a change in political attitudes in Ireland to education with the growing realization that the economic development of the country and educational development of its citizens were interlinked (Coolahan 1981). To meet such economic and social objectives and to ensure a better education system for all, the following innovations were implemented;

- introduction of a comprehensive post-primary school curriculum which would include academic and practical subjects (1966)
- provision of free post-primary education and travel (1966)
- abolition of the Primary Certificate exam (1967)
- new Primary curriculum (1971)

- raising school leaving age to fifteen (1972)

The abolition of the Primary Certificate Examination in 1967 rejected the notion that primary education was simply a preparation for secondary or the sole preparation for adult working life. This shift in perception resulted in primary education having its own 'function in preparing the child to take his place ultimately as an adult in society both in work and in leisure' Curaclam na Bunscoile (1971, p. 4). Another stimulus for change in the Primary Sector came about as a result of:

A development outside of Ireland which generated most excitement in the 1960s- the Report of the Plowden Committee. Hurley (1977, p. 16).

However the excitement and the significance that the Plowden Report caused in certain circles did 'not have national impact ... there was not a widespread clamour for change or innovation' (ibid, p. 17). The significance of the Plowden Report was that it declared its support for childcentred philosophy of education and 'endorsed the trend towards individual and active learning' HMSO (1967, para.553). The Report also, through identifying best practice in schools, highlights the direction that schools should move in:

Towards a deepening of their teachers understanding of how children develop ... is of prime importance, both in avoiding educationally harmful practices and in introducing effective ones. HMSO (1967, para.10).

This, thinking about children's development, is a deliberate action that sets out to 'devise the right environment for children, to allow them to be themselves and to develop in the way and the pace appropriate for them' (ibid, para. 505). The 'right' environment accepts the child, is aware of the stages of children's development, is sensitive to the differences between children's development, has the ability to foster

‘some hope of a balanced mature adult and of him/her being able to live in, to contribute to, and to look critically at the society of which he forms a part’ (ibid, para. 505)

The report also highlights the direction schools should move away from:

The ‘platitudes’ of educational aims and towards a recognisable philosophy of education, and to a view of society ... by encouraging staff of the school to keep thinking about what they are doing. (ibid, para. 501-503)

A school environment that must be moved away from is one where the aim of schooling is solely to ensure that, on leaving school, pupils are ‘fitted to grapple with the world which they enter’ (ibid, para. 506). This widely held view, Plowden states:

Isolates the long term objective, that of living in and serving society, and regards education as being at all stages recognizably and specifically a preparation for this. (ibid, para. 506).

What is interesting in Plowden, with regard to children learning in school, is that it states that despite the:

considerable body of liberal thinking on the education of children [which] was available to teachers, Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Froebel, Whitehead, Dewey, Montessori and Rachel MacMillan ... it may be doubted whether the direct influence of these or any other writers was great. (ibid, para. 510).

What did clearly influence the understanding of children’s learning in particular in Britain and Ireland was the work of Jean Piaget. Piaget’s scheme of child development, Plowden states, has practical implications ‘for the curriculum and organization of primary schools’ (ibid, para. 553). The combination of the influence of cognitive development research undertaken by Piaget and the growing awakening to the significance and importance of liberal thinking on the importance of childhood

education in the Plowden Report influenced much of the thinking that was to become *Curaclam na Bunscoile* (1971).

Prior to 1971, primary education served as the basis of the totality of formal education for a large proportion of the population. This placed an onus on primary education to provide an education that would equip children not progressing to post-primary level to advance themselves in the world. By 1971 primary education had moved away from the narrowness of the National Schools' Curriculum (1832-1922) based on the three R's, that is Reading, Writing and Arithmetic and through a primary school curriculum dominated by a teaching of Irish (1923-1970).

The development of *Curaclam na Bunscoile* (1971) as a child-centred, locally contextualized, integrated and activity based curriculum was in response to the emerging developmental psychology of Piaget which emphasised the how, rather than the what, of learning. The principles of Piaget, the process of development through successive stages and the integrative nature of development are clearly stated:

Each person must experience each stage in order to be ready to advance to the next and when experience in one stage is not adequate the over-all development tends to be distorted. *Curaclam na Bunscoile* (1971, Cuid 1, p.18).

However the justification for some of the innovations in the curriculum 'without reference to a specific source' caused uneasiness at the time, (Griffin1978, p.21).

Similar to The Plowden Report there is an awareness of the implications of this 'modern psychology' for the structure of the curriculum:

Curriculum should be flexible to allow each child to progress at an appropriate pace and to achieve satisfaction and success at his own level ... Curriculum should be integrated to allow the young child is

not conscious of subject barriers; he views knowledge as a key to life and his questions concerning the whole world around him range over the whole field of knowledge. Curaclam na Bunscoile (1971, Cuid 1, p.19).

These 'modern' psychological developments also have implications for the relationships between the child, other children and the teacher. The child is now seen to be the 'most active agent in his own education' (ibid, p.18). The teacher's role is 'one who provides suitable learning situations and who guides and stimulates the child in his pursuit of knowledge' (ibid, p.18). For an educational experience to be 'genuinely educational, the pupil / learner must be actively involved with the material which is at an appropriate level for him / her', (Gash 1985, p.87). This development in how learning in children occurs meant that that the primary teacher's role also had to evolve from being:

One who merely imparts information but rather as one who provides suitable learning situations and who guides and stimulates the child in his pursuit of knowledge. Curaclam na Bunscoile (1971, p.18)

Knowledge acquired in this progressive way 'through the child's personal experience and discovery is likely to be more meaningful and purposeful than information acquired at second hand' (ibid, p.18).

The influence of Plowden and its adoption of the liberal approach to the child's education is clearly stated, 'the course of education cannot be allowed to become an empiric development' (ibid, p.12). There is an explicit acknowledgement that values, religious and ethical imperatives, democratic and nationalistic principles, within Ireland should influence education and play a part in determining educational aims and priorities. It is explicitly stated that these values in Ireland have shaped educational aims in order to foster a concern not only with life but with the purpose

of life and with raising the awareness of an appreciation for the privilege of belonging to an Irish civilization and its democratic institutions. It is with these caveats that the aims of the primary education are stated as:

To enable the child to live a full life as a child ... To equip him to avail ... of further education so that he may go on to live a full and useful life as an adult in society. (ibid, p.12).

These aims, it was hoped, would shift the balance away from an education system in Ireland that was curriculum centred to a more progressive child centred education system. Primary education, while educating the child, is also concerned with equipping the child for further education. The purpose of such an education is that the child will live a full as an adult in society. The children of the new curriculum would be more adaptable through having:

A much more active role in their own education and consequently show much more self-reliance, confidence and flexibility of mind in tackling fresh challenges when presented to them. (ibid, p.16)

This disposition within the child would also show through how they would approach the world as adults:

To prepare them to work in it and find enrichment during leisure time, to meet its challenges, to accept what is worthwhile in it and reject what is shoddy, to make a full responsible contribution to its evolution. (ibid, p.14)

The function of the curriculum designed to meet these aims:

Must therefore endeavour to cater for the full and harmonious development of each child and must at the same time, be sufficiently flexible to meet the needs of children of widely varying natural endowment and cultural background. (ibid, p.13)

The concept of continuity is expressed as:

The child's education should be an organic development and should not involve a significant change of method and matter for him in



passing from one stage to the next, from one class to the next or from primary to post-primary school. (ibid, p.13)

The warning in Plowden that, 'general statements of aims were of limited value' CACE (1967, para. 501) seems to be ignored, there is an implicit liberal philosophy of education evident. The responsibility of 'developing a recognizable philosophy of education' (ibid, para. 504) are explicitly entrusted to the Principal and the classroom teacher:

Must keep abreast of educational thought and development, introduce new ideas and initiate experiments within the curriculum...be receptive to new ideas, to be in touch with his fellow teachers and with educational thought in this and other lands. *Curaclam na Bunscoile* (1971, p. 21)

Implementing *Curaclam na Bunscoile* (1971) also meant making allowances for flexibility in timetabling and teaching methods. The pre 1971 curriculum was divided into subject compartments, resulting in a focus on what ought to be taught. To overcome this 'logical' arrangement and its resultant content-lead teaching and passive learning the new integrated curriculum would have its 'various aspects arranged under the following headings: - Religion, Language, Mathematics, Social and Environmental Studies, Arts and Craft Activities, Music and Physical Education' (ibid, p. 20). To change the subject compartment mentality a flexible timetable was envisaged consisting of 'blocks of time rather than clearly defined half hour periods' (ibid, p. 22). What was paramount in the new curriculum was placing 'the quality of the pupil's learning at the centre of the teacher's discerning planning and practice' Hogan (1996, p. 163). This new sense of education as active participation by both child and teacher meant that a degree of freedom had to be allowed to teachers to integrate subjects.

### **Developments post 1971**

To give the impression that *Curaclam na Bunscoile* (1971) was a total success would be incorrect. The abolition of the *Primary Certificate Examination* (1967) while maintaining the Intermediate Certificate at post-primary meant that some post-primary schools were selective in their intake. The effect this had on primary schools was that instead of sixth class students being engaged by the principles of *Curaclam na Bunscoile*, they were being prepared for entrance exams for post-primary education. It was not until 1993 that the use of assessment tests for selection purposes by post-primary schools were prohibited.

The 1971 curriculum also caused some controversy as 'no public debate of the principles of *progressivism* took place' Sugrue (1990, p.14). University lecturers had theoretical objections to the influence of progressive theories in the curriculum and held that there were pedagogical inadequacies with regard to progressive education identified through 'falling standards, socially disadvantaged children suffer more than more privileged peers from progressive methods of teaching the basics' Murphy (1986, p. 20). A 'critique' of the 'substance' of these 'charges' was written (Hogan 1986). To the two questions mentioned above, falling standards and socially disadvantaged children's educational disadvantage, Hogan refers to 'the available evidence gathered since the introduction of the curriculum in 1971' (*ibid*, p.36ff). This available evidence was gathered from:

- *Evaluation of the New Primary Curriculum for Primary Schools*, Conference of Dublin Primary Schools, 1975

- *Primary School Curriculum: Curriculum Questionnaire Analysis*, INTO, 1975
- *The New Primary School Curriculum: Its Implementation and Effects*, Dept. of Education, 1977
- *'A study of the Implementation of the 1971 Curriculum for Irish Primary Schools'* Sr. M. Walsh

The evidence showed an improvement in the standard of English and the understanding of Mathematical concepts. The exceptions to these improvements were that there was some deterioration in spelling and handwriting and that in Mathematics the deterioration in the memorization of number facts and computational skills had been noticed. With regard to the second charge, 'none of the five evaluation studies included social class as a variable, so no direct evidence is available on the matter' (ibid, p. 37).

Other evaluations of the same documents show that even though there was a:

Massive endorsement or acceptance of progressive educational theory at the level of belief ... this does not amount to a change in practice ... life in sixth standard classes in Irish Primary schools ... is quite highly structured, teacher controlled, and oriented toward the attainment of traditional goals. Sugrue (1990, p.14).

In assessing child centred education in Ireland since 1971 Sugrue also states that there was a need to:

Seriously query the child-centred camouflage of the primary curriculum ... which hid the ... unshakable subject structure of the curriculum, the fragmentation of the curriculum and the tyranny of the whole group instruction. Sugrue (1990, p. 9).

### **Developments at post-primary from 1970 to 1983**

The early 1970s also saw innovations in curriculum development at post-primary level. These curriculum developments included work by the Curriculum Development Unit, TCD (the Integrated Science Curriculum Innovation Project, the City of Dublin Humanities Curriculum) and the Curriculum Development Centre at Shannon Comprehensive School. The period also saw the initial development of the Transition Year and Pre Employment Courses.

Curriculum reforms were also necessary to respond to the diverse educational needs presented by larger enrolments of students in post-primary schools. In September 1970 the Minister for Education set up a committee to “evaluate the present form and function of the Intermediate Certificate Examination and to advise on new types of examinations” Dept. of Education, (1974). The *Report on the Form and Function of the Intermediate Certificate Examination (ICE Report)* in 1975:

Recommended a gradual move towards school based assessment, which would be more varied in its modes, wider in the ability range it served, broader in the qualities it assessed and more flexible and frequent than the Intermediate Certificate Examination. Andrews (1983, p. 64).

This recommendation of school based assessment refuses to go away and remains a contested issue to this day (Coolahan 1994; Ireland 1995; ASTI 1999; NCCA 1999, 2005).

The above mentioned innovations in curriculum development tried to provide coherent links between the new primary school curriculum and the post-primary curriculum, and endeavoured to develop new forms of assessment for post-primary examinations. In spite of these efforts the paradigm for post-primary education

remained the secondary school model with its *Rules and Programmes* with some adaptation to accommodate the vocational, comprehensive and community schools. Despite expanding the aim of education from a general preparation for life to include pupil preparation in order “to meet the economic and manpower needs of the country”, the further development of post-primary education was in a strait jacket. This paralysis was due it is claimed to “a lack of clarity on the question of the aims of education” (Mulcahy 1981, p. 74) and the post-primary system being locked in the grip of the reality of the public exam. The resultant narrow paradigm of what a unified and comprehensive education system could be “exercised an inhibiting influence on actual reform ... the school – and particularly the second level school – had lost its way” Mulcahy (1981, p. 36).

There was a growing awareness of things not being familiar for students when they transferred from primary to post-primary and a conviction that educational development of pupils should be organic. This awareness can be clearly seen in the terms of reference issued by John Wilson, Minister for Education 1978 in appointing a committee that resulted in the *Report of the Pupil Transfer Committee* (1981). In the report a distinction is made between the features of primary and post-primary education. The distinctive features of Primary education are that it involves participation by the pupil, that is active and the teacher is allowed freedom to integrate most subjects of the curriculum. The distinctive feature of post-primary education is that it is subject centred, where each subject is taught as a separate entity and assessed by the Intermediate Certificate. The Report stated that this form of assessment “may be open to reform, its abolition should not be contemplated

because of its threefold function” Dept. of Education (1981, p.15). These were stated as its educational function; imparting of a body of knowledge, its employment function and its social function:

For at least two-thirds of the parents, the Intermediate Certificate is the first entirely independent and objective assessment of their children’s scholastic ability and staying power. Dept. of Education (1981, p.15).

The Report states the aim of education as “the imparting of knowledge” and states that the “first essential is that the teacher should have a solid grasp of the subject” Dept. of Education (1981, p.35). What is suggested is:

The dovetailing and greater alignment of syllabi between primary and post-primary aided by in-service programmes for primary and post-primary teachers. Dept. of Education (1981, p.42).

This dovetailing and alignment of syllabi can be achieved, the Report states, through identifying subjects at second level, “which are taught at post-primary level that contain representation from the primary sector” Dept. of Education (1981, p.68). The Report finds that this work should be done especially in Irish, Mathematics and Geography. The proposal to appoint Transfer Advisors was never implemented. All that could be expected as an outcome of this report was that the system would be tinkered with and that there was no need for an overhaul. Apart for a need to fine tune and service, the education system of the time was useful and had stood the test of time. This mindset inhibited further organizational and curriculum reform between primary and post-primary.

### **Developments from 1984 to 1987**

In 1984 Gemma Hussey the Minister of Education set up the interim Curriculum and Examinations Board (CEB). The CEB was set up to report to the Minister on the

desirable aims, structure and content of curriculum at first and second levels, “as major changes were needed in curricula and assessment procedures” O’Ceallaigh (1985, p. 8). Expectations of the CEB at this time were that it would address the misfit between schooling and real needs of pupils, (Andrews 1983); that its understanding of curriculum would extend and include primary and post-primary and that it would “provide structures or means which we as teachers can solve our own problems” Crooks (1983, p. 70).

The CEB (1984) took seriously the challenge that education had lost its way due to the lack of clarification of the aims of education, the resultant poor development of curricula and the effect the form of public assessment was having on post-primary school culture. To further the development of a broader and more balanced core curriculum the CEB envisaged that formal education should be designed as a continuum. The Joint Committee’s proposals for Junior Cycle appeared in *Issues and Structures in Education* (1984). The motivations behind this need for educational change were the developments, at home and abroad, for education to become more democratic, egalitarian and comprehensive:

Autonomy be given to individual schools and to teachers as professionals...greater educational provision for individuals ...broadening the range and type of abilities schools cater for with appropriate curricular. CEB (1984, p. 26).

While inviting the public to join in a discussion leading to a formulation of an “explicit statement of educational aims” (CEB 1984, p.12) the document does articulate a statement of educational aims listed alphabetically to represent the equality of each aspect and to dissuade any attempt to create a hierarchical relationship being developed between them:

The general aim of education is to contribute towards the development of all aspects of the individual including aesthetic, creative, cultural, emotional, intellectual, moral, physical, social and spiritual development for personal and family life, and for working life, for living in the community and for leisure. (ibid, p.14).

With regard to curricula and examining the existing situation at Junior Cycle the CEB identified the need for:

A broader and more balanced core curriculum, with an increased emphasis on skills and processes;  
A curricular structure that is sufficiently flexible to recognize and accommodate curriculum initiatives at school and regional level;  
Assessment procedures that are determined by the aims and objectives of the curriculum. (ibid, p.16).

Identification of these needs led to the development of a proposed curricular framework, based on “areas of experience” in the form of a “wheel”, CEB (1984, p.17). The contents and layout of this diagrammatical presentation were criticized as:

Inappropriate to present complex curricular issues in an overly simplistic diagram ... dissatisfaction with an approach which seemed to indicate that subjects could be uniquely identified with one and only one area of experience. McNamara *et al* (1990, p. 8).

There were also genuine fears by teachers of subjects listed in the Additional Contributions that they were going to be squeezed out; this was acknowledged by the Board as not their intention. The intent behind this curricular framework was that it would:

Facilitate closer co-ordination between the curriculum at primary and post-primary levels. CEB (1985, p.16).

With regard to Assessment and Certification the CEB highlighted the shortcoming of the existing assessment system not only as regards to the form of assessment but how the existing form of assessment was not only “artificial” but had “undesirable



back-wash effects” on learning and “inhibit the development of curricular variety” CEB (1984, p. 24). The resulting discussion led to the publication of the less radical policy document, *In Our Schools* (1986) and through “the practical experience of educationists, parents and teachers” the CEB was now able to specify some of the aims of education, (ibid, p.10).

Literacy, numeracy, including the creative and applied dimension of mathematics, and oral communication were highlighted as the key objectives of the education system. The inclusion of science and technology, the development of the creative and aesthetic experience of the arts was understood as a must not only as an educational experience for the student but also for the reality of economic development.

Other aims are stated: equipping students with the attributes of “*adaptability and flexibility*”, knowing their own worth, developing a confident and healthy attitude towards their own “*mental and physical development*”, contribute to their “*moral and spiritual development*”, develop young people as “*caring, responsible and participative members of society*”, ensure that students have an “*appreciation of their own rich and diverse cultural heritage*”, and a tolerance, respect and openness to others and their cultures, CEB (1986, p.10 ,original emphasis in italics).

There is a distinction between these two paragraphs. The aims stated within first paragraph can easily be seen as subject areas around which learning can be organised, “elements of learning” CEB (1986, p. 22). The aims stated in the second paragraph are about creating internal dispositions within students towards themselves and resulting external expressions of these dispositions towards others.

However, on the aforementioned point of subject areas these would have to be redefined and developed. To ask the question of what a subject is challenges previous held ideas of the purpose and function of syllabus construction, content and assessment. This issue has been crucial in syllabus development to date.

What *In Our Schools* (1986) was trying to initiate was the development of the potential within each child through “developing to the fullest the potential within each subject” and in doing so to contribute towards its stated educational objectives, CEB (1986, p.21). By adopting this approach it also took account of:

Schools which may not have the resources to offer a large number of subjects may nevertheless provide a wide range of experiences for their pupils by fully exploiting the potential of the subjects which they are in a position to offer. Hyland (1986, p.10)

This notion of subject potential was radically new in that the subject is the vehicle of and subservient to the pupils’ learning experience. The adoption of *In Our Schools* (1986) as a policy document asked questions about what should be the content of a curriculum, how it should be taught and assessed, if at all. This is why continuity within children’s development is stated as important because the focus is not solely the development of the subject but the development of the learner. Developing the potential within each child by developing the fullest learning experience potential within each subject means that the principles of breadth and balance, differentiation, relevance and flexibility within the curriculum are proposed to ensure this development of the learner is continuous. Adopting this philosophy of education also meant that introducing a new range of compulsory subjects, as outlined in *Issues and Structures in Education* (1984) was not necessary as long as “the curriculum at junior cycle should involve pupils in each of the area of experience” CEB (1986,

p.25). It was stated that such an involvement could “also allow for the system to evolve gradually by the adoption of new units or sections of courses” Crooks (1983, p. 68).

Guidelines for schools in the implementation of such a curriculum frame-work were suggested with recommendations for the maximum and minimum time spent by students in junior cycle on the different areas of experience. It was suggested that the design of these junior cycle courses should be underpinned by meeting the needs of the “entire ability range” Dept of Education (1986, p. 24). To this aim “courses should be offered at three levels, Foundation, General and Advanced’ (ibid, p. 24). They suggested that the design of these courses should allow for fluidity in how these courses might be combined for a student allowing an integrative approach to teaching and mobility for students within these courses. These suggestions challenged the notion of teacher specialization and level rigidity allowing students to move within the courses matching their ability to varying elements within the course. These guidelines echoed the changes made to accommodate *Curaclam na Bunscoile* (1971), where the rigidity of the timetable had to change, where the idea that the attainment of a specific standard by a certain age was abandoned, where the emphasis was more on drawing up a programme of work rather than teaching a curriculum.

### **Developments from 1987 to date**

The *Primary Curriculum Review Body* (PCRB) 1987, initiated by Minister O’Rourke, was set up to fulfil a pre election promise by Fianna Fail. The PCRB

endorsed the underlying principles of *Curaclam na Bunscoile* (1971) with the following recommendations:

Table 2:1 Recommendation of the PCRB. Adapted from Dept. of Education (1990) p.9-22

1971 Principle	1990 Recommendations
Full and harmonious development	Promote all aspects of children's development while allowing for curriculum priorities.
Due allowance for individual difference	Need for a recognition of and a tolerance of individual differences in emotional, social and personality development.
Activity and discovery methods	Teachers should be urged to adopt a diversity of teaching style, as discovery methods require a high level of teacher skill and preparation.
Integrated curriculum	Need for greater differentiation between the various subjects in the curriculum as children get older, in line with stages of development in their thinking.
Environment- based learning	Never intended that each locality should have its own curriculum. It was the explanation the unfamiliar in terms of experiences and encounters that are already part of the child's experiences.

These recommendations were made on the basis that the principles of 1971 were now 20 years old and developments in education had to be allowed for. The PCRB also stated that the statement of aims of education should be re-formulated, to take account of the fact that the period of compulsory education was extended to 15 years of age and the awareness that agencies other than schools could also make an input in preparing children to live full and useful lives as adults in society.

The PCRB stated that pupil assessment should not be over intensive and that when assessment is undertaken a combination of formal appropriate standardized tests and informal teacher's assessments should be used. The development of a Department of Education profile card would contain relevant information that should be available to "parents, post-primary schools and other appropriate persons and agencies" Dept. of Education (1990,p. 100). Since the abolition of the Primary Certificate in 1967 this idea of a mechanism to contain and make available relevant information along

with the failure of such efforts is noted, (*Report of the Pupil Transfer Committee*, 1981; Coolahan 1981, Crooks and McKernan 1984, CEB 1986, Lynch 1989). This failure led to many second level schools developing their own assessment procedures for selection and ranking students according to ability. The use of assessment tests for selection purposes has been prohibited since 1993.

In 1999 the *Revised Primary School Curriculum* was launched. While it retained the child centred approach of *Curaclam na Bunscoile* (1971) it:

Sets out in great detail what the child should learn and how the child can learn most effectively ... [it] reflects the thinking and aspirations of the National Convention on Education (1994), Charting our Education Future (1995) and the Education Act (1998). NCCA (1999, p.4).

The Revised curriculum continued to emphasize the central position of the individual child. The aims of the curriculum are, to enable the child to live a full life as a child and realize his or her potential as an unique individual, to enable the child to develop as a social being through living and co-operating with others and contribute to the good of society and to prepare the child for further education and lifelong learning. Special emphasis is given to the following areas within the revised curriculum: Literacy and Numeracy, The Arts, Science, European Awareness Programme and The Irish Language. Having learnt the importance of supporting changes the Primary Curriculum Support Programme was established prior to the revised curriculum's launch.

The NCCA, also set up in 1987 by Minister O'Rourke, was asked as a matter of urgency to plan for a new Junior Certificate and its target date for implementation was 1992. By 1988 separate Junior Certificate syllabi for Art Craft and Design,

Business Studies, Gaeilge, History, Geography and Science were launched. They were developed within the context of the elements of learning recommended in, *In Our Schools* (1986),

Each contained clearly articulated aims, specifying these aims under the headings of knowledge, concepts, skills and attitudes. Hyland (1988, p. 43).

However within a year the NCCA went in a different direction, the elements of learning of the CEB were substituted by knowledge, understanding, skills and competencies, (NCCA 1989). The Junior Certificate Programme was introduced in 1989 not only to replace but unify the Group and Intermediate Certificate Programmes, in this it was successful. The Junior Certificate was developed as a continuum of and a progression from the primary curriculum. Its outcomes are outlined as six areas of experience which students should have formal experiences of. These are;

- Knowledge and appreciation of their social, cultural and physical heritage and environment
- Understanding and appreciation of the central concepts of citizenship
- Competence in literacy, numeracy and spoken language skills which will allow them to participate as young adults in society
- Experience in various areas of activity – artistic, intellectual, scientific, physical and practical
- Formative experience in moral, religious and spiritual education
- Knowledge and supportive guidance in matters of personal health, sexual awareness and relationships. Government of Ireland (1995)

A seventh area was added to this 1995 list in 1999;

Understanding and appreciation of the value of thinking and learning and a positive attitude towards schooling and the opportunities it offers, Government of Ireland (1999)

It was not intended that that all experiences be subject specific. The new Junior Certificate was an effort to match the needs of students with appropriate courses, levels and form of assessments; these intentions have had degrees of success. The Junior Certificate programme sought to extend and deepen the quality of students' educational experience in terms of knowledge, understanding, skills and competencies and to prepare them for further study in senior cycle. Within the Junior Certificate programme there is an alternative, the Junior Certificate Schools Programme (JCSP). This programme is aimed at the potential early school leaver and for other students who have difficulty in coping with the junior cycle curriculum. JCSP emphasizes the essential skills of numeracy and literacy as well as personal and social skills. All students work towards Junior Certificate Foundation Level in English and Mathematics as a minimum, and study a relevant course in Irish language and culture. Students are also encouraged and facilitated to take other Junior Certificate syllabi to examination stage. On completion students receive both state certification for the subjects assessed by the state and a school based assessment profile.

In a report undertaken by the Marino Institute of Education reporting on schools' perceptions of their experience of implementing the new Junior Certificate programme between 1989 and 1992 it was stated that teachers and school principals gave:

Pride of place to syllabus specifications, text books and specimen papers, - even ahead of the organized in service days, in being helpful to the understanding of aims, principles and required changes. Kavanagh (1993, p. 92).

This prioritizing of the content of the curriculum and assessment were the crux of the dilemma in that without the Junior Certificate having a rationale and framework the only paradigm it was associated with was the Leaving Certificate. What had not changed was the “centre’s control” (Gleeson 1996, p.60) on the curriculum, the learning environment and the development of syllabi and assessment. This resulted in the culture of our education system especially at second level remaining unchanged in that teacher and educational communities continued to respond to:

Bald lists of requirements and approved subjects with their syllabuses and examinations requirements. OECD (1991, p. 67).

The examination dominated system meant that the teaching-learning processes were still being organized around “transmitting central syllabuses” (Lawton 1989, p. 10). The stated aims and principles of education were like disruptive behaviour: something that got in the way of teachers covering the course. The only way to deal with them was to reduce in importance their ability to guide and inform teaching and learning by ignoring them and pay attention to procedures that facilitated the covering and assessment of the course.

Walshe states that the “late eighties saw a quickening of pace in debates on educational issues and an unstoppable momentum towards change on many fronts” (1999, p.7). In response to this and over a period of five years and the tenureship of three Ministers of Education, O’Rourke, Davern and Brennan, a Green Paper on Education: *Education for a Changing World* was published in June 1992. The need for this paper was to respond to the challenge of change, for Legislative development appropriate for our times and structures, for accountability towards



money invested and to respond to recent reports and recommendation of various review bodies. The issues for public debate were in the following six areas:

To establish greater equity in education; To broaden Irish education; To make the best use of education resources; To train and develop teachers so as to equip them for a constantly changing environment; To create a system of effective quality assurance; To ensure greater openness and accountability throughout the system, and maximize parent involvement and choice. Government of Ireland (1992, p.5).

These issues initiated a consultative process that resulted in public and private seminars, conferences and conventions, and a large volume of written submissions from:

All the main education players, individuals involved in education, while about a fifth came from school boards of management. Walshe (1999, p.32).

This response could be interpreted as an endorsement by society that education system needed change and that such a change must involve partnership.

In October 1993 Niamh Breathnach T.D. opened The National Education Convention, to “engage in structured and sustained discussion on key issues of education policy in Ireland”, Coolahan (1994). The outcomes of this convention helped shape the *White Paper: Charting Our Education Future* (1995).

*The White Paper: Charting our Education Future* (1995) clearly articulates a series of aims of education that are action orientated by using words such as, to foster, to nurture, to promote, to develop, to provide, to create and to ensure. These aims are listed to “inform internal school community, in all its aspects, and also the links between the school or college and the wider community” (ibid, p.10). The test of whether these aims are to be taken seriously is, are there any “references as to how these ideals *are* expressed through curriculum?” Cassidy (1992, p.74). There needs

not only to be an expression but the experience of these aims throughout the curriculum by students. Curriculum expression/experience is best observed at the school level as this is where curriculum impacts. The *White Paper* acknowledges this and states that an Implementation Group will be mandated to “draw up a detailed timetable and programme for a fundamental restructuring of the assessment carried out at the end of the junior cycle” (ibid, p.60). The *White Paper* (1995) proposed that the new curricular framework will be wider than its subject content.

The Green Papers articulated needs for Legislative development appropriate for our times and structures were developed and articulated in *The Education Act* (1998) and *The Education Welfare Act* 2000. The significance of *The Education Act* (1998) is that the principles of inclusively and equality of access, accountability and transparency, respect for diversity and the spirit of partnership must be reflected in any procedures or policies agreed as part of the implementation of the Education Act. It also established the NCCA on a statutory basis. *The Education Welfare Act* (2000) replaced the old *School Attendance Act* of (1926). It places a statutory obligation on parents to ensure their child attends a recognized school and for that school to register all children attending it. It also establishes National Educational Welfare Boards with statutory functions with regard to school attendance.

A review of the Junior Certificate, *Junior Certificate: Issues for Discussion* (1999) stated that, “students, it is argued, have never experienced the Junior Certificate programme as it was intended”, (ibid, p.2). The explanations given for this lack of experience are “the narrow range of modes and techniques of assessment” and the Junior Certificates, “domination by a terminal written exam” (ibid, p.2). The review

also stated, “the need for change has become urgent” (ibid, p.12). It envisions that the future development of assessment for Junior Certificate as characterized by two features; “local school supported assessment and a reduced emphasis on terminal written examinations” (ibid, p.8). The reasoning behind this vision is what sole reliance on external assessment excludes:

The affective development of students, their ability to work as part of a team, individual contribution to group projects, autonomous potential, and personal initiative. NCCA (1999, p. 36).

The Junior Certificate curriculum was designed to be assessed through a variety of modes and techniques. The reliance on terminal external assessment has a narrowing impact on teaching and learning, (Hyland 1992, NCCA 1993, Coolahan 1994). The review also states that there is not just a divergence between primary and post-primary but a divergence within the post-primary between the two levels of certification, Junior and Leaving and the effect that this divergence is having on what is taught and how it is taught. It stated that the past historical purpose of the Junior Certificate marking an end of formal examinations was redundant; it is not a terminal examination for the majority of students. The document also asserts that the Junior Certificate is being approached by schools as a Leaving Certificate for younger students. This was never its intention. The Junior Certificate Programme does not sit to easily within school organizations that perceive their main function as preparing students for the Leaving Certificate. What drives this may not be just teachers reverting to the familiar but a simplistic notion of accountability demanded by other partners in education. While the document focuses on the importance of assessment development it does also identify that:

The failure to focus on learning support at junior cycle has given rise to a situation where the need for change has become urgent. NCCA (1999, p.12).

The NCCA's junior cycle review committee is presently preparing a plan for developing the junior cycle of post-primary education. It is hoped that this plan will identify the resources necessary to support this development. A number of areas for actions have been identified include curriculum overload and overlap, curriculum planning, transition from primary school and assessment for learning.

### **Conclusion**

The earlier periods of consultation and discussion, 1960 to 1983 / 1984 to 1987, brought into focus the need not just for curriculum development but that the developments must be aware of their ripple effect in other sectors. This implied the need to clarify the aims of education and the need to develop a coherent and consistent curricular framework of learning experiences and assessment procedures which would respond to students' developmental stage, their ability and aptitudes. The core of such a curriculum connects knowledge and experience. This implies that school is not the only environment that learning can take place in, but that students can learn more than they are formally taught and therefore that the role and function of school has to change. This period also highlighted the importance of collaboration and representation on the development of curricular framework between both primary and post-primary.

The later period from 1988 to date brings into focus that bringing about such changes in education was difficult because of its multilayered ness. To account for the failure of the Junior Certificate as solely due to restrictive assessment procedures

and lack of learning support is too simplistic as it does not take into account the causes of failure documented in the management of change literature, (, McLaughlin 1990, Rudduck 1990, Sarason 1990, Fullan 1991 and 1993, Louis 199, Stoll and Fink 1996). There is also resistance from parents to maintain what they perceive to be traditional schooling and education, (Oakes *et al* 1992). This is understandable as they have a past experience of their own schooling that an information night on curriculum developments such as the JCSP, Transition Year, LCAP and LCVP may have a limited impact on. Changing teachers' notions of what it means to be professional is also a complex area that requires resources, curricular space and the development of practices that support teachers' own reflection and professional development. The future challenge for educational reform is not just to transform schools into learning organizations which of itself is valuable but also that educational reform has to challenge and transform the political and social expectations of education.

As the focus of this research is the transition from primary to post-primary school the next chapter outlines a brief history of transition reform in Ireland, the development of transition programmes and looks at the legislation relating to personal data, and the implications of this legislation for primary and post-primary schools.

## Chapter 2

### Interface reform between primary and post primary in Ireland

Irish education has been aware that the education of children should be ‘organic’ Curaclam na Bunscoile, (1971, p. 13), and that the transition between primary and post-primary is important (Government of Ireland 1974, 1981, 1995, CEB 1984, 1985, 1986, NCCA 1990, 1999, 2004, 2006, OCED 1991, National Education Convention 1994). Despite this official awareness action to date has been sporadic. This chapter briefly reviews the policies that have identified the importance of transition and the deficiencies of the directions of these policies. The hypothesis is advanced that the real issues around transition for students arise out of the failure of primary and post-primary schools to reorganize their structures in how they educate early adolescents. The relevant Legislation with regard to the keeping of records on pupils and the transfer of data between schools are also identified and explored. This exploration suggests that current legislation might give an impetus for primary driven communication. The chapter also critiques existing communication and liaison procedures need to be developed and extended.

#### Policy

The first policy statement that highlighted that the transition between primary and secondary demanded a policy response was the *Report on the Form and Function of the Intermediate Certificate Examination*, “the first year of secondary – or the last year of primary – should so be planned as to ease transition” Department of Education (1975, p.65). This was never acted on. With greater numbers continuing on to post primary from primary there was a growing awareness that the connections

existing between the two systems in previous decades would not be adequate for the present and future. *The Pupil Transfer Committee* (1981) also addressed the problems faced by new pupils transferring to Post-primary. However on closer reading the problems identified are based on the Committee's "experience and judgments" as ones that will probably happen, Dept. of Education (1981, p.16). This suggests that no rigorous research by the committee was entered into to try and identify the problems of Irish pupils. Only two reports are mentioned: one Irish, Fontes and Kellaghan (1977) and one from the United Kingdom, Warnock (1978) to ascertain the extent of those pupils presenting with transfer problems. The Irish report is quoted to highlight that 13.2% of Irish primary school children are "unfit to cope with the reading demands of post-primary school" (Dept. of Education 1981, p.17), while the second is used to extrapolate proportions of Irish children with "problems of the kind are more or less of the same order as these British figures" Dept. of Education (1981, p.18).

The Committee goes on then to mention "the minority in question, whatever its precise dimension" (ibid, p.18) that will transfer with emotional, intellectual, social, physical or other problems demanding special attention. Later on in its summary this body of children is estimated as 20%, (ibid, p.85), how this figure is arrived at is unclear. The Report identifies categories of children at risk. Similar categories appear in the literature of the time (Dale and Griffith 1965, Pumfrey and Ward 1977 and Youngman and Lunzer 1977). These categories have a common factor in that these categories of pupils have experienced failure in one form or another. During this time of transition "they may feel beaten before they start" Department of

Education (1981, p.19). An element that fuels this sense of being “beaten” is the expectation to conform to the school’s ethos without having any of their own needs met.

The literature on transition at that time highlighted the themes of lower or damaged self-esteem, self-image disturbance (Simmons et al 1973 and Blyth 1983). Other factors that play a significant part at this time are stated as the “environment, biological development and social behaviour” Spelman (1979, p.24). There is an expectation at this time that students are expected to “shape up or ship out”, Cotterell (1986, p.81). *The Pupil Transfer Committee* (1981) however states that the vast majority of students adjust to the transition from primary to secondary school very well. This adjustment accomplishment by most pupils was previously highlighted by Rutter et al (1979), Nisbet and Enwistle (1966, 1969). Adjustment accomplishment is important for students transferring because:

Young adolescents are at a critical point in their development, as is the changing adult world they are entering. In large part, this explains why educators around the world seem to have identified the transition years of schooling as a focal point of educational reform. Reforming these transitions years of schooling seem to promise a double indemnity – against serious harm coming to the future of our youth, as well as to the world they will inherit. Hargreaves (1996, p.2)

There is a tone to the report of *The Pupil Transfer Committee* (1981) that suggests that there is nothing wrong with the system that pupils are transferring to. One of the more positive insights within the report is a challenge to schools that delegate responsibility for school transfer to a teacher. They state clearly it is not the exclusive responsibility of any specialist but rather that “any and every member of the staff may well have an extremely useful part to play at any given moment in a



child's formation" Dept. of Education (1981, p.29). This criticism is still mentioned in more recent literature of the way "schools tend to departmentalize the management of the transition" Hargreaves et al (1996, p. 175). The Pupil Transfer Report recommended;

Personal contact between teachers involved in transfer of pupils. Teacher Training; process of selection for candidates suitability for entry to Higher Diploma in Education, and a minority view that post-primary teachers training be a continuous combination of the academic and the pedagogic and so that the selection concerned should precede university entry. Dept. of Education (1981, p 3).

These recommendations were never acted upon by the government of the day despite the awareness that what was needed to alleviate transition difficulties was:

The identification, re-examination and realignment of the fundamental philosophies underpinning the approaches adopted in primary and post-primary teaching. Burke (1987, p. 20).

This re-examination and realignment of underpinning philosophies had been begun by the interim CEB in their publications, *Issues and Structures in Education* (1984), *Discussion Paper on Primary Education* (1984) and *In Our Schools* (1986). The work was not solely an exercise in bridge building between primary and post-primary while maintaining the status quo. Rather, it gave voice to the articulation of a philosophy of education and a belief that stated that the period of compulsory education from the age of 6 to 15 must be designed as a continuum of curricular experience and was in serious need of reform. The *Junior Cycle Review* (1999) also stated the critical importance of the transfer from primary to post-primary:

Given the significance of this process for student achievement and the patterns of early school leaving, particular emphasis needs to be placed on enhancing the experience of transition for all students in all schools. NCCA (1999, p. 63).

In *Charting our Education Future* the transition from primary to second level is stated as a challenge for pupils:

The change from primary to second level affects students in different ways. Some thrive on the difference. For others, problems in making change can affect them adversely throughout their time at second level. Such problems arise from; Poor communication between primary and second level schools; Difficulty for some students in gaining access to the first choice school; Differences in teaching methods and approaches; Curricula which do not suit a student's particular abilities and aspirations; Being compelled to make subject choices, or choice of subject level, too soon and later unduly restrictive options. (1995, p.46)

This researcher found it helpful in taking a closer look at these problems to tabulate them and match them with their corresponding action proposed in the same White Paper (Table 3:1 below). This figure highlights that there is a deficit of an action plan for the problems to do with communication, differences in teaching methods and no mention of resource provision with regard to personnel or time allocation or acknowledgement that the decisions affecting student's subject choice are complex. This researcher takes the view that these deficits of a clear action to address these problems undermine the three principles of curriculum relevance, continuity and progression that the Junior Certificate is founded on among others. It is also the opinion of this researcher that if this list, as outlined in the White Paper, was adopted as a checklist by a school to tackle transition problems, the outcomes of such efforts would be limited as they would be failing to address where these problems originate from.

Table 2:1 Structural challenges for student transition adapted from White Paper (1995) p. 45-47

Number	Problem	Action
1	Quality of Communication	None
2	Equality of opportunity and participation	Education Act proposed in White Paper, enacted 1998
3	Differences in teaching methods and approaches	None
4	Curricular	Secondary – NCCA, Junior Cycle to be more student centred, cf NCCA Junior Cycle Review.  Primary – NCCA to ensure study of courses in Modern Languages, Science and Creative and Performing Arts. New Primary Curriculum introduced 1999.
5	Subject Choice	Recommended position: Participation and experience in/of the widest possible range of activities and subject areas during the first year.

Take, for example, the problem identified, difference in teaching methods and approaches. These differences as a source of problems may be overstated, “frequently exaggerated” Hargreaves et al (1996, p. 19). Support for this claim can be found in many studies in the UK and America. Relevant to this research is the Irish study of sixteen primary teachers, which found that student centred learning in primary schools, is as highly structured as post primary schools, (Sugrue 1996). Hargreaves (1996) goes on to claim that the distinguishing feature between schools is not pedagogy but the cultures of primary and post-primary schooling. This suggests that it’s the cultures of primary and post-primary schooling that need to change. If this hypothesis is correct the real issues around transition may arise out of the failure of primary and post-primary schools to reorganize there structures in how they educate early adolescents. What might be useful in trying to come to some understanding of these differences is to identify “how and why schools organize themselves the way they do” Entwistle (1993, p. 220).

There has been much research undertaken, published and unpublished in Ireland, Great Britain, USA, and Australia on the importance of and need for transition programmes (Nisbet and Entwistle 1969, Spelman 1979, Derricott 1985, Thorp 1994, Hargreaves et al 1996, Kerr and Schagon 1999, Cotterell 1982, Kirkpatrick 2000, Foley 1997, Naughton 1997, O'Connor 1982). This research has identified the importance of this event for students, the factors that influence successful transfer and thereby informing the need for and planning of pupil transfer programmes. The literature highlights the importance of collaboration between primary and post-primary schools, that there should be pre and post elements to the transfer which extend both sides of the transfer time frame, and that transfer programmes involve teachers, parents and pupils. In addition to this there is Irish literature on the pastoral care of transferring pupils (Collins and McNiff 1999; Monaghan 1999).

There are many examples of transition programmes (Deis Na Gaillimhe 1998, Garton 1987, Kirk 1994, O'Dalaigh and Aherne 1986) and advice on how to devise such a programme, (Hablin 1978, Gemmell 2000, Lynch 2000, Naughton 2003). However transition programmes need to be developed not for their own sake but out of an awareness that the transition from primary to post-primary is one of "many critical incidents" that the whole community face, Hamblin (1978, p.18). This awareness of transition as a critical event requires schools to look at:

The emotional implications of transfer for pupils, the type of transfer that is being made both by individuals and groups, the degrees of continuity and discontinuity of pupils experience caused by and what is happening/ has been happening at the other side of the transfer. Gorwood (1986, p.9)

While this researcher welcomes the identification of problems that are challenges for pupils transferring from primary to post-primary outlined in *Charting our Education Future* (1995), and shares the urgency for action as expressed by the NCCA (1999), this researcher takes the stance that such a list is deficient. Its deficiency lies in the fact that it does not encourage schools to reflect on how school culture, school and classroom organization affect the experience of student transfer.

In early 2003 NCCA commissioned a longitudinal of students' experiences of curriculum in the first three years of their post-primary schooling. Research on the first year was published in 2004. Research on the second year was published in 2006. The report on student experience of 3<sup>rd</sup> Year has just been published at the time of writing in 2007. The NCCA commentary on the Smyth et al (2004) research concludes that, discontinuity exists between primary and post-primary schooling and accepts that its existence 'can have an effect on the academic, social and psychological dimensions of young people's experiences of transition', (2004, p. 17). The research also 'identifies practices that support student integration and those that contribute to transition difficulties', *ibid*, p.18. While these conclusions, are similar to the problems identified in *Charting Our Education Future* (1995 p. 45-47) as outlined in Table 3:1 above, they are also different. There is an awareness that school culture, how schools support student integration, how schools choose to organize the teaching and learning of a student cohort with a range of differing ability and the range and type of subjects offered can support transition or contribute to transition difficulties.

### **Communication; the impetus of Legislation.**

The Legislation with regard to the keeping of records on pupils is covered by the *Education Act (1998)*, the *Education Welfare Act (2000)* and the *Data Protection Act (1988)*. The Education Act 1998 states that all schools should maintain records relating to the progress of students:

To ensure that the education system is accountable to students, their parents and the state for the education provided. (op cit p.)

The *Education Welfare Act (2000)* obliges a school to keep records on a child's attendance:

The principal of a recognized school shall cause to be maintained in respect of each school year a record of the attendance or non attendance on each school day of each student registered at that school. (Section 20,1)

Records can be manual or processed / computerised and include:

Any information not held on computer. It includes a pupil's record files, reports, registers, card indices, documents and all other written, typed or manually maintained forms of record, including audio and visual recordings, wherever this record is held. IEM Supplement (1/5/2003), p. 3

The keeping of such records must comply with the provisions laid down in Section 2 of the *Data Protection Act (1988)*. With regard to accessing this information schools must ensure:

Those parents of students, or in the case of a student who has reached the age of 18 years, the student, have access in the prescribed manner to records kept by the school relating to that student in his or her education. Education Act (1998, Section 9,g)

While none of the legislation mentioned specifically refer to the issue of pupil transfer from primary to post-primary school, the Education (Welfare) Act 2000 does explicitly refer to the transfer of and the sharing of information between 'data

controllers'. The term 'data controller' and 'data' are defined terms in the Data Protection Act (1988) and these definitions are incorporated into the Education (Welfare) Act 2000:

'Data' – means information in a form in which it can be processed

'Data controller' – means a person who, either alone or with others, controls the contents and use of personal data. Data Protection Act (1988)

The definition of data controller can be applied to any teacher or principal in a school that compiles data on any individual in a class, year group or school.

On the transfer of information between schools, which in this research involves communication between the principal of the primary school and the principal of the post-primary school, there is a clear statement that there is a statutory onus on the principal of the school students are transferring from to 'notify' the principal of the school to which students are transferring of:

(a) Any problems relating to school attendance that the child concerned had while attending the second mentioned school referred to therein, and

(b) Such other matters relating to the child's educational progress as he or she considers appropriate  
Education (Welfare) Act (2000, Section 20,5)

In the sharing of information between data controllers, which in this research involves the principal of the primary school and the principal of the post-primary school, there is a recommendation that:

The data controller of a prescribed body may supply personal data kept by him or her, or information extracted from such data, to the data controller of another prescribed body if he or she is satisfied that it will be used for a relevant purpose only  
Education (Welfare) Act (2000, Section 28, 1)

The term 'relevant purpose' is unpacked in a following subsection of the Act and includes:

Recording a person's educational ... history or monitoring his or her educational ... progress in order to ascertain how best he or she may be assisted in availing of educational opportunities or in developing his or her full educational potential'  
Education (Welfare) Act (2000, Section 28, 3a)

From the above it is evident that there is no explicit statutory requirement on the principal of the school pupils are transferring into to gather information on incoming students but only to receive the statutory required information on school attendance and any other information that the primary principal considers appropriate. The importance of monitoring pupil's educational progress is also outlined in the *Revised Primary School Curriculum* it is stated that:

The monitoring of continuity is one of the most important functions of the principal as a manager of curriculum. Occasions in the child's life in which discontinuity can occur include the transition from home to school, from class to class and from primary to post-primary school. (1999, p. 19)

With regard to the transition between primary and post-primary it is also stated that:

The detailed statement of content in the primary curriculum, and the assessment procedures inherent in it, will greatly assist in facilitating communication between teachers and schools at both levels.  
Department of Education and Science (1999, p. 19)

The NCCA also proposed the development of a pupil record card that would. Provide valuable information for the post-primary school. (1999, p. 39). Recent research in Ireland, on the flow of information between primary and post-primary schools at the time of pupil transfer states that it is:

... inadequate ... only a minority of school principals received information on all their in-coming students and almost half are dissatisfied with the amount of information they receive. Where



information is given to post-primary schools, it tends to be verbal rather than written. Smyth et al (2004, p. 56)

The same research also states that:

...Having linked primary school(s) helps to improve the information flow, at least between certain members of school staff like Home-School-Community Liaison Coordinators. (ibid, p. 78)

In the NCCAs commentary on this research they identify the cause for this 'inadequacy' and suggest a solution:

The uncoordinated approach to information transfer between primary and post-primary schools ... points to a need for a shared strategy between primary and post-primary sectors regarding the recording and transfer of student information. (2004, p. 3)

The commentary goes on to state that meaningful and useful information will:

Depend on their (principals and teachers at post-primary) familiarity with the primary school curriculum, their understanding of the reporting mechanism, and their ability to interpret the types of information passed on. (ibid, p.3)

This rhetoric exposes an assumption that the 'areas of experience' (NCCA 1999), do facilitate a continuum between primary and post-primary education and that continuum is sound and does not need to be examined. The rhetoric also exposes a belief that if the management procedures were in put in place the stated inadequacy would be eradicated. While managerial procedures have their uses, this stance is too simplistic as it:

... fails to see the intricate nature of the relationships among the aspects of the educational environment. Apple (2004, p.107)

Further, to explain the effect of inadequate information flow, as solely caused as a result of a deficit of familiarity, understanding and/or ability to interpret information overlooks other possibilities of cause. Research in the UK looking at the extensive

range of information flow between primary and post-primary schools found little willingness by teachers to accept other teachers' assessment of students, (McCallum 1996). In Galton *et al* (2000), it was found that even when documents were passed on they were ignored because post-primary principals maintained:

That secondary [school] teachers could more efficiently ascertain a child's ability in their specialist subject without reference to primary records, particularly these were often regarded by secondary teachers as vague and sometimes misleading. cited in Smyth *et al* (2004, p.10)

McCallum (1996) and Galton *et al* (2000) reveal not just a technical problem requiring a systems management solution but the need for consideration to be given to differences in educational values and visions that exist between teachers and between both sectors. The purpose of these considerations is not an exercise in bridge building between primary and post-primary to maintain the status quo; rather they must articulate the philosophies of education that operate, revealing the centres each sector works within and out from. These studies reveal that schools and state agencies involvement in developing management processes to assist transition procedures are incomplete. They are incomplete without the same schools and state agencies being simultaneously interested in establishing liaison and communicative process to support continuity in educational values.

Establishing curriculum continuity involves a multilayered liaison between primary and post-primary schools. The analysis of Derricott's (1987) facets of liaison, (Table 2:2 below), of what is involved in the development of curriculum continuity suggests a partnership approach to education. A partnership model is promoted as a 'fundamental principle' within education (Government of Ireland 1995). Partnership has been defined as a working relationship characterized by:

A shared sense of purpose; mutual respect; a willingness to negotiate.  
Mac Giolla Phadraig (2005, p. 95)

Table 2:2 Facets of Liaison; adapted from Derricott (1987) p 155ff

Facet	Goal	Focused on
Administrative	Share information between schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• pupils,</li> <li>• teaching methods,</li> <li>• curriculum</li> </ul>
Social / Pastoral	Smooth adjustment of pupils to a new system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• visits both ways</li> <li>• discussions re special needs</li> </ul>
Curricular	Establishment of curricular continuity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• discuss</li> <li>• plan</li> <li>• implement related courses and approaches to teaching</li> </ul>

Combining these two elements, the tri facet goals of liaison with the partnership characteristics of a working relationship assisted in the development of research questions. These questions would try to establish whether transition liaison procedures in Rafoarty are comprehensive procedures and secondly to indicate whether the concept of partnership informs how schools approach students' educational experience at this time. Partnership involves more than sharing information but involvement in communicative processes. Information refers to facts about students. Communication is different in that it has a 'three-part unity' (Vanderstraeten 2001, p. 384). The first part involves the selection of appropriate and useful information, the second part is choosing how to express the information in order for it to be understood and thirdly that an understanding takes place, in that the information is not just observed but that the receiver can construct information from the utterance. In this way the selected information infuses the experience of all

the educational partners. There may also be an understanding of how learners think about school and how this thinking evolved.

However, before these issues around school culture, curriculum and continuity are looked at the next chapter will state what exactly pupil transfer is and develop gender and age profiles for Irish pupils. The term adolescent and what is understood as adolescent development needs to be unpacked in order to identify and to highlight their developmental needs at this time. The chapter will also identify the problems and issues involved in student transition identified in research literature.

## Chapter 3

### Adolescent development and student transition

Pupils in Ireland transfer between primary and post primary education at approximately 12 years of age to complete the final phase of compulsory education, the Junior Cycle. The Junior Certificate was introduced in 1989 'to give a coherent single unified programme for all 12 to 15 year olds' NCCA (1999, p.5). Transferring at this age within an educational system or to a lower secondary school is a common feature of a number of international education systems, (ibid p. 147). In the year 2000/2001 59,660 students enrolled in Year 1 of the Junior Certificate. In the same year there were 54,226 students in ordinary 6<sup>th</sup> class primary, which would mean that in the Year 2001/2002 these students would be enrolling in Year 1 of the Junior Certificate. The gender profile of the enrolment cohort in Year 1 of the Junior Certificate for the year 2000/2001 of 59,660 was 29,540 female (49.5%) and 30,120 male (50.5%) students. The age profile of the enrolment cohort in Year 1 of the Junior Certificate for the year 2000/2001 is tabulated below:

Table 3.1 Age Profile of Year 1 Junior Certificate Students 2000/2001

Age on 1 <sup>st</sup> January 2001	Number of Students	Number of students as %
11 or younger	51	0.1%
12	22,424	37.5%
13	34,061	57%
14	2,902	4.9%
15	222	0.37%

This table shows in Year 1 of the Junior Certificate that 95% of pupils are between the 12 and 13 years of age. The age profile for the student cohort in 6<sup>th</sup> class

primary for the same year, 95% are between 11 and 12 years of age. This means that for 2001/2002 the potential age profile in Year 1 of the Junior Certificate will be similar. From the statistics available it was not possible to generate a corresponding gender age profile.

Developing age profiles indicates the stage of human development children transferring from primary to post-primary education have reached. Their age profile indicates that they are adolescents. Two key transition points have been identified in adolescence, the transition to early adolescence from childhood and the transition to adulthood from late adolescence, (Steinberg 1993). The majority of these pupils, 6<sup>th</sup> Class primary and 1<sup>st</sup> Year Junior Certificate aged 10 to 14, fall within the average age and age range of early adolescence, (Slavin 2000). This stage of adolescence is understood as a distinct point of development as it is characterized by the extraordinary physical and cognitive changes which:

... permeate every aspect of development during this stage, not only creating the impetus for myriad other changes in the young person's life but also influencing what resources he or she has to cope with those changes. Feldman et al (1993, p.15)

What makes it distinct therefore is, the type and rate of change, the meaning given to the changes that occur and that the degree of the ability of the individual to adjust at this time can influence future adjustments.

### **What is meant by adolescence?**

From the above it can be stated that, adolescence is a biological, cognitive and psychosocial period of development between childhood and adulthood that requires adjustment by children. Individual adolescent development is also dependent on the social context. These developmental adjustments, over the total period of

adolescence, are concerned with an emerging sexual development and becoming a sexual being, the maintaining and development of relationships, a growing independence and responsibility for oneself and others. With regard to its position within the development of a person it can be stated that, “adolescence may begin around the age of ten and lasts until about the age of twenty-two” Seifert et al (2000, p.373). The words *around* and *about* are used purposefully as:

There is no known psychological criterion that correlates perfectly with age, and no psychological state that is universally recognized as the marker of adolescence ... the word adolescent labels a diversity of young people, and covers a lengthy developmental span. Durkin (1995, p.507).

### **Puberty**

The pattern of changes that occur in adolescence are referred to as puberty, “which leads to full physical and sexual maturity” Seifert et al (2000, p.374). The average age and the age range indicate that Irish 6<sup>th</sup> class primary and Year 1 Junior Cycle pupils 2000/2001 aged between 10 – 14 years have begun the pubertal process. There is also the strong possibility that for some girls the pubertal process is nearing completion. The timing of maturation has implications for early adolescents (Brooks-Gunn 1993, Durkin 1995, Slavin 2000 ). Brooks-Gunn make the point that, “we know more about the effects of maturational timing on the adolescent than we do about the meaning of pubertal changes” (1993, p. 41). They state that this is:

Surprising [as] it would seem necessary to know how individuals generally incorporate societal and personal experiences of this universal set of events into their self-definitions. (ibid, p. 41)

They would claim that the focus on the universal experience of adolescence rather than individual differences within it would take the focus away from comparing an

individual's development with his/her peers to focusing on the individual's own comfort with his/her own development. Beane *et al* support this view and state that "most research today attempts to understand the perception and experience of young adolescents." (2002, p.1160)

### **Perspectives of adolescents within developmental theories**

The purpose of developmental theories is that they can "help to bring observations, events and facts which seem random and disconnected into some meaningful relationship and order" Muuss (1996, p.xix). The meaning that is given to understanding adolescence is important as it shapes relationships between adults and adolescence and how these relationships are structure and organized. While it is outside the scope of this research to give a detailed account of all the developmental theories, this researcher feels that the usefulness of certain perspectives of adolescence need to be challenged and that the educational implications of certain perspectives need to be highlighted. There are no exclusive theories of adolescence; rather there are developmental theories of human development that position adolescence as a stage within that development. These perspectives of adolescence within human development are commonly called theories of adolescence.

Cockram and Beloff (1978) identified four major perspectives on adolescence which are manifest in psychological theorizing. These are adolescence as "storm and stress", as role transition, as a developmental stage and the lifespan approach to adolescence.

The "storm and stress" perspective portrays adolescence as moody, emotionally unstable and difficult for adults to interact with. It is a view of adolescence,



influenced by Darwin's theory of evolution, proposed by G. Stanley Hall in 1904 and has become part of people's perception of adolescence. Another view of adolescence is that it is that adolescence is perceived as an identity crisis, "the struggle to decide who she or he is and wants to become" Durkin (1995, p.516). This view originating in Eriksons (1950) theory of development has also been subjected to investigation. This task of adolescence has been accepted as being of central importance within adolescent development and has influenced the models of Blos, Kohlberg, Loveinger and Kegan (in Kroger 1996).

The work of Mead (1970) and Bronfenbrenner (1974) argued that these perspectives are not global perspectives and only arose as a result of the alienation of young people from adult culture in Western capitalist culture. Bandura (1977) also challenged this perspective of adolescents and questioned whether it was the correct perspective of adolescence even in Western capitalist culture. He found that most adolescents did not particularly oppose their parents' values, or show hostility or rebellion. It is clear therefore that the "storm and stress" perspective has been shown to have a limited usefulness- appropriate only for some adolescents.

Muuss (1997) highlights the educational implications for a wide range of perspectives on adolescence. An awareness of the wide range of these perspectives on human development is important for school organizations in that the perspective and even the range of perspectives held within a school by teachers and parents will have educational implications for students. The major modern developments are Lerner's (1985) developmental contextualism and Bronfenbrenner's (1979)

ecological model of development. Elements of the above two models can be recognized in the life-span approach to adolescence.

The life-span view of human development, “the study of changes over the entire span of the individual life” Muuss (1996, p.343) perceives adolescence as a time of reciprocal stimulation between the individual and others around them, a time of processing and using information with the propensity to make choices (Lerner 1985). The life-span perspective sees development as “multidirectional, multicontextual, multicultural, multidisciplinary and plastic” Berger (2001, p.4). This perspective appeals to this researcher as it perceives development as non linear and it takes account of the environment that development occurs within. Environment includes the historical, socioeconomic and the cultural context. The life-span developmental theory emphasizes:

That change and therefore development, does not come to an end with adolescence, but that it is a continuing fundamental aspect of the human condition that ceases only at death. Muuss (1997, p.343).

This is important, because if a teacher were to perceive herself /himself as developed and the adolescent as undeveloped, in a sense not a ‘real’ person yet, this perspective would influence how that teacher would relate with that adolescent. On the other hand if the teacher perceived themselves and the adolescent as people who are on a journey of change and development, such a perception could influence the relationships within the school by enriching how people understand each other as developing within it.

This theory of human development divides development into three domains, the biosocial, cognitive and psychosocial. These domains are important for every age

and are holistic, “every aspect of human behaviour reflects all three domains” Berger (2001), p.6. It provides an alternative to the perspective of a solely academic outcome of schooling, and it challenge’s the content and the relevance of curriculum provision to respond to and assist the development of the three interlinked domains of human development.

Other influences on how we view adolescence are culture and society, as “culture and society do not just respond to biological events – they also influence those events themselves”, Beckett (2002, p. 113). Such influence can be seen in the early theories of human development, and therefore our understanding of adolescence as a part of that development, were andocentric, Muuss (1996, p.xxi). This ‘androcentric’ perspective lead to the assumption that male development was the norm (Gilligan 1979) resulting in the neglect in the development of a perspective on female development. Other influencing factors are the individual adult’s own degree of comfort/discomfort with his / her own adolescence, individual difficulties especially with regard to father’s willingness to address the subject of puberty, and ambivalent educational materials used to inform adolescents, (Feldman et al 1993, Ianni 1989). Other societal influences on early adolescent development include the cultural preference for thinness, general and specific athletic demands, school and peer influences, parent-child relationships, and the intensification of gender roles, (Brooks-Gunn et al 1996). Levels and degrees of autonomy, of intimacy and emotional health also affect the personal experience of adolescence.

## **Cognitive Development**

Piaget and his associates Stage Theory of Cognitive Development attempts to explain the development of intellectual behaviour claiming that children need to “acquire for themselves a set of intellectual mechanisms which allows them to be logical, to organize their thoughts and experiences in an orderly way and eventually to reflect on their own intellectual processes” Fuller (1995, p. 133). Piaget’s theorizing on stage development drew attention to the reality that a “child is not a miniature adult and his mind is not the mind of an adult on a small scale” Kozulin (1986, p 13).

Stage theory divides intellectual development into four major periods, sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete operational and formal operations. There is a distinction made between the first three periods and the fourth period, the first three periods are related to the child and the fourth to preadolescent / adolescent development. These stages of mental development in children are associated with chronological ages of 0-2, 2-7, 7-11. The 11+ stage is associated with the preadolescent / adolescent stage and the development of formal operations. However for Piaget and Inhelder, (1966) this exact association between developmental stages, and within each developmental stage, and chronological age are not as definite. It is also important to remember that intellectual development is understood as a potential and “that every subject does not realize all of them [formal operations]. Moreover their realization is subject to accelerations or retardations, according to the scholastic or social milieu”, (ibid, p. 131). What is clear is that each stage of mental development is interlinked to its previous stage:

The mental development of the child appears as a succession of three great periods. Each of these extends the preceding period, reconstructs it on a new level, and later surpasses it to an even greater degree. Piaget and Inhelder (1966, p. 152).

What Piaget and Inhelder (1966) have to say about the preadolescent mental development is of interest to this research. Piaget states that preadolescence mental development is “a final fundamental decentering” (ibid, p. 131). While this decentering is distinct from the subjective centring that has been evident in previous stages it is still connected to previous mental development in each of the earlier stages. It is understood as an:

Unfolding of a long, integrated process that may be characterized by as a transition from subjective centring in all areas to a decentering that is at once cognitive, social and moral. (ibid, p.128).

The purpose of decentering for the preadolescent is the “liberation from the concrete in favour of interest oriented toward the non-present and the future” (ibid, p. 131). Decentering is the beginning of “hypothetico-deductive or formal thought” (ibid, p. 132). Piaget and associates reveal, through experiments to isolate the logical aspects, the new thought structures. The new thought structures are demonstrated through the preadolescent’s ability, to combine objects, propositions, inversions and reciprocities and to comprehend proportion, double systems of reference and notions of probability

Whereas the concrete operational child works with the concrete and the real, for the adolescent possibility dominates reality. What this intellectual development is allowing the preadolescent to engage in is the “conquest of reality as well as the capacity for clear formulation” (ibid, p. 145). Piaget states that new ways of thinking and verbalizing about one’s world can also allow the preadolescent access to their

own “experimental spirit” (ibid, p. 145). This was investigated and demonstrated by Piaget through series of experiments, e.g. experiments of the metal rods and the pendulum, Piaget (1958, p. 70). These changes of thought are not solely cognitive. They have an affective dimension, “the two aspects, affective and cognitive, are at the same time inseparable and irreducible” (ibid, p.158).

Intellectual development for a child comes about through the development of a schema, “the structure or organization of actions as they are transferred or generalized by repetition in similar or analogous circumstances” Piaget (1966, p. 4). This concept schema is used by Piaget and Inhelder to describe what the child does and sometimes used to describe actions that are not immediately obvious. The child progresses toward intelligent behaviour by adapting their schemata as they encounter their environment. This ‘mechanism of progression’ (Piaget and Inhelder 1966) is termed adaptation and involves the two complementary processes of assimilation and accommodation. New reality encounters are “filtered and modified through existing schemes”, assimilation and the “modification of existing internal schemes to fit reality is called accommodation” (ibid, p. 6). This process is reproduced and developed through out each stage of mental development. As Bryant states, “children change because they are drawn into experiences which make them change their view of the world again and again. They work it out for themselves”, (1995, p. 135).

However intellectual development is not automatic, it is dependent on the following interrelated and interconnected factors, none of which on its own can result in full mental development. In the listing below of the four factors that describe mental

developments the exact wording of Piaget and Inhelder (1966, p.152) are used unless otherwise stated. They are:

- Organic growth and especially the maturation of the nervous system and endocrine systems
- Role of exercise and of acquired experience in the actions performed upon objects. These experiences are; (1) physical – acting upon objects in order to abstract their properties (2) logico Mathematical – acting upon objects with a view to learning the result of coordination of actions
- Social Interaction and Transmission
- Self regulation – described as a process of equilibrium. The tendency towards equilibrium results in an increase in coherence and stability. Equilibrium is reached within the 11+ stage of mental development around the age of 14-15

Another approach to how intelligent behaviour develops is located in the work of the Russian Lev Vygotsky. His Sociocultural Theory claims that higher mental functions must be viewed as products of mediated activity, that there is a dialogical character to learning consisting of cooperation between children and adults that can result in solutions that are internalized by the child to become an integral part of his / her own reasoning. This means that, rather than as in Piaget theory where a child's learning is related to their stage of intellectual development Vygotsky is claiming that , “learning leads development” Newman and Holzman (1993, p. 60). The development of intelligent behaviour is explained through a three stage process that results in the “process of concept formation” Kozulin (1986, p. 105). The first phase, syncretic stage, is where the child is concerned with the physical characteristics of objects. While there are three steps in this stage, where things are ordered by trial and error, spatial position and a combination of both it results in an “incoherent coherence” (ibid, p. 110). The second phase on the way to concept formation is the “establishment of bonds and relations” between objects, (ibid, p. 135), which are

termed complexes. These complexes can be associative, collective, chain, and diffuse. Seeing and understanding the possible relations between objects range from simple complex thinking to advanced complex thinking. Within this phase there is the development of pseudo concepts. The third phase of concept formation involves the ability “to abstract, to single out elements and to view the abstracted elements apart from the totality of the concrete experience in which they are embedded”, (ibid, p. 138). It is this “mastery of abstraction, combined with advanced complex thinking that enables the child to progress to the formation of genuine concepts”, (ibid, p. 139).

What must be remembered however is that these phases of intellectual development are not internal are not separated from the environment that the child develops within. The dialogical character of learning is clearly stated by Vygotsky with regard to adolescent intellectual development:

Unlike the development of instincts, thinking and behaviour of adolescents are prompted not from within but from without by the social milieu. If the milieu presents no such tasks to the adolescent, makes no new demands on him, and does not stimulate his intellect by providing a sequence of new goals, his thinking fails to reach the highest stages, or reaches them with great delay. (ibid, p.108).

However for the adolescent that is still using syncretic and complex forms of thinking alongside the beginnings of concept formation it “is less a period of completion than one of crisis and transition” (ibid, p. 141). This is due to the discrepancy between the adolescent’s ability to form concepts and his ability to define. From experiments undertaken, adolescents could form a concept and use it correctly in a concrete situation. However to express that concept outside the concrete situation proved difficult because of the narrowness of the definition of the



concept. This is due to the fact that their intellectual development allows them to analyse reality with concepts before they have the intellectual ability to analyse the concepts themselves without reference to any concrete situation. This is formulating concepts abstractly.

The last difficulty, which is termed the greatest, is where when they have grasped and formulated the concept on an abstract, to apply it to new “concrete situations that must be viewed in these abstract terms – a kind of transfer usually mastered toward the end of the adolescent period”, (ibid, p. 142). From these two theorists it can be seen that the cognitive development of the adolescent has been traditionally characterized by the ability to:

Build formal systems and general theories that transcend (and sometimes ignore) practical experience. Berger (2001, p. 432)

An ability to think about possibilities, by scientific reasoning, and by to an ability to combine ideas logically. Seifert et al (2000, p. 374)

Formal thought is also reported to emerge by the time children are 12 years old, Atwater (1996); Flavell et al, (1993). This characterization of formal thinking is in keeping with Piaget’s model of adolescent development. However there are difficulties with the Piaget model, “Shayer and Adey (1981) suggests that only a minority of adolescents, about 30 per cent at the age of sixteen reached this stage” Head (1997, p. 103). Head suggests that the reasons behind this are that there may be multiple forms of advanced thinking and that there may be a difference between the genders. Durkin does state however that:

The developments in reasoning capacity in adolescence enable – indeed, compel – the young person to think about phenomena of the material and social world and her or his place in it in greater depth, and often with great intensity. (1995, p. 512).

These developments of self-understanding enable the adolescent to develop the ability to focus on self. This development of reflectivity is “one of the first signs of early adolescence...the tendency to think about what is going on in one’s mind and to study oneself” Slavin (2000, p. 93). Young adolescents may fail however to place their own thoughts in perspective. For Piaget this is ‘adolescent egocentrism’ where the adolescent attaches excessive weight to their own insights and “fails to appreciate that other people may have their own, different theories and concerns” Durkin (1995, p. 512). Elkind (1984) suggests that young adolescents are prone to entertain feelings of an imaginary audience, a sense of being on show, with the rest of the world focused on their thoughts, feelings and behaviour. This preoccupation can lead to the development of the personal fable “where the adolescent sees themselves above many of the world’s mundane demands and risks” Durkin (1995, p. 513).

### **Personal – Social Development and the school environment**

Cognitive processes are not independent of the social context. Transitions between schools temporarily disrupt the child’s organization of self-concept (Materska et al 1987). The self-concept is a person’s own “non-evaluative picture they have of themselves” Biehler et al (1997, p. 410). Gage *et al* also states, that judgements based on the self concept determines:

How they feel about themselves, what they might do in the future and how they might evaluate their own performance. (1998, p. 144).

The self-concept is made up of two parts: descriptive and evaluative, self image and self esteem. The information received through interaction with others around

adolescents and the expectations they have of them effects the young adolescents self-concept. Lower self esteem is reported in early adolescence as individuals endeavour to cope with the wide range of transitions they are going through (Fend and Schroer, 1985, Eskilson *et al* 1986, Simmons et al 1987, Petersen *et al* 1991; Eccles *et al* 1991). An explanation for reported drop in self-esteem in early adolescence is:

Since self-esteem involves a comparison of the self with a standard, any change in standards without a concurrent change in the skills the child needs to meet those standards can cause a drop in self esteem. Borich et al., (1997, p. 80).

However during the whole period of adolescence “there is evidence of a rise in self-esteem” Coleman et al., (1989, p. 59). In Irish research, focused on assessing post-primary school effects on educational development, it was found that:

Certain aspects of the schooling process, in particular the nature of teacher-pupil interaction, influence pupils’ views of their own abilities. There is a reference group effect with pupils in highly academic or strict schools evaluating themselves against somewhat higher standards and consequently becoming more critical of their own academic abilities. Smyth (1999, p. 115)

Recent research reveals that student’s self-criticism of their own academic abilities can be identified as early as May of their first year in post-primary school:

At the beginning of first year, students are generally positive about school and their teachers. By the end of first year, attitudes to school and teachers have become somewhat less positive on average and students are less positive about their own academic abilities. Smyth et al (2004, p. 243).

The standards that effect academic self concept are set by the adolescent themselves (Borich et al, 1997). This is interesting because a student that has a low academic self concept has standards that they can not live up to and maybe by helping them set

alternative standards that complement their skill base may make it possible to enhance their self esteem. Supporting students as they develop their ability to undertake self assessment, as they make social comparisons, could result in their setting achievable realistic standards. This is important for adolescents as “the risk and experience of failure...are sources of psychosocial stress for adolescents” Geldard et al (1999, p. 29). Such assistance, it is claimed, is a real need in Ireland as Irish adolescents’ inability to cope with stress can be seen in the rising suicide rates (Hayes 2001). This suggestion also has implications for families and schools in how they set implicit and explicit standards for students. Standards can be identified by what is acknowledged as success, by what is omitted and by what is celebrated or overlooked in families and in schools. Comparison of self with standards will inform student’s self-standard setting and affect their academic self concept if they fall short of them. The importance of this relationship between student self esteem and teacher/ parent / guardian expectations is illustrated by Barber (1996), see Table 3:2 below.

Table 3:2 Relationships between students self esteem and teacher expectations

	Student Self Esteem Low	Student Self Esteem High
Teacher Expectations Low	FAILURE	COMPLACENCY
Teacher Expectations High	DEMORALISATION	SUCCESS

Adapted from: M.Barber, *The Learning Game*, 1996, p. 183

Coleman et al (1989) states that the ability to cope is not just related to a lack of necessary skill, adolescents are less able to cope if they do not feel relaxed and comfortable within at least one of the following, their environment, life-arenas and role-relationships. They further state that:

There needs to be some arena of life or some set of role-relationships with which the individual adolescent can feel relaxed and comfortable, to which he or she can withdraw and have the self invigorated. (ibid p. 60).

This means that for some adolescents the education setting is a place to be escaped from because they are uncomfortable and not relaxed within it, while for others it may be a place of comfort and relaxation that invigorates them. To enhance schools as a place that is positive for students it is:

Contingent on it (schools) forming a comprehensive integration 'package' which is underpinned by a positive informal climate. Smyth *et al* (2004, p. 289)

There is evidence that shows that educational environments can be problematic for young adolescents. There is evidence of loss of self esteem, especially in early maturing females, declining academic achievement, a sense of boredom and stress levels being raised (Beane *et al* 2002). Difficulties are also caused for students in this transition by a poor "stage environment fit", (Eccles *et al* 1993) and a "developmental mismatch" (Entwistle 1993). Beane *et al* explain "stage environment fit" as:

Early adolescence is a stage when young people are seeking more autonomy and independence, are engaging in more self assessment based on social comparison, are becoming more capable of using higher level cognitive strategies, are increasingly concerned with peer relationships and are in need of close adult relationships outside the home. (2002, p. 1152)

'Developmental mismatch' can occur as:

Junior high school teachers often become more controlling at the very time when children are seeking increased autonomy; and the large, impersonal junior high school is not compatible with the needs of young adolescents for social recognition. Entwistle (1993, p. 215)

Transferring between a familiar to a less familiar environment means coming face to face with degrees of discontinuity and change. Hargreaves *et al* state that:

the exhilaration and pain of growing up for many early adolescents resides in their having much less confidence in what they are moving towards than in what they left behind. (1996, p.1)

The fact that the environment of schools can cause problems for adolescents, the poor 'stage environment fit' and 'developmental mismatches', raises questions of how primary and post-primary educational settings are organized. The presence of these "tensions" (Beane *et al* 2002) within a school would indicate the schools awareness of young adolescents' needs and an effort to provide them with appropriate educational experiences.

Hargreaves *et al* states that, "too many of our students are turning away from schools physically, or tuning out of them emotionally and intellectually", (1996, p. 156). This turning away and tuning out can be linked to the individual pupil's level of self-esteem. Drudy *et al* states that what affects pupil's level of self esteem are the definition given to what is intelligence:

By defining intelligence in narrow linguistic and logical mathematical terms, we are in effect ensuring that most children will not be defined as particularly intelligent ... it seems likely that the lack of self-esteem, the sense of failure or indifference that is frequently found among those whom schools have failed is directly related to the negative labelling that ensues from this kind of thinking. (1993, p. 234).

At primary level Hargreaves states that:

The complicated interplay of care, control and ownership in the commitment of elementary teachers may have important implications for students and their movement towards independence as they approach adolescence. (1996, p. 25).

In the Irish context the age profile developed earlier suggests that they are not approaching adolescence, but are in the early stages of adolescence. Therefore, the issues of teacher care, control and ownership need to be researched to identify to what degree do these issues encourage or discourage “the development of independence, autonomy and security to grow beyond those who care for them” (ibid, p. 25). Ownership is when the teachers need to care for students’ takes precedence over and gets in the way of the students’ needs for developing independence. This type of ownership fails to validate the “teenagers need to satisfy themselves that their maturity is being recognized” Head (1997, p. 25). These points call into question whether primary education in Ireland is preparing children for engaging effectively with education at post primary level (NCCA 1999) and is how primary schools are organized recognizing the young adolescents need for developmental recognition.

At post-primary level there are three dominant and interrelated factors – “academic orientation, student polarization and a fragmented individualism” Hargreaves *et al* (1996, p.26). Schools by their nature have an academic orientation, however over commitment to it disengages students who are not “served well by the academic, subject based curriculum” Hargreaves *et al* (1996, p. 89). This narrowness defining of what counts as achievement and success can polarize students into “good” students and “not so good” students and neglects to target education towards

essential elements of adolescence. A Finnish study of students' perceptions towards studying and learning states that students:

Did not find many instances when pleasure, enjoyment or happy feelings were observed in relation to studying and learning in the official school. Lahelma (2002, p. 370).

The reasons for this were threefold, the lack of regard to decisions surrounding curriculum, working methods and how time is structured. These reasons highlight that the curriculum has tended to be something planned for and done to students. To overcome this patronizing of students the challenge is "to embrace curriculum making practices that are more inclusive and valuing of student voice" Brooker *et al* (1999, p. 95). In Smyth *et al* students reported that enjoyment of first year is affected by:

Students who felt they were taking too many subjects were less likely to report enjoying first year more ... students with a higher reading score were more likely to report enjoying first year subjects. (2004, p. 209)

This deficit of pleasure, enjoyment or happy feelings is also reported in an U.K. study of the dip in positive attitudes to science after transfer in a mixed gender secondary school:

Even allowing for the reluctance of young adults to express strong positive emotions about the world of learning, it was rare to find a pupil who expressed any degree of excitement about new subjects or new ideas encountered during Year 7. Galton (2002, p. 257).

When this data was broken down by ability into low, average and high attaining groups, enjoyment declined for the high attaining group and within that group "high attaining boys show greater dissatisfaction with their schooling" (*ibid*, p. 257). This is despite the curriculum developments and efforts at transfer reforms. What this



study claims will improve attitude has “less to do with changing curriculum and more to do with the way the existing curriculum is taught” (ibid, p. 264). With regard to transfer reforms, the purpose of which was to ease transition, he claims:

There needs to be less attention to the production of curriculum materials and to pay more attention to establishing greater continuity in teaching. (ibid, p. 260).

It must be emphasized that Galton (2002) is not saying stop curriculum development, nor is he saying stop producing curriculum transfer materials, what he is asking for is balance to be struck between these elements of education and the establishment of continuity in teaching. He also raises questions on how curriculum is planned and identifies two factors that militate against continuity of student educational experience, curriculum overload and a subsequent over-reliance on direct teaching methods. These questions are important as they directly impact on teaching methods and approaches which are outlined as a source of problems for students transferring from primary to post primary. The main impetus to making a positive transition is the:

Centrality of curriculum experiences and the key role of the teacher in assisting student adjustment. Cotterell (1982, p. 296).

Galton also draws attention to the relatedness of pupil expectation and lack of enjoyment. In the quest for continuity an important point can be overlooked:

Pupils don't wish to continue to do primary work now that they are at big school and therefore tend to lose motivation and interest. (2002, p. 262).

Similar findings are found in Smyth *et al*:

... almost a third of students felt that many subjects in first year just repeated what they had learnt in primary school: The geography down

there is just the exact same in primary, and the history. And the English. (2004, p.208)

Teachers can also mistake “the lack of motivation for lack of cognitive capacity” Beane *et al* (2002, p. 1161). The consequence of such a mistake could result in a student being encouraged to move from a level they are capable at to a level they are even less motivated in. This link between loss of student motivation, student interest and teachers interpretation of it and curriculum content is highlighted in the research of Gottfried *et al* (2001). The research focuses on whether academic intrinsic motivation (AIM) is a stable construct from middle elementary through the high school years. The concept of academic intrinsic motivation is the:

Enjoyment of school learning characterized by a mastery orientation: curiosity; persistence; task endogeny; and the learning of challenging difficult and novel tasks. (2001, p. 3).

They concluded that AIM is stable and their research claims that it decreases for Math, Science and Reading and this decline is related to school curriculum. This is not to deny that school environments, academic anxiety and home environments:

Provide plausible avenues for further research ... actual aspects of the subject matter itself, or the way it is taught, may be important to examine. (ibid, p. 5).

Math has the greatest decline in academic intrinsic motivation. Gottfried *et al* (2001) highlight aspects of Math that could contribute to this downward shift, how it is perceived in relation to other subjects as harder or easier, less autonomy with regard to course content for teacher and pupils, individuals have lower expectations of success and do not see the need for Mathematics outside school. The research draws attention to the fact that there is a slight increase in academic intrinsic motivation from age 16 to 17, a suggested explanation is that “the prospect of applying for

college may serve as a wake up call, and that their future directions are more charted than they have been in the past” Gottfried *et al* (2001, p. 10). However not everyone goes to college and no suggested explanation is given for non-college students. They also state that their data “imply that if one is to intervene to enhance academic intrinsic motivation, it had better be early in a child’s schooling” Gottfried *et al* (2001, p. 14). This intervention would be in the form of assessing and identifying strong and weak areas of academic intrinsic motivation with the appropriate educational planning. What the appropriate educational planning consists of is not mentioned. This point though is a strong argument for continuity in the following two areas, diagnostic assessment procedures within and between schools and communication within and between schools that allows for educational planning. This researcher, while accepting the findings that AIM is a stable construct that declines in Math, Science and Reading must highlight that enjoying and being excited by a subject does not exclude “a lack of ability to cope with the work, nor an unwillingness to tackle school tasks and homework for personal benefit”, Galton (2002, p. 258). The importance of Gottfried *et al* research is that:

The mean decline of AIM over the ages for Math, Science and Reading and the absence of decline for social studies, indicates that AIM is related to the school curriculum. (2001, p. 10).

To focus solely on declining AIM and students making up the deficit through personal drive and ambition is too narrow. Why students achieve and others flounder has to do with many interwoven factors. One such factor is the task of study, “many pupils fall short of their potential because they do not know how to set about the task of study”, Nisbet and Shucksmith (1986, p. 8). What Lahelma (2002),

Galton (2002), Gottfried *et al* (2001) and Smyth *et al* (2004) draw attention to is the importance of enjoyment in the process of student learning.

### **Student disposition**

In an Australian “sought to investigate whether students arrive at high school with dispositions which presage relatively poor adjustment to school” (Boman *et al* 2001 p. 401), they found that “dispositional optimism is directly linked to student’s positive adjustments in their interactions with the school environment” (ibid, p. 402). Their definition of dispositional optimism is a student’s “confidence in the accessibility of future positive outcomes” (ibid, p. 403). Their results state that most students make a successful adaptation. Of their sample of 102 students, aged between 12 to 14 years old, 15 (12 male, 3 female) were clearly hostile to the school. They understand hostility as “the manner in which people interpret anger-provoking situations” Boman *et al* (2001, p. 403). It would appear that the identified hostile students are expecting that bad events are actually likely to befall them, and they interpret their experience of school through this paradigm. The study does not say how this disposition can be managed but they do speculate that the school environment could play a part by:

Actively rewarding optimistic children, whereas those who fail to exhibit overtly optimistic responses experience a level of reinforcement deprivation that contributes towards negative feelings and hostility. (ibid, p. 404).

It would be of interest to this researcher to see, how these students are categorized by teachers as the words optimistic, pessimistic or hostile do not usually feature in teachers’ explicit evaluations of students, what elements of ‘school’ are contributing towards students’ attitude of negative expectations of school and what steps are

being taken to assist a change in their expectations. Similar findings were found in an Irish study where pupils' perception of themselves is influenced by how adults, parents and teachers respond to the outcomes of evaluation and that past experiences of evaluation influence their own perception of themselves:

Children who perceived themselves to be clever spoke about evaluation with some excitement, and welcomed the opportunity for a public display of self in positive terms (through tests, reports, parent/teacher meetings) that brought with it the potential for praise and rewards from significant adults in their lives. Conversely, for children who did not perceive themselves to be clever in school, evaluation brought with it the risk of rebuke and punishment from parents and teachers. Devine (2003, p.107).

It could be suggested from this that not only these students, but all students, were being measured on some scale of worth and that from the teachers' perspective all students are slotted into the top, middle or bottom of the teacher's "hierarchy of worth" Pomeroy (1999, p. 476). This could be described as a "coercive relationship: the exercise of power by the dominant group to the detriment of a subordinate group" Cummins (1994, p. 299).

The suggested defining feature of the ideal teacher-student interaction is "dialogue", Pomeroy (1999, p. 477). Such teachers would know their students, talk to their students, explain things to them and would listen. It must also be recognized that relationships between adults and adolescents can be strained at this time. This is because of:

The existence of widespread myths about each other, the battle for autonomy, the horizontal stratification, the self-consciousness and the establishment of adult discourse. Head (1997, p. 28).

The teacher must also recognize that:

Pupils are apprehensive with new teachers are inclined not to ask questions, discipline – understand what is expected of them, that they may have problems with not finishing a task before the bell went, there are differences in the way class teachers dealt with them compared to Yearhead and monitors. Measor and Woods (1984, p.20)

There must also be awareness within the school as to what is happening within the student cohort. Within the first few weeks:

Coping strategies, survival skills are being developed and fraternity structures among boys are forming that may be positive/ negative developments for the individuals concerned or for the school community. Beynon (1985, p. 94).

Within a very few weeks “the difficulties pupils are having are schooling problems not transfer problems” Delamont and Galton (1986, p. 45). Why this is so may be due to how pupils are inducted into schools. There would seem to be a difference between transfer programmes and induction programmes. The latter appears to be an element within the former and is directed towards pupils when they begin the new school year.

### **School Induction of students**

In a Finnish study it is reported that, “the induction of new students into school practices is in many ways banal. They are presented with simple repetitive guidelines” Gordon *et al* (1999, p. 689). The induction methods emphasize the school desire that students quickly become “professional students, students who are able to conduct themselves competently without making mistakes or getting into conflict, unless they want to” (ibid, p. 689). A professional student appears to be a student that can adjust between their own need for autonomy and the school need for control. Successful transition for students centres on whether a student spends “more of their time tackling control rather than exercising agency” (ibid, p. 696).

It would appear then that when, the method of professionalization is through the use of repetitive guidelines by the school, and successful transition by pupils is conforming to these guidelines, then professionalization of students may be less about students exercising degrees of personal agency and more about students adopting roles in school which accept teacher control, authority and expertise. 'Good students' are those that have acquired good academic and social skills, as well as having a positive and cooperative disposition (Lawton *et al*, 1989, cited in Hargreaves *et al* 1996, p. 29). This highlights the importance of teachers and students willingness to conform to their role in the function of the school setting. That both teachers and students accept that the relationship between teachers and their school, teachers and students and students and their school consists of a relationship between three rules:

Hierarchical rules which establish the conditions of order, character and manner ... Every pedagogic practice must have sequencing rules and these will imply pacing rules ... Criteria rules which the acquirer is expected to take over and to apply to his/her own practices and those of others. Bernstein (2003, p. 65).

Schools have an interlinked multifunctional aspect. This becomes clearer when the concept of school is unpacked:

The official school ... consists of the curriculum, lessons, formal hierarchies, and the disciplinary apparatus. The informal school ... consists of informal hierarchies, application and interpretation of rules and social interaction. The physical school ... consists of space, time, voice, movement, and the curriculum of the body. Gordon *et al* (1999, p. 691).

This unpacking of the term school, the awareness of multilayered nature of school and the ability of students to either adopt different roles or why some withdraw and resist is useful when induction programmes are being planned for purpose. It can

also help identify imbalances within these programmes identifying which elements of schooling the programme is focusing on or ignoring, whose needs are being prioritized. In observing how the transition group is inducted by the school it is possible that the theories in use will be revealed and become visible the aims of the school.

Apart from inducting students into the school the programme must also address the curriculum the students are being introduced into. Tochon and Munby state that there is a real need at this time for teachers “to be able to connect children with the curriculum” (1993, p.5). To make these connections teachers have to be aware of and understand the past experiences students have of learning processes and teaching methodologies. An element that contributes to positive student adjustment is how teacher and pupil engage. It is claimed that the main impetus to making a positive transition, in spite of “carefully thought out transition programmes” (Spelman 1979, p.273) is the centrality of curriculum experiences and the key role of the teacher “in assisting student adjustment” Cotterell (1982, p.296). How student and teachers engage with each other is a key feature of school life. It is reported that “teachers’ various approaches to subject teaching were less important to students than the interactive relationships established with students” Wallace (1996, p. 36). On a study of disruptive boys’ experience of school, “teachers rather than the curriculum, are the substantive opinion formers” Garner (1995, p. 28). While Pomeroy’s study, is not focused directly on assisting student adjustment, it highlights teacher behaviour patterns that affect how students construct themselves as learners and engage in the school. The behaviour patterns:



That were found to be antagonistic and humiliating included shouting, telling students to shut up, responding sarcastically, putting young people down and name-calling. These behaviour patterns of teachers were perceived to communicate to the students that they as students were not valued and, often not liked as individuals. (1999, p. 469)

### **Summary**

Two key transition points have been identified in adolescence, “the transition to early adolescence from childhood and the transition to adulthood from late adolescence”, Steinberg (1999). The majority of 6<sup>th</sup> Class primary and 1<sup>st</sup> Year Junior Certificate fall within the average age and age range of early adolescence. How early adolescence is understood is important as it shapes relationships between adults and these adolescence and how these relationships are structure and organized. An awareness of these issues within early adolescent development asks questions of how educational settings are organised. The need to care for students in primary schools must not take precedence over and get in the way of the students’ needs for developing independence. The teacher centred subject orientation of post-primary schools and how teaching, learning and assessment interact may be subverting early adolescent engagement in learning. How schools engage in the process of educating students in individual schools is encapsulated in the concepts of school culture, curriculum and continuity. The next chapter seeks to unpack these concepts of in relation to education at primary and post-primary in Ireland.

## Chapter 4

### Culture, Curriculum and Continuity

In Chapter 2 it was stated that how schools integrate students and choose to organize the teaching and learning either supports or contributes to transition difficulties for students (Smyth *et al*, 2004, Beane *et al*, 2002). How schools choose to organize teaching and learning depends on their school culture and the working understanding teachers have of curriculum and continuity. However the concepts of culture, curriculum and continuity have many meanings. The term school 'culture', while accepted as an understood common phenomenon, is an elusive term with a profusion of meanings related to the stance and preference of the educational theorist, educational practitioners and researcher methodology. The stance and preference of educational theorists and practitioners is based on the assumption that their preferred:

... Choice and definition of a term is a given and their interpretation of the chosen term has agreed terms of reference when they do not. They fail to disclose what influenced their definition/choice, or discuss the parameters and framework within which the term is set. Such ad hoc meanings and assumptions have undermined critical reflection and impeded school culture research. Prosser (1999, p. 6)

Despite these impediments the term school culture is a central concept in school improvement and school effectiveness literature. Having an understanding of a school's culture is important if the school is to embark on any aspect of school development. The same can be said of the terms 'curriculum' and 'continuity' in that both are central concepts in education and the understanding teachers have of them are important. How teachers understand them influences why they teach the way they do, allows practices to develop that support student integration and allows how

teaching and learning is organized to become part of the routine of school life. This chapter is divided into three sections. Each section discusses each of the three terms in turn and discloses what influences the use of the term in this research.

### **Culture**

This section challenges the viewpoints of school culture that assume that school culture pervades and influences everyone in the school in the same way to the same extent. Such viewpoints fail to see that cultures are actively constructed by their participants. They also fail to see that the concept of culture is understood differently depending on the participant's position in the school.

In an Irish study, on school effectiveness over a range of pupil outcomes, the difference between schools is as a result of 'key schooling processes', Smyth (1999, p. 218). She also claims that 'as well as differing in their formal organization, schools differ in their climate, particularly in their academic climate and the nature of teacher – pupil interaction within the school', (ibid, p. 99). These differences account for the phenomenon that while schools may appear outwardly similar in that they are all involved in education, each school has its own distinctive way of engaging in it. This distinctiveness of each school's engagement in the process of education is encapsulated in the concept of school culture.

The emergence of the concept school 'culture' in the UK in the 1970s came from the school effectiveness movement (SEM) where the concept was linked with the effectiveness of secondary schools. An effective school, it is claimed, is a school that produces successful educational outcomes for its students. Advocates of SEM naively argued that 'if the educational process was organized appropriately, it was

possible to overcome the problems faced by urban schools and their students' Swaminathan (2003, p. 37). In this way school culture was regarded 'as a constellation of effectiveness factors' Hopkins *et al* (1994, p. 86). In the 1980s the significance of the concept of culture was recognized by the school improvement movement (SIM) in that 'values and beliefs' underpin schools and are 'essential to teaching and learning' Deal and Kennedy (1983, p. 140). Identifying and using 'values and beliefs' as guides could enable schools to improve and change (Fullan 1982). Along with the SEM and SIM there was the influence of management and organization theory from America, adopted to focus on the relationship between organizational culture and leadership.

All these developments resulted in holistic viewpoints of school culture encapsulated in popular phrases and slogans as 'the way we do things around here' (Bower 1966), 'what keeps the herd moving west' (Deal and Kennedy 1983) and is described as a type of 'social glue' (Alvesson 1993). These holistic viewpoints assume that the school culture pervades and influences everyone in the school in the same way to the same extent. There was an emerging growing understanding that culture was not holistic but had subterranean aspects and as a result the 'micro politics' theories of the underworld of school culture developed. This understanding of culture stated:

that a school's unique culture is the aggregation of its subcultures has placed 'stress on specific aspects of education such as leadership, the curriculum, the teaching learning process, school improvement and academic outcomes. Prosser (1999, p. 11).

To take the stance that culture is fixed, immutable and inert, (Rutter *et al.* 1979) fails to see that cultures are actively constructed by their participants (Pollard 1985, Nias 1989). Holistic perspectives of culture also fail to understand that the concept of

culture is understood differently depending on the participant's position in the school, principals (Staessens and Vandenberghe 1994), staff (Deal and Peterson 1999) and students (Royal and Rossi 1996 / Shann 1999) cited in Glover and Law (2004).

The distinction made between the school structures and school culture during change processes is important as it helps unpack the concept of culture. Structural aspects of schools are arrangements chosen by school management to help it conduct its affairs and realize its aims (Hargreaves et al 1991). There are three common dimensions to all such management arrangements:

Frameworks – provide structure within which action for change takes place

Roles and responsibilities – comprise elements for both structure and culture

Ways of working – are mainly cultural, Hopkins et al (1994, p. 88).

These dimensions illustrate the importance of the close link and interdependence between school structure and school culture. Collapsing distinctions between these dimensions of culture places school culture easily into the aforementioned phrases that suggest an all embracing holistic school culture. Distinguishing between the dimensions of structure accounts for the phenomenon that while schools are 'renewing at the organizational level', structural renewals may not be having an effect at the classroom level, the way teachers are working (Heckman 1987 cited in Hopkins *et al* 1994, p. 90). This suggests that ways of working are at a deeper level and by solely focusing on 'the first dimension of schooling- the formal, reified, organizational structure' (Reynolds and Packer 1992, p.179) educationalists fail to appreciate the 'deeper level' contained within the concept of culture. What is at the

heart /mind of school culture therefore is not its organizational structures rather it is the:

Basic assumptions and beliefs that are shared by the members of the organization, that operate unconsciously and that define in a basic taken for granted fashion an organization's view of itself and its environment. Schien (1985, p. 6).

This definition of school culture is preferred by many writers (Stoll and Fink 1996, Hopkins et al., 1994) in that it draws attention away from structures that 'reflect' a school's culture and onto the '*taken for granted-ness*' of teaching. However Schien's definition contains a paradox in that it has elements of both a structured and unstructured organization. The paradox is due to a root metaphor of school as an organization existing in the definition, 'to organize means to arrange things into a coherent whole' Sergiovanni (1994, p. 214). School culture consisting of basic and unconscious assumptions and beliefs, by its very nature cannot be organized into a coherent whole as it is possible that such a culture may not be shared by all members of the school. Yet an unstructured organization could result in chaos. What Schien's definition does not reveal is how it is possible for the mixture of assumptions and beliefs to coexist.

It is also claimed that teacher's assumptions and beliefs are connected with how teachers, pupils and parents interpret their role within a school tradition and school identity, (Hargreaves *et al* 1996). However school traditions and school identities are not insulated in their local context but are also:

Situated and constrained by the wider social context of external examinations, parental expectations, the structures of paid and unpaid labour markets *and* the hierarchical ordering of educational relations. Lyons et al (2003, p. 383).

Because of these situational and contextual constraints schools with similar contextual characteristics have different mindsets (Stoll 1999, Smyth et al 1999). Describing a school cultural mindset then is about identifying and examining things that can be seen and revealing things that cannot be seen.

What can be seen are the school customs, school rituals, school symbols and school language (Deal and Kennedy 1983, Schien 1985, Nias et al., 1989, Hargreaves D, 1995). For Stoll school culture can be most clearly seen through inter-related generic dimensions:

In the ways people relate to and work together; the management of the schools' structures, systems and physical environment; and the extent to which there is a learning focus for both pupils and adults, and the nature of that focus. (1999 p. 35).

These generic dimensions 'reflect' only part of the school culture. What these aforementioned 'artefacts of culture' (Schien 1985) and 'generic dimensions' (MacGilchrist *et al* 1995) do not reveal are school norms, the collections of personal and group guiding principles and perceptions. Norms are the 'shared beliefs within a social or professional group of what behaviour ought to be in a given situation or circumstance' (Merton 1968, 1973, Gibbs, 1981 cited in Braxton *et al* 2001, p. 570). School norms are the unspoken school rules of teacher and student behaviour and action, revealed only in catchphrases that focus on 'fundamental issues of how people relate to and value each other' Stoll (1999, p. 37). How teachers relate and value others stem from teachers' theories and beliefs:

A set of conceptual representations which signify to its holder a reality or given state of affairs of sufficient validity truth or trustworthiness to warrant reliance upon it as a guide to personal thought and action. Harvey (1986, p. 660).

What these guides to personal thought and action are, are developed out of:

The perceptions they have of their own work as a teacher, the kind of children being taught, the responsibilities they have and their fundamental concept of teaching. How this set of perceptions comes together will influence an individual teacher's attitude towards the children taught. Bennett (1995, p. 51).

These influencing perceptions are shaped and informed by what teachers do and teachers think which are 'fundamentally influenced by their beliefs, assumptions and values which in turn shape norms' Stoll and Fink (1996, p.100). Norms can be separated into *sacred* and *profane* each of which have their own characteristics:

Sacred norms are those that 'define professional purpose and are fundamental to teacher's beliefs and are generally not subject to change. Profane norms are 'acknowledged as the particular way things are done in the school and are seen as more susceptible to change. Hargreaves *et al* (1996, p. 22).

Norms may be also unwritten, in that:

Life within a given culture flows smoothly only insofar as one's behaviour conforms to unwritten codes. Disrupt these norms and the ordered reality of life breaks down. Morgan (1997, p. 139).

While the distinction between sacred and profane norms is useful, teachers' beliefs and practices are also 'grounded not only in their expertise and altruism, but also in the structures and routines to which they have become attached', Hargreaves (1994, p. 356). For Hargreaves the work culture of teachers is made up of two interrelated aspects:

Cultural content- what teachers think, say and do. Cultural form-patterns of relationships teachers work in. (2000, p.166)

The patterns of relationships that teachers work in are well documented. The literature highlights the importance of school leadership, (Blake and Mouton 1978) and the orientation this gives to schools, (Handy 1993). There are also numerous



models developed to assist in the understanding of types of interaction that takes place in school, (Bush 1995), school dynamism and direction, (Hargreaves 1995; Stoll and Fink 1996; Rosenholz 1989; Hopkins et al 1994) and staff interaction, (Meyerson and Martin 1987). Hargreaves states that:

If we want to understand what the teacher does and why the teacher does it, we must therefore also understand the teaching community, the work culture of which that teacher is part. (2000, p. 165).

The cultural content and cultural form shape each other. Student perception of school culture is through both its cultural form and pattern:

The school rules ... subject routines ... whole-school curriculum policies ... as they only manifest themselves in what happens in school and classroom. Glover and Law (2004, p. 235).

The purpose of interview questions with regard to culture will be to identify aspects of culture that cannot be easily seen, school norms, that is the collections of personal and group guiding principles and perceptions. As norms are revealed in catchphrases that focus on how people relate to and value each other, this will inform how the analysis is approached. The data analysis will also endeavour to reveal the teachers' theories, beliefs, assumptions and values regarding:

Their own work as a teacher, the kind of children being taught, the responsibilities they have and their fundamental concept of teaching. Bennett (1995, pg 51).

Student perception of school culture is through both its cultural pattern in that they can reveal what they perceive teachers think in what they say and do and its cultural form in that they observe to some degree the patterns of relationships teachers work in.

## **Unpacking Irish Educational Cultural content.**

### **Challenges to a holistic notion of culture**

In the Irish education system the difference between primary and post-primary education is often encapsulated in the dichotomy that primary is child centred and post-primary is subject centred. These descriptions of centres:

Are usually described as being in opposition: each emphasizing and attempting to compensate for what the other allegedly does not possess, and, therefore cannot provide, Sugrue (1997, p. 1).

This claimed dichotomy between primary and post primary education also associates child-centred with the term progressive and subject-centred with the term traditional. This association of types of educational organization with ideology leads to questions about what are the purposes/functions of education. To accept this either/or situation with regard to purposes/functions of education may be in fact a distortion of what ideological centres are being actually revolved around. De-cloaking and revealing plurality of centres challenges the whole notion, firstly, that these two opposing centres are in opposition and secondly, that there is only an either/or situation with regard to the purpose / function of compulsory education.

### **Purpose / Function of Education**

The literature reveals not only a traditional progressive split with regard to the purpose / function of education but a wider range of competing perspectives around the purposes of education, Figure 5:1. This clearly illustrates that if the “two grand narratives of teaching” (Sugrue 1997) between traditionalism and progressivism are solely accepted as the only narratives, other narratives may unobtrusively become purposes / functions that education gravitates towards.

Table 4:1 Competing perspectives of education. Adapted from Austin et al (2003, p.23)

Ideology	Purpose / Function
Traditionalism	Transmission of cultural heritage
Progressivism	Humanistic values are the central context and the main point of school experience
Transformational	Educational experience to challenge the entropy of the cultural, economic and political formations that education will inevitably support
Corporatism	Educational experience defined in terms of the moral, economic, political, and procedural operating principles consonant with government own managerial logic and métiers

The discourse of opposition and compensation can also suggest a consensus of disposition within primary and post-primary that may or may not exist. The terms child centred and subjected centred are descriptive terms Sugrue (1997). Such descriptive terms have a “history of meanings ... meanings that are negotiated and changed across time” Chung and Walsh (2000, p. 216)

### **The meaning of child centeredness**

The development of the notion of child-centeredness was as a result of “the convergence of multiple trajectories of inscribed new theories of power into the child / adult division” Baker (1998, p. 155). Baker traces the emergence of child – centeredness in the USA and states that whether it be the political philosophies of Rousseau, the genesis of the common school in America (1647), the Prussian school system of the 1700’s or the impact of culture – epoch theory, there was a belief that:

Children needed salvation, from industrialization, from hell, from ignorance of language or literacy skills and / or from savagery, and that the adult organization of schooling was a key source of redemption. (ibid, p. 159).

These trajectories informed adult understanding of the nature of childhood and the distinct needs of children. However not every child could be redeemed, culture

epoch theory not only made a distinction between children and adults but between the children of races, some children had an ethnic propensity to be civilized. In child study terminology, “it was the coloured race that would remain forever child-like” (ibid, p. 160).

Baker points out that for schools to earn the label progressive, child –study or child –centred in USA, there needed to be strict adherence to the ‘technologies’ of teaching techniques, handbooks and the arranging of space, objects and furniture. The significance of these technologies was that development was controlled, monitored and anticipated by teachers, that development had a cause effect relationship that one could “measure and record and trace its pathway” (ibid, p.162).

What is interesting about this notion of technology centred education is that the child is centred on adult priorities. This notion of technology centred education is challenged by Dewey, who was at the forefront of the battle:

To abolish the old tradition that schools were merely charged with the somewhat static duty of handing on to each new generation a relatively fixed body of subject matter items. Carmicheal (1974, p. viii.)

Dewey however does not ‘adopt a partisan standpoint’ (Hogan 1986, p. 28) rather he would require teachers to have an enlightened understanding of the complexities of human experience, leading to insights into how impediments to fruitful learning might be identified and tackled. Dewey’s treatise *The Child and the Curriculum*, (1902) argues that the “child is the starting point, the centre and the end” and that the method to be used in education “is the method of mind as it reaches out and assimilates” (ibid, p. 9). Dewey attacked both the old traditional education because of “its invidious comparisons between the immaturity of the child and the maturity

of the adult” (ibid, p. 15) and the child-study movement because of their claim that “a child of a given age has a positive equipment of purposes and interests to be cultivated just as they stand” (ibid, p.15). He claimed that both traditional education and the child-study movement “both fail to see development as a definite process, having its own law which can be fulfilled only when adequate and normal conditions are provided” (ibid, p. 17). Dewey’s philosophy of education insisted that teachers must focus, take into account how children develop, “it is his present powers which are to assert themselves; his present capacities which are to be exercised; his present attitudes are to be realized” Dewey (1974, p. 34). It is on this basis that it is stated that the child centred movement in education grew as a protest, “against the old rigidly systematized school which imposed its procedure on all pupils” Entwistle (1976, p. 22).

In *Democracy and Education* (1916) Dewey makes a clear distinction between conservative education and progressive education, and outlines his view of what education should be concerned with. For Dewey conservative education is education as formation, as recapitulation and retrospection whereas progressive education is reconstructive. Education as formation he links with the Herbartism. Herbart (1776-1841) emphasized “that the goal of education is the development of a person with character and humane convictions who understands the great art of constructive and harmonious living” Ulich (1968, p. 508). While Dewey acknowledges the contribution that Herbart made towards highlighting the importance of educational method in education, it is the Herbartian emphasis given in schools to “the unique

role of the subject matter in the development of mental and moral disposition” (ibid, p. 69) that Dewey takes issue with.

Dewey states three points on the educational implications of this *doctrine*,

- 1) The formation of mind is wholly a matter of the presentation of the proper educational materials.
- 2) The business of the educator is, first to select the proper material in order to fix the nature of the original reactions, and, secondly, to arrange the sequence of subsequent presentations on the basis of the store of ideas secured by prior transactions.
- 3) There is a perfectly universal method in instruction in all subjects for all pupils of all ages.

For Dewey the:

Fundamental theoretical defect of this view lies in ignoring the existence in a living being of active and specific functions which are developed in the redirection and combination which occur as they are occupied with their environment. (ibid, p. 71)

Education as recapitulation and retrospection he associates with culture epoch theory outlined earlier. Such education:

Looks primarily to the past and especially to the literary products of the past and that the mind is adequately formed in the degree in which it is patterned upon the spiritual heritage of the past. (ibid, p. 73).

Dewey is not saying that the experience of the past is redundant at present, rather he is stating that there is “an enormous difference between availing of them [the products of past history] as present resources and taking them as standards and patterns in their retrospective character” (ibid, p. 74). The business of education

Dewey states, “Is to liberate the young from reviving and retraversing the past than to lead them to a recapitulation of it” (ibid, p. 76).

For Dewey education is “the reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, which increase ability to direct the course of subsequent experience” (ibid, p. 76). Reconstructive education is a “direct enrichment of the life of the young and not merely a more or less repellent preparation for the duties of adult life” Dewey (1934, p. )

From this definition of education and the points raised in *The Child and the Curriculum* it can be seen that, for Dewey, the purpose and method of education is about the guidance and direction of the learner and the learner becoming self aware which empowers him/her with a living motivation to progress further. This concept of a living motivation is mentioned in *The Child and the Curriculum* as a counter weight to the traditionalist’s defence of and extolling of “dulling exercises and empty exercises” which on the surface appear to motivate learners, (ibid, p. 28). Dewey correctly highlights that learner’s can also be interested for other reasons than love of learning. Learners can be motivated if:

Conditions are continually supplied which demand that mode of operation and preclude any other sort ... the material of the lesson is rendered interesting in contrast with some alternative experience.(ibid, pp. 28-29)

Dewey was concerned with the part teaching played in education; the *something* that was needed to help in the understanding of how children developed was supplied by Jean Piaget in particular and to a much lesser extent in Europe by Vygotsky. It is important to acknowledge that Dewey’s reconstructive concept of education was among one of many contributions that made up the ‘polyglot’ of progressive

education. Progressive education separated into different strands in America and in Britain. In America what was meant by child-centeredness became a “code word giving loosely affiliated groups a common identity” Chung and Walsh (2000, p. 229). In Britain the theories and practices of progressive education were also diverse (Selleck 1972). Three strands of progressivism have been identified in Britain, humanitarian libertarianism, liberal and socialist, (Gordon 1986). While all these strands are important in their own right it is the diffusion of the liberal strand rhetoric of child centred and society centred education in education reports, curriculum development, and teacher training colleges and to a degree in school practice in Britain and Ireland that is predominant. The liberal strand gets endorsed because:

Child-centred practices based on the needs of children as they are revealed in the progressive classroom have a fit with the needs and values of a society developing along liberal, humanitarian lines. Gordon (1986, p. 39).

### **Paradigms of Educational theories and beliefs**

In an analysis of Irish educational documents undertaken to reveal the theoretical assumptions of Irish educationalists three paradigms of education prevalent are revealed. They are:

Consensualism- that society is represented as an undifferentiated whole  
Essentialism- individuals are defined in terms of fixed or given talents, abilities or intelligence  
Meritocratic individualism- individuals who make the effort deserve to be rewarded in society, IQ + effort = merit. Drudy and Lynch (1993, p. 48ff).

Of these three paradigms it is suggested that ‘the conception of the individual that predominates among Irish educationalists is basically an essentialist one’ (ibid, p.



59). The implication of this dominant paradigm for teachers working in schools is that intelligence is:

Equated with logical Mathematical and linguistic ability and educationalists (including teachers) are predisposed to regard educational development as having definite limits with certain kinds of people. (ibid, p.59).

O'Brien identifies the 'language of essentialism' in second level teachers' perceptions of first year students. She states, that in teachers' descriptions of students they:

Indicate a view of weakness as academic weakness tending to ascribe academic weaknesses as a characteristic of individual students. (2004, p. 56).

The 'persistent use of the language of weakness' by teachers, (Lynch and Lodge 2002) reveals a mindset that stratifies students and excludes students 'even in schools where mixed ability is the prevailing policy. Paradigms of consensualism can also mean that there is 'assumptions of homogeneity around sexuality, ethnicity and ability' Lynch and Lodge (2002, p. 87). There are also serious implications for schools in that essentialism and meritocratic individualism 'imply that failure or success in school is a function of what the individual *qua* individual is or does' Drudy and Lynch (1993, p. 63).

This narrow acceptance, within the work culture of teachers, of what intelligence is and distinctions being made by teachers with regard to possible student educational development and outcomes leads to 'cultures of stratification' in the mindset of teachers, Lynch and Lodge (2002, p. 85). This culture of stratification 'operates at an institutional level in terms of ability grouping' across schools, and at interpersonal level within classes in terms of the 'scope and nature of the time and attention given

to different types of students' (ibid, p. 85). Corbet writing about inclusivity and school culture, states that 'most educational institutions create their own cultural norms which define who is achieving and who is failing' (1999,p. 129).

### **The influence of assessment on cultural content and cultural form**

Lynch and Lodge also claim that 'there is one universal practice that has an overriding influence on the culture of second level schools in Ireland, namely the 'Leaving Certificate' (2002, p. 97). While not referring to the Leaving Certificate, Barnes and Seed state that:

Examination papers ... offer to teachers and the taught the most persuasive arguments about what model of the subject is appropriate, what should go on in lessons, what knowledge, skills and activities should be emphasized and what can be safely ignored. (1984, p. 236)

Why this practice dominates school culture is also explained as a student focus:

Experience with external examinations would seem to indicate that all too many students focus their efforts on mastering strategies to help them over the examination hurdle rather than developing mastery of subject matter and honing lasting competencies. Kelleghan *et al* 1996 (cited in NCCA 1999, p. 50).

The assessment process is obviously impacting on teacher and student work culture.

Recent research into the teaching and learning of Mathematics and English in Irish post-primary school classrooms identifies that:

All of the twenty lessons observed involved what is referred to in the literature as a traditional approach. The traditional approach reflects a view of Mathematics as a 'static, structured system of facts, procedures and concepts' (Henningsten and Stien, 1997, p.524). It is assumed that Mathematics is a fixed, clearly defined subject matter. A procedural rather than a conceptual and or/ problem solving approach to the subject prevail. Lyons *et al*, (2003 p. 113)

The prevalence of traditional teaching methods was also found in the same study for the teaching of English compared to Mathematics:

In both subjects, classroom work was generally teacher led and teacher controlled. Teachers initiated the work phases of the lessons and dominated public interaction. Both subject's also featured low levels of student initiated questioning, with a very small time being spent on homework setting and lesson aims. However, while Mathematics teachers led their lessons by demonstration, English teachers led by interpretation through dialogue. (ibid, p. 250)

This finding supports the claim made in other Irish research that teaching in second level schools operates along strong didactical lines (Drudy and Lynch 1993, Lynch and Lodge 2002, O'Boyle 2004). Reliance on 'traditional 'chalk and talk' teaching' has also been identified in the teaching of first year's students in post-primary school (Smyth 2003). This traditional / didactic approach to teaching is understood as 'part of a wider set of cultural and pedagogical practices in teaching' Lyons et al (2003, p. 114). These cultural and pedagogical practices include teachers working in isolation from their colleagues, the stress of state examinations and the 'over emphasis on a very narrow, pressured definition of academic achievement' Lynch and Lodge (2002, p. 84).

### **Teacher Isolation and cultural form**

Teachers teaching in isolation are limited in the development of teaching strategies, in that teaching strategies can only develop out 'of the context of their classroom experiences and the images they framed of good teaching from their own days as pupils' O'Boyle (2004, p. 418). Such a teaching style is unbalanced in that it depends solely on the teacher's experiences without any input from teaching theory and 'reflects teachers' own image of teaching shaped by their own socialization, biographies and identities' (ibid, p. 427). In such circumstance, it is claimed that, teacher isolation creates 'cultures of non-mastery' of alternative teaching methods

contributing to why there are no other 'modes of instruction in class other than from a prescribed lesson plan or a frontal (ex cathedra) mode', Huberman (1993, p. 229). Joyce *et al* (2002) suggest that teachers may not be teaching badly but that the repertoire of their teaching skills is very narrow.

However working in isolation fosters teaching autonomy, discretion and privacy from the gaze of colleagues, management and parents. It means that as long as results in the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate are satisfactory there is little if any need to evaluate or reflect on teaching performance. These cultures, of teacher isolation and teacher privacy exist not only within individual schools and school sectors but exist between schools and between Primary and Post-primary schools. This claimed on the basis that the post-primary schools tend to be 'unfamiliar with the assessment approaches, the curriculum content and the methods of instruction used in sixth class' Naughton (2003, p. 116). This unfamiliarity leads to assumptions by post-primary school teachers about student learning biographies where they 'assume a tabula rasa or assume a certain level of understanding and knowledge among first year students' Smyth (2004, p. 132).

### **Conceptions of learning**

Biggs *et al* (1993) draws attention to two conceptions of learning, quantitative (A to C) and qualitative (D to F), that influence how people think about learning (Table 4:2 below). Each conception contains different assumptions about learning and of what is to be learned and how it is to be learned.

Table 4:2 Conceptions of Learning. Adapted from Biggs *et al* (1993, pp. 20- 21)

Conceptions of learning	What	How
A. Increasing one's knowledge	Learning, unspecified new things	Absorbing, storing
B. Memorising and reproducing	Facts	Repetition and memorising
C. Applying	Facts and procedures, knowledge of rules	Make use of it in some way, adjusting and applying known rules
D. Understanding the meaning of content	Ideas– meaning becomes paramount	Grasping, understanding seeing
E. Seeing something in a different way	View of things, principles	By studying things become a pattern, appearing different
F. Changing as a person	The meaning of experience	By deep involvement in learning

It can be clearly seen that the qualitative conceptions of learning, especially F, clearly relate to the official intended aims of the primary and the post-primary curriculum. Teachers, students and parents have their own conceptions of learning, espoused and in use; these conceptions of learning interact and inform each other's expectations. Biggs *et al* suggest that there is a back wash effect on student learning through what the emphasis teachers place in their teaching and in what they assess:

The quantitative and qualitative divides are not antagonistic but feed each other. You cannot form a view of something unless you know the facts. The problem occurs when you stop at the facts; and teaching and assessing in a way that emphasises facts is a good way of telling students to indeed stop at the facts. Rote learning then becomes an end, the purpose of learning, rather than a means towards acquiring understood and usable knowledge. (1993, p. 21).

This emphasis by teachers that indicates what is important content to learn and how to learn it that is picked up by students is also revealed in Devine exploration of primary schooling from the perspective of pupil's:

In terms of the exercise of power between adults and children it is clear that more adult-centred goals of productivity and long term usefulness inform children's of what is valued and considered as 'real' learning in their curricular experience. (2003, p. 49)

Teachers' conceptions of teaching will influence students' conception of teaching and learning. If learning is conceived as solely quantitative (A to C) then teaching is the transmission of knowledge, if qualitative (D to F) then teaching is the facilitation of learning where teacher and student are actively involved. However there is a third possibility of institutional learning and teaching:

Learning needs validation, by being taught and evaluated in an institution of learning. This conception follows from the idea of compulsory schooling and, to some extent hold schools accountable for what they do: parents, employers, higher educational institutions, all need some kind of reassurance of standards at various points throughout schooling. Biggs et al (1993, p. 25).

These illustrations of different conceptions of learning are not a sequence as conception F, changing as a person, happens gradually and at different times and can affect a person cognitively, socially or emotionally.

In Carnell *et al* three models of learning each with their own concurrent understandings of how learning occurs are identified. The first model, the reception model:

It is concerned with the acquisition of knowledge, and with memorization and reproduction. ... Basic essential skills are emphasized while emotional and social aspects of learning are not addressed. Teaching in this model resembles transmission and stress cognitive learning and logical, objective, abstract, sequential thinking. (2002, p. 11)

This model of learning and teaching can be easily termed quantitative where learners and teachers are concerned with how much they can learn and teach. The second model, the constructivist model, which is more qualitative, understands that:

Learners actively construct knowledge through such activities as discussion, discovery learning and open ended questioning, usually related to their everyday experience, often with the help of those around them. (ibid, pp.13 -14).

The third model, the co-constructivist model of learning:

Involves ... collaboration by learners in critical investigation, analysis, interpretation and reorganization of knowledge, and in reflective processes, in areas that have meaning in the learner's lives.(ibid, p. 14)

Learning through a curriculum involves using a learning style. In a study of the relationship between the learning styles, the preferred teaching styles and the "academic ability" of leaving certificate students, Tuomey draws attention to a finding in the research of Marton et al (1976), "how one learns determines the process" (1997, p.370). Two types of learning are identified deep learning approach and surface learning approach. These approaches identify what the students focus on. Deep learning is in evidence "when an individual learns due to interest in the material being studied or due to its personal relevance" Tuomey (1997, p.372). Surface learning focuses on the text, and students concentrate on memorizing and reproducing the content of the material which they have read without necessarily understanding it" , (ibid, p.372).

### **Teaching and Learning**

Teaching in stressful conditions related to examination pressures may result in 'defensive teaching' Paechter (2000, p.139). As a teaching strategy 'defensive teaching' has three identifiable characteristics,

Teachers control the knowledge that is made available to students by presenting it in such a way that is meaningless in any but the school-test context ... Information is fragmented into lists, reducing it to facts, simultaneously suppressing alternative interpretations and facilitating quantifiable testing ... Conceptually difficult topics were

simplified so that while there was an illusion of dealing with the subject matter, the students were not required to put in the work needed for understanding of the issues involved. (ibid, p. 139).

Defensive teaching can result in the students classroom experiences being irrelevant to their lives, and stresses the segmentation and reduction of knowledge into small separate units. This leads to a lack of interconnection within the curriculum. Defensive teaching is focused on the learning off of information rather than the development of understanding. It focuses the purpose of classroom teaching on the attainment of credentials through examination. An element in achieving this goal is student docility, which is rewarded 'by making it easier for you to pass the test' (ibid, p. 141).

Structuring the content of classroom learning experiences in such a way for students identifies that the goal of teaching is 'performance oriented', that effort and ability are inversely related rather than 'mastery oriented', where greater efforts lead to greater outcomes, Pintrich and Schunk (2002, p.546). In performance oriented classrooms students are expected to act as 'passive receivers of information', Kinchin (2004, p. 303). O'Brien identifies a dichotomy in what teachers welcome and expect from first year pupils in post-primary school:

Teachers welcome the openness and enthusiasm of the students while at the same time comment that the second level system demands a more serious and passive approach from students. (2004, p. 59)

These comments reveal the teacher desire for student docility and how such docility will be rewarded. It allows teachers to focus 'on the transmission of a set of curriculum content that is organized in routine ways' Clark *et al* (1999, p. 158).



Such classroom organization 'assumes a certain level of understanding and knowledge among first year students' Smyth (2003, p.132) and may explain why:

One third of (first year) students who did not receive formal learning support would have liked additional help in one or more subjects. (ibid, p. 231).

In investigating 12 and 14 year old students' beliefs about their preferred role as learners of science, (Kinchin 2004) reports an overwhelming preference among students for a constructive learning environment as against an objectivist learning environment. Students who preferred the objectivist classroom saw it either as an 'easier learning scenario' or were 'concerned with fulfilling the demands of examinations' (ibid, p. 306). Students who preferred the constructive classroom saw it as 'more interesting, more effective and allowing the students to have greater ownership of their own learning' (ibid, p. 307). It is also clear that if students and teachers engaging in first year post-primary school have no initial appreciation of each others expectations of the nature of interactions demanded, expected between teacher and student and of the appropriate role to be played by the student and the teacher, students will be less 'able to maximize their own learning', Kinchin (2004, p. 301). This highlights a need for dialogue. A *dialogue*, not only to:

uncover the student's prior learning experiences, which consists of not only of the factual information they hold, but also includes their perceptions of their own learning biographies that will be used by them to modify their approach to future learning' Kinchin (2004, p. 307).

While student docility and routine transmission of content can be recognized and understood as a very restricted way of organizing learners and facilitating learning, taking steps to change didactic teaching methods as the problem could result in

limited success. It demonstrates a failure to understand that such organization of learners and learning, within how the present system is organized, enhances the possibility and importance of teacher academic success. Bennett states:

Many teachers are more willing than academics and administrators to accept the high priority placed upon GCSE performance when judging schools: it is their own academic success which gives legitimacy in their jobs, and to deny the importance of academic success is to deny the foundation of their own position. (1998, p. 51)

### **Textbooks**

While there is no state examination in Irish Primary schools, classroom learning is structured around textbooks. A Primary Inspectorate report states:

In fewer of half of the reports, 15% - 49%, there is a suggestion of lack of compliance with 126 of Rules for National Schools, which sets out the responsibility of teachers to plan their work. Dept. of Education and Science (2002, p. 12).

The report recommends that for a few schools, up to 15%, that there would be less emphasis on textbooks. However by 2005 the Inspectorate in their evaluation on the quality and extent of curriculum implementation in English, Mathematics and the Visual Arts in a sample of Primary Schools state that,

Textbooks exert a dominant influence on teaching and learning in a significant number of classrooms. In these classrooms the teaching tended to be didactic, and undemanding and repetitive learning tasks were provided for the pupils. There was little emphasis on the development of higher-order thinking skills, on nurturing pupil's creativity, or on encouraging pupils to respond emotionally and imaginatively. Teaching methodologies were restricted, and the essential emphases of the curriculum were not accorded prominence. The quality of pupil's learning was found to have significant scope for development in these instances, and the pupils were not sufficiently interested or engaged in their learning. (ibid, p. 49)

Neither report examines what has caused reduced preparation time and the structuring of classroom learning around text books. The phenomena can only be

fully understood through examining how the 'wider pressures, demands, expectations and commitments' impact on teacher's work, Hargreaves (2000, p. 138).

While there is awareness in official documentation and research undertaken by Smyth et al (2004), O'Brien (2004) and Naughton (2000) that the transition between primary and post-primary is a period of adjustment for students, there seems to be a lack of awareness of the depth of this need for adjustment by both classroom teachers and students in taking account of students' prior educational attainment. In a study of 133 primary school children, aged from 7 to 11, 'teachers and pupils come to a shared understanding of what is and what is not tolerated in their interactions with one another' Devine (2003, p. 35). Pupils are clear 'that the teacher's role is one of authority and that they are essentially being paid to 'boss' the children and tell them what to do' (ibid, p. 87). Pupils perceive a difference between subjects, describing Irish, English and Mathematics as being work, and others, such as Art and Physical Education, being a 'release from the concentrated learning demanded' (ibid, p. 49). Pupils also perceive evaluation 'as a significant feature of school life and one that is firmly rooted in preparation for the grown up world of work and productivity' (ibid, p. 107). Pupils view evaluation as a negative / positive experience:

Children who perceived themselves to be clever spoke about evaluation with some excitement, and welcomed the opportunity for a public display of self in positive terms (through tests, reports, parent/teacher meetings) that brought with it the potential for praise and rewards from significant adults in their lives. Conversely, for children who did not perceive themselves to be clever in school, evaluation brought with it the risk of rebuke and punishment from parents and teachers. (ibid, p.107).

Devine's study demonstrates the importance of an awareness of how pupils, teachers and the curriculum interact, shape and inform beliefs about their roles and their ability compared to others. Smyth *et al* identifies that for first year students in post-primary school:

The nature of the interaction among teachers and students in school appears to play a significant role in influencing not only student attitudes to school but student's own views of themselves. (2003, p, 188)

### **Curriculum**

This section articulates how the aims of the Irish Junior Certificate can be understood. It will also clarify how the term curriculum is used and how this usage gives an orientation to teaching.

Using the categories outlined by White (2004) to analyze the aims of the National Curriculum in England it is clear that the aims of the Irish Junior Certificate fall into similar categories, namely the development of personal qualities, skills, and knowledge and understanding of students. The purpose and function of stating curriculum aims:

... Focus attention on the developing the understanding of the pupil rather than on the delivery of predetermined content or the achievement of pre stated behavioural changes ... and it provides us with a firm and clearly articulated base from which to make all the decisions that curriculum planning and educational practice require of us. Kelly (2004, p. 82).

The aims articulated in Junior Certificate syllabuses are developmental there is an instrumentalist process operating in Irish education. The NCCA refer to the Junior Certificate as a 'preparation':

For the requirements of further programmes of study, of employment or of life outside full time education, for the responsibilities of

citizenship in the national context and in the context of the wider European and global communities. (1999, p. 6).

This justification of the Junior Certificate on this basis of what it leads to suggests that the curriculum could be viewed as non educational:

If one of the things that characterizes education as opposed to other activities that involve teaching and learning, such as training and instruction, is that education is essentially concerned with activities undertaken for their own sakes, such a notion of education is clearly at odds with the idea that activities planned accordingly to extrinsic behavioural objectives, goals extrinsic to the activity itself. Kelly (2004, p. 67)

The aims of the curriculum are to be realized 'structured around eight areas of experience and a range of approved subjects' NCCA (1999), p. 10. Such structuring of learning, through framing learning experiences, is envisaged would, allow for and encourage curricular quality in schools:

These eight areas of experience should be used by schools in framing and evaluating curriculum policy and provision and schools in turn should be accountable for the quality of curriculum offered at junior cycle. (ibid, p. 27)

Without the preceding analysis of the curriculum it could be suggested that curriculum planning is concerned with the elements of process and development as distinct from a curriculum as content and objectives. In a process and development curriculum the students would spend less time memorising and recalling facts and arguments and more time acquiring fundamental understandings (Lawton 1999).

Students' learning is deep learning which is contrasted with shallow learning:

...Learning must have a consequence for the learner. By consequence we mean that by learning X, the learner will see the world in a slightly different way. If the learning that has taken place is merely capable of being reproduced at a later date in answer to the demands of some form of assessment which replicates the original problem, and the

context for that problem then what is being taught is 'shallow' learning only. Browning Carr et al (1997, p. 28).

It could be also suggested from the above that when the NCCA use the term curriculum it is stated purely in terms of description rather than prescription. Such rhetoric suggests an intention that such a curriculum would allow for and encourage schools / teachers to select the content, from an approved list of subjects, in order to promote all the stated aims. Such a mindset overlooks the fact that the curriculum designed may not resemble the curriculum delivered in schools. Stenhouse draws attention to a difference between curriculum intention, curriculum prescription and what actually happens in schools:

In essence it seems to me that curriculum study is concerned with the relationship between two views of curriculum – as intention and as reality. I believe that our educational realities seldom conform to our educational intentions. We cannot put our policies into practice. We should not regard this as a failure peculiar to our schools and teachers. We have only to look around us to confirm that it is part of the human lot. But, as Karl Popper has observed, improvement is possible if we are secure enough to face and study the nature of our failures. The central problem of curriculum study is the gap between our ideas and aspirations and our attempts to operationalize them. (1975, p. 3)

This difference between curriculum intention, curriculum prescription and what actually happens in schools is dependent on location:

The curriculum resides in two locations. In the first instance it is located in the school as an institutional organization with its own goals, structures, systems and roles. ... In the second instance the curriculum is located in a nexus of socio-cultural-political processes. These encompass curriculum and schooling activities and increasingly are significant in shaping the content and orientation of curriculum, and legitimizing what good teaching practices are, and to what ends. Callan (2006, p. 7)

What may have happened is that schools' goals, structures, systems and roles rendered schools unable to actually use the designed curriculum principles and

frame-work locally which in turn diluted the intention of the curriculum. It could also be that the non educative aims of the Junior Certificate subverted the educative aims that were concerned with the development of personal qualities, skills, and knowledge and understanding, through focusing solely on extrinsic behavioural objectives and goals. From their perspective Sugrue and Gleeson claim that the cause of the dilution of curriculum principles is connected with how the education system is structured and the separation of educational provision:

The perpetuation of existing structures within the NCCA, DES and the Inspectorate, as well as the separate provision of primary and post-primary schooling, contribute significantly to and perpetuate discontinuities, fragmentation, existing power relations, suspicion and lack of trust in the system, with the needs of learners being relegated to post-primary consideration. Such existing scenarios continue to privilege curriculum subject content over more generic cross-curricular considerations such as critical thinking, creativity, imagination, problem solving, social and emotional learning, all of which are vitally important as contributions to, as well as participation in, a knowledge society. (2004, p. 297)

The stated aims of the Junior Certificate reveal a curriculum that justifies itself as both an educational curriculum, concerned with the development of personal qualities, skills, and knowledge and understanding, and as non educational curriculum concerned with extrinsic behavioural objectives and goals. This analysis of the stated aims of the Junior Certificate as both educational and non educational, it is claimed cannot provide ‘...us with a firm and clearly articulated base from which to make all the decisions that curriculum planning and educational practice require of us’ Kelly (2004, p. 82).

What also needs to be clarified for this research is how the term curriculum is used. Is it a broad usage that encompasses everything within the school or a narrow usage

that equates curriculum with syllabus, or is it somewhere in between? In reflecting on what the term curriculum means in the *Revised Primary Curriculum* (1999)

Sugrue draws attention to this expanding notion of curriculum:

Increasingly definitions have become more inclusive, thus embracing the official and the unofficial, the formal and the informal routines of schools and schooling, with increasing awareness also that, due to great permeability of boundaries between school and community, the external climate and more general socio-cultural and economic milieu have considerable shaping influences on what transpires in classrooms. (2006, p. 172)

The term 'curriculum' is also used in such an inclusive manner with regard to the post-primary curriculum, the NCCA stating that:

It consists of the full range of learning experiences provided for students. (1999, p. 5)

This usage of the word curriculum is in fact a general summary of a legislative description of what curriculum encompasses as outlined in the White Paper on Education (1995) and is very similar to the general summary used in connection with the National Curriculum in England:

The school curriculum comprises of all learning and other experiences that each school plans for its pupils. DfEE/QCA (1999, p. 10).

It is claimed that the purpose behind having a broad notion of what the concept of curriculum hinges on is the awareness that the concept curriculum and syllabus are not the one and the same:

Those who are interested in the curriculum in the old fashioned and relatively simple sense of the syllabus or programme of study saw, correctly enough, that what is on the syllabus is never totally identifiable with what is taught, still less with what is learned, and in some cases is barely comparable. Barrow *et al* (2004, p. 61)



The NCCA description of curriculum does not solely equate it with subject syllabi but connects it with how and why students are taught and with outcomes for the learner. The rationale behind the curriculum is stated as the ‘personal and social development’ of children. Whether this is in any way a practical and productive understanding of the term curriculum Kelly suggests a test of any attempt to define the term curriculum:

*Any definition of curriculum, if it is to be practically effective and productive, must offer much more than a statement about the knowledge content or merely the subjects which schooling is to ‘teach’ or transmit or ‘deliver’. It must go far beyond this to an explanation, and indeed justification, of the purposes of such a transmission and an exploration of the effects of that exposure to such knowledge and such subjects is likely to have, or is intended to have, on its recipients – indeed it is from these deeper concerns, . . . , that any curriculum planning worthy of the name must start. (2004, p 4).*

While the NCCA description falls short of this test, the content of Chapter 2 of the Review of the Junior Cycle (1999) does explicitly state and go some way to satisfy this test. The aims of the Junior Certificate, the intended outcomes of the curriculum for individual students, and the principles by which to reference curriculum planning and curriculum practice are stated. However, as I have already outlined above, there is confusion in the aims of the curriculum in that it is justified as both an educative and non educative curriculum and could promote divergent orientations of education allowing teaching and learning, instruction and training to coexist in schools. Despite purposefully broadening the notion of curriculum, to expand it beyond the requirements of syllabi, the operationalisation of the general Junior Certificate aims in schools has been through the development of syllabi for each subject:

*While the CEB began, in the mid 1980’s, to effect serious debate about curriculum in our schools, the focus of its replacement, NCCA*

was confined to curriculum tasks largely associated with syllabus revision. Callan, (2006, p. 27).

While this statement overlooks many of the NCCA's contribution to curriculum development and educational change in Ireland, it does highlight that by solely focusing on change as the restructuring of an existing curriculum without any reference to teaching or classroom management:

Adds credence to the view that the Junior Certificate simply involves a change of syllabus content ... and that teachers' practice and belief will be largely unaffected. Gleeson (1989, p. 14).

The model of curriculum that would continue to coexist even with new syllabi would be an objectivist model where:

The educational purposes of the curriculum take pride of place, content is selected not for its own sake but for its presumed efficacy at enabling us to achieve those purposes, organization is similarly designed with these objectives in mind, and evaluation is framed so as to assess how far these objectives have been achieved. Kelly (2004, p. 15)

Kelly goes on to state that the flaws of such a model is in the passive view it has of humanity, of learning, of educational purposes and the impoverished integrity of the process of education:

Fundamentally behavioural, linear, instrumental and leads to a loss, rather than an enhancement of freedom for both teacher and pupil. (ibid, p. 59)

### **Curriculum orientation**

The usage current when the Junior Certificate launched stated that it was:

A programme of activities (by teachers and pupils) designed so that pupils will attain so far as possible certain educational and other school ends or objectives. Gleeson (1989, p. 14).

This definition (Grundy 1987, p.11) demonstrates that the designed curriculum exists prior to and outside the learning experiences of students. Such a curriculum silences students in that they are told what they must learn and how they will do it. The orientation to teaching is academic rationalism where teachers are told what they must teach and how to teach it. In this way teacher can also be silenced as the curriculum is something solely to be transmitted by teachers to students.

Table 4:3 Curriculum Orientation adapted from Eisner *et al* (1974, pp1-18)

Curriculum Orientation	Prime Concern / Focus
Development of Cognitive Processes	Interactive relationship between the learner and the material
Technology	Developing the technology of instruction
Self-actualization	Liberation and development of each child
Social Reconstruction	Social reform
Academic Rationalism	Cultural Transmission

At same time however there was a growing awareness that curriculum expands beyond what is taught, referring not only to the content, but also including the process of teaching and learning:

Pedagogy is important because teacher and student activities are an integral part of the curriculum as experienced by students and because a number of the affective aims of Junior Certificate cannot be achieved through traditional, expository teaching methods. Gleeson (1989, p.16)

This way of looking at curriculum practice understands curriculum as process. In this sense curriculum is not a physical thing, but rather the interaction of teachers

and students in an educative process. Its orientation is less towards the aforementioned academic rationalism and more towards the development of cognitive processes:

A curriculum is an attempt to communicate the essential principles and features of an educational proposal in such a form that it is open to critical scrutiny and capable of effective translation into practice. Stenhouse (1975, p. 23).

This curriculum orientation is not equating curriculum with process nor is it making both terms interchangeable and meaningless. This understanding of curriculum is different in that curriculum develops within and out of the learning experiences of teachers and learners. It also enables teachers and learners to make judgments about the experiences of learning. However this conceptualising of curriculum is not without its problems:

*(there are)* those who want some greater degree of uniformity in what is taught. As Stenhouse comments, the process model is essentially a critical model, not a marking model ... At the end of the day many students and their families place a high premium on examination or subject success and this inevitably enters into the classroom. This highlights a second problem with the model we have just outlined - that it may not pay enough attention to the context in which learning takes place. Third, there is the 'problem' of teachers. The major weakness and, indeed, strength of the process model is that it rests upon the quality of teachers. If they are not up to much then there is no safety net in the form of prescribed curriculum materials. The approach is dependent upon the cultivation of wisdom and meaning-making in the classroom. Smith (1996, 2000)

The preceding analysis of the stated aims of the Junior Certificate reveal a curriculum that justifies itself as both an educational curriculum, concerned with the development of personal qualities, skills, and knowledge and understanding, and as non educational curriculum concerned with extrinsic behavioural objectives and

goals. Because it has both educational and non educational aims, it allows at one and the same time for different approaches to teaching and learning to occupy the same curriculum space. There would appear to be in existence a curriculum orientation towards teaching and learning that is academic rationalism. Such a curriculum orientation is concerned with transmission and demands silence and compliance from both teachers and students to be transmitted.

### **Continuity**

This section states why the concept of continuity in education is important. The origins of the notion of continuity are briefly outlined. It identifies that while the concept is in official documents dealing with the primary curriculum the use of the concept is problematic. The problem is due to the fact that different educational settings have philosophies of education that are underpinned by divergent principles. While the concept of continuity is used to suggest shared connections between primary and post-primary education in practice it may exist only in degrees. This may be due to some confusion with regard to different types of continuums. The section also identifies what shared understandings would underpin a curriculum designed for continuity.

The issue of continuity is of central importance for understanding development. The concept of continuity is associated with the connectedness of development over time (Emde and Harmon 1984; Lerner *et al* 1996). When transitions are being made within educational settings and between educational settings then curricular continuity becomes an issue for all the partners in education.

In the Review of the Junior Certificate (1999) the NCCA states that continuity between the primary and post-primary curriculum exists, that the intended curriculum provides curriculum continuity in reality. The concept of educational continuity and its importance for children is explicitly used in official documents dealing with the primary curriculum:

The child's education should be an organic development and should not involve a significant change of method and matter for him in passing from one stage to the next, from one class to the next or from primary to post-primary school. Curaclam na Bunscoile (1971, p. 13)

The monitoring of continuity is one of the most important roles of the principal as a manager of curriculum. Occasions in a child's life in which discontinuity can occur include the transition from home to school, from class to class, and from primary to post-primary school. To maintain continuity for children of all stages, and in order to circumvent unnecessary duplication or gaps in information, principals need to ensure that procedures for consultation and liaison are put in place. Revised Primary Curriculum (1999, p. 19)

The origins of the notion of continuity in education are underpinned by insights into the processes of human growth and development:

...all growth and development (a) follows a sequence, (b) proceeds from the less mature to more mature, (c) is cyclical, and (d) is organic. Taba (1962, p. 89)

Understanding the processes of human growth and development supports the perspective that students learn through teachers organizing content sequentially. Such perspectives can be seen in the practical suggestions for beginning teachers at post-primary level:

Proceed from the experience of the pupils, from the known to the unknown, from the simple to the complex, from the concrete to the abstract. NUIM (2004-2005, p. 22).

However, solely sequencing a lesson through its content does not automatically provide an appropriate sequencing of learning:

...Sequencing consists, not so much in the succession of details in the various areas of knowledge as in the continuity of learning steps leading towards the formation of ideas and the use of cognitive processes. Taba (1962, p. 189).

This notion of continuity, in the form of simultaneous developmental movement toward the formation of ideas is linked with the use of cognitive processes. Students do not form ideas and then at a later stage use their cognitive processes, they happen within the same timeframe. The movement from known to unknown, simple to complex, concrete to abstract are not individual steps separated by time frames but are movements happening simultaneously. Without this understanding of continuity, the education of students could be designed around a notion of education that would encourage children to:

Devote years to unreasoning accumulation of facts and mastery of specific procedures and then trying to superimpose thinking onto this accumulation. Naturally one needs facts in order to think, but one need not assume that a time span must separate the two steps: both processes can go on in the context of the same learning act. Taba (1962, p. 189)

Educational theories of Bruner (1960), Gagne (1965), and Ausubel (1967) also support such a developmental notion of growth and development and the need for continuity. For Bruner the education process is understood as a structured process of instruction that facilitates learning which:

Consists of providing aids and dialogues for translating experience into more powerful systems of notation and ordering. (1966, p. 21)

The instructor's role is one of:

Leading the learner through a sequence of statements and restatements of a problem or body of knowledge that increase the learners ability to grasp, transform, and transfer what he is learning. In short, the sequence in which a learner encounters materials within a domain of knowledge affects the difficulty he will have in achieving mastery. (ibid, p. 49)

The object of instruction is to make the learner or problem solver self sufficient:

If information is to be used effectively, it must be translated in to the learner's way of attempting to solve a problem. (ibid, p. 53)

Bruner warns that there is not an optimal sequence for presenting a body of knowledge rather it is important to recognize that:

There are usually various sequences that are equivalent in their ease and difficulty for learners. There is no unique sequence for all learners, and the optimum in any particular case will depend upon a variety of factors, including past learning, stage of development, nature of material, and individual differences. (ibid, p. 49)

Bruner does state that how "final learning" is "judged" will also affect the sequencing of a body of knowledge. Bruner lists examples of six possible criteria of judging final learning and in the case of each individual criterion the sequencing should be different. What these sequences of presentation would look like is not stated, what is clear that the sequencing of content material will be influenced by varying different types of judgments. A link therefore exists between a teachers/schools understanding of educational final ends and how a body of knowledge is sequenced.

What is clear is that learning for an individual is an active process of constructing one's knowledge through relating new information to previous acquired knowledge. The learning relationship is not one of stimulus and response but an internal mediating process that transforms any stimulus before giving a response. Learning,



which for Bruner is about the growth of individuals, is not understood in terms of Piagetian stages, but rather as “steps” or “spurts”:

These steps or spurts or whatever you may choose to call them are not very clearly linked to age: some environments can slow the sequence down or bring it to a halt, others can move it along faster. In the main, one can characterize these constrained sequences as a series of prerequisites. It is not until the child can hold in mind two features of a display at once, for example that he can deal with their relationship. Bruner (1966, p. 5).

He also states that no aspect of knowledge is beyond the understanding of any learner, if sequenced:

Any idea or problem or body of knowledge can be presented in a form simple enough so that any particular learner can understand it in a recognizable form. (ibid, p. 44)

Gage understands the purpose of educational learning as resulting in the development of five capabilities namely: intellectual skills, cognitive strategies, verbal information, motor skills and attitudes, which are types of outcomes of learning. These outcomes of learning are dependent on internal learner conditions and externally planned and arranged events which are designed to promote learning. These externally planned and arranged events constitute instruction. Learning is understood as cumulative, in that it allows the student not just the capability to undertake the task in hand but also:

When a particular rule is learned, for example, the individual establishes a capability that can transfer to the learning not only of a simple to a more complex rule but also to several others. ... Learning is cumulative, then, because particular intellectual skills are transferable to a number of higher order skills and to a variety of problems to be solved. (1977, p. 145)

Ausubel states that:

Potentially meaningful material is always learned in relation to an existing background of relevant concepts, principles, and information which provide a framework for its reception. (1967, p.76)

Meaningful learning is understood by Ausubel as:

Some form of representational equivalence between language (or symbols) and mental content. (ibid, p. 35)

As to the sequencing of content, two principles must be considered; progressive differentiation and integrative reconciliation (figure 5:4 below). However these principles are dependent on and are influenced by two important factors, the introduction of appropriate subsumers prior to the learning task and that the new information should be discernable from the established conceptual systems that subsume it.

Figure 4:4 Principles to guide the sequencing of curriculum content, adapted from Ausubel (1963, p. 80)

Principles	Explanation of Term
Progressive differentiation	The most general and inclusive ideas of the discipline are included first and are then progressively differentiated in terms of detail and <b>specificity</b>
Integrative reconciliation	Reconciling and integrating new ideas with previously learnt content. Exploring relationships between ideas, to point out significant similarities and differences, and to reconcile real or <b>apparent inconsistencies</b> .

The problem, Ausubel claims, is that these principles of progressive differentiation and integrative reconciliation are misunderstood and that most students:

... Are required to learn the details of new and unfamiliar disciplines before they have acquired an adequate body of relevant subsumers at an appropriate level of inclusiveness. As a result of this practice students and teachers are coerced into treating meaningful materials as if they were rote in character, and consequently experience unnecessary difficulty and little success in both learning and retention. (1963, pp. 79- 80)

The use of text books that segregate and compartmentalize also undermines these principles due to the assumption that:

... pedagogic considerations are adequately served if overlapping topics are handled in a self contained fashion, so that each topic is presented in only one of the several possible places where treatment is relevant and warranted, i.e. the assumption that all necessary cross referencing of related ideas can be satisfactorily performed (and customarily is) by students. Hence little serious effort is made to explicitly explore relationships between ideas, to point out significant similarities and differences, and to reconcile real or apparent inconsistencies. (ibid, p. 80)

Curricular continuity also becomes more of a problem between educational settings when the philosophy of education is underpinned by divergent principles. The Primary curriculum in Ireland is described as “child-centred” whereas the post-primary curriculum is described as “subject-centred”. Using such descriptors to describe is based on the assumption that both curriculums’ are being described from the same perspective of curriculum. Stenhouse states that there are two different views of curriculum:

On the one hand the curriculum is seen as an intention ... On the other it is seen as the existing state of affairs in schools, what does in fact happen. (1975, p. 2)

The descriptor ‘child-centred’ is regularly used to describe the curriculum intention of the Primary education and the descriptor ‘subject-centred’ is similarly used to describe the curriculum reality of post-primary. It would be more correct to state that from the perspective of curriculum intention/ aims, the Primary curriculum is ‘child-centred’ and that the post-primary curriculum is the ‘development of personal qualities, skills, and knowledge and understanding centred’. From the perspective of curriculum reality, post-primary is described as ‘subject centred’ and a new

descriptor would have to be developed for Primary. Some commentators support this view as there is evidence to query the Primary descriptor 'child-centred' as a 'camouflage' for what actually happens (McKernan 1990, Sugrue 1997). The curriculum reality of post-primary is the focus of teaching towards preparing students for assessment. Within such an orientation the notion of curricular continuity is shaped by prior teacher knowledge of their subject content and the requirements of assessment procedures rather than being shaped by a teacher student engagement that endeavours to develop the student's prior primary educational experiences (Kinchin 2004).

Prior to the research of Smyth *et al* (2004) the NCCA were of the view that curriculum continuity did exist. There is a 'special relationship' between primary and second level education especially in light of the Revised Primary Curriculum (1999):

The primary curriculum is seen as having a special relationship with second level education and this revision has taken place in the context of a number of developments which have occurred in second level education in recent years. Department of Education and Science (*ibid*, p. vii)

The NCCA however state that there is more than a special relationship but that:

The curriculum at junior cycle is a further development of the approaches to learning which underpin the primary curriculum and takes cognizance of the full range of knowledge, concepts, skills and attitudes associated with primary education. (1999, p. 7).

The NCCA understand the concept of curricular continuity as important as it supports the rhetoric of child-centeredness which pervades the primary sector and the rhetoric of an ideology of developing all students' abilities which pervades primary and post-primary. The rhetoric of continuity also reveals the belief that

students learn sequentially and therefore learners need continuity to continue learning. In a recent commentary on Smyth *et al* (2004) research into curriculum provision and school integration among first year students the NCCA reiterate, within the first few pages of the commentary, their 1999 stance that:

In promoting the overall development of the student, the junior cycle review committee in 1999, defined the areas of experience that underpin junior cycle and established clear linkages between these and the curriculum areas in the Primary School Curriculum. The continuum between primary and post-primary education is clear, but an understanding of this has not permeated the system in a meaningful way. NCCA (2004, p. 6)

This statement that curricular continuity exists reveals three things a simplistic notion of change, the confusion between terms and the reality of curriculum implementation:

Perhaps the greatest single failing of most educational change theory was the reliance on an over-simplistic model of change. According to this view an innovation, once formally adopted, could automatically be considered in place in daily practice in school. Hord (1987, p. 12)

The history of curriculum innovation is replete with examples of the confusion of adoption and implementation. Gleeson (1989, p.10)

The statement argues that through defining the areas of experience and establishing clear linkages between them and the six areas which underpin the primary curriculum, the continuum must exist. This argument overlooks two things, stating a correlation between two things does not establish a cause –and –effect relationship and neither does it bring into existence the effect. This false correlation allowed the NCCA to claim that the continuum, whether it exists or not, was sound and did not need to be examined. The false correlation also allowed the assumption that the ‘continuum’ in curriculum design should create a shared understanding between

primary and post-primary schools of what any given subject might look like, so that teaching, learning and assessment should be unproblematic as students transfer. This correlation further underpins the belief that if management procedures to enhance the exchange of information and develop meaningful understandings were put in place the stated inadequacy would be eradicated:

It points to a need for a shared strategy between primary and post-primary sectors regarding the recording and transfer of student information ... [this shared strategy] would depend on their (principals and teachers at post-primary) familiarity with the primary school curriculum, their understanding of the reporting mechanism, and their ability to interpret the types of information passed on. NCCA (2004, p. 3)

However as Derricott states:

Liaison procedures may ease the transition from school to school but they do not ensure continuity of curricular experience. (1986, p. 16)

The NCCA may also be referring to two different types of continuums, the first is the continuum between primary and post-primary education and the second is the continuum between primary and post-primary schooling, both terms being used in the commentary. The continuum between primary and post-primary *schooling* suggests the notion of an institutional continuum between organizations each, 'with its own goals, structures, systems and roles' (Callan 2006, p. 7) whereas the continuum between primary and post-primary *education* suggests a continuum in a shared understanding between the both sectors on the processes of growth, development and the associated forms of learning, teaching and assessment. This distinction between schooling and education suggest that when the NCCA are referring to the continuum between primary and post-primary education and primary and post-primary schooling they are confusing two separate resonances of

continuity. However despite this claim of the existence of curricular continuity the NCCA accepts the conclusions Smyth *et al* make with regard to the curriculum and learning in first year:

A substantial group of students in the case study schools reported experiencing a discontinuity in learning experiences between primary and post-primary levels. A significant proportion of first year students do not see the post-primary curriculum as following on naturally from that at primary level and the majority see the teaching methods used as quite different. A significant minority of students found a mismatch in the standards of Irish, English or Mathematics between Primary and post-primary level. This tended to vary within school, indicating that students coming from different feeder schools may have different backgrounds in the various subjects. The issue of curriculum discontinuity between primary and post-primary level was also evident from the teachers' perspective with less than a third of first year teachers in the case study schools feeling that the primary curriculum was a good foundation for their subject and only half reporting familiarity with the nature of the primary curriculum. (2004, p. 285)

Accepting this conclusion that discontinuity exists illuminates what the NCCA possibly mean when they use the word continuity. Accepting this conclusion also reveals that post-primary teachers and post-primary students experience discontinuity differently. Continuity would exist if students' learning experiences in primary and post-primary were in some way connected and if there was no mismatch in subject standards. Continuity would also exist if teachers perceived that students were prepared for post-primary subjects and that they, as teachers, were familiar with the Primary curriculum. For teachers the discontinuity is in the perceived lack of preparedness in students for post-primary subjects, subject content, the students are alluding to discontinuity in teaching methods.

In Northern Ireland two similar divergent ideas around curricular discontinuity were also identified. A study investigating the extent to which a centrally prescribed

programme does, in reality, result in an expansion of science teachers' planning for continuity across the primary/post-primary interface revealed two quite distinct ideas of curricular continuity. The two perspectives were labelled recognitionist and resumptionist:

... recognitionist is a requirement for children to recognize a common thread running through their learning experiences in science, and resumptionist is a requirement to resume at an appropriate starting point. Jarman (1997, p. 299)

What is interesting about these two perspectives is that they allude to responsibility and roles within science. For those who hold the recognitionist perspective the responsibility appears to lie solely in students ability to recognise familiar threads and subject categories running through curriculum. In the resumptionist perspective the responsibility is the teachers' to find a starting point common to all and the students' role is to acquiesce to this. The research also claims that there is no clear understanding of what curricular continuity is despite there being a National Curriculum. She also states that there is:

Merit in the promotion of a broad definition of the term which stresses the need for children to be able to see the links between their present and previous experiences of science, so that they can sense the continuity and progression for themselves. Jarman (1995, p.157)

This perspective of continuity is not prefaced by requirements; the needs of children are imperative and while not mentioned the teacher's role is suggested as one of enabler. It is interesting as well to note from this her perspective continuity and progression are *seen* and *sensed* by students. It is their seeing links and sensing progression that is the test of whether continuity exists.



It is clear that the search for curriculum continuity is therefore not the continuity of the intended curriculum but of the curriculum as experienced by teachers and students, curriculum as reality. In accepting the conclusions of Smyth *et al* (2004) the NCCA state that:

Undoubtedly, the totality of these findings gives urgency to the review of the junior cycle. It is clear, for example, that the length and content of junior cycle subject syllabuses needs to be looked at, especially the appropriateness of course content for lower ability students. There is also a need to consider, where appropriate, strengthening of the practical and skill- based aspect of subjects and for these to be reflected in the methods of assessment employed. (2004, p. 12).

This proposed review of the Junior Cycle and the strengthening of the practical element within subjects overlook an important aspect that of what curriculum building must be concerned with:

... The way in which educators build curriculum, select materials, and choose instructional techniques depends, to a large degree, upon how they define learning. ... Everyone who teaches or professes to teach has some sort of theory of learning. However, teachers may be able to describe their theories in explicit terms or they may not – in which case we usually can deduce from their actions the theories that they are not yet able to verbalize. Thus the important question is not whether a teacher has a theory of learning but, rather how tenable it is. Bigge *et al* (1999, p.2)

Teachers need curriculum that are structured (Derricott 1987). Structured curriculum purposely inform how the learning environment is organized, that the curriculum in its content, presentation and its sequencing is informed by how children learn (Table 4: 5 below). A curriculum designed for continuity would necessitate shared understandings of how pupils / students learn and how the content of that learning must be sequenced. Derricott highlights that curricular continuity would also:

Necessitate the presence of an agreed curriculum plan which is implemented in both the junior or middle school and in the lower

years of post-primary school to which children are transferred. The agreement between schools implies consultation amongst staff and the ability to plan together. (1987, p. 16)

Table 4:5 Aspects of a structured curriculum, adapted from Derricott (1987)

Curriculum Structure	
As Logistical	The way in which the environment is organized for learning.
As Logical	The way in which the content of the curriculum is organized and the sequence it is presented to cater for the needs of pupils at different ages and stages.
As Psychological	The way knowledge about how children learn is best used to sequence learning.

In the Irish context the NCCA (1999) was claiming that a shared understanding existed, without consultation or the provision of planning time, between primary and post-primary schools that would support curricular continuity. This was in spite of the NCCA (1999) being aware of the disposition and educational perspective, that most post-primary teachers think in terms of their subject rather than areas of experience:

Most of the teachers in post-primary schools are subject specialist. Pre-service training and subsequent in-career development for teachers are usually focused on developing and enhancing expertise in the teaching of particular subjects rather than on approaches to the areas of experience. Assessment for certification is currently based on the outcomes of individual subjects rather than the more generic outcomes, types of learning or key skills associated with the areas of experience. (1999, p.14)

Being a subject specialist relates to how mathematical, historical, scientific statements are organized into a body of knowledge, so a subject specialist is a specialist in certain statements of knowledge. Subject specialists have distinctive types of knowledge:

Declarative knowledge that refers to knowledge that so- and so is the case. ... Procedural knowledge is knowledge leading to action. ... Conditional knowledge is knowing when and why a procedure is important. It involves both the other two forms of knowledge, knowing about the situation (declarative), and as well as what to do, (procedural). It also involves metacognitive or self knowledge; that is, knowing whether you have requisite knowledge, whether you can apply it and whether you are applying it adequately or not. Biggs et al (1993, p. 8)

It is clear therefore that the issue is not that teachers are subject specialists, because every walk of life is dependent on subject specialists. The issue is how they as subject specialists understand the process of learning, how they approach the teaching and sequencing of their specialism and what they prioritise as learning outcomes within the specific context of an education setting, school. What is central therefore to implementation / non-implementation of a curriculum is the 'make or break' role of the teacher:

The quality of any educational experience, then, will depend to a very large extent on the individual teacher responsible for it. Kelly (2004, p. 10)

The intended Junior Certificate curriculum for some teachers has not informed or moved them beyond declarative knowledge to procedural knowledge and they are reliant on something other than the educational perspective of the NCCA to frame and evaluate their every day decision making. Callan in highlighting the different contexts involved in curriculum development as outlined above, draws attention to the existence of an embedded idea of curriculum with its cultural roots and associated structures which provides an alternative perspective. This perspective indicates that:

The existing curriculum culture in our schools is characterized by a dominance of textbook learning oriented to examinations with an

emphasis on obtaining content knowledge through the mode of didactic teaching. (2006, p. 46)

What is also interesting is despite the fact that there is in England and Northern Ireland a National Curriculum and as a consequence there is a common curricular and assessment language between the sectors, contacts between primary and post-primary schools “produce little by the way of shared understanding”, Jarman (1995, p. 156). The types of contacts that are unproductive are ones that are meetings for meetings’ sake. What are needed are “agreed aims and objectives of any links, so that these may continuously inform the efforts of those involved and provide a basis for review and evaluation” Jarman (1995, p. 157). In the MI Project referred to earlier, the relative success of the dialogue has been attributed to several key components, “place, purpose and focus, lens and language to help provide a perspective and tools for construction and evaluation” Naughton (2001, p. 66).

This section identified that the issue of continuity is of central importance for understanding development. The rhetoric of continuity reveals that the belief that students learn sequentially and need continuity to continue learning. Without this understanding of continuity the education of students could be designed around encouraging children to unthinkingly accumulate facts and mastery of specific procedures.

There is evidence to show when the NCCA are referring to the continuum between primary and post-primary education and primary and post-primary schooling they are confusing two separate resonances of continuity. They appear to allow to collapse into each other an institutional continuum between organizations each, ‘with its own goals, structures, systems and roles’ (Callan 2006, p. 7) and an

educational continuum that suggests a shared understanding between the both sectors on the processes of growth, development and the associated forms of learning, teaching and assessment.

It is also clear that the search for curriculum continuity is not the continuity of the intended curriculum but of the curriculum as experienced by teachers and students, curriculum as reality. The experienced curriculum needs to be structured (Derricott 1987). A structured curriculum, designed for continuity, would necessitate shared understandings of how pupils / students learn and how the content of that learning must be sequenced. It would also necessitate a shared understanding the process of learning, how they as teachers approach the teaching and sequencing of content for students and what they prioritise as learning outcomes within the specific context of an education setting, school. What is central therefore to implementation / non-implementation of continuity in the curriculum is the 'make or break' role of the teacher. What is needed to establish curriculum continuity are:

Agreed aims and objectives of any links between primary and post-primary, so that these may continuously inform the efforts of those involved and provide a basis for review and evaluation. Jarman (1995, p.157)

## **Conclusion**

This chapter established that teaching norms are revealed in catchphrases that focus on how people relate to and value each other. This will inform the methodology used in this research as its aim will be to reveal the teachers' theories, beliefs assumptions and values. The analysis will identify the work culture of which that teacher's are part of. The student can also reveal a school's cultural pattern in what they perceive

teachers think in what they say and do and its cultural form in that they observe to some degree the patterns of relationships teachers work in.

There would appear to be in existence a curriculum orientation towards teaching and learning that is academic rationalism. Such a curriculum orientation demands silence and compliance from both teachers and students. The rhetoric of continuity reveals the belief that students learn sequentially and need continuity to continue learning. A curriculum designed for continuity would necessitate shared understandings of how pupils / students learn and how the content of that learning must be sequenced. The issue is how teachers understand the process of learning, how they approach the teaching and sequencing of content for students and what they prioritise as learning outcomes within the specific context of an education setting, school. What is also needed to support curriculum continuity are an agreed set of educational principles and aims in existence between primary and post-primary with regard to teaching and learning.

## Chapter 5

### Methodology

This study is focused on the area of student transition from Primary to post-primary school within a large urban town in Ireland. Since the *Pupil Transfer Committee Report* (1981) there has been, until relatively recently, very little published research on the issue of pupil/ student transfer. In 2004 two pieces of work, Smyth *et al* (2004), funded by the NCCA, and O'Brien (2004), funded by the Department of Education and Science were published. Smyth *et al* examines the transition process from the perspective of the post-primary school in order to:

Address the gaps in Irish research on how post-primary schools can influence integration and learning of their students in first year. (2004, p. 16)

The research sample was large; at national level 567 school principals were surveyed using a postal survey to explore the ways in which post-primary schools manage the transition process, and a total of 329 key school personnel and teachers of first year students in the twelve case study schools were interviewed. To provide an academic baseline for assessing the academic progress of students a Drumcondra Level 6 reading and computation test was administered twice to students, 916 students early in the academic year and 715 students later in the academic year, the students also completed a questionnaire at similar times. In addition to this, 38 group interviews were conducted with students in 11 of the case study schools, the 12th school having withdrawn itself from the research. 81 parents participated in telephone interviews. The research combined qualitative and quantitative approaches.

O'Brien's' (2004) study was qualitative and focused on the transition experience of pupils, teachers and parents. She reported the views and experiences of 153 pupils before they made the transition to post-primary and after they had made the move, together with the views and experiences of 64 teachers in total, drawn from primary and post-primary schools. 50 parents were also interviewed.

Smyth *et al* (2005) research is on a large scale, whereas O'Brien (2004), while maintaining a broad base is more exploratory, however both pieces of research reveal that 'transition as a subject (*merits*) serious analysis' Naughton (2005, p. 119). O'Brien also states that because of this broad research base there is a need for:

Focused studies... to target aspects of the transfer process in order to answer questions about the impact of transfer on students. (2004, p 86)

In seeking to contribute to this research area, it was judged a possibility that a distinct contribution may be made by exploring the impact of transfer on students through contextualizing it, through locating the research location within a geographical area. The intent of the current study is to identify and describe what curriculum factors, if any, were affecting the continuity of educational experience after the transfer of students from Primary to post-primary school in a town. This enquiry is based on data collected during the academic year of 2003 - 2004.

The enquiry is influenced by the impact of the enquirer's literature research around the issue of transition, and the critique of official (DES, NCCA) documentation that was undertaken. The framing of the inquiry and the formulation of research questions were informed by the following. The development of education since 1960 highlighted the growing awareness of the importance of collaboration to connect the curricular frameworks of primary and post primary. This requires partnership and



liaison between primary and post primary. The second area is that adolescent engagement with learning requires the teaching cultures of primary and post primary schools to respond to and focus on adolescent developmental needs. The third is that despite the statements in official documentation that curriculum continuity exists, because it is built into curriculum design in fact it may not exist in practice.

### **Personal statement and history**

Having worked for a financial institution for a number of years I resigned to pursue the development of a Judeo Christian faith perspective on life. Through working with the oppressed and marginalized in Ireland and abroad for some years I became aware that there are hidden realities in society and social structures that needed to be challenged and exposed. I saw teaching as possible avenue to live out these values and commitments. At present I am a teacher in a post-primary community school working as a guidance counsellor. This position within the school system and the interaction it affords me with students, staff and management has allowed me to develop an understanding of how the system works and how the system fails, for whom the system works for and for whom the system fails. It also leads me to ponder whether there is a cost even for those for whom the system appears to work. I agree with the following view that:

Researchers ought to share especially in the scepticism of consensus, since it is arguably, their particular function as intellectual citizens to challenge the easy and self perpetuating consensus that society creates for itself (Roszak, 1969). At least they have to observe that what any group of people believe or agree to be true may rest on, for example, unexamined tradition, the hegemony of a dominant class, the suppression of self censorship of dissenting opinion or collective hysteria – all things that intellectuals and researchers have traditionally been expected to subvert. Bridges (1999, p. 606)

To understand what teachers and students believe with regard to their experiences around transition encourages the use of a constructivist approach. I am aware that there are charges laid against constructivist thinking, that there are elements of pragmatism that turn 'the truth or falsity of a belief into a matter of social agreement' Bridges (1999, p. 606). It is for this very reason, that social agreement is not the basis of some objective truth, that constructivism appeals to me in that it allows one to challenge the status quo. The claim for the reliability of this research is made, not on any arrogant claim of objectivity, but on the grounds of the clarity of the teleological purpose of the enquirer, through revealing his 'personality' and that the observations 'intrinsically involve the observer', Kirk et al (1986, p. 51).

### **Identifying the Research Location**

Stake (1995) recommends that cases be chosen on the basis of the opportunities they provide for learning. Finding a suitable location to undertake this research involved the consideration of numerous factors. The case study location would have to have a mixture of some Irish school organizational and sector types. As the methodology was qualitative, consideration had also to be given to the feasibility of undertaking the collection and typing up of the research data within a fixed time scale, mainly the early part of an academic year. It was also judged that it was imperative to have some post-primary schools within the chosen location participating as case study sites for this enquiry. This decision was taken on the basis that there were so few of them in any given location that an absence would restrict population size and could influence the perspective of transition as that involved students, teachers and induction programs in the town. While initially it was thought that with the presence

of multiple Primary schools in all the identified locations, random selection would have to take place to select participants. This in fact did not happen, a convenience sample was used.

Issues around objectivity became apparent early on in the enquiry design. Some of the proposed locations were also judged unsuitable because of the enquirers' involvement and familiarity with them. The location would also have to be within a certain distance of the researcher's home that would facilitate the ability of others to care for the researcher's children while this element of the research was being undertaken. Because of these considerations Rafoarty was judged a suitable location.

### **The Research Setting**

Rafoarty is an urban centre, developing and expanding as a dormitory town with commuting and residential development located at some distance from where people work. This expansion is reflected in its population growth from around 13,000 in 1996 to 23,000 in 2003. It serves as an administrative, employment, commercial, health and recreational centre for its immediate hinterland and beyond. A high percentage of persons are employed in manufacturing and production, commerce and professional services and mining. The problem of long term unemployment remains deep rooted in certain parts of the town with a close correlation between low educational achievement and high unemployment. At present in excess of 5,000 students attend primary and post-primary education. There are 10 primary schools and 4 post-primary schools within the town envelope with post-primary schools accommodating students from a 10-15 mile radius. At present there is no Third Level Education in the town. The Primary schools are coded and in Table 5:1 and

the post-primary schools in Table 5:2 below. The number and profile of volunteer interviewees are contained in Table 5:3 below.

Table 5:1 Profile of primary Schools

Primary School	Location	Enrolment	Status	Code
Fanaghans	Village (v)	F126/M 87 Coed (co)		Fanaghan (vco)
Gargin	Town (t)	F216/M 175 Coed (co)	Disadvantage (D)	Gargin (tcoD)
Killin (tcoD)	Town (t)	F 55 / M 92 Coed (co)	Disadvantage (D)	Killin (tcoD)
Leagans (rco)	Rural (r)	F161/M 186 Coed (co)		Leagans (rco)
Meenagran (tco)	Town (t)	F208/M 118 Coed (co)		Meenagran (tco)
Sallows	Rural (r)	F 95/ M 120 Coed (co)		Sallows (rco)
Tamur	Town (t)	F236/M 264 Coed (co)		Tamur (twco)

Table 5:2 Profile of post-primary Schools

Post-primary	Type	Enrolment	Status	Code
Ardbane School	Voluntary school (vs)	Male (m)		Ardbane (vsm)
Breter School	Voluntary school (vs)	Female (f)		Breter (vsf)
Creevins School	Voluntary school (vs)	Female (f)	Disadvantaged (D)	Creevins (vsfD)
Drum Coe School	Community College (cc)	Female 127 Male 248 Coed (co)	Disadvantaged (D)	Drum Coe (cccoD)

Table 5:3 Number and Profile of volunteer interviewees

School Code	Senior Management	Teachers	Number Interviewed and School Role	Students
Ardbane (vsm)	1 Deputy	6	1- Year Head 5 - 1 <sup>st</sup> Year Subject Teachers	8
Breanter (vsf)	1 Principal	8	1 -Year Head 6- 1 <sup>st</sup> Year Subject Teachers 1 - Guidance Counsellor	8
Creevins (vsfD)	1 Principal	12	1- Year Head 8 -1 <sup>ST</sup> Year Subject Teachers 1- SCP Personnel 1- Guidance Counsellor 1- Home School Liaison	8
Drum Coe (cccoD)	1 Principal 1 Deputy	14	1- Year Head 8 - 1 <sup>st</sup> Year Subject Teachers 3- SCP Personnel 1- Guidance Counsellor 1- Home School Liaison	8
Fanaghan (vco)	1 Principal	1	Sixth Class Teacher	None
Gargin (tcoD)	1 Principal	1	Sixth Class Teacher	None
Killin (tcoD)	1 Principal	1	Sixth Class Teacher	None
Leagans (rco)	1 Principal	1	Sixth Class Teacher	None
Meenagran (tco)	1 Principal	1	Sixth Class Teacher	None
Sallows (rco)	1 Principal	1	Sixth Class Teacher	None
Tamur (twco)	1 Principal	1	Sixth Class Teacher	None

### **Choosing the candidates for interviewing**

The study would be developed through interviewing principals, teachers and students at post-primary and principals and sixth class teachers in primary. All the interview questions were piloted in May 2003 with students in a neighbouring town who had transferred the previous September from primary school. Taking time to formulate interview questions resulted in them acting as a framework rather than a restrictive structure. Interview questions were also piloted with Primary principals and post-primary personnel. It was decided because of the finite resources available to the researcher, that pupils of primary schools and parents would not be included in this research. To produce data that would reveal local concerns the interviews were viewed as a local accomplishment where:

... both the interviewer and interviewee rely upon their conversational skills and common-sense knowledge of social structures to produce adequate utterances, Silverman (2001, p. 104).

### **Gaining access**

Gaining access to the post-primary schools within the location involved initially persuading senior management in all four post-primary schools to allow the research to take place in their school. While senior management had no objections to their schools participating, they all explicitly stated that they would not speak for their staff. In Creevins (vsfD) an additional requirement was that I would have to address and gain approval of the school's Parents Association. During the previous academic year industrial action had been undertaken by the larger of the second level teacher unions, ASTI, involving the banning of teacher union members carrying out supervision duties outside of timetabled class time. While the dispute

was settled at the time of carrying out the research, some teachers, members of the ASTI, were hesitant to become involved in activities outside their teaching hours. Impinging on teachers break time and/or asking them to become participants in such an enquiry would need careful planning. As a member of the ASTI, and very much aware of the difficulties of the previous year, this aspect of gaining teacher representation in the enquiry was approached with great care. Management in all schools agreed to introduce me to their staff and invited me to address them. The time allotted for this, in three of the four schools, was during the eleven o'clock break during a school day, in the fourth I was allowed to address staff during a break on a staff day. The address outlined who I was, what my research interest was, why I was interested in it, why I needed them to participate and how the finding of the research would be used. In all schools the initial reception of the invitation to staff to participate was poor. However over a period of three weeks staff came forward, this was as a direct result of a considerable time spent on behalf of the enquirer sitting around staff rooms talking to staff members, informing them on a less formal basis of what the participating in the research involved. That teachers were willing to get involved was due to the fact that I had to address them and spend time in staff rooms to get their involvement. Conscious of the effects of the ASTI dispute I addressed them as a fellow teacher with a research problem they could help me with and by being present in the staffroom to engage with them as I waited for respondents may have affected how quickly I built up a rapport with them. This is similar to Oakley's findings:

I had found, in my previous interviewing experiences, that an attitude of refusing to answer questions or offer any kind of personal feedback

was not helpful in terms of the traditional goal of supporting rapport.  
(1981, p. 49)

In this 'waiting time' an unforeseen challenge arose; namely that the semi structured interviews were designed for periods longer than the class period that teachers were willing to give. While the timing of interviews was arranged at convenient times interviews would have to last no more than a class period. This raised the question of whether, given the shorter period of time, I would be able to establish rapport with the respondents. My presence in the staff room over an extended period of time and the willingness to disclose who I was and what I was about assisted in the building up of rapport prior to the interview interaction as Oakley states:

In most cases, the goal of finding out about people through interviewing is best achieved when the relationship of interviewer and interviewee is not hierarchical and when the interviewer is prepared to invest his or her own personal identity in the relationship. (1981, p. 41)

The undertaking of focus group interviews with students operated on the assumption that students could and would articulate their perceptions. To this end I interviewed them in their own school, kept the questions appropriate and unambiguous. I used my skills as a guidance counsellor to respectfully elicit and encourage responses. Whilst in the design stage the focus had been on the structure of the interview, in the research location the focus was on the setting in which the interview occurred. Staff members also recruited other colleagues and informed me of other staff members who might be interested in participating.

The student sample was randomly selected in three of the post-primary schools from class lists supplied by the Principal or the Year Head. In Drum Coe (cccoD) the students were selected from a list of students supplied by the Year Head, this was



because over 50% of the first year student cohort was made up of students with a wide range of special needs. Accepting this judgement call by the Year Head unwittingly:

Categorized people as narratively incompetent. As a result their voice and the particular what's of their lives will not be heard in interview data. Holstein *et al*, (1995, p. 21).

Written permission was sought from parents and students in all schools for their involvement in the enquiry (Appendix 2). All interview data was collected and stored on tape and were typed up by myself as they were collected. This was deliberately done as it allowed me to become familiar with the data informing my observations as emerging categories, themes, relationships and concepts developed. Written field-notes were also kept.

At primary school level gaining access to principals proved difficult. Whereas with the post-primary schools the Principal could be contacted through a secretary, in Primary schools contact was through a message machine. This was due to the fact that some principals teach and that the day is structured differently from that in post-primary schools. Despite this inability to recruit participating Primary schools at this stage the decision was made to proceed with collecting the data from post-primary schools. In February 2004, a meeting was organized by the local Education Centre between the local primary and post-primary schools around issues to do with transition. The Principals of Creevins (vsfD) and Drum Coe (cccoD) were the impetus behind the meeting. I was invited by the Director of the Education Centre to chair the meeting. The meeting proved very useful to my research in that it resulted in gaining access to some primary school principals.

The School Completion Programme (SCP) manage a transition programme between the primary schools and two post-primary schools in the town, Drum Coe (cccoD) / Creevins (vsfD) and Gargin (tcoD) / Killin (tcoD). Students are identified in primary schools that may not make the transition into post-primary school. This identifying and targeting of students results in relationships being developed which means that students make the transition. Failing to make the transition is a complex situation that includes how schools undertake the process of student transition and student and parental attitude towards education and the educational system.

### **Framing the Enquiry**

In considering what method of educational research would be adopted it became clear that there existed a continuum of stances situated between two major research paradigms:

The two notions of positivism and interpretivism retain currency in terms of common parlance among researchers. They remain shorthand terms that encapsulate the major schism within approaches to social research. Denscombe (2002, p. 6)

Both notions in their extremities are an approach in principle to social research that takes a position on how the nature of the social world can be understood (ontology) about what can be known and how it can be known (epistemology). What counts as good research has to satisfy different criteria within each of these paradigms. Niglas (1999) highlights the inappropriate use of the term paradigm in educational research and states:

It has become very common in methodological literature that quantitative approach is described as belonging to the positivistic paradigm and qualitative approach to interpretive paradigm. p. 4

This closed alignment of method with epistemological and ontological stance is not recommended as the guiding principle of enquiry. Denscombe states that what should guide the enquiry is:

The research question, not the purity of an ontological or epistemological stance about what the social world is like and the fundamental principles by which we come to understand it. (2002, p. 23)

This pragmatic stance is supported by Niglas in her conclusion to her inquiry into whether there is a paradigmatic empirical difference in research dichotomies. She states:

...we have to reject the notion of the dichotomous nature of educational research ... the results show that there is no consistency in methodology of studies, which would give us the reason to look at qualitative and quantitative approaches as incommensurable paradigms. This leads to the conclusion that the statements made by proponents of paradigmatic view should be taken as normative rather than empirical in their nature. (1999, p. 15)

As the purpose of the interview questions of this enquiry are, to reveal the meaning that students and teachers operate out of and create during this transition time, my capacity to construct meaningful data has to be placed at the centre of the theorizing process. This enquiry concern of the construction of meaning also demonstrates that this enquiry is concerned with truth:

It is also vital for qualitative researchers to be aware of and lay open the theoretical and epistemological foundations of their research to the community of interested readers. Greckhamer (2005, p. 732).

Justification of our choice and particular use of methodology and methods is something that reaches into the assumptions about reality that we bring to our work. To ask about these assumptions is to ask about our theoretical perspective. Crotty (1998, p. 2).

It is from the claim for social constructed meaning that my theoretical and epistemological foundations emerge. This constructivist approach denies the existence of an objective reality in that it:

Asserts instead, that realities are social constructions of the mind and that there exist as many such constructions as there are individuals.  
Guba and Lincoln (1989, p. 43)

The stance taken that no objective reality exists places a 'moral imperative' on constructivists not only to construct but also if necessary to reconstruct reality and to be continuously:

Alert for –indeed, to seek out-challenges to the prevailing construction (however much it may be supported in consensus), and to stand ready to refine, change, or even reject that which is currently believed in favour of something else that, on examination, seems more reasonable and appropriate to those in the best position to make that judgment'  
Guba and Lincoln (1989, p. 47)

This constructive ontological stance has a knock on epistemological stance which understands that knowledge emerges as a product of human interaction. The findings of any study, it is claimed, exist because of the interaction of the inquirer with what is being inquired into:

Precisely because there is an interaction between observer and observed that literally creates what emerges from that inquiry. Guba and Lincoln (1989, p. 44)

This interaction demands that there is a space created for reflexivity on the part of the enquirer:

Reflexivity provides the space where, as researchers, we critically reflect upon the social conditions in which we have constructed our accounts. Dunne et al (2005, p. 87)

Bridges states that to provide truthful accounts of peoples constructions of their world there is an:

Imperative on the researcher to penetrate all sorts of lies, deceit and misrepresentation. (1999, p. 612)

Methodologically he rejects the notion that insists on empirical observation and methods substituting instead 'four specifications', (ibid, p. 613) required to be met to conduct a constructivist enquiry. The first three are that the study be pursued in a natural setting, that there is sufficient known about the time/context frame a priori to know what questions to ask and that qualitative methods are used. The fourth specification however is framed in the language of a right, the right to incorporate and use tacit knowledge. The tacit knowledge used will be the knowledge gained through the enquirer's professional occupation as a Guidance Counsellor in an Irish post primary school. In dealing with transition issues on an annual basis, the enquirer, has developed a 'know how' about curriculum and adolescent developmental issues. In this enquiry these specifications can be met.

The enquiry was undertaken as a case study. The purpose of the enquiry, the defining and development of the questions and the theoretical and epistemological foundations suggest that using an exploratory case study approach could be a suitable 'horse for this course', Denscombe (2002, p. 23). To demonstrate the validity of the data, in its collection and analysis, the interpretation of it and the confidence that it accords with what is real the following procedures would have to be adhered to as outlined in Stake (1995). The data collected would have to be substantial and descriptive. The data analysis would be concerned with correspondence and patterns, and the interpretation would involve interviewees reviewing typed interviews.

The collecting of data had to be completed within the time frame of an academic year through obtaining the descriptions, recollections and the experiences of individuals within participating post-primary schools and primary schools. Subsequent development of research questions of enquiry provided that a 'strong rationale' existed for choosing a qualitative approach, Creswell (1998, p. 17). The issue questions developed from the sense that certain issues may need exploration at a local level. The role of the enquirer can be aligned with the role of the case study researcher as an interpreter:

The researcher recognizes and substantiates new meanings. Whoever is a researcher has recognized a problem, puzzlement, and studies it, hoping to connect it better with new things. Stake (1995, p. 97)

Stake in his reflection of Von Wright's (1971) clarification of the difference between explanations that promote understanding and understanding that is expressed in terms of explanation, states that there is an epistemological difference:

Between case studies seeking to identify cause and effect relationships and those seeking understanding of human experience. (1995, p. 36)

This difference of enquirer intention is the basis of the epistemological difference between choosing either quantitative or qualitative methods. It was thought that the function of such an approach would facilitate the development of a local description of transition that could feed into existing theories and present a contextualized, detailed view of transition that is presently absent in Irish research:

Not necessarily to map and conquer the world but to sophisticate the beholding of it. Stake (1995, p. 43)

## Interview questions

The formulation of interview questions emerged from the development of a conceptual framework which focused on three interrelated factors:

- Are transition liaison procedures in Rafoarty are comprehensive procedures
- Does the concept of partnership informs how schools approach students' educational experience at this time
- Does how teachers commence teaching first years can identify aspects of culture that cannot be easily seen, school norms, that is the collections of personal and group guiding principles and perceptions.

These three interrelated factors determined what data to collect and the development of interview questions (Appendix 1).

In interviewing, participants were not conceived as 'passive vessels of answers' (Holstein *et al* 1995) and an awareness that accessing their experiences and knowledge was dependent on:

How parties to the interview construe and manage their respective roles in relation to what is asked about and the answers conveyed. (op cit, p. 30)

Understanding the research process as a narrative and looking within the data, beyond utterances as merely points of view encouraged the development of analytical questions:

Indeed, one of the strengths of thinking about our data as narrative is that this opens up the possibilities for a variety of analytic strategies. Such approaches also enable us to think beyond our data to the ways in which accounts and stories are socially and culturally managed and constructed. That is, the analysis of narratives can provide a critical way of examining not only key actors and events but also cultural conventions and social norms. Coffey *et al* (1996, p. 80)

These assumptions and search for alternative view points are connected to the life history of the enquirer. The use of semi structured interviews with teachers and principals and focus groups with students was decided upon in the research design in that they allow for depth to be achieved by providing the opportunity for the interviewer to probe and expand the respondent's answers:

Qualitative interviewing is a way of finding out about what others think and feel about their worlds. Through qualitative interviews you can understand experiences and reconstruct events in which you did not participate in. Rubin and Rubin (1995, p. 1)

The use of focus group interviews with students was chosen:

To place the participants on a more even footing with each other and the investigator...meanings and answers arising during focus group interviews are socially constructed rather than individually created. Berg (2004, p. 127)

Qualitative interviewing fits in with a constructivist epistemological stance in that:

It is not looking for principles that are true all the time and in all conditions, like the law of physics; rather, the goal is understanding of specific circumstances, how and why things actually happen in a complex world. Knowledge in qualitative interviewing is situational and conditional' Rubin and Rubin (1995, pp. 38-39)

### **Generalization:**

Stake states that:

We do not study a case primarily to understand other cases. Our first obligation is to understand this one. ... The first criterion should be to maximize what we can learn. (1995, p. 4)

This, Stake argues, renders generalizations generated between cases as *less trusted* than generalizations from one, Denscombe states, however, that this is a 'minority view', (2002, p.151). William (2000) suggests that it is possible to make generalizations from particular cases. The problem is caused in that we do not



express the full meaning of the term generalization. He goes to expand the term to three possible meanings of the word generalization, Table 5:4 below.

Table 5:4 Possible meanings of the word 'generalization', adapted from William (2000)

Type of generalizations	Meaning
Total	Where every <i>S'</i> is identical to <i>S</i> in every detail
Statistical	Where the probability of situation <i>S</i> occurring more widely can be estimated from instance of <i>s</i>
Moderatum	Where aspects of <i>S</i> can be seen to be instances of a broader recognizable set of features

Moderatum generalizations, if used as a definition, can allow generalizations to be generated between cases:

Interpretivism ... can make clear the meaningful experiences of actors and specifically why they believe the world is the way it is and if these experiences can become *Moderatum* generalizations then they can form the basis of theories about process and structure. William (2000, p. 222)

William states that, using the Moderatum definition, allows the permissibility of theoretical inference, the idea that theories / universal claims can be derived from the study of a single case which exemplifies a type. William supports his stance, using two examples of research, Geertz (1979) and Fisher (1993):

If one takes generalization in a broad non-scientific sense to mean 'a general notion or proposition obtained by inference from particular cases' (Concise Oxford Dictionary), then interpretive research is replete with generalizations. Some of Geertz's claims about life in Bali or about the role of ritual are far reaching and hard to verify, whereas Fisher's claims are much more modest and are clearly testable in other contexts. Both studies, however, infer from specific instances to conclusions about a culture or social milieu and this would seem to be inevitable if we are to 'say something of something. William (2000, p. 212)

Yin agrees with this position stating that:

Case studies... are generalizable to theoretical propositions and not to populations or universes. In this sense the case study, does not represent a sample, and the investigators goal is to expand and

generalize theories (analytical generalization) and not enumerate frequencies (statistical generalization) (1994, p. 21)

Stake does accept, not only the possibility, but that the function of case studies is to allow readers of case studies to make inferences and connections with perceptions of similar types through the authors using Geertz's 'thick description' to give a full a picture a possible:

Thick description is not complexities objectively described; it is the particular perceptions of the actors. Can readers accept subjective description? Often the researchers aim is not veridical representation so much as stimulation of further reflection, optimizing reader's opportunity to learn. (1995, p. 42).

I also take the view that the limits of the claims about the possibility of the truths emerging in this enquiry are of the type, I believe that 'p' is true in this case and because of the type of 'p' it is possible that 'p' may be true in other cases.

During the interviews and in reviewing of interviews with participants, especially with student and teachers, it became apparent that there were many layers of emotional content in the statements and assertions of respondents. In questioning whether claims of truth could be made on the basis of these psycho-dynamic statements are important I concur with Bridges view that such language has a truth asserting character:

We know how the language in which an assertion is made may be selected to persuade, to intimidate, to assert authority or power over somebody ... To acknowledge this psycho-dynamic dimension of language is, however, entirely compatible with maintaining its propositional, truth asserting character. (1999, p. 599)

### **Ethics**

The ethical rules for school-based research proposed by Hitchcock and Hughes (1995, p 51-52) were adopted. The research was deemed viable to

undertake and care was taken in its design. Anonymity was given to the participating schools and individuals to prevent identification of the subjects and/or the location. The aims, objectives, methods of the research and that the findings of the research would be published were explained verbally to teachers and students and outlined in letters to students' parents while seeking their permission to interview sons or daughter (Appendix 2)

### **The constraints of this research**

Time provided a limiting factor on data collection. There was also the limitation of resources as this research was being undertaken by an individual researcher with no financial backing for the research. The collection of the data from students, from all four schools had to be within a narrow time frame the second term, October to December. The reasoning behind this was that students had to be allowed to settle into their school and yet not be far removed from it to not be unable to describe or recall their recollections. While this was achieved with most students, students from Ardbane School (vsm) were interviewed in January. As already stated teachers and students could only be interviewed within one class period, this meant that interviews lasted between thirty five and forty minutes long. In Ardbane School (vsm) the interviews included a single group interview with three teachers due to their lack of availability at other times. The interviews with Senior Management in Primary and post-primary were not constrained by the same time limit. The Principal of Brenter (vsf) was unavailable after the initial meeting with regard to gaining access to conduct the research in the school. The Principal designated a member of staff as my contact point with the school.

## **Conclusion**

The research is focused on how curriculum structures affect the continuity of students' educational experience as they transfer from primary and post-primary schools in a town. It is a constructivist enquiry undertaken as a multiple case study. In adopting such an approach it was judged that the research would produce a local contextualized, detailed view of the transition process. Chapter 6 contain the findings with regard to Principals and teachers and students' perceptions on,

- The transition liaison procedures in Rafoarty
- Whether the concept of partnership informs how schools approach students' educational experience at this time
- What guides how teachers commence teaching first years

While students are not directly involved in transition liaison procedures influence their experience of transition. How schools approach student integration and commence teaching them identifies aspects of school norms. These findings are contained in Chapter 7.

## Chapter 6

### **Findings: primary and post-primary principals and teachers'**

In this chapter the findings of primary and post-primary principals and post-primary teachers' data is presented in five sections. The research questions informed the presentation of the findings. The first section presents the analysis of the primary and post-primary principals' data of whether transition liaison procedures in Rafoarty are comprehensive procedures. It also focuses on how the recording and monitoring of the progress of pupils prior to, during and post transition is valued differently by primary and post-primary principals. The second section presents the results of the data analysis on whether the concept of partnership informs how schools approach students' educational experience of curriculum continuity at this time. It identifies the challenges for partnership posed by the differing public, primary and post-primary perception of the purpose and function of education in preparing pupils for transfer. The third section reveals post-primary principals' perspective of the transfer process, entrance assessments, subject choice and the concept of curriculum continuity revealing further cultural and structural challenges to partnership. The fourth section presents the analysis of post-primary teachers' data with regard to the information outcomes of transition liaison procedures in Rafoarty. Distinctions are made between the types of information about students that teachers choose to use and ignore. It also reveals a category of information that links students to primary schools. The fifth section identifies the problems teachers observe with regard to first year students in their classrooms. Section 6 presents how

classroom teachers approach the curriculum as they start teaching first years and the level of contact they have with Primary schools.

### **Section 1**

#### **The monitoring and recording of pupils' progress in primary schools**

The interviews with primary principals establish that pupils' academic and developmental progress is closely monitored and recorded as they progressed through the Primary school. All seven Primary Schools Principals stated that their individual schools did have procedures in place to monitor pupils' educational and social development. These procedures commence in Junior Infants and subsequently track and record the child's academic development, indicate their academic and social abilities as they progress through Primary school. This information is compiled through recording teacher observations, recording the outcomes of class tests and a range of standardised test results in Reading and Mathematics. Personal data on the individual and his /her background is also recorded. Records are kept in a file or report card / book which travels with the child as they progress through the school. The details are either retained by the class teacher or held centrally by management. The pupil record is understood by primary principals as significant to them and as somewhat insignificant to post-primary principals.

#### **The Primary School Pupil Record**

While there is uniformity between Primary schools, in that a pupil record is developed in all schools, each school uses a variety of means to develop records and of controlling who has access to such records. In Leagans (rco) the Principal controls

teacher access to all pupil information, when teachers and pupils change classes, he only allow teachers access to the:

Types of things I think will influence what will affect that child settling down or their academic progress. Leagans (rco)

The Principal in Killin (tcoD) stated the view that teachers taking a class for the first time should not access pupil reports too quickly. This is to ensure teachers:

They don't come with baggage to the pupil, (recommending) that maybe that they wait certainly until after eight or ten weeks before they go down that road. Killin (tcoD)

All schools state that they exclude sensitive, confidential information from being maintained and transmitted in written form. Not writing down information is understood as a prudent activity that they as schools understand will have no legal implications under the Data Protection Act (1988). These findings are similar to findings of Smyth *et al* (2004). However if, as data 'means information in a form in which it can be processed', if it were to be established that verbal communication was the 'form' from which information was processed the degree of prudence, in such a practice as outlined above, might be called into question. Confidential information when it is written down is encoded using a code developed and understood by teachers in Gargin (tcoD). By choosing to deal with the communication of confidential information within the school, in such a way, it has also become data.

### **Significance of the pupil record for primary school principals**

Despite the findings of the Smyth *et al* (2004) regarding the inadequacy of information received from primary schools, Primary Principals in this research look upon the pupil record of a sixth class pupil as an important educational document.

This research suggests that the inadequacy of the flow of information is due to the reluctance on the part of some post-primary principals to see it as significant. Primary Principals state that the student's record should be a significant document for Post-primary schools especially when students transfer into them at the end of sixth class:

... All the information that is needed about the child is here in Primary school, I am convinced of that. We have the MICRA, SIGMA and WISC tests every year. They are all up to date. They could have all this, see the pattern. We have the personal data, the family background. A lot of years work is focused into them. Sallows (rco)

This importance of the student record as a significant document of record was reiterated in five of the seven Primary schools. Two schools however, Gargin (tcoD) and Meenagran (tco), saw it as an internal document. Both these schools are attached to their respective post-primary school, both primary and post-primary school being managed respectively by the same group of religious. For the principal of both schools pupil transfer is understood in terms of pupil relocation within a wider school organization:

They go on to our post-primary school. Gargin (tcoD)

We are Breter (vsf) primary. Meenagran (tco)

For both these schools significant transfer information consisted of providing answers to questions that the post-primary school requested:

We give a lot of information on special needs, resource provision, family and personal problems. Gargin (tcoD)

What they mainly want to know is their social skills, talents or weaknesses ... levels of parental involvement and co-operation and if a child has been giving hassle. Meenagran (tco)



This request for information draws attention to factors that Primary and post-primary principals perceive as contributing to sustained difficulties for students in the transition process.

**Primary Principals' perception of the insignificance of the pupil record for post-primary school principals**

Analysis of the interviews suggests that post-primary school personnel perceive their section as *the* educational system, ignoring the legal obligation that as part of the education system they need to work with other education providers:

... to ensure that the education system is accountable to students, their parents and the state for the education provided. Education Act (1998)

Post-primary school principals are perceived by their Primary school principals as being selective with regard how they treat information. The goal of the reception procedures focus solely on the administrative and social / pastoral facets of liaison (Derricott 1987):

There are those (Creevins (vsfD)) that want the full picture, those that just want the academic and the behaviour and those then that just want to know, about who have the special needs and get the free books. Sallows (rco)

While it is unclear what is meant by the 'full picture', it is something more than 'the academic', 'the behaviour' 'the special needs' and the 'free books'. However the 'fullness' of the efforts of Creevins (vsfD) falls short of Derricott (1987) analysis of the facets of liaison. None of the post-primary schools in Rafoarty have procedures in place to facilitate teachers from different schools to discuss, plan and implement related courses and approaches to teaching. In this way at the level of practice procedures are 'dualistic' in that they focus on administrative and pastoral / social

facets of liaison. Because of this 'dualistic' approach to liaison the curricular facet of liaison is understood as the impossible search for academic consistency. This acceptance that academic inconsistency, with regard to academic standards, exists between primary schools has an impact on why the 'pupil report' does not transfer to post-primary:

It is that their intake is not just from our school but from many diverse primary schools in the area and surrounding area. That there just would not be that sort of consistency between primary schools to get consistency. Leagans (rco)

With regard the sharing of knowledge, Primary principals would be of the opinion that while reception procedures exist, their own personal initiatives to inform post-primary schools of pupil's progress have been not just undervalued but treated as 'rubbish':

... For years I would have done very detailed reports. It would be a very different report from going home. It was teacher speaking to teacher. So I did a special one to help them understand this child going in. I would never bring the child down; I would couch it in specific terms. They got lots of information. I got the distinct impression it went into the bin. Sallows (rco)

When asked to justify this position of information being binned the Principal stated:

It was when I would be asked to ring up a school by a parent and I would refer to something in a report I had written, I got the impression they never saw it, read it or heard of it. Sallows (rco)

Other post-primary principals had similar experiences of post-primary schools attitudes to primary schools efforts at providing information:

The form was not always welcome in the schools. Fanaghans (vlco)

All our value judgments on children are backed up by testing and teacher observation. There is proof. It is the post-primary saying we have to do our own thing to really know. Sallows (rco)

The significance of the pupil record for post-primary schools is dependant on whether the pupils were transferring to a school involved in the School Completion Programme; if they were not the pupil record was redundant:

It is just that they are not part of the programme. Killin (tcoD)

Primary Principals care for the well being of pupils in their schools and in their interviews they expressed concern whether there would be the same level of patience and care in the system they were transferring into:

I am always worried for him or her going down the tube, no one picking up on them. There are some kids you have to keep chatting with them, coaxing them, you know. Keep bringing them along. Leagans (rco)

Because of the intimate relationship you develop with a family you know things, you see things and you wonder how much you will ever really get to pass along to a post-primary school. You wonder will there be time for them. Killin (tcoD)

While local liaison processes do exist but they are bureaucratic in nature in that their outcomes are not the concern of the whole school (Dept. of Education 1981, Hargreaves *et al* 1996). It is either administrative, in that it is concerned with the passing on of information about primary pupils, or social / pastoral, in that it involves discussion among specific teachers with responsibility for pupils with special needs. It is not curricular liaison in that teachers from different schools do not discuss, plan or implement related courses or approaches to teaching and learning. In this way, the liaison processes of post-primary schools in this study can only be understood as reception procedures as they ignore any curricular engagement between teachers (Derricott 1987, p.155ff). Because of this liaison procedures are not comprehensive procedures.

## Section 2

### **Challenges to Partnership -Pressure on the Primary Curriculum**

Six of the seven Primary school Principals disclosed that the transition to post-primary school imposes pressure on the teaching of 6<sup>th</sup> class curriculum. The interviews reveal that this pressure is applied through a mixture of elements within the transition process itself, internal school factors and reported parental perceptions and expectations of education. While these findings are in keeping with O'Brien (2004) and Smyth *et al* (2004) there are differences. There appears to be an informal league table operating between some primary and post-primary schools around the acknowledgement of and the distinction between primary schools that have / have not prepared pupils to an academic standard acceptable to post-primary schools in Irish, English and Mathematics. This claim is supported through the analysis of post-primary Principals later in this chapter.

### **The Entrance Tests**

Despite the fact that entrance tests for selection purposes are not allowed, the language of the entrance test, their reported importance in the mindset of parents, pupils and schools is still much in evidence. For Primary schools the entrance test is an examination of only three subjects, Irish English and Mathematics, which are called academic:

You are concentrating on what they are going to be tested on in Irish, English and Mathematics for a part of the time coming nearer to the test. Gargin (tcoD)

The pure academic subjects are setting the agenda in schools in this town. Leagans (rco)

A Primary principal stated their own personal determination, when they were a sixth class teacher in 2001, to resist these tests influencing how they would teach.

When I took over sixth class I was determined that these tests would not become the focus of the school year. I was determined that that was not going to happen. ... It felt as if I was in a culture of entrance tests. The post-primary schools were demanding, in that the type of tests they were producing was difficult. The children had to address themselves toward those tests. I felt I was doing them a disservice if I did not prepare them for them, for actually sitting in front of them, to train them to do exams, to train them the way of answering these questions, to train them into the stuff of the tests which I was not agreeing with anyway. Sallows (rco)

For five of the seven schools, the Principal stated that the pressure to modify their teaching in sixth class included parental pressure:

The schedule of work is affected by an awful lot of parental pressure that they must have their kids prepared for entrance exams. Tamur (tco)

We have pushed them so hard for entrance exams because parents, especially in areas like this, look upon the entrance test as our Leaving Certificate. Leagans (rco)

The Principal of Tamur explained the pressure to modify the 6<sup>th</sup> Year schedule of work as being not only as a result of parental pressure but also instigated by teachers within their own school:

It is coming from dedicated teachers as well who have papers in front of them from previous years who want to prove that these children that they are sending into post-primary school will have done the best they can here while they are in. Tamur (tco)

While the pressure of the entrance exam was in much evidence in the primary Principal accounts it was only stated as an issue in pupils' interviews within a specific post-primary school. These pupils stated that entrance exams are a focus of sixth class. The students' comments however did concur with the Primary principals

concerns that the purpose of entrance exams is to differentiate between pupils abilities:

You are studying in sixth class for them, to see what level of class you can get into. Breuter (vsf)

For Irish you get into Honour's or Pass and the same for English and Maths. Breuter (vsf)

### **Academic competition between Primary schools**

The research also revealed that the entrance tests play an important part in building up the academic reputation of a Primary school. Primary principals are aware that parents and post-primary principals have formed opinions about their school on the basis of their pupil's performance:

A Primary school stands and falls in sixth class on their reputation of how well their pupils get on in entrance tests. People can say all they want about what we have to cover, the whole course, and they do but they rush things to make sure that, if you know that for example in, Ardbane test they always have say Irish grammar verbs, you make sure they are done by February or March. Killin (tcoD)

The teaching of Primary schools of exam specific material, specifically in Irish English and Math, also has a perceived benefit for the Primary school. The teaching of exam specific material builds up an image of such Primary schools that enhances their reputation for covering specific material well and creates a positive public disposition towards the Primary within post-primary schools:

... Certain things you have to have covered. They will say then, oh yes, Mr. does the Irish grammar, they will be grand. You stand and fall and your school stands and falls. Standard of Irish in that school would not be great, high standards of Math's there coming in, they will be grand, they will be well up. Well up meaning that, they can cope with what is ahead and that they have covered all the courses. Killin (tcoD)

The covering in advance of specific known elements of entrance exams and doing well in them also receives notice and creates the perception among parents that primary schools differ in their ability to provide ease of access to specific post-primary schools. The findings above demonstrate that entrance exams are perceived by school principals, individual teachers and parents as high stakes events. An explanation for this can be found in the understanding that the tests have a definite purpose connected to, the perceived reality, that streaming exists in the post-primary schools students are transferring to.

### **The perception of the existence of streaming in post-primary**

Two Principals claimed that streaming pupils on grounds of ability in post-primary is a reality that is denied:

In reality there is still streaming. Sallows (rco)

They say they don't stream, they stream hard from the start because we know it. Leagans (rco)

The Principal of Gargin (tcoD) while talking about the good communication they had with their Post-primary school stated:

... and even when they have done all the exams they come back to us. They let us have a look at those and see are they a fair assessment of the child. Sometimes a child can do badly on the day which is taken into account; otherwise a child will end up in a wrong class. Gargin (tcoD)

When asked to explain what was meant by 'a wrong class', the Principal stated:

You want to make sure you have not made a glaring mistake, a child you should have in an 'A' class way down or even the other way around, just because of a test. Gargin (tcoD)

Another Principal talked about students being placed into 'appropriate groups', Meenagran (tco). Principals also alluded to what parents want for their children:

They want their child in the best class because they probably feel if they were in some other class they would not be pushed. Killin (tcoD)

This referencing to ‘wrong classes’, ‘appropriate groups’ and ‘best classes’ reveals a mindset that perceives that classifying children around ability levels based on entrance exams exists for Primary Principals and parents of primary school children. This classification of children reveals the existence of an ‘essentialist’ paradigm and a disposition that predisposes that educational development as having definite limits with certain students (Drudy and Lynch, 1993).

The relationship between all primary and post-primary schools is not a working relationship based on partnership (Mac Giolla Phadraig 2005). There is a sense that the post-primary schools in Rafoarty, with the exception of Creevins(vsfD), see no relevance in what primary education is trying to achieve and there is little interested and insensitivity to their contribution.

### **Section 3**

#### **Post Primary Principals’ perception of the transfer process**

The transfer process of students into Drum Coe (cccoD) is understood by the Principal as unique in Rafoarty in that they as a school don’t have distinct feeder primary schools. Drum Coe (cccoD) take students from at least 18 separate feeder schools. Students transferring into Drum Coe (cccoD) are predominately either students from specific geographical areas of the town, that are made up of mainly public authority housing, or students with specific educational needs. For these reasons the Principal talked about an ‘educational apartheid’ operating in the town:

Through no wish of Drum Coe, we are seen as the Special Needs school of this town. There is an educational apartheid going on that is



very handy for the other three schools in this town. On my desk here (*holding up a letter*) I have an application from parents of a child in another post-primary school in this town who has been told by the principal of that school that we have all these resources to deal with the problems and needs of your child, which is not true at all but that is what parents are being told. Because of the clientele we get it makes it easier for the other three ...

The Principal sees that this practice of exclusion as a challenge to the principles underpinning the White Paper on Education (1995):

To have a good healthy social inclusive education system in the town you will need, not identical, but roughly similar transfer rates of levels of ability and special needs to all four second level schools. The way things are happening now you have all the fall guys going to the Tech and in terms of the future, whether you are looking at it from educational, social or economic point of view it would be far more beneficial to society and the individual and their families if we had more equity and a more level playing field. Drum Coe (cccoD)

The Principal is also aware that despite the past history of student's achievements in many regional and national awards in curricular, co curricular and extra curricular it is difficult to change parent's perceptions of Drum Coe:

What is happening in schools is not clear to parents. Traditionally there was the image that if went to post-primary school you went ahead. You went to a career, you went to University. If you were good with your hands you went to the Tech. The Tech. was for weaker students. Drum Coe (cccoD)

The Principal is of the opinion that other schools in the town are manipulating parental perception through the type of education provision they make available especially at Leaving Certificate Cycle:

By a school even designating itself disadvantaged there is a risk. By a school having Leaving Certificate Applied there is a risk. It is no coincidence that the other three schools at the moment do not have a Leaving Certificate Applied. If they were committed to inclusiveness they would have Leaving Certificate Applied. Drum Coe (cccoD)

This past historical divide between schools and the more cultural legitimacy given to using 'your head over your hands' is still prevalent in the perception of parents and is also evident among the students. These student / parental perceptions are not only formed from expectations of what outcomes individual schools can / cannot deliver but also by the 'cultural content' of what teachers think, say and do (Hargreaves 2000). The Principal claims what is 'put out there' and encouraged is the perception that points matter and the perceived importance of them is targeted at parents. Not only do these socio political perceptions need to be challenged but a more balanced approach to measuring success needs to be adopted:

Parents look at their children. They probably think I have got one chance for my child in education. Is the only bench mark the number of points they get in their Leaving Certificate? What does not feature in league tables is the time spent doing extra curricular activities and the individual care and time spent on students who would need it.  
Drum Coe (cccoD)

This perception parents and pupils have of individual school educational focus influences not only their choice of post-primary school but how they use the educational system:

There are parents and pupils who won't even consider Ardbane (vsm). Ardbane (vsm) is where you go and where you get all the points, they would do a Leaving Certificate from the start. Drum Coe (cccoD)

This understanding of what post-primary school education can offer parents and students, it is claimed, is further entrenched in sixth class primary school through the learning emphasis within some primary schools;

I know certain primary schools I think would be practicing for the entrance test. Drum Coe (cccoD)

The perceived difficulty for Drum Coe is that, when the cultural legitimacy for education is limited to students attaining high Leaving Certificate points, and their resulting attainment of college places, then schools who cannot prove their ability to attain such points or places lack the dominant cultural legitimacy:

This is a good school. We have difficulties. If someone asks me how many of your students have gone to medicine this year I say none. If that is the mark of a good school we are not going to come out highly in that. Drum Coe (ccoD)

In Creevins (vsfD), which is also involved in the School Completion Programme, the importance of student transfer is underpinned personally by the Principal through developing and maintaining 'working relationships' with Primary schools (Pugh and De'Ath, 1989). That this procedure actually happens can be clearly seen to be verified in the interviews with the Primary Principals. The reason behind this process is the belief that Primary schools contribution to the transfer process of students is a positive contribution:

The Primary schools know these pupils much better than we would know them, even with this assessment. Creevins (vsfD)

While the transfer process is understood as something that extends beyond obtaining information and the first few weeks of September:

The real work for Junior Certificate begins in second and third year. What happens in first year is settling them into school. I am not saying that after Christmas we put an emphasis on the academic but it is really gearing them up and the real work starts in second and third year if you are looking at the real exam itself. Creevins (vsfD)

This is an example of rhetoric and actual practice that sustains the coexistence of a reception and constructive model of teaching and learning (Carnell *et al* 2002) identified in the both subject teacher's and students analysis, within schools. While it

supports both types of learning perspectives at different times, it maintains the dominance of the reception model over the constructive model by referring to the former as 'real' and tolerates the constructive model as long as it supports the traditional model, 'gearing them up'. This commitment to settling students in first year and the 'gearing them up' is illustrated in how students are monitored. In October and January the year head meets students individually. The purpose of these meetings is to monitor the academic development of students. The monitoring of students academic performance early in First Year by senior / middle management also illustrates how the reception model of learning is sustained within the school, in that, while the inspection of students journal for specific items appears centred on students it also highlights for teachers what method of teaching is judged valuable by management:

The Deputy Principal and myself and sometimes the year head would go around the first years as to how ..., for instance were they filling their homework journal in, that sort of thing, the emphasis there, are you taking down your homework. The implication is if you are not taking it down, how are you actually doing it? We would do that up to Christmas on at least two or three occasions and it would be regarded as important. Creevins (vsfD)

While all schools state that they visit Primary schools, an analysis of Ardbane (vsm) reveals that visiting Primary schools is dependent on their location and size. Two primary schools that Ardbane (vsm) have a 'large' student intake from, and are within close proximity, are personally visited by either the Principal or the Deputy Principal. Primary schools that have smaller number of students are not visited but are telephoned:

I visit all the big schools. I speak to all the class teachers of every student who is coming to the school or the principal or a combination

of both. Particularly the big schools in the Rafoarty area that would be both sending in the region of forty students each here. In cases of schools say where there are only two or three coming, say some of the outlying rural national schools, I would phone each of the principals or each of the teachers. Ardbane (vsm)

Later in the interview the 'big schools in the Rafoarty area' are mentioned by name. Schools are distinguished through referring to the types of pupils that attend them and that pupils from certain schools are used as a bench mark for comparing the academic standards between pupils and their schools,

You could end up like Meenagran (tco) in the past, travellers, and have had to cope with a lot of that and they have done very well (stressed). Some very good lads have come from there and they have worked very hard to do that against the odds. If you were to, go and say who the good schools are purely on academic results, you would not be including them. Killin (tcoD) would be the same, they have had a lot of non nationals, so they have been struggling to get these fellows up to a standard to compare with the best from Tamur and Sallows and some of the real good country schools. Ardbane (vsm)

It can be inferred from the above that a mindset exists in post-primary schools that there are 'good' and not so 'good' primary schools and therefore primary students associated with types of schools are also categorized. The 'good' primary school is one that has taken time to acquire in their students an academic standard in Irish, English and Mathematics that is approved of by post-primary Schools.

### **The post-primary perspective of entrance assessments / exams**

The results of assessments and entrance exam are chosen by post-primary management as the basis around which they disclose information to primary schools. The purpose of this disclosure is to allow respective primary schools to look at and identify possible mismatches between specific student's performances and the Primary schools understanding of that student's ability. While this practice may

suggest 'liaison', such practices are still part of a reception procedure as they fall short in that they are administrative and not focused on facilitating teachers from different schools to discuss, plan and implement related courses and approaches to teaching. This practice also highlights the possibility that a shared belief exists between primary and post-primary schools that past performance is an accurate indicator of future performance, that education is understood to exist as a linear rather than as a step wise sequence. It also highlights post-primary schools' willingness to trust a set of test scores administered by them and their trust that those scores will provide most of the information they need to know about any pupil.

Examples of administrative liaison can be seen in all post-primary schools. Drum Coe (ccoD) and Creevins (vsfD) send out forms to gather information with regard to specific student's learning support needs. The collection of these forms facilitates additional verbal information. The gathering of information in Ardbane (vsm) is done solely by the Senior Management and in Breanter (vsf) by a group of designated teachers that visit schools. All this information gathered on students is retained by the Senior Management. Why this information on students is withheld from other staff members is justified on two grounds:

I am also very conscious of the fact that, particularly with students who have a bad record they sometimes may need to have the slate wiped clean and get a chance to build a new school era for themselves ... I am a bit reluctant to furnish information to anyone because I prefer to let people form their own judgments of people rather than having me giving them a picture of someone in advance. Ardbane (vsm)

This notion of clean slates, that everyone is on the same footing, suggests a strong sense of schools creating an ethos of equal opportunity for students. Such an

understanding of equality of opportunity is also untenable as curriculum continuity is dependant on 'planning ... rather than left to chance and circumstance' Hargreaves *et al* (1996, p. 40). It also indicates that despite post-primary schools gathering information on students they are less than willing to trust the primary school teacher judgments of student ability or their own staffs' ability to deal with it such information in a professional manner. The 'clean slate mentality' results in the information received from primary schools not being made available to staff. Such notions of equality, through ignoring the perceived past failures of students, also ignores the actual past attainments of students. In light of the White Paper (1995) the rights of students to an education are couched in terms of 'in accordance with her/his ability', not disclosing a student's ability to school teachers could result in an inadequate educational provision.

The process of gathering of information and the retrospective checking out of student's academic ability on entrance assessments in Ardbane (vsm) and Brenter (vsf) facilitates the creating of subject classes. Both schools stream for Irish and Mathematics, in addition Brenter (vsf) also stream for English, on the basis of the entrance test and information received from Primary schools. The justification of the practice of streaming reveals two dynamics operating in schools, that certain subjects enjoy a reputation for being thought of as more academically demanding than others, and that a streaming mindset exists in other subjects but the implementation of it is delayed until second year:

Teachers felt a need for it early on; that you cannot have them all going through for three years doing Honours. The teachers want to be able to give them a three year run at whatever course it is. Brenter (vsf)

The only streaming that took place was for Irish and Math. Everything else is done on a random selected basis; mixed ability. The Math and Irish teachers feel that it would be very difficult to teach mixed ability in those subjects. Ardbane (vsm)

There is a possible third dynamic that might be operating in these schools. Despite streaming being stated as limited to certain subjects the presence of streaming facilitates the development of teacher mindset with regard to student's ability and what counts as achievement. This mindset may result in all subjects being taught as streamed while grouped as mixed ability. Forming mixed ability classes and not utilising all the information supplied by primary principals may be connected. Through using mixed ability to organise classes, post-primary principals allow their teachers, to make up their own minds about students ability on the basis of a clean slate. Drum Coe (cccoD) is designated disadvantaged and Creevins (vsfD) participates with them in the disadvantaged scheme.

### **Subject Choice**

The forming of first year classes is described as 'difficult' by the Deputy Principal in Ardbane (vsm). The difficulty is in trying to be sensitive to the information gathered about students and combining it with student's subject choices. Some subjects cause more difficulty than others, some of the student choices are described by the Deputy Principal as 'whims' and some students are allocated subjects:

Now it is very difficult, to put all the combinations together. You have a whole lot of things, including people who are opting for music and wood work. I do my best to try and facilitate all these things. In some cases I need to do the subject choice for the students. We cannot just possibly give them all the subject choices that they would wish. Particularly in the, (pause) because of the woodwork scene where you would have only 24 in each class. People have to do things like Latin



and Music that they may not wish to do. I cannot facilitate everybody's whim. Ardbane (vsm)

The Deputy Principal goes on to state that if students do not like this practice of subject allocation they should go elsewhere. There is also the suggestion, in what the Deputy Principal says, that there are types of subjects, types of schools and types of students and that certain types of knowledge and curricular activities, schools and students do not function well together. This suggestion confirms the existence of a local past historical divide between schools and that the local cultural legitimacy given to using 'your head over your hands' is still prevalent:

So, they end up doing things they didn't choose. The bottom line is this, if people don't want this they really should be going elsewhere and there are choices where some schools are operating a less academic program than we are. Ardbane (vsm)

The context of this statement is that there is an ever increasing demand for enrolment in a school with a limited number of places:

The big difficulty we have is that we are not able to take the numbers. It is going to be an increasing problem. We have two hundred and fifty applicants for 170 places. How do you?... Einstein can't ... you end up playing God. That's why we have a queue of people outside the door wanting to come in to talk about the fact that their son did not get in. Ardbane (vsm)

The Deputy Principal also states that the transition from primary to post-primary is not a problem for students. This statement is made on the basis that they never have heard a student looking to go 'back' to primary school. While the Deputy Principal accepts that students:

... may have slight difficulties with the combination of subjects and all the different teachers and things like that, my experience is that they have made the transition much easier than sometimes they have been given credit for. Ardbane (vsm)

Such evidence overlooks the notion of how power is structured in schools and may accept and understand too easily what the notion of what going 'back' means to students.

### **Curriculum Continuity**

On the issue of continuity of student's curriculum experience, the Principal of Drum Coe (cccoD) refers to the fact that because they are dealing with a small cohort from a large spread of primary schools continuity is nearly impossible. While similar comments are made by others throughout this study the Principal highlights the fact that for Drum Coe (cccoD) their students are possibly experiencing learning discontinuities even in primary school. The Principal states that curriculum continuity is being subverted by two elements. The first concerns the logical structural aspect of curriculum (Derricott 1987). The principal claims that primary school teachers, for reasons stated earlier in this chapter, choose to ignore the content and sequencing of their curriculum, concentrating on the content of something perceived as important and focusing this teaching of content on 'good' students. This focusing on the 'good' introduces the notion of a value being attached to and judgements being made about children in educational settings. In this way the sequencing of learning is left to chance and results in the educational needs of all pupils, especially the not 'good' being sidelined and overlooked:

Continuity would be helpful, but it is not there, especially when you are dealing with special need kids, they are all over the place. They are the kids that have been in the back, are in withdrawal, are in special units, are passed by in Primary school because the teacher needs to and has to concentrate on all good kids in the front seat. Drum Coe (cccoD)

This 'concentration' in sixth class of primary school is as a result of a perception that streaming exists in post-primary schools. This perception in turn places an onus on Primary school teachers to prepare 'good' pupils for post-primary school (Lawton et al, 1988). The only continuity that is possible in such circumstances for Drum Coe (ccoD) is to identify with, to build and develop on parents / guardians interest in their child's education as they start post-primary school:

Parents need to understand what post-primary school is and stay in touch with what the child is experiencing and schools need to be aware of the amount of adaptation pupils have to make. Drum Coe (ccoD)

On the question of whether Ardbane (vsm) monitors the continuity of a student's education as they transfer, the Deputy Principal clearly states that such a task is a non starter not only in Ardbane (vsm) but in any post-primary school. The comments also reveal the lack of consideration or understanding of the psychological aspect of curriculum continuity (Derricott 1987). The educational experience of students is structured around the progression towards certification and not structured around what is known about cognitive development:

The simple answer to that is probably no. I wouldn't say anyone does it. We basically get them in here in September. We have a whole new variety of teachers and pupils and they go in and start working away on the Junior Certificate syllabus straight away and they would have probably pay little or no attention to what has been done before. Ardbane (vsm)

The Deputy Principal has an understanding why this is so. He states that not only are Primary schools different in what is taught but they also differ in the type of student that transfer into Ardbane (vsm):

We could be getting students from twenty schools. So what you would do in x or y might be quite different from z or Tamur or Killin (tcoD).

There is a vast spectrum of abilities in the schools as well as among the type of pupil going to the different schools. Ardbane (vsm)

Because of these differences the issue at transfer is more of a cooperative reception set of procedures between primary and post-primary and not one of monitoring the continuity of student curricular experience between primary and post-primary.

An example of poor curriculum continuity is disclosed in Ardbane with regard to Deputy Principal's understanding of students' educational experience in Irish. The Deputy Principal reveals that students have experienced being sidelined or overlooked with regard to Irish in Primary. This concurs with the comments of the Drum Coe Principal indicating that the logical and psychological aspects of curriculum structure and how they are approached by teachers has allowed aspects of pupils' educational experience to become illogical and chaotic. It is illogical in that it appears to be sequenced around the educational requirements of schooling and not the sequenced for the educational needs of students. Chaotic, in that it is not dependent on what is known about cognitive development but is dependent on what is known about syllabus requirements. It also reveals that how primary teachers distinguish between 'good' and not 'good' students is more complex than the Drum Coe Principal suggestion that the distinction is made on the grounds of special needs. If the distinction to sideline or overlook primary students in Irish was made solely on the grounds of special needs then these students would possibly have an exemption from studying Irish. The students the Deputy Principal in Ardbane is referring to have no exemption for studying Irish:

There are cases of people who seem to be, (pause). They seem to be more or less ignored for Irish purposes at National School Level and then we have to put them into a class. They might have scored zero on

our entrance test. I have entrance tests here from fellows here last year and I am quite sure that, (pause). I would say we would have probably fifty fellows failing Irish of one hundred and sixty eight. We would have fellows getting zero, four, five, three, ten, six (reading from list) that sort of thing but they have no exemption from Irish. So they have no Irish and no exemption. Ardbane (vsm)

Not having an exemption in Irish means that they cannot fulfil the matriculation requirements of third level colleges or meet the requirements of specific careers in the public sector. Teaching Irish to 'these' students causes teaching difficulties for teachers. The comments reveal a reception model of teaching:

The whole Irish thing is a disaster really. What we are trying to do is to beat Irish into fellows who basically have none. Ardbane (vsm)

We are fortunate in that we have a few very good Irish teachers who don't mind working at the pits of the job, lack of student knowledge. Ardbane (vsm)

Post primary principals of the three schools, Drum Coe (ccc0D), Creevins (vsf) and Ardbane (vsm) all perceive the transfer process differently. Drum Coe (ccc0D) clearly state that the transfer process reveals a historical educational divide in the town that separates students predominately on the basis of social class.

#### **Section 4**

##### **Information outcomes of transition liaison procedures for teachers**

In identifying what the information Teachers state they need to know about first year students as they begin to teach them a distinction can be made between two different types of information that they use. This information can be divided into two broad categories, personal and social and educational information. Personal and social information is related to family background, personal circumstances and recent critical personal events whilst educational information refers to academic ability,

information on physical / medical conditions, emotional, behavioural difficulties and information on learning difficulties. There is a third category of information that Ardbane (vsm) explicitly state is important: linking students with the Primary schools students have transferred from. Teacher access to all this information is controlled by Senior or middle management depending on the school and is gathered through reception procedures developed over the years.

### **Personal / Social Information**

While Senior and middle management regard both types of information, personal/social and educational, as valuable and necessary the former is judged more important by them as personal and social information can highlight potential conflicts between students:

I think it is important to know of any emotional or behavioural difficulties that students have. It is probably more important than where they stand on any academic scale. When trouble erupts in first year, it can erupt very suddenly over something that is very small, and you are looking and saying, 'Why did this cause a huge amount of trouble?' and then it turns out that there was something that went on between them in Primary school. Ardbane (vsm)

Class room teachers state they are more comfortable knowing that there is personal and social information in the school, that requires them to be sensitive to possible student difficulties as they make the transition rather than knowing it:

We don't need to know the details. We just need to know that you need to be sensitive to this student. That is sufficient for us to know without invading their privacy. Creevins (vsfD)

In all schools there is evidence that some classroom teachers do not want to know this personal and social information and understand it as irrelevant to their teaching

and students learning. They place an emphasis on not knowing anything about students in order to teach students:

In English, as far as teaching the subject is concerned I don't need to know anything about them. Brenter (vsf)

I feel I don't need to know personal details because I take the person in front of me and unless it is a health issue or a learning disability, which could be very important, family background baggage like that I don't feel it necessary at all. Drum Coe (cccoD)

This notion of 'taking the person in front of me', that everyone is on the same footing, suggests a strong sense of schools creating an ethos of equal opportunity for students. Teachers are focused on creating classroom conditions that allow them to set the same work for all students in the same subject group. They then use the differences between students as the basis for second year streaming. Seen in this way mixed ability teaching is more about labelling students on the basis of academic performance rather than trying to create an equal opportunity for students. It also reveals that establishing curriculum continuity is not considered as a priority for classroom teachers.

### **Educational Information**

Educational information consists of the results of entrance tests / assessment and the outcome of sharing information between primary and post-primary schools. While the results of the entrance test, a source of academic ability information, is available to all, the information shared between primary and post-primary schools is either not accessible, slow in arriving or arrives too late for classroom teachers in all schools:

As a Math teacher I could be definitely given a lot more information, instead of me finding out two or three weeks down the line with a child that has serious problems with multiplication, division, addition

and subtraction and we are trying to do BOMDAS and Algebra.  
Ardbane (vsm)

Teachers in Drum Coe (cccoD) state that, without adequate educational information they are left on their own in the class room working with students, developing an intuition that something might be wrong with how a student is undertaking class work, without exactly knowing what was wrong or how to respond to it. Their comments also disclose that they themselves have identified in their own teaching practice that there are gaps in their professional development as teachers:

I'd say to myself, this student is struggling with the work because it is too difficult which is not fair on the student or myself. Students that I have had in the last four to five years would have had ADHD, reading ages of 7 or 8, students with low social skills, no ability to sit still in the classroom. My experience with how to deal with these students has been my own experience. I have had no education or theoretical background with how to deal with it. Learn as you go along is my case. Drum Coe (cccoD).

This sense of being alone and depending on their own experience and judgment is concurred with in a lot of teacher's interviews. Knowing that a student has a learning difficulty is one thing and knowing how to deal with that difficulty in a classroom situation is another:

As a teacher I would say that I would not be comfortable with my knowledge of how to deal with certain conditions because my knowledge is very bare. I would have no training or background to deal with dyslexia or how to deal with ADHD. Drum Coe (cccoD)

However there are differences among teachers in that some only want the educational information and look upon all other types of information especially dimensions of the personal and social information as 'baggage':

I take the person in front of me and unless it is a health issue or a learning disability, which could be very important, family background baggage like that I don't feel it is necessary at all. If I meet the person



on a level playing field then I could form my own expectations for them and discover them as I went on, and unless it was something very specific, say that they were being abused at home or something that might cause them not to get a nights sleep, that I would need to know of, but not the details. I leave that for others if they feel they need to know. Drum Coe (cccoD)

Other teachers state that the information that each class room teacher should have access to depends on the subject they teach. This reveals an assumption that some subject teachers require less information than others and those teaching subjects, that they also assume are not part of the primary curriculum, require less educational information:

As a Science teacher I don't think that the need for information is as important. Maybe in the future with the new primary science but up to now they all come along in more or less on a level playing field and we treated them as such. Level playing field they did not have a science background. Ardbane (vsm)

Teachers from other schools also share this view and claim that depending on the subject all students can be taught in post-primary school without any reference to prior learning in primary school:

Especially in History and Geography, that I teach, I don't think I need any information before they come in. Often times the information that they have learnt in either History or Geography is not really relevant to our course. In any case it will be forgotten. Brenter (vsf)

Not needing any information is justified because of the existence and the use of the entrance exam /assessment. These exams / assessments are used to differentiate between ordinary and higher level students in all schools except Creevins (vsfD). In Ardbane (vsm), Brenter (vsf) and Drum Coe (cccoD) the entrance exam /assessment is used as the basis of forming classes in Irish, English and Mathematics. This notion of not knowing information about students is also justified in order to create a level

playing field, a new opportunity and it appears across all schools and is shared by all school personnel as a way of facilitating a fresh start for students.

Why information is withheld and only given on as a result of a problem is understood, by some teachers, as a way senior management hold onto power and reflects the level of trust between individuals within schools and the existence of hierarchies in the schools:

They are holding on to power. It does not make any sense because its there on each pupil for people to be made aware of. I suppose some teachers can say something to a pupil that would be completely inappropriate. However it is a bit ridiculous that another adult would have to monitor what information other adults are getting. With holding information has a consequence for me and the pupil in my classroom. Drum Coe (cccoD)

It was explicitly stated in Ardbane (vsm) by the Deputy Principal that information is purposely withheld from staff members:

I am a bit reluctant to furnish information to anyone because I prefer to let people form their own judgments of people rather than having me giving them a picture of someone in advance. Ardbane (vsm)

### **Linking students with Primary schools**

On the third category of information, knowing which Primary school students had transferred from, it was stated that it allowed the school to 'know' individual students better:

I suppose it give me, maybe, it gives me a way into, of getting to know the pupils, that they had had a brother in the school. I would hate to get to midterm and not know every single one of them. Ardbane (vsm)

In encouraging the respondent to expand on the connection of the importance of how 'knowing' the primary school assists them to understand the student it became clear

that primary schools attended are used by the school as an indicator of a student's previous educational attainment and an assurance of possible future attainment:

In one primary school for example, when we had strict streaming in the school, the vast majority of sixth class there would have been in the top class here. Their entrance results meant that they got in there (the top class). It was a combination of factors. It was because of the intense grinding for the entrance test and also because of their teachers. As students they had a natural curiosity and a greater ability to be interested in and informed on a wide range of topics and not just academic. Ardbane (vsm)

In clarifying how long ago this referred to, as the teacher referred to a situation that happened in the past they stated:

Well actually that would still be the case. Ardbane (vsm)

This linking of students with their primary schools is also highlighted in the analysis of the Deputy Principals interview in that 'good' primary schools spend time making sure that students acquire an academic standard in Irish, English and Mathematics that is approved of by the post-primary school. Such 'linking' also reveals how a school 'position themselves to [be seen to] attract the most educationally attractive students', Lynch and Lodge (2002, p. 62) and in this way reveals how schools continue to choose to stratify themselves on the basis of social class.

It is clear that a lot of the information gathered in liaison procedures does not filter down to the classroom teacher. Knowing that there is information in the school if they require appears to be sufficient for them. Because of class room teachers understanding of their work much of the information is understood as superfluous to how they teach.

## Section 5

### **Student Transfer: problems identified by teachers**

Post-primary schools are organized around timetables in which time is structured into segments, classes, of between 35 and 45 minutes. These segments can be single or double classes, depending on the subject, and the use of these segments for class purposes changes each day of the week. Post-primary schooling is about being in a time conscious space. This is different from the self contained units of organization within primary schools. In all the schools lockers are available for use by the students to facilitate the storing of books. Being able to use a locker to store and retrieve class material and understanding the timetable as a schedule for getting to class are key skills for first years. The extent of students having problems is understood by teachers to be related to individual student ability to manage and organize themselves within the school. Teachers clearly recognize that students organizing themselves in a new physical environment that is larger and organized differently than their primary school can be difficult for some students. The initial problems that students encounter are to do with coming to terms with managing the different spaces and types of relationships of post-primary school present. These problems are understood to be short lived. The majority of teachers in Breinter (vsf), Creevins (vsfD) and Ardbane (vsm) did not mention their relationship with students as a significant problem in student adjustment (Smyth 1999). Instead they talked of 'persistent problems' connected to the difficulty students have in adopting the correct classroom behaviour and study skills they need to acquire in order to bridge the perceived gap in their subject content knowledge. While the induction

programmes are designed to introduce and familiarise students into the physical, public space of the school, they are of short duration and do not address classroom issues outlined above. Teachers also perceive the first few months in post-primary as a period of readjustment for students and parents /guardians:

The assumption that what they were like or how they succeeded in primary school is similar or the same as how they were going to be in a new group of pupils that their success in Primary school is equal now to the success that they are going to have in post-primary school. Creevins (vsfD)

Teachers in Drum Coe (cccoD), with a concentration of students with literacy / numeracy difficulties, are aware that students may continue to experience patterns of academic failure. These students have missed out on making successful transitions within primary school. While they may be in sixth class they have been left behind academically. This results in the transfer being described by teachers as an impossible 'academic jump':

Academically they are not able to make the jump. They have not even progressed to maybe sixth year in primary school. Somewhere they have been left in fourth year as far as reading and writing is concerned and it has never been made up. Now they are asked to make a big jump which is probably too much for many of them. Drum Coe (cccoD)

These teachers also suggest a link between students with weak literacy / numeracy and poor communication skills can affect their ability to communicate with adults and interact with class mates:

Probably the brightest children have the least difficulty in making the transition. They have better language skills. They are probably more confident. Their self esteem is probably higher so that they are less intimidated, they are less afraid to go up to somebody and say, 'Look, I am supposed to be in room 24, where is that?' Whereas children who don't have the language skills are found wandering around and then getting into trouble they have not asked for help. Drum Coe (cccoD)

This mismatch between their verbal / numerical level and what is expected of students is also mentioned in other schools; however some teachers mention it in a less understanding and less tolerant way. Such teachers perceive that students in post-primary should be able to do post-primary classroom work and homework for themselves. Not being able to do it by themselves is a 'drawback' and being labelled as not 'having it'. These comments highlights that the learning and teaching are not understood by teachers as interrelated, and the existence of teacher belief that student attributes alone that determine learning:

The biggest problem I find is that their literacy level is not high enough. They just don't have it. Many of my students do not have a literacy age over 10 I would say. When I have gone back looking for information it has confirmed this. That has a drawback because students cannot go home and learn their work if they cannot read the text books. Creevins (vsfD)

The School Completion Programme team perceives the importance of achieving an appropriate academic standard as a critical factor for students in a system that is focused on the Leaving Certificate. They also perceive sixth class as part of the examination system. These perceptions are based on what pupils tell them:

When we push twelve year old children into post-primary school, their first year is geared toward their Leaving Certificate. The whole post-primary system is geared up for it. It is working from day one towards the Leaving Certificate exam with a Junior Cert in the middle as a check. It starts in sixth class. It is there that they are prepared for the entrance exams and you need to do well in these to get into the good class to do well for your exams. That's what we hear, that's what the children all tell us. Drum Coe (cccoD) / Creevins (vsfD)

Other teachers concur with this notion of how the exam system in post-primary schools militates not only against developing the continuity between Primary and

post-primary school but also defines the task of a post-primary school teacher and what a post-primary school teacher is and is not concerned with:

There is no attempt to develop continuity between primary and post-primary school because we are squashed in. We have to prepare our kids; we have three years to prepare them for the Junior Certificate. That is what our job is really. So no matter what way they come into us we are being squashed into that scenario. We have to teach them for those three years and get them to a standard and then we also have the extra pressure. The Junior Certificate is a certain standard but to try to get these kids who want A's in their Leaving Certificate is a huge pressure. The Leaving Certificate is impacting on the Junior Certificate, right down to first year ... the teachers are not sitting down and thinking anything about what the Primary curriculum was like. Creevins (vsfD)

Teachers in Brenter (vsf), Ardbane (vsm) and Creevins (vsfD) perceive that the problems students are having can be attributed to some deficit in how the students were taught in primary school. The fact that students are not all at the same level, not ready for teaching is interpreted not just as a lack of consistency in academic standards among primary schools but also as evidence of lack of classroom discipline in primary schools. It also reveals a desire on the part of some post-primary teachers for having docile students to teach, that accept their authority unquestionably:

They have a whole lot of different standards and a variety of ways of doing things. There are definitely different standards of work. I would like to think that we would have some kind of standard that we would know that they have all reached or they have not reached. Brenter (vsf)

I find that they have less a sense of classroom discipline than before. They are more inclined to challenge any explanation they hear about how to do things. It is only a minority of them that do it but they are enough to disrupt the whole class. The ones that do challenge are always looking for an easy way to do things; the handiest way out of doing a problem, whether it is mathematically sound does not matter. Ardbane (vsm)

Students have to be settled down into this new environment quickly. A perennial task for teachers of first year students, therefore, is to change the way students initially behave within the classroom. There is a suggestion that this way of students interacting in the classroom is a new experience for them and that they have to be taught social skills of talking, listening and sharing within a class group:

They are keen to be two pages ahead of you, they like that and all these new books, they have to look at them, they are exciting they are different and for a first couple of weeks there is an excitement about it. Brenter (vsf)

There has to be certain rules, otherwise there would be twenty talking at the one time. They are only allowed to talk if they put their hand up. At first they don't know that and they don't adhere to that even though we set the rules at the beginning. It does take about two weeks to get into the habit and once you keep doing it and you are consistent it works. Creevins (vsfD)

Other teachers perceive that students' problems are caused by the differences between how post-primary and primary school classrooms are structured. The post-primary structure imposes restrictions on student movement to facilitate a different type of teaching and learning,

Sitting in an assigned place in a classroom; the fact that they are not sitting in groups anymore, the fact that it is a more traditional way. You look up at the board, you look at the teacher. You get information from teachers now. Whether that is good or bad that is a whole different issue but that is the way it is done here. There is not that sort of freedom to get up and move around and sometimes that takes a bit of time. Creevins (vsfD)

This new academic emphasis, the work and behaviour associated within post-primary challenges students' ability to organise themselves and maintain equilibrium and life balances:



I would see the strain on a few girls. You might get a note from a mother, 'My daughter is spending too much time at homework' at which I would take action immediately. If she is doing it others are probably doing it as well. It is not fair, they have a life. They are not here just to spend their entire time in this school and get brilliant academically. This is part of their lives, not their lives. Brenter (vsf)

How students approach classroom work and homework is also understood as problematic. Teachers perceive that students approach post-primary classroom work and homework with a mindset developed in primary school. They understand this problem as resulting from the difference in how learning is organized and different skills being used:

Geography they have it three times a week. They may not have it on three consecutive days. While they like it because it is new, they have difficulty with it. The difficulty is with homework. They sometimes forget it so they leave it until the night before, but then that day they have already got a pile of homework from other teachers. They don't have the ability to organize things. Brenter (vsf)

When you say to pupils your homework is to check over something in class, they are like, 'How? What do you mean? How are we supposed to learn that?' Creevins (vsfD)

Teachers are also aware that there are problems for students when they are faced with a teacher that insists on and persists in only speaking Irish in class, in that they are not able to see a relationship between primary and post-primary Irish. Students are afraid and not confident that this method of teaching Irish will result in them learning Irish. This is particularly true of English speaking Primary schools as it challenges students' academic self image in Irish:

It is this fear that they have been taught through English all the way along. They wonder how they can possibly be in a class where a person is speaking another language. They believe they cannot learn here. But I as a teacher am confident I can sort it out. They were taught Irish in Primary school. They were probably taught Irish in a sheltered way, where people did not speak Irish to them. They learnt

their phrases and they learn from their Buntas. They never had to listen to this flow of Irish. Good students from a lot of English speaking primary schools really, really want to be taught their grammar formally. They like to have their rules. They like to be able to hang their stuff there and say that is the rule for it. Brenter (vsf)

From the perspective of one Deputy Principal the study of Irish is a problem for some students in that the development of their skills in Irish has been purposely overlooked in Primary school. Teaching Irish to students that have poor Irish language skills and no exemptions results in teaching difficulties for teachers:

The whole Irish thing is a disaster really. What we are trying to do is to beat Irish into fellows who basically have none. There are cases of people who seem to be, (pause). They seem to be more or less ignored for Irish purposes at National School Level and then we have to put them into a class. They might have scored zero on our entrance test. I have entrance tests here from fellows here last year and I am quite sure that, (pause). I would say we would have probably fifty fellows failing Irish of one hundred and sixty eight. We would have fellows getting zero, four, five, three, ten, six (reading from list) that sort of thing but they have no exemption from Irish. So they have no Irish and no exemption. We are fortunate in that we have a few very good Irish teachers who don't mind working at the pits of the job, lack of student knowledge. Ardbane (vsm)

Other teachers understand the mismatch between subject knowledge and students ability to understand it as problematic due to the content being outside their world of experience:

Glaciation; when you start talking of things that happened tens of thousands of years ago. Tens of thousands of years ago does not exist in their minds they have no idea of it. They don't get it, it is hard for them. They get it after three or four weeks, they kind of begin to trust what you are saying. Then they start to say 'Oh I actually saw a hill like that that was missing a big chunk, is that what a ...is? Brenter (vsf)

While teachers are aware of the problems that exist for students, some personally state that teaching first years is frustrating. What causes frustration is the clash

between what the teacher and students perceive as important, students are still focused on activities and features of class work they enjoyed and were part of class work in Primary school:

For first years these things are so important. The, making it look pretty and the making sure I have time to colour in my diagrams. They like colouring, colouring was fun. For them they wonder where that has gone. It is gone for the next five years. Brenter (vsf)

The teacher frustration is linked to where students are at and what they as teachers see as important and where they want to bring them to:

I want them to ask questions from different angles rather than asking can I move my page. I would prefer them to be sitting back looking at the diagram and asking, 'What happens next?', 'What happens if the rock falls down?' those type of questions. For them the task is the completion of the drawing rather than the understanding of the diagram. Brenter (vsf)

In Ardbane (vsm) teachers identified a male culture of schooling that accepts certain behaviour, as a way of boys relating to other boys and all students, to survive, must come to grips with it:

This aggressive way of behaving towards others has become part of their way of communicating. It is their communication, the pump on the back, the sure I was only messing sir, and they are generally only messing. Ardbane (vsm)

This male culture is understood as part of a school tradition that must be learnt by the individual student themselves. How this is done is unclear; not learning it can have consequences for students:

You have lunchtimes and you have football, it's cool, it's a status thing to be on the first team. ... Everything is new, everything is different and they don't know the unwritten rules of the school. Every school has these unwritten traditions which are important for to follow. Ardbane (vsm)

An area, that no other teacher in any school mentioned, was their observation of how first years spend their lunchtime in a school where physical sport and physical activity is valued. It is suggested that lunch time is a problem for students if they don't play sport and they are not part of a group network:

I think how they spend their lunchtime is a key thing as well. It has to be if they are not involved in sport, because in sixth class they can play. They would be laughed at. I think they would be afraid that they would be laughed at if they started playing games. It is in a sense an unwritten rule among boys in general. Girls have their own coping mechanisms that they (pause) their playing is discussing. It takes the boys a while to settle down, getting into a group. My son now is in third year and he has been lucky enough *now* to find a group that he can be easy in. Ardbane (vsm)

For the School Completion Programme team the problems with transition for pupils are associated with how the schools expect them to behave:

Our relationship with students is one of equals. We don't put ourselves above the students. We are there alongside them and when they see us in with them in post-primary they see us as equals, as their mentors. Drum Coe (cccoD)

This relationship is contrasted with the relationship teachers have with students. This relationship is influenced by the type of institutions schools are and that do not allow students to see teachers as their equals. This is because how teachers and pupils interact:

The thing with teachers is that they are so regimented. In the first few weeks teachers go in with a full fist, applying the letter of the law for the first few weeks. Drum Coe (cccoD)

Teachers, in this study, did not mention their relationship with students as a significant factor for students in student adjustment to post-primary school. There is little evidence to suggest that teachers are aware of the distinctiveness of this point of adolescence and that its distinctiveness requires curriculum differentiation

between students (Beane *et al* 2002). Teachers in Drum Coe (cccoD) did suggest that a link exists between weak literacy / numeracy and poor communication skills. It is suggested that these students experiencing difficulties may lack social competencies, have poor personal interaction and find it difficult to solve social problems.

## Section 6

### **How teachers start teaching first year students**

How teachers start teaching first year students reveals three groups of teachers,

- Teachers who have their own stated pedagogic aims that are student centred (constructive perspective),
- Teachers who are willing to make degrees of compromise between their own stated pedagogic aims for students and the subject based requirements of state assessment and certification (constructive / objectivist perspective)
- Teachers whose pedagogic aims are closely aligned with the subject based content requirements of state assessment and certification (objectivist perspective).

What is also revealed are two different models of learning, reception and constructive (Carnell *et al* 2002). The identifiable differences between teachers were revealed in teachers' attitudes around what is important for students to learn, how students learn and what is important for teachers to do to facilitate student learning. From the sample of teachers used, the Drum Coe (cccoD) sample group, tended to use a constructive perspective to teaching whereas the teachers in Ardbane (vsm), Brenter (vsf) and Creevins (vsfD), appeared to adopt a more objectivist perspective

to teaching. The constructive / objectivist perspective, a mixture of both the other perspectives, was evident in a few individuals from the three latter schools. The dominant model of learning in all schools is the reception model. At the classroom level there was no evidence of any one dominant school culture operating in any school but rather teachers sustaining their own images and expectation of teaching and learning through reference to their own stated pedagogic aims. There is some evidence from this research about how these degrees of difference in perspectives are sustained in individual schools.

Teachers have also set routines in how they teach first year students. The constructive perspective teachers were more willing to allow their professional discourse with students to influence how they start teaching first years. This degree of willingness appeared to stem from the expected outcomes these teachers have of teaching and learning and how these expectations influence the teaching learning process. The Drum Coe (cccD) expectation of educational outcomes were less orientated towards students 'scoring points' and more orientated towards engaging students where they were at. This orientation allows the teacher the freedom of choice to choose a starting point within their subject that concurs with identified student past educational attainment. They have to find that. In this way teachers actively establish a type of curricular continuity through a student teacher engagement that endeavoured to establish and build on the student's prior primary content coverage. Those teachers with a constructive / objectivist perspective of teaching also started in a constructive manner in order to establish positive professional relationships with students, prior to commencing their orientation

towards preparing students for the Junior Certificate. The objectivist perspective teachers focused how they started teaching students on 'the course'. The notion of curricular continuity did not exist for them as something to achieve between the primary and post-primary. What they are focusing on is curriculum consistency, establishing a close alignment between the subject content they and their colleagues teach and the requirements of school and junior certificate assessment procedures. Because of this, the sequencing of the subject knowledge content is dependent either on the text being used and / or the subject department's arrangement around summative assessments at Christmas and summer. It also appears that these teachers are more focused on a schedule than on a programme of learning.

There was no evidence in any school of collaboration between teachers apart from selection of text books and designing summative assessments. Teacher teaching and student learning are related as an event in their own isolated classroom. Teaching processes in schools are still informed by norms of privacy, autonomy and non interference (Lortie, 1975; Johnson 1990; Hargreaves, 1994). However there is some evidence of the surveillance of teachers and students by management.

### **Constructive Perspective**

This group of teachers appear to have a personal practical knowledge of teaching that is built, not just on their willingness to interact with students but in how they allow that interaction to modify how they start teaching first years. These teachers understand that they can contribute through their teaching to the personal/social and educational development of their students. They believe that learning happens when students trust the teacher and when a connection is made for students between with

they are doing in the classroom and the world outside. Their stated position as teachers, suggests they are working out of a constructivist model of learning (Carnell *et al*, 2002) and a constructivist model of teaching (Kelly 2004). They allow students take time to settle into their new surroundings. This taking of time assists individual teachers to discover something about the student's comfort with regard to elements of literacy and numeracy. The teachers are also gauging individual student's ability levels for themselves, independently of entrance test results:

I feel when the students come in I know nothing about them. I feel it is my duty to try and assess them myself. Obviously they have been placed in classes which are felt appropriate to them from their entrance tests, but this is a fluid arrangement where students can be changed. I feel I don't know anything about them. I assess their ability to speak and communicate. I assess their reading ability. I get them to write in the first week, just a simple topic how they spent their summer holidays. I would take that up just to see where they are at.  
Brenner (vsf)

These teachers are concerned with the curriculum elements of process and development and are actively seeking out how they can use their teaching skills to work with students and make connections. In this way it appears that they are guided by their own pedagogic aims. Their teaching is something that they have reflected on and these reflections inform their teaching practice. They are motivated by their own love and appreciation of their subject and want to share it:

It is a visualization of things, of bringing events, words, writing to life.  
Brenner (vsf)

They do not look on their classes as a homogenous group transferring from primary school but as a group of individuals with an individual and micro cultural identity, with multiple experiences. They are aware that students are coming into a new space; new spaces mean that students have to discover the space and hence may get



lost in it, have to get used to others in that space, those different from themselves, who are also exploring and occupying the same space. It is structured, not only by time and curriculum content but by people. Students are also learning inside and outside the structure of the classroom:

What I do is to do a drama around being lost somewhere. Who got lost today? Well so did I, I got lost going from the Lab to the Home Economic room. By the way who knows where the Lab is? Which one, there are two of them? Make a kind of jokey talk about it. The class I came from five minutes ago. There is one group from the country. There is another group then from the town whose experience is loud music, people around all the time. Some live in huge houses from wealthy backgrounds. They are all from different backgrounds. Because they used to go to different Primary schools in which they were settled, now they are all together all of a sudden. Creevins (vsfD)

In trusting their own teaching aims they are not guided immediately by the subject based requirements of assessment, or the codified syllabi of subject content. What guides them is their desire to identify aspects of student's personalities they can use to get students to work with them. They do it through listening to students express themselves:

The only talking I am doing is only really to set up a routine, and then you listen for everything else. You will know from the questions that are asked by students as to what level they are at and the pace they are going at. Brenter (vsf)

They do this through resisting the temptation to start book work immediately, through encouraging students to become interested in the subjects like science; some purposely assume they know nothing about the subject while making a conscious effort to find familiar material that students might be able to connect with. They use different methodologies building up trustworthy methods not framed by the content

of the 'paper'. The 'paper' refers to the script students are given in the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate state examinations:

I am not following a book or a checklist. (Pause) It is coming out of me. I am not saying I am following a formula. Brenter (vsf)

They use various resources and approaches to guide their teaching and student learning. Group work is one of the methods these teachers use to start teaching first year students. They perceive students may be familiar with it from primary school and using group work brings, otherwise individual students, into contact with each other in a learning environment that students appear to enjoy:

I tend to use group work wherever possible with first years. In that time they were talking to each other, sitting around in a circle. Now some people (teachers) find that threatening. I found that students enjoyed what they were doing and put massive work into it. It is hugely structured and very hard work and they learned a lot. The parents liked it as well ... They liked the idea that it was a bit closer to primary school in its nature; the tables facing each other instead of all facing forward and it was less threatening as a result and they worked really hard. Creevins (vsfD)

These teachers start this way because they see post-primary education not as something purely academic but as the development of student self understanding and a positive academic self image within students. The teachers need to engage with, to formatively assess students, is motivated by a desire for developing continuity between Primary and post-primary learning and their awareness of the lack of information at subject teaching level between Primary and post-primary:

I don't feel there is enough communication between primary and post-primary school at all. I really believe we do not know what they are doing in Primary school. Ardbane (vsm)

They perceive that this lack of communication results in difficulties for student learning and teacher teaching (Hargreaves et al 1996). The comments also suggest

that they as teachers perceive the problem of lack of continuity as one of content repetition or duplication, and that for the teacher, because of lack of continuity, the challenge is how to teach students from different primary schools in mixed ability classes:

French in Primary school, I say that is a waste of time. When they come in here they start at the start of French. There is no communication between primary and post-primary school. They think that this is fabulous to introduce French. Kids come in here in first year and they are bored. She has done French and we are starting her from scratch. Primary schools think they are wonderful introducing French. It is not worth a dam if we don't carry on from where they are at in Primary school. Creevins (vsfD)

### **Constructive / Objectivist Perspective of Teaching**

Some teachers commence teaching with a student centred orientation in that they adapt their teaching to facilitate the development of a positive academic disposition towards their subject and social skills among their subject group. There is however evidence that they are putting off the inevitable:

If we could achieve this (disposition) in first years, not to be afraid of but preferably to love and enjoy each subject then in second and third year there is lots of time for the exam stuff. Creevins (vsfD)

'Exam stuff' is a content and objectives approach to teaching, learning and assessment that students pick up from each other, developing their own expectations that exams matter. This highlights that students as they start first year already have learnt, have come to know something about what is expected of them in education:

They develop these expectations with themselves. A lot of parents were surprised where does this pressure come from? The pressure is within them. It is part of the learning that they experience when they talk to friends and being part of a group. They learn by osmosis. A Shultz cartoon the other day, and he had Charlie Brown with a book strapped to his head. He said he is trying to learn by osmosis. It's not a

book that is strapped to students' heads it is their mobile phones, it is their friends, the fashions and this notion that the junior cert matters. Creevins (vsfD)

... they are being geared from sixth class towards the Leaving Certificate. Drum Coe (cccoD)

### **Objectivist Perspective**

Teachers whose pedagogic aims for students are closely aligned with the subject assessment requirements of the Junior and Leaving Certificate take a more objectivist approach to teaching and tend towards understanding learners as passive recipients of knowledge. The knowledge, skills and activities of state assessment are emphasized as appropriate purposes of education and frame not only the knowledge to be learnt but are also used as the indicators of teacher / student success or failure. The curriculum as content and objectives are what needs to be taught by teachers and learnt by students. Because of this the teacher is more inclined to control all aspects of the situation, tending to be dismissive of prior knowledge, understanding it as irrelevant, disconnected or an impediment to the knowledge they wish to impart. Regulation of student behaviour and concurring student classroom discipline are necessary conditions for the imparting of their subject knowledge.

For these teachers what influences how they start teaching first years depends on a variety of teacher perceptions. These include their perception of the purpose and use of the entrance test and its identification of student ability. Such perceptions create expectations by teachers with regard the learning potential of students, that a specific class's ability is fixed. Through using the entrance assessment to differentiate between students and generate classes of Higher and Ordinary Level students,

teachers assume that students are ready, receptive and willing to be taught at the appropriate level and pace:

We do grade them in Irish, so you would know if you had a better class or a weaker class. The grading system is used because some will have more Irish than others. Some will have attended a Gael Scoil. Others will have been more able at Irish in their English speaking school. If you have these able students in with those who have very little Irish both groups are not going to have a chance to develop their ability or improve in Irish. Brenter (vsf)

They also state that all students can be taught in post-primary without any reference to prior learning in primary school:

What they have learnt in either History or Geography is not really relevant to our course. In any case they will have forgotten it. I suppose over the years just asking questions and I have children myself and I know what they have covered in Primary school. I know they have forgotten certain things when they come into post-primary school. Brenter (vsf)

The text book is an important instrument in how these teachers start teaching. It is chosen by the subject department and is used not only to guide the coverage of course content but to direct teachers as to how much must be completed each year in order to assure Junior Certificate course completion. In this way it prioritises what the class unit must know by a certain time restricting the freedom of the teacher. Text books are also chosen on the basis of level of course being taught, suggesting that subjects other than Irish, English and Mathematics are also taught on the basis of perceived student ability. Teaching by text book also suggests that there is no agreed curriculum plan between levels and therefore the possibility of poor linkages between ordinary and higher levels subjects. There is also the possibility that the meaningful material contained in text books will be rendered meaningless by segregating and compartmentalizing it through rote learning, (Ausubel 1963):

Well I would say I basically I am taking it from the text. We are assigned a text and we work together to assign a text for Irish and History. The text book as far as I am concerned would determine a lot of what type of course they are going to follow. There is a particular book they would follow for pass (Ordinary Level) history. There is a particular book they would follow for honours (Higher Level) history course. Creevins (vsfD)

This practice of covering a certain number of chapters within a specific timeframe by teachers operates on a subject department level. It places an imperative on teachers not only to cover specific course areas but also assess specific course content by a specific time. While this procedure makes teachers aware of the content that binds them together in that it sets common goals for teachers there is no evidence that such a procedure facilitates the development of or the pursuit of a common understanding on how students learn:

We all cover a certain amount of material and by the very, very latest Halloween, you know well the lads you have there should be there or should be moved elsewhere. There is a volume of work in the Math department that has to be covered and you have to go with that. There is a common exam at Christmas and at Summer. Ardbane (vsm)

There is a set syllabus to be covered in first year science. Now, you may give whatever test you want to give at Christmas or Easter during the *year* but when summer exams come up there is a common test. We need to know for second year then what the situation is. Ardbane (vsm)

A specific teacher talked about the difference between teaching Religion, when there was no pressure from the subject based requirements of syllabus assessment and the current situation where there is, and how this has impacted on how they approach teaching first year students:

It is the same for English and Religion. In the past Religion there probably was a little bit more leeway for 'getting to know processes' but it is not there anymore because we have a syllabus to get through. Ardbane (vsm)

Teaching Mathematics to first year students is also about going back to basics, not assuming that there is much of a mathematical knowledge base there, challenging and changing the methods that students are familiar with from Primary school. This going back to basics is indicative of a lack of trust between Primary and post-primary teachers. Teaching also means changing a student's mindset toward solving Mathematical problems developed in Primary school:

The most important thing in primary school, as far as I can gauge, is to have the correct answer, not how you arrive at the answer. A lot of them can do the work mentally but they cannot write down their answer in steps to show how they achieved that result. Drum Coe (cccoD)

This lack of attention by first year students to Mathematical method and its importance is also referred to in Creevins (vsfD) and Ardbane (vsm) as an important aspect of how teachers start teaching first years. What teachers are trying to do is to establish themselves as teachers that can maintain discipline and order in the class room. To this end classroom teachers stated the importance of being strict with first years:

I would be very strict with for the first few weeks with first years. This is to lay the foundations. They have to know that this is as far as they can go. I ease off coming to near Christmas. Setting those foundations makes teaching first years easier. Ardbane (vsm)

Teachers with a traditional perspective also make a connection between teacher strictness and their ability to maintain a silent environment to facilitate teaching without disruption. This is something they have 'learnt'. It is about building up a perception in the mind of the student of what type of teacher they are:

What I find is when you go into them they are silent anyway. I am going in and saying, this is me and this is how I teach. I would not be

like Hitler in the class, just letting them know ...so they would know how far they can go. Ardbane (vsm)

While silent class's results in teachers teaching without disruption and are easier to teach, silent classes not only reduce the possibility for disruption but reduce the possibility of discourse. Silent classrooms can also have learning consequences for certain types of student:

You tend to pass over them. Because they are quite, you tend to think they are taking it in. We tend to pass over quite kids. Ardbane (vsm)

Even walking among the desks, seeing what they are writing, nine out of ten times they would be sitting there scribbling on a page pretending they are switched on. Ardbane (vsm)

The perceived lack of educational continuity is also a problem for these teachers as they work out of assumptions of what students should be able to do. These assumptions are informed by the assessment demands of the curriculum at Junior Cycle. The narrowness of this syllabus / examination focus means that while teachers are aware of the difficulties students may be having with basic numeracy and literacy skills, they as teachers, do not have the pedagogic understanding of the methods used in Primary nor do they understand them:

Now Math is different they are taken more slowly through it in Primary. There is a certain course in Post-primary, it sounds like a horrible thing to say that you are teaching a course when you are teaching children. Your responsibility is to get them through as much of the course as you possibly can and no one thanks you if you don't. The weakest child's parents expect that their child is brought through the course. You are expected to get through the book. I have to say that to teach Math at primary level is difficult. I don't know how to teach someone to add, subtract, multiply, divide. I have to assume that they know these things and have to work on these assumptions. My method of subtraction is different from their method. I don't understand it. It is crossing out and writing in numbers, what is it? Creevins (vsfD)



I taught English and I worked out of the assumption that they can write an essay but they can't write an essay. They write five lines for an essay, and that is their essay. You would assume that they would, when they come into school they could write an essay. Writing an essay shows an ability to understand and explore an issue. They love spelling tests, because this is what they were used to. Brener (vsf)

These three perspectives of how teachers start teaching first years indicates that poor 'stage environment fit' (Beane et al, 2002) for adolescents exists in post-primary schools. While teachers indicate that they are sympathetic to students there exists a lot of teacher control, there is evidence of teacher 'patronizing' of students (Brooker 1999) in that there is little if any regard to include students, with regard to decisions surrounding curriculum, working methods and how time is structured, and there is a strong emphasis on whole group instruction through using direct teaching methods. What takes primacy in the curriculum appears to be the elements of content and objectives over process and development. There is no mention of the development of thinking skills in students. An assumption exists among teachers that student exposure to subject content is sufficient to develop understanding (Ausubel 1963).

### **Contact with Primary School**

Subject teacher's contact with Primary school is extremely limited in all schools. Contact between primary and post-primary is understood as the responsibility of the Principal, Year heads, School Completion Programme personnel, Home School Liaison or teachers with posts for first year students. Because of this, post-primary and primary contact is understood by classroom as bureaucratic and not the concern of the whole school (Hargreaves *et al* 1996). Such bureaucratic liaison is either administrative, in that it is concerned with the passing on of information about primary pupils, or social / pastoral, in that it involves discussion among teachers

with responsibility for pupils with special needs or other identifiable needs. It is not curricular in that teachers from different schools do not discuss, plan or implement related courses or approaches to teaching. This lack of curricular contact by classroom teachers creates an environment that allows teachers to associate students with older siblings that may be in the school or have passed through the school. For some, this sibling association by teachers recalls a less than positive memory of their own school days where their identity was diluted and their individuality was dismissed:

I am also wary of this idea of, 'Is she the sister of ...?' that type of thing. I am wary of that. I hate the fact that I was in school myself I was often called my brother's name or I was often called my surname. I wanted to be me, but the structure did not allow for it and the teachers would not or did not care. Creevins (vsfD)

While some teachers want more communication between Primary and post-primary schools they draw a distinction between working with and communicating with Primary schools:

I don't want to be involved in working with Primary schools. I think we have enough work to do. I think a certain level of, more communication in their final year. I wouldn't mind knowing what they have covered, even if it was on a theme basis. Brenter (vsf)

A recent in-service, in Rafoarty, involving personnel from the Primary Curriculum Support showing connections to post-primary teachers between fifth and sixth class primary curriculum in English, Irish and Mathematics:

I felt it told me nothing basically. It did not give me any concrete information about what they were doing. It was all completely and utterly vague to my mind. I was not the wiser at the end of it. I passed it out to all the other English teachers. I said to them, 'Does it give you any more information?' and they said, 'No'. I tossed it out. Creevins (vsfD)

While teachers stated that it would be useful in having more professional contact focused on teaching methodologies in the light of new developments within the primary curriculum, its usefulness is dependent on its connection to what students would be doing in post-primary school:

It would help providing that all primary schools were clear on what content should be followed in order to carry on into post-primary school. It could not be that individual primary teachers would decide what (pause) that they are going to do things if there was not a set programme to follow. Brenter (vsf)

This statement does suggest that the individual teacher perceives that the aims and function of primary and their respective role in education is to prepare students for the post-primary curriculum and that this is not happening in a uniform manner. This discontinuity between the focus of primary and post-primary and the lack of uniformity between primary schools standards is explained, with regard to the study of Irish:

From a language point of view there are a lot of good Primary teachers but there are a lot of them who are out of practice with Irish as a spoken language. In some cases, they may have been teaching junior classes for a number of years and they may have lost confidence with using their normal language naturally with the more senior classes. I think that is why we see students with strong comprehension and written Irish but yet they cannot understand or speak in any comfortable way at all. Brenter (vsf)

Teachers see themselves as not having any role dealing with or awareness of continuity of student's educational experience. Teachers claim it would not be an issue raised by parents. What parents are concerned about are more of a pastoral and social well being of their child. Teachers did distinguish between parents. The distinction was made about parents whose first child was making the transition:

I think there is a big gap, a big jump between primary and post-primary school education especially for the first child of a family. I think education has changed hugely in the past ten fifteen years that parents can't go by their own experience of what it was like in post-primary school. Ardbane (vsm)

Teacher were also aware that some students could experience difficulties in that they might not be able to follow the post-primary school curriculum but these difficulties would be dealt with by the special needs teacher.

The School Completion Programme team had an awareness of issues around continuity / discontinuity of students' education. They stated that poor academic achievement in primary impacts on academic achievement and student engagement in post-primary school. The particular post-primary schools continuity / discontinuity issues are related to the environment subject teachers want to teach in and how they can use school rules to control certain students entry into that environment and how resulting student disengagement can occur:

You have difficult ones who are thrown out because the teacher says, well it will be easier if he is not in my class. They can be thrown out of class if they go in with their tie not on or the full uniform not on. The following week the rest of the class had started a project and they were put sitting over to one side and given a book and told to read the book. Now the two lads would be a low reading age. They couldn't actually read the book. They sat there and after five minutes they got up and wanted to get involved in the project but were not allowed. They called the teacher something and they were thrown out. Drum Coe (cccoD) / Creevins (vsfD)

The general issues are concerned with non achievement of an academic standard in primary and its short and long term consequences for students:

We have a lot of children coming into post-primary school that cannot read a book. I've seen a lot of psychological assessments and they have reading ages of 8,9, or 7. I don't know if we are being fair to children to allow them into an institution that demands a higher academic ability and expect them to survive in it. I think there is a

huge question here when we allow children leave primary education with insufficient academic ability. We are not doing their morale, their confidence good and we are damaging their future. Drum Coe / Creevins (vsfD)

The School Completion Programme team expressed their frustration with a primary /post-primary system that equally fails pupils / students and that blames everyone else and refuses to accept responsibility:

There are a lot of people [teachers] saying it is not our fault it is theirs and on the other side they are saying it is not our fault it is theirs. The kids are going through the system while we are busy blaming each other and they are leaving. Drum Coe (cccoD) / Creevins (vsfD)

Teachers however did talk about their knowledge of what pupils do in primary school. This knowledge is built up informally through personal friendships with Primary school teachers. However the responsibility for continuity between the primary and post-primary curriculums is understood not to lie with them but with the Department of Education and Science:

The post-primary teachers have a curriculum as well and it is up to the Department to co-ordinate the two. We have ours, they have theirs and if the two don't meet, well it is not our fault. Creevins (vsfD)

It also highlights that despite the effort being put into current liaison procedures the output of them are not being integrated into the post-primary schools.

While teachers do not perceive the teaching of content as a problem, socialising first year students for teaching is. A perennial task for teachers of first year students, therefore, is to change the way students initially behave within the classroom. They have to *learn* 'to sit and listen, that learning is a matter of sitting and listening and that answers come out of a text book or a teacher's head' Sotto (2007) , p. 2. Teachers in first year classes not only prioritise gaining control over students but

actively change the behaviour students have used to assist them learn in Primary. Teachers teach 'defensively' (McNeil 1986), controlling and restricting the usefulness of knowledge to the context of the 'test'. There is an expectation among some teachers in this study that students in post-primary should be able to do post-primary classroom work and homework for themselves.

### **Conclusion**

Smyth et al (2004) states that there is 'an inadequate flow of information' between primary and post-primary schools. This research highlights that in Rafoarty, post-primary school's, are not just the receivers of information but actively filter and ignore information flowing from primary schools. The sharing of information and the act of communication has been shown to be different (Scheffler 1967, Vanderstraeten 2001). All post-primary schools have similar procedures that allow information about pupils to be verbally exchanged. Activities are organized for pupils and parents and processes that allow for consultation between school representatives concerning pupils with individual difficulties and or special educational needs are evident. However it is clear that the procedures are neither communicative or liaison rather they are reception procedures as they are not underpinned by an interchange of meaningful information (Derricott 1987). None of the post-primary schools in Rafoarty have procedures in place to facilitate teachers from different schools discussing, planning or implementing related courses and approaches to teaching. The enrolment process with its use of assessment procedures facilitates the gathering of some information and informs the post-primary management in the formation of streamed Irish, English and Mathematics classes.

The findings also calls into question the cause of the 'information gap', as suggested by the NCCA (2004), suggesting instead a limited willingness on the part of post-primary schools to engage with the information primary schools possess on their pupil's. There is also a suggestion that Primary principals want not just to be the providers of information but to be involved in communication and to be accepted as partners in the educational process. The study establishes that because of the bureaucratic nature of the liaison procedures information is used for solely for administrative purposes. Primary and post-primary schools appear to historically use the transition process to seek to position themselves with each other especially those schools that are perceived as attractive to parents of middle class families. While the catchment area of town primary schools should allow access to all post-primary schools selection procedures that favour past pupils' children prevent equality of access. There is also evidence to suggest that an informal league table exists between post primary and primary schools. The study also suggests that there needs to be greater cognisance of the conflict and differences that exist between the two sectors. Curriculum continuity is understood by principals and teachers of post-primary schools as the search for the impossible. Curriculum discontinuity, they conclude, is the educational experience of most students where the sequencing of learning is left to chance and the developmental needs of students being sidelined and overlooked.

## **Chapter 7**

### **Student Perceptions**

Students are not directly involved in transition liaison procedures. However their experience of transition, how schools approach their integration and how teachers commence teaching them identifies aspects of school norms that cannot be easily seen. The literature research highlighted that the environment of schools can cause problems for adolescents. There is also a need for an awareness of the distinctiveness of this developmental point within adolescence which requires curriculum differentiation. Such an awareness to find a balance between responding to the needs of the child, the demands of subject discipline and the requirements of external assessment could act as evidence as the suitability of schooling of early adolescents. The research question developed from the literature research informed the presentation of the findings. The first section presents students feelings around transition and their perceptions on how transition is managed by their schools. It reports on how students themselves manage the transition. The second section presents the students experience of continuity, discontinuity and change. The third section identifies the students' experience of the classroom environment with regard to their perceptions of teachers, learning and the purpose of assessment.



## Section 1

### **Student's feelings associated with the transition process**

In keeping with U.K. and Irish research, (Rudduck 1996, O'Brien 2001, Smyth *et al* 2004, and O'Brien 2004), the interviews with students of first year post-primary level schools disclosed a wide range of feelings associated with their transition into post-primary school. The feelings ranged from feelings of anxiety to feelings of excitement. It must be pointed out that for many students the transfer is also a positive experience they look forward to because of the, " new and expanded environment of the receiving school, new curriculum and school work and other non-curricular opportunities available in the receiving school", Lee *et al* (1995, p.60). All students were able to name their feelings and explain what was causing them and what helped them to come to terms with the fact that they were in post-primary School. There is some distinction between how boys and girls described the feelings associated with transition (Smyth *et al*, 2004).

All boys interviewed described the first few days of post-primary as different to Primary school and something that had to be got used to. One boy described his feelings of his first few days as 'nervous' and that these feelings were due to:

There were very few people here from my primary school so I didn't know a lot of people and there were a lot of new subjects as well.  
Drum Coe (ccccD)

For the male students in Drum Coe the settling was an event that 'had to be got on with' that they 'got used to after awhile'. A positive factor in boys' own reporting of settling into school was connected to their ability to confidently act on

information or take location directions from teachers, friends and to operate independently of siblings:

They (teachers) would help us. Tell us where our classes were. Give us information on things like that. Ardbane (vsm)

Having my brothers here helped. They showed me where the classes were for the first three days. At a certain stage I didn't want them to help. Ardbane (vsm)

The girls, however, talked about a variety of feelings, 'nervousness', 'confusion', 'uncomfortableness', 'embarrassment', 'weirdness', 'scared' and 'worried'. The girls' feelings of nervousness appear to be associated with being unfamiliar with the school as a physical space, with school subjects and with teachers:

Because you didn't know here you were going and you had to find the classrooms and get to know your subjects and your teachers. Getting to know the teachers was most difficult because ... the different personalities, but most of them were nice. Brenter (vsf)

Feelings of confusion were due to the difference in the number of subjects and the struggle to get organized in order to operate in the school system on one's own and the consequences of not being organized:

It was very confusing because you had more subjects and then you had to remember which subject you had and if you lost your timetable you have to figure it out and it was very confusing. Drum Coe (cccoD)

Everyone else knew where they were going and you were just wandering around the place being late for class. Brenter (vsf)

### **Students' perceptions of schools' formal support structures.**

Despite all the post-primary schools having various methods and ways of inducting students into post-primary schools, students, when asked to recall what assisted them, remembered scant details of the school's efforts and focused instead on their own ability to make the transition through forming friendships and individual

teacher's ability to empathise, understand their situation and / or give directions. A clear distinction can be seen between the schools in this regard. Students in the two single sex girl schools Brenter (vsf) and Creevins (vsfD) had greater recall and disclosed more detail of how school support systems impacted on the start of post-primary school than the student's in Ardbane and Drum Coe. For students, settling into post-primary school, involved schools attempting to assist students in making friends, familiarizing students with their physical surroundings, informing students how to operate in these surroundings through understanding their class timetable and telling them the school rules. Drum Coe (ccoD) is involved in a School Completion Project but the students did not mention any formal school procedures that either assisted or hindered them making the transition. In keeping with the other schools, teachers' informal assistance was indicated as important for students during the first few days as they gave direction and showed empathy and understanding for students. Induction programmes and individual teachers attempt and assist the integration of students into the physical / geographical space through informing students how to operate in that space.

**Familiarising students' with the schools physical environment.**

Students in Ardbane (vsm) had very little to say about how school structures assisted them settling in. They saw the purpose of coming in a day earlier:

To get to know your classroom and timetable. Ardbane (vsm)

This comment highlights knowledge of two elements 'classroom' and 'timetable' and suggests that students are initially working out of a primary school reference point where everything is classroom focused and that they are not thinking of being

in a post-primary school but being in a post-primary classroom. The 'timetable' is the mechanism through which other classrooms are accessed and for the students, even though they had mastered it over time, timetables were:

Not easy to understand during the first few days. Ardbane (vsm)

Students in all schools felt that being shown rooms once in an unfamiliar place was not helpful highlighting again that 'knowing' school involves gaining an autonomous knowledge about how to independently move around school. They suggested an alternative strategy:

Just showing us the rooms once does not help. I think they should have given us a treasure hunt. That would have got us used to the school. Creevins (vsfD)

The students stated that while the school tried to assist them settling in, settling into post-primary school was something they worked out for themselves. The systems of home room and subject groupings used in Creevins (vsfD) helped students as it allowed groups to form and prevent students from struggling on their own to work things out:

There were people in my homeroom: in my subject groups so I would go with them. Creevins (vsfD)

A system of student mentoring, also a part of the formal support structures, was also stated as beneficial:

It is kind of easier to talk to seniors rather than to talk to teachers because they kind of know what you are going through in first year. Teachers might not. Creevins (vsfD)

From these student comments it appears that the formal support structures existing in the school, that come into play as the year starts, are perceived as more useful to the students than the induction process used on the first day. It should be noted that of

the four post-primary schools, Creevins (vsfD), did not mention explicitly that teachers had an informal or formal role in settling them into post-primary school.

For some students, in both the single sex female schools, Brenter (vsf) and Creevins (vsfD), the purpose of being brought in a day earlier was seen as unhelpful as it failed to assist them in understanding the physical space of the school or how to organise themselves in it. The unhelpfulness is also related to the schools' emphasis on how students are to behave (Gordon et al 1999). This emphasis on what behaviour is expected of them can be confusing and suggests information over load:

That does not help because they don't show you where the rooms are or they don't follow your timetable they just tell you the rules. Brenter (vsf)

I would start wondering what is going on and I would be confused. The rules ... there were too many of them at one time. Creevins (vsfD)

### **Teacher assistance in the transition process**

In three schools, Brenter, Ardbane and Drum Coe, students described how teachers played a key role in the process of them settling into post-primary school. They did this in many ways:

Teachers helped generally at the start of the school, directing you or if you something hard explaining it to you as well. Drum Coe (cccoD)

Teachers helped as well. They just understood what we were going through. If you were lost they would know what was wrong with you. Brenter (vsf)

Some teachers kept saying that they knew it was a big change but just take things easy and don't be afraid to say anything to other students and all that stuff. Ardbane (vsm)

The students also stated that the induction programme was something that was done and now 'was over'. The students contrasted teacher's attitudes in the first few days/weeks and now:

They were really nice and then when you did something wrong or you had not something right they were just down on you. They are real hard. Creevins (vsfD)

Students in the boys' school also stated that they perceive a change in teacher's disposition to them as first years very early on in the school year:

In the first few days they did seem to be a bit kinder than they are now but that did not last very long. Ardbane (vsm)

The teachers were nicer in the first few days about homework and all this stuff. The easy stuff lasted for about a week. Ardbane (vsm)

This contrast in teachers' attitudes in Ardbane is supported in that teachers' self report how they start teaching first years, they are intentionally strict in order to create an environment in which they can teach without disruption. The School Completion Programme team also support this student perception of the interaction between students and teachers in other schools:

The thing with teachers is that they are so regimented. In the first few weeks teachers go in with a full fist, applying the letter of the law for the first few weeks. Drum Coe (cccoD) / Creevins (vsfD)

This would indicate that students are experiencing poor 'stage environment fit' in that at the time adolescents are in need of close adult relationships outside the home the possibility of establishing such relationships with teachers is being inhibited by teachers educational practice. Being taught in silence is also restricting the development of thinking skills in that no substantive and meaningful discourse is taking place. To successfully negotiate the geographical and social transition from

primary to post-primary these student statements do highlight that students need time to allow new patterns of behaviour, new forms of attachment and the resultant new ideas about themselves to become part of their new identity.

### **Making friends**

Schools attempted to assist students making friends through various methods:

To play games and write each others names down on a piece of paper and get to know each others names. Creevins (vsfD)

However, as more than one student stated, getting to know names is different from making friends:

Making friends is something that you have to do yourself, but it did help writing down the names and getting to know the faces. Creevins (vsfD)

This point that friendship making was something one did by oneself was repeated many times throughout different schools.

### **The importance of friendships**

For all students' the making of friends and knowing how to get around the new space were a priority and were inter connected. The feeling of being 'scared' however was due to being on their own in a class without friends:

I did not know anyone when I came in. I only knew a few girls but they did not end up in my class. I felt scared because I did not know where I was going. Brenter (vsf)

For some this lead to feelings of desperation:

You were kind of desperate to make friends quickly. Creevins (vsfD)

Making friends fulfils many needs. Students make a clear distinction between just having a friend or a friendly face in the school and making and having friends in one's class. While having a brother, sister or someone you know in the school

helped by knowing where they could be located at break time having a friend in your class was described as being 'lucky' as it:

Kind of helps you to know that there is someone else there in the same position. Brenter (vsf)

While sharing a friendship or making a friendship with another in a similar position was seen as a positive, in that it alleviated a student's sense of aloneness, having a friend who knew their way around was even better:

Once you have people who know their way around in your class, you are o.k. Creevins (vsfD)

The friends I already knew helped me to get around, to get to know how to get around the school. Drum Coe (cccoD)

Such friendships and associations, while difficult to make, overcame the sense of the student being unsettled and separated:

It was not easy for me to settle in because I came here with three other girls from my school. I knew them all. They all got put into the one class and I was the one that was separated and that was hard. I did not know anyone and it was tough trying to get to know them but after awhile we would get to know them and it was nice. Brenter (vsf)

This process of sharing in and developing empathetic friendships and developing associations with those that know their way around the physical space of the school resulted in student's reporting they had settled into their post-primary school. What is interesting is that they as students are not just integrated into the school on the basis of what formal school structures do, they integrate themselves by actively looking towards their classmates.



## **Section 2:**

### **The students experience of continuity, discontinuity and change.**

Continuities and discontinuities between primary and post-primary can be identified within and between groups of students learning experiences. During an initial analysis of all students responses there appeared several differences in how the questions were answered. In analyzing the transcripts a difference was revealed between Drum Coe (cccoD) and the other schools. The transcript reveals a group of students individually describing and understanding their experience differently. Each Drum Coe (cccoD) student described these differences from his / her own perspective and stayed with this perspective throughout the interview allowing an analysis of each student's own unique experience and understanding. The experience Drum Coe (cccoD) students had of Primary and post-primary schools were specific for / to this group of students. In the other schools a different dynamic occurred. The initial questions, in all schools, resulted in individual students expressing their experiences of what it was like settling into their post-primary school. Once these were made a group consensus appears to have formed around issues and these group concerns dominated the student's engagement.

#### **Aspects of Primary school missed by students**

Primary school was missed by some students because of the friendships lost, changed and how travelling further to school impinged on pastimes they enjoyed in

Primary school:

I would prefer to be back in Primary school. A lot of my friends went to other post-primary schools and I don't see them. It was more fun in Primary, shorter hours, subjects were not as hard, you got to see more of your friends, more fun. Drum Coe (cccoD)

I enjoy the matches in Primary. I can't do them here because I have to get the bus home after school. Brenter (vsf)

One thing I miss, I went to a mixed school. I miss the lads because they were real funny in my class and I miss them. Brenter (vsf)

I miss girls in the class. Girls were able to get around our headmaster in Primary. Ardbane (vsm)

### **School discipline**

Students state that they perceive a difference between the discipline procedures of Primary and post-primary schools. Even though the students have come from various primary schools they all experience discipline in post-primary school as different. In Primary school students feel their teachers know them better and this affects how they are disciplined:

I think that in Primary school the teacher has you for the whole day so they know what you are like ... In Primary a teacher would give out to you for doing something but that is it. Brenter (vsf)

You would get a lot of chances in Primary school. The teacher would be at the same people all the time, this is your last chance, but no one would get in real trouble. The teachers over here would say it once maybe twice and that is it. You get a sheet or a conduct report and that is fair. Drum Coe (cccoD)

Students refer to how discipline is used by individual teachers in post-primary as, too much. While the students understand that there must be discipline they see discipline as a way of putting order on students. What amazes students is the ability of teachers in post-primary to recall past events:

Teachers in post-primary they remember, they record everything. Creevins (vsfD)

A consequence on things being recorded for students is that that is what they are remembered for:

In post-primary if you do something, even if it is very small in their class they still remember. If it is as if that is all they remember you for. Creevins (vsfD)

Students suggest that some teachers are deliberately trying to create for themselves a persona of strictness in order that it will get around all first years:

Some teachers are trying to get attention. They want the whole school to say that is a strict teacher. Creevins (vsfD)

There appeared to be in the boys' accounts a prevalent teacher attitude that expects students to misbehave and not to tell the truth:

When I was called to the office for this meeting the teacher said you better have a good defence ready ... If you go over to ( ) class (having been sent out by a teacher to another teachers class) and ask for a book and you go out and look for her and a teacher sees you. Well it's like a quiz. Why are you going? Where are you going?. The teacher then checks with the other teacher to see are you telling the truth ... They don't trust us. Ardbane (vsm)

### **Subject Choice**

Subjects studied in first year are chosen for a variety of reasons. The reasons behind choosing subjects vary from liking a subject, to choosing a foreign language because of the summer holiday destinations and to needing it for a future career. Subjects are also not chosen for a variety of reasons. Reasons include the students perception of subject utility, subject difficulty, personal preference is also clearly influenced by parental guidance and familial familiarity.

All subjects are sampled by students in Creevins (vsfD) during first year before they are chosen in second year. In Brenter (vsf) students are allowed to sample some subjects in first year through doing certain subjects for a period of six weeks. In Ardbane (vsm) subjects are chosen prior to entry and in Drum Coe (ccoD) students can move between subjects for the first few months. In Creevins (vsfD) this practice

is seen as positive in that it allows students to become familiar with unknown subjects. Becoming familiar with subject content changes previously held notions about what subjects they were going to do prior to the sampling process. For other students the process was seen as a delay in making subject choices they had already decided on and doing three languages was a source of confusion and frustration:

If I had to pick subjects before I came in I would not ... If I had to choose before I came in I would not have chosen art because I thought I was no good at it but when I came in here I really liked it ... It helps with the fact of doing Home Economics, Business and Science I always thought I was going to do Home Economics. I am now thinking of doing Science. Creevins (vsfD)

It is very hard doing two languages as well as Irish. One test I was writing down the German for French so I ended up writing the French for German. It is really confusing. Creevins (vsfD)

In asking supplementary questions it became clear that within the sampling process there's a gender difference in that female students understand the choice between two specific subjects as significant. The significant choice for girls was the choice between Home Economics and Science. Choosing between these subjects is a choice around present practical enjoyment and possible future career needs:

The hard one to choose is between Home Economics and Science because for Careers when you are older you need science but then again you like to do Home Economics because you do all the fun stuff whereas in Science it can be a bit boring. It is just how do you choose between the two of them? Home Economics is good but you might have to choose Science for what you want to be. Creevins (vsfD)

To solve this dilemma student's suggested a solution:

They should be subjects that you have to do. Creevins (vsfD)

Students also made it clear that other factors also influence how students choose and make their subject choice:

I think that sometimes you might like the subject but you might not like the teacher. Or you might like the teacher and don't like the subject. You might be afraid to choose. You might think I should choose that subject and I might get a nicer teacher next year. You know the teacher is going to affect your choice. Creevins (vsfD)

### **Perceived differences in subjects.**

Students in answering this question talked about the differences in how they interacted with specific subject material in primary school. Their comments suggest that learning in Primary and post-primary are book knowledge, learning is the reproduction of sounds being produced by teachers and that how they learn is related to how the teaching style of teachers:

In Primary Science we just read out of the book and there was all this stuff about, like, explaining about fish and we did no experiments. We talk about science now whereas in Primary we just read and read and read and we did not do anything. Ardbane (vsm)

We did French in Primary. She was saying stuff and no one would understand and she would use games where we had to speak French where we would not know what to say or anything. We were just saying French sounds not speaking French. Ardbane (vsm)

The students also perceive a discontinuity between Primary and post-primary in that the subject content has changed and got harder in Mathematics, Irish and English and in the amount of 'learning' expected in post-primary:

I thought Mathematics has got much harder. It was real easy in Primary because it was just adding, division and multiplication. Now it's sets and algebra and all this ... Irish in Primary was about verbs and stuff now we have to learn loads of words ... In English all we did was read a novel now you have to study poetry and all this ... There is a lot more learning. Ardbane (vsm)

In Primary school the questions would be what is, such and such a character's name. In post-primary school it is what do you think the character felt at this time. You have to think more and more about it and put yourself in the place of the character. In Maths, definitely it

has got harder. Math in Primary we did in a particular way and I came in here and they did it in a particular different way. Drum Coe (ccc0D)

Some of the students explicitly refer to the difference between learning Irish in primary and learning Irish in post-primary and that now learning Irish is structured into the day through a timetable:

I did Irish hardly ever in Primary school and I have it four days a week now. Well we did it once or twice a week in Primary but if we were doing English and we were reading a story we would keep going instead of moving into Irish. Irish is hard to understand in post-primary school. The teachers talk fluent Irish. You cannot understand. They might not say it in English. They just try and let you figure it out yourself. Creevins (vsfD)

One student gave her analysis of why Irish is so hard in post-primary:

All the Primary schools do a different level of Irish and the teachers act as if it is the same level and sometimes people are really good at it and you are just really average. It is really hard sometimes. Creevins (vsfD)

While subject names sound familiar students see differences in these subjects content and make up compared to what they were doing in those subjects in Primary and there is sense that students are experiencing a curriculum overload:

Science, we did not have Biology and Chemistry, we had simple things like science and nature ... Geography in Primary school you always did. We did not do what we do here like climate, separating rocks and all that. In Primary school you just learn about the counties of Ireland ... English is all these new big words, metaphors that I have never heard before. In Primary it was just do this story and answer this question. Creevins (vsfD)

With regard to foreign languages students are aware of an initial perception they have of repetition of what had been done previously that quickly dissipates. This initial perception lulls them into a security that is short lived and highlights the need for greater continuity in teaching to support students learning experiences:

We did French last year and when we came in here we were thinking we had this all done and then after awhile we were thinking no I do not. Brenter (vsf)

We started French in sixth class and the teacher would just do it. She would just do it, tell you something and she would never help you but now in post-primary school they actually stop and explain it to you. Drum Coe (cccoD)

For some student's subjects like Art are totally new and they enjoy the novelty of it, which it appeals to a skill they never knew they had and that they can build on and learn through:

They teach us how to do it. The first half of the class they explain and where to start at the bottom or top of the drawing. Drum Coe (cccoD)

It is clear from the above that integrating students into a school is not a once off event rather it is a process that is underpinned by a 'positive school climate' Smyth (1999), Smyth et al (2004)

### **Section 3:**

#### **Students' perceptions of the 'good' teacher**

Because of this student perception of this new solitude in class and the seriousness of the classroom the student's are aware that they are dependent on 'good' teachers to learn. This typifying of teachers by students reveal that before Christmas first year students had formed clear ideas about what teacher behaviour does and does not facilitate learning. From the students' comments there appears to be three elements in their evaluation of good teachers. Good teachers convey to students that they as teachers are competent in their subject area know how to teach and can accept students' interventions:

If you are going to learn a subject you need a teacher that will help you that is a good teacher... A good teacher is one, when you ask a question they don't shout and say wait a minute. Brenter (vsf)

This description of a good teacher is repeated again and again throughout the interviews especially the ability to develop a trusting relationship with students.

Students also refer to class experiences that they enjoy and like:

It is easier to learn because you are not afraid to ask her. Brenter (vsf)

We started French in sixth class and the teacher would just do it. She would just do it, tell you something and she would never help you but now in post-primary school they actually stop and explain it to you. Drum Coe (cccoD)

Some teachers make you want to learn and they don't scare you. They laugh and joke in class and you actually like that subject and you are dying to get in there to the classroom before the bell rings. Creevins (vsfD)

### **Teacher differences**

When students talk about differences between teachers, they describe it in terms of difference in degrees of teacher seriousness and strictness. Students interpret this teacher disposition as an indicator of a lack of willingness by some teachers to engage with them at the level they are at. They also sense that there exists for teachers a hierarchical scale of worth based upon a year group's position with regard to Junior or Leaving certification. The students are aware that they are now part of a system that is more centred on subject coverage rather than student caring (Hargreaves *et al* 1996):

First years are not a priority compared to exam classes ... None of the teachers care. It is not in their job description. Not in their contract they just teach you. Ardbane (vsm)

My Maths teacher, she teaches well and everything but she is a bit too into the subject. You have to do this and don't make a sound, if you



cough don't make a noise, she's strict. Well ... she is too into it. Drum  
Coe (ccccD)

For some students this lack of engagement by teachers with students at the level of understanding they have of subjects leads to confusion:

I knew what I had to do in Primary school but now I get confused at times. Ardbane (vsm)

They also discuss and illustrate the close alignment and interdependence between teaching, learning and assessment:

The teachers in post-primary are very serious. They are not really strict, some are as strict as Primary but they are more serious especially about exams. Creevins (vsfD)

### **Students' perception of the differences in learning processes**

The stated differences between primary and post-primary learning processes are not dramatic. While students they state these differences they also reveal similarities between the curriculum content in Primary and post-primary that it is being presented to them as a series of facts to be learnt. The major difference is that learning in post-primary is now something that has to be completed for testing and is completed by testing. Because of this there would appear to be a dominant style of teaching at both Primary and post-primary that discourages personal ownership of learning and possibly inhibiting the enhancement of personal identity (Muuss 1986). The analysis also illustrates the amount of control teachers in both primary and post-primary have over student learning. Students focused on the differences in how they interact with subject material in post-primary and the resultant activity undertaken in post-primary by students.

The main difference between primary and post-primary is that learning is now understood as more 'serious' in that it has an 'academic orientation' (Hargreaves 1996, p.25), that there is an 'emphasis on external expectations and disciplinary rigor' (Beane *et al* 2001, p. 1158):

We take notes in History and Geography now whereas when we were in Primary we would read the book. It is easier to take notes. We sit in classes the whole time writing notes ... Primary school was fun like, well it was not fun. Here it is so serious you have to have everything perfect. Notebooks, all the notes down, keep them in order. Creevins (vsfD)

For some students writing is seen as easier than reading others distinguish between writing that assists understanding and writing that does not:

Sometimes they do too much writing in subjects like in Home Economics. Sometimes in English we just write and write and never stop writing. I don't like that, it does not really help. In Home Economic it helps because we can go back over it. Drum Coe (cccoD)

This distinction between writing that is helpful and unhelpful centres around the connectedness of the task of writing to the purpose of assisting student understanding. Writing is also understood by students as a way of controlling behaviour in class:

In Science sometimes the teachers stops doing experiments and gets us writing if someone starts messing. Drum Coe (cccoD)

Post-primary school note taking implies that school work now consists of knowing a fixed content of information through a technique of note taking that students must master to learn correct answers. The point of taking notes was understood by the students as connected to the difference between Primary and post-primary school and the purpose of post-primary education. For the students the purpose of post-primary education is to pass exams:

In Primary they were teaching you because you need to know the stuff but in post-primary they are just teaching you so you can pass exams ... The Junior Certificate, they are teaching you stuff so you can pass it ... Teachers help you for your exams; they tell you what you have to learn. Brenter (vsf)

To achieve this end of passing exams student's perceived that note taking facilitated exam passing through the understanding that if you can write it down it was possible to get it into your head. This for the student's was learning. This method of learning was approved of by the student's as one student explained:

You put this book in front of you with all this writing and it seems all jumbled up and they put it into facts that you can learn easier that will get you the same mark. Brenter (vsf)

The students see differences between Primary and post-primary. Primary was a place you went to, met friends and returned home from. Learning in Primary was described as being different to post-primary school, summed up in the phrase, 'taking things in':

In Primary it was like school was a place where you went in. You learnt some stuff, you talked to your friends and you went home. Now you have to take stuff in ... More of a story than actual facts ... They go into a lot more detail now. Creevins (vsfD)

The 'taking things in' is connected to the taking in of subject facts and details. For students the difference does not stop there. They now, not only have to take these facts and details in, but show the teachers they have taken them in through reproducing them accurately:

You have to have it off by heart. Creevins (vsfD)

### **Isolated learning**

Students state that the academic spaces of the school, classrooms, are locations where they rely on their own abilities and personal qualities levels. Trying to survive

in classrooms reveals that teachers are not focused on student adjustment as the transition into post-primary is experienced by students as a type of 'immobilisation' (Becket 2002):

We had a great time at the start and then the next thing they just dumped you in all your classes. Creevins (vsfD)

For the first few days it was like walking on water, then suddenly you sink in. Creevins (vsfD)

There is an additional consequence for students in how they learn, in that, they are in an environment that insists that they are now dependent on their own abilities and personal qualities to learn. Such insistence is in direct opposition to an 'adolescents need for care, security and group attachment' Hargreaves (1996, p.30). The students are aware that the difference in seating arrangements in class can also affect teacher's perception and judgment of student behaviour. The nature of learning in post-primary expects students to become dependent on their own personal qualities and abilities:

In Primary school you would always sit beside someone and if you were stuck you could always talk, but you cannot do that now. You are still sat beside someone but it is different ... There is no time to be joking you just have to learn it. Brenter (vsf)

You could ask the person beside you in Primary. In post-primary you are sitting on a desk on your own and if you get talking to the person next to you, just asking them for a pencil or something you could get a conduct or something. When you are sitting in individual desk teachers can see you more easily. Drum Coe (ccoD)

Some students talked about the difference between the lack of teacher support in post-primary compared to what they were used to in Primary, the growing sense that they are isolated / separated from their classmates. They are also aware that teachers are focused on teaching, student experience of being taught means listening to a

teacher talk without necessarily understanding what the talk stands for (Sotto 2007), and that not understanding the talk has consequences for them as students. While students indicate that they are working by 'writing', they have a sense that their present written work is illusory learning when they compare it to prior experiences of learning in Primary:

In Primary it is a lot easier because you are learning. In any subject you discuss it before you start. But here you just go into class and you do your writing and your work and that is it. There is no point going into a class and writing stuff down that you don't know what you they are talking about. Creevins (vsfD)

In Primary when we would do something and someone would not get it the teacher would get counters and she would make us come to the top of the class and she would make you work it out for ourselves. In post-primary you have to get it written down in your note book and you have to go over it and keep going over it on your own till you know it ...In Primary teachers worked with you and now you are on your own. Creevins (vsfD)

Teachers focus the class on those that understand. Creevins (vsfD)

### **Competition and streaming**

Female students are also aware that there is competition to get into Higher Level classes and use assessment results to compare themselves with each other. While there is no suggestion that teachers explicitly encourage this competition and comparison there is the suggestion by students that it is implicitly supported by them, in that competition enhances teachers teaching and facilitates student study. Not reaching a certain standard can result in a students being labelled by their teacher:

It is after the test that the competition is. Everyone is asking, what did you get? I only got 52 and the person beside you says that they got 90 and then they say so as to be nice, you did really good ... I don't think teachers encourage it but they are aware of it. They don't mind it. It is

kind of better to have it. It encourages you to study more and get better than the others. Creevins (vsfD)

### **Pace of Instruction**

While the boys do not identify the prioritising of academic achievement they do identify the pace of teacher instruction as too quick (Smyth et al 2004). In this research the problem of quick teacher instruction, is stated as resulting in student confusion, caused not just by the pace, but by the predominant activity students engage in during classes:

I think they go much faster sometimes. It is hard to keep up. To keep up I take someone else's copies and take down their notes. Ardbane (vsm)

Yes, they go very, very fast and I get my pen out and write as fast as I can, it is all writing. They go to fast and confuse me. Ardbane (vsm)

Other students in the same class stated that their feelings of being lost and confused is a result of lack of communication and understanding between the teachers about what each of them is doing with the class:

It is real annoying because in one you are copying things down of the board and with the other he would start on them again for some reason. Ardbane (vsm)

When asked to explain this situation it became clear that in some instances students in first year are timetabled to have two teachers for the one subject, in this case Mathematics. While this was the only case of this identified in all the four schools its significance is important. The confusion experienced by this student he claimed affected his academic self esteem:

It confuses me. I was comfortable with Maths in Primary, now I feel bad about myself ... We have two very different teachers for Maths and they are doing two very different things and I am lost and confused. Ardbane (vsm)

Not only the teaching pace causes confusion but where the teacher chooses to pitch the lesson is identified as impinging on student's ability to progress in a subject, as this extract illustrates:

Irish, it depends on the teacher you have. I have ( ) and she explains everything to you. My French teacher who also teaches Irish she just comes into class and starts talking fluent Irish and no one knows ... She asks us to start doing stuff in the book and we don't know what to do ... In Irish she would be just talking and talking in Irish ... She tells us to do an exercise and she won't explain it ... This morning I copied my homework because I did not have a clue. She goes they are really easy and they were not so I copied them. Ardbane (vsm)

For one student the confusion is not only to do with subject differentiation but that in each subject teachers teach differently:

In Primary school we had the one teacher the whole time. Now there are ten different ways of teaching ten different subjects. Ardbane (vsm)

Teaching pace also affects female students through how and around what subject departments in schools structure the learning content of first year classes:

Our Maths teachers has to have the Maths chapters done by a certain time so she just goes on and half of us don't really know what we are doing but she just goes on anyway. We have to have the same stuff done as the other class. We have to have chapters done by the end of the year. Because when we were (unclear) even if we were behind she just skips straight away and we have to move up to what the other girls are doing in a different class. You have to be with the other girls; everyone has to finish at the same time. Creevins (vsfD)

### **Awareness of difference in ability**

Student's claim that the move into post-primary is associated with the realization that there are consequences as a result of differences in ability that are highlighted among them through testing and through their own judgment in comparing themselves to others. Teachers' expectations of students reveal a paradigm of

'consensualism' (Drudy and Lynch 1993, p. 43). Students claim that teachers expecting all students to be at the same level is unrealistic. For students this is described as pressure and unbalanced expectations:

In Primary school everyone is kind of the same but now you have to work hard this year to get into Honour or Pass next year. Right now my head is about to explode. Last year everyone was the same and the teacher taught at the same level. Creevins (vsfD)

There could be a girl, an A student in our class. The teacher expects you to be up with here and you have to try your hardest to get up. Creevins (vsfD)

Yes, Maths. We have done a test about a week ago .She expects everyone to get 90 or higher. Some people are really good at Maths and some people are just ok, and she expects everyone to get 90. Creevins (vsfD)

Students state that not being able to live up to teachers expectations of what they should be able to achieve results in them being labelled:

She tells us we are not working hard enough and that we are lazy. Creevins (vsfD)

### **Homework**

Students also make a connection between tests, learning and doing homework. They prioritise the homework of teachers that they know will test them and seem to indicate that teachers are aware that testing students encourages and compels students to do homework:

I think it is to check to see you are doing your homework as well. Giving you tests makes sure that you do it ... If you have a test you study that subject more, you don't just go down and watch the telly, you figure you have to learn this ... They give you bits to study and I don't study it until we have a test to study it for. When they set a test I study it better. Brenter (vsf)



However there is another reason why work that is going to be tested is learnt by students:

When we get vocabulary she tests us the next day and if you don't get it right you stand up. There is this one girl and she had to stand up and she felt everyone was looking at her and laughing at her and she did not feel good about herself. Brenter (vsf)

Other student's, specifically the boys, only do homework on the basis of it being corrected or being useful next year. By next year the student is referring to the fact that he likes the subject enough to do the work and pick it next year.

( ) gives us essays but she never corrects them so we never do them. I do the homework of the subjects I am going to do next year. Ardbane (vsm)

Students also report that while a teacher having a persona of strictness increases the possibility that homework will be done and that the teacher can teach without being disturbed by students may result in the subject not being liked by students and may predict students not learning in class:

Sometimes the teachers are being really strict so as you would be afraid of them and you would always do the homework for that class. It doesn't really work though because you end up hating that subject ... You don't ask questions. You are afraid to ask questions because you are afraid of her, that she would bite your head off. Creevins (vsfD)

Teachers, students claim, demonstrate a lack of understanding as to regards how much homework a student can realistically do. It is clear because of the factors outlined above that students prioritise their homework. Students also stated that teachers share in this understanding of how and why students prioritise their homework and may manipulate the homework system by testing regularly:

Teachers act as if they are your only teacher and they give you loads of homework ... If your work is not good the next day you cannot

explain to them that your Irish teacher gave me loads of homework and I spent ages on it ...They don't expect you to have any other teachers. Creevins (vsfD)

### **Students' experience of teaching and assessment**

The analysis of the data reveals the 'prioritising' of academic achievement (Lynch *et al*, 2002) in both the single sex girl schools. Female students identified assessments as something that unsettled them after they made the transition from Primary to post-primary. The teaching and the testing of knowledge is stated by students as the main learning difference between Primary and post-primary. Tests, students claimed, were something new:

I never had them in Primary school and it was such a big change to have them every day. Brenter (vsf)

When challenged on the accuracy of this statement the frequency of testing was changed to most days. 'Not having a test' in Primary was also changed to not having as many as in post-primary. For some student's Primary and post-primary school is a culture of testing and being tested. The difference between Primary and post-primary is in its intensity:

Friday in Primary was really the worst day because you had all the tests. You had reading test, spelling test, Irish test and your Maths test. Now you have all tests all the time and they can happen any day. Brenter (vsf)

The start of the year when we came in here it was like we were getting test every day of the week, not just one, two or three. It is very annoying. Brenter (vsf)

### **Difference between assessments**

Students distinguished between class tests and seasonal tests, identifying seasonal tests as harder because of their intensity, even though they had only had experienced a Christmas test:

Well if it is a serious test at Christmas or summer test it is worse because it is one test after another, every day ... and everything is quite. Brenter (vsf)

The students described the experience of class testing as being uncomfortable, causing stress, by being placed on a spot by a teacher in full view of everyone else. This sort of testing is also seen by students as something that can happen at any time. They also made a distinction between oral and written tests and the pressure and consequences associated with each:

Sometimes it is really embarrassing. If you don't know the answer and the teacher is there and you now you could be on the spot next. You are glad this great light is not over me yet. Oral tests are harder than written tests. If the teacher asks you a question and everyone is looking at you and you just freeze. In a written test less pressure goes into your head because you are on your own and no one but the teacher is reading it. Creevins (vsfD)

### **Purpose of assessment**

For students the purposes behind tests are connected to student learning, teachers teaching and indicating subject content progression in subject areas. The testing of this knowledge is mainly done orally and is done during class time. The purpose of a test in class time is understood by students as a way of checking up on them:

To make sure you learn things ... before you move onto a new section ... To make sure that you know what she is teaching you. Brenter (vsf)

They would go around the class, and say, call out your name and say what machine would you use to plough, or do the bog and you have to have it all off. Creevins (vsfD)

Tests, the students claimed scared them. In questioning the students about this it became obvious that it was not necessarily the test itself but the consequence of the test result that worried students:

It makes you feel really weird because your mam gives out. Brenter (vsf)

I think it is to show the parents at parent teacher meetings what you remember and stuff. Creevins (vsfD)

The Junior Certificate was also highlighted by students as a way teachers endeavour to motivate students and as a focus given by teachers for student learning:

They are always warning you not to fall behind or you will not be able to do your Junior Certificate ... I think they mention the Junior Certificate so that you will go and learn it really well ... We would just be doing a subject and we would be reading this line and we would be reading this paragraph and then they would be saying that would be handy for answering a question in your Junior Certificate. Brenter (vsf)

Students state, that teachers justify this practice on the grounds that they are preparing them for the Junior Certificate. However students under pressure wonder will they be able to keep pace with such a high work rate for three years. The thought of being under such pressure has its effects on female students:

They keep on going this is the base for the Junior Certificate. If you work hard now it won't be as hard later. You know next year they are just going to go, ok now you really have to work hard. Creevins (vsfD)

It kind of worries me. I am thinking I have to study really hard now because it is going to get harder next year and harder the year after. When they mention it now it terrifies me. Creevins (vsfD)

It kind of does, it really terrifies. Girls if they compete over little things like Irish tests how are they going to be over the Junior Certificate? Creevins (vsfD)

## **Conclusion**

While girls remembered and reported how school support systems impacted on the start in post-primary school in general students remembered scant details of their school's efforts. They all focused on their own ability to make the transition and that settling into post-primary school was something they worked out for themselves with the friendship of other first years. Making friends is an important as companionship makes unfamiliar places and spaces less 'scary'. Teachers do play a part through giving directions, expressing empathy and giving encouragement.

The discontinuities of student's educational experience are around differences in school discipline, subject sampling and subject choice. Surprisingly there is continuity for students in that the focus of learning is still learning from a text. How they learn is through writing notes. The discontinuity is that there is now an 'academic orientation' that extends not only to their school work but into after school work. They also experience themselves as isolated learners dependent on their own abilities and personal qualities. To succeed in this environment they need 'good teachers' who engage with their questions without shouting.

Students by Christmas of first year in this study are aware that there is a close alignment and interdependence between teaching, learning and examinations. They are also becoming more aware of differences in ability and the consequences of these differences. Female students are aware that they are now in a competitive learning environment while boys state that the pace of instruction is too quick, in that while they are busy writing what they are supposed to be learning gets lost. Homework and the examination of homework influence how students prioritise

homework. Students state that teachers use their insight into how students prioritise homework to ensure it is completed.

## Chapter 8

### Discussion of Findings

The purpose of this research is to identify and describe how local curriculum factors affect the continuity of student educational experience after they transfer from Primary to post-primary school. It was judged a possibility that a distinct contribution may be made to this research area by exploring the impact of curriculum structures on the continuity of student's educational experience through contextualizing it within a specific geographical area. The analysis established correspondence and patterns within the data that supports the view that the findings of this research may be true beyond the local and have significance for understanding the wider national context.

The results of the study highlight that local conflicts and differences exist between and within the primary and post-primary schools which contribute to the existence of a local culture of educational blame around academic standards. That students are not all at the same level, 'not ready for teaching' is interpreted by post-primary teachers as a lack of consistency in academic standards among primary schools. What facilitates contact between primary and post-primary schools are local historical procedures around the transition process. There is very little evidence in this study to suggest that primary and post-primary schools have a shared sense of educational purpose. The study finds that what passes as communication between primary and post-primary is in fact not communication as suggested by Vanderstraeten (2001). This is claimed on the basis that while information passes between primary and post-primary schools, post-primary schools choose to ignore

information from within the communication. This deficit is not the fault of individual principals or teachers, but is due to how schools interact with 'socio-cultural-political processes that shape the content and orientation of curriculum, and legitimizing what good teaching practices are, and to what ends' Callan (2006, p. 7).

### **Restricted educational partnership**

The working relationship between primary and post-primary teachers is a relationship that is not based on educational partnership (Mac Giolla Phadraig 2005, p.95). Aspects of the transition process, such as the procedures around entrance assessments/tests and the collecting of personal/social and educational information, while they provide points of contact are not indicative of educational partnership. The information available from primary schools is at present little used or valued in post-primary schools. While the Primary schools in this study have high regard for standardised assessment they acquiesce to the procedures within the transition process that are controlled by the post-primary schools. Despite the many misgivings Primary Principals have of the transition processes Primary schools benefit in participating in this type of relationship. The benefit is that through identifying where most of their students transfer to they are publicly known as a school that is connected to specific post-primary schools in the town. This can then be interpreted and used by primary schools as a public indicator of their own schools apparent academic success.

In spite of the abolition of the *Primary Certificate Examination* (1967) and the prohibition of the use of assessment / tests for selection purposes by post primary schools sixth class students are still being prepared for an academic transition to



post-primary education. 'Good' primary schools are schools within a post-primary schools catchments area that ensure that students acquire an academic standard in Irish, English and Mathematics that is consciously approved of by the post-primary school. In this way primary schools attended are explicitly used by *some* post-primary schools as an indicator of a student's previous educational attainment and an assurance of possible future attainment. A Primary schools inability/ability to align itself with an academic post-primary school impacts on how they are perceived in the locality. The study shows how one Primary school is excluded despite its best academic efforts because of selection mechanisms in post-primary school that favour past students' children. These expectations and selection mechanisms suggests that an informal league table exists locally and that primary schools efforts to align and position themselves reveals that a mindset of stratification exists in post-primary towards local primary schools.

#### **The lack of curriculum liaison**

Local liaison processes do exist but they are bureaucratic in nature in that their outcomes are not the concern of the whole school (Dept. of Education 1981, Hargreaves *et al* 1996). Such bureaucratic liaison is either administrative, in that it is concerned with the passing on of information about primary pupils, or social / pastoral, in that it involves discussion among specific teachers with responsibility for pupils with special needs. It is not curricular liaison in that teachers from different schools do not discuss, plan or implement related courses or approaches to teaching and learning. In this way, the liaison processes of post-primary schools in this study

can only be understood as reception procedures as they ignore any curricular engagement between teachers (Derricott 1987, p.155ff).

What facilitates liaison between schools is not the educational experience of pupils/students over time but a moment in time that are entrance assessments/tests. Post-primary schools in this study use the assessment outcomes as a means to identify possible mismatches between specific students' performances and the Primary schools understanding of individual student ability. The mutual reflection on mismatches is the basis of additional contact between primary and post-primary. This practice suggests that the reception procedures have a degree of liaison. However by not developing into or containing any element of curriculum planning around establishing continuity of students' educational experience this researcher understands that this practice is still an element within a reception procedure.

The poor quality of communication identified above, plus the lack of any effort to make connections between the teaching methodologies, undermines the three principles of curriculum relevance, continuity and progression that the Junior Certificate is founded on. In such an educational environment the continuity of a learner's experience of learning struggles to exist.

### **Curriculum Continuity**

The review of curriculum developments in Irish education clearly envisaged that formal education should be designed as a continuum where the emphasis was more on drawing up a programme of work rather than teaching a curriculum. The findings of this study indicate how existing school structures and how teachers commence teaching first years contribute to the lack of curriculum continuity in the

learning experience of students. Curriculum continuity is not understood as a problem and therefore not a matter of concern. While the study has found that local Primary schools do monitor and record the educational progress of pupils whether pupils experience curriculum continuity in their primary school was not the focus of this research. There is no evidence that primary schools engage in dialogue with pupils to uncover their pupils' prior learning experiences. It is probable despite the development of a pupil record in primary school that pupil learning biographies are left unexplored and underdeveloped.

Curricular continuity is understood by post-primary principals and teachers as the impossible search for academic consistency between Primary and post-primary. This position is justified on the grounds that there are inconsistencies in academic standards and student academic achievements between primary schools; that students within individual primary schools fail to reach appropriate post-primary academic standards.

The entrance assessment and the examination system in post-primary schools appear to militate against developing curricular continuity. Primary school teachers in sixth class displace the content and sequencing of the primary curriculum and concentrate on the content of something perceived as more important, preparation for the entrance assessment / exam. Entrance assessments encourage the attainment of an academic standard in Irish, English and Mathematics that is consciously approved of by the post-primary school.

The post-primary examination system defines the task of a post-primary school teacher and what a post-primary school teacher is concerned with and is not

concerned with in teaching first year students. Post-primary teachers clearly state that they have no role dealing with or awareness of the importance of curricular continuity within student's education. In this study both primary and post-primary teachers, to a greater degree, ignore the logical and psychological aspects of curriculum structure (Derricott 1987, p.18). In this way aspects of student's educational experience become illogical and chaotic. Illogical in that student's educational experience appears to be sequenced around the educational requirements of schooling and not sequenced around their educational needs. Chaotic, in that, the students' educational experience is not dependent on what is known about cognitive development but is dependent on what is known about syllabus requirements. In this way the sequencing of learning is left to chance and students' experience varying degrees of learning discontinuities.

These factors, how teaching is sequenced and teaching's dependency on, and still 'giving pride of place' (Kavanagh 1993, p. 92). to syllabus requirements constrains teachers curricular thinking. There is a dominant view across all post-primary schools that students can be taught without any reference to prior learning in primary school. Not attempting to understand the past experiences students have of learning processes and teaching methodologies restricts students ability to 'connect students with the curriculum (Tochon and Munby 1993, p.5). The one exception to this view, found in Drum Coe (cccD), has not been interpreted as the teachers trying to establish curriculum continuity. It is the uncovering of a single dimension of a students' prior learning, the factual information students have studied. This research interprets this as an effort to establish some degree of *continuity of content* between

the curriculum content of primary and post-primary. At no stage do teachers try to uncover students' perceptions of their own 'learning biographies' and because of this students will be less 'able to maximize their own learning', (Kinchin 2004, p. 307). It is also clear from what has been stated above that the 'fundamental philosophies underpinning the approaches adopted in primary and post-primary teaching' Burke (1987), p.20 thwart the education of pupils/ students being experienced by them as a continuum.

### **The clean slate mentality**

Post-primary principals allow their teachers, to make up their own minds about student's ability on the basis of a 'clean slate'. This notion of clean slates, that everyone is on the same footing, suggests a strong sense of schools creating an ethos of equal opportunity for students. Such an understanding of equality of opportunity is untenable as curriculum continuity is dependant on planning (Hargreaves *et al* 1996). Teaching on the basis of the notion of 'a clean slate' allows teachers off the hook with regard to developing curriculum continuity. The evidence of a 'clean slate mentality' in this study suggests that these schools choose not to be aware of and /or do not want to understand the past experiences students have of learning processes and teaching methodologies. In this way the schools are actively constructing a framework for teaching and learning that ring fences the educational experiences of post-primary students from their educational experiences in primary school. Post-primary teachers unfamiliarity with elements of what goes on in Primary schools (Naughton 2003), leads to the development of assumptions about student learning biographies. This 'clean slate mentality' is the 'norm' in the schools in this study. It

operates as the correct teacher behaviour when teaching first years. Teaching first year students is seen as being about going back to basics, not assuming that there is much of a knowledge base there and / or challenging and changing the methods that students are familiar with from Primary school. This going back to basics is indicative of a lack of relevance / regard of post-primary teachers for student's primary educational experience.

### **Teachers views of parental perceptions of education**

The study also finds that post-primary schools manipulate parental perception of their school through the type of education provision they make available especially at Leaving Certificate Cycle. There is evidence in this study the historical divide given to using 'your head over your hands' is prevalent in Ardbane (vppm), Brenter (vppf) and Creevins (vppfD) and supported by the 'cultural content' of what teachers think, say and do (Hargreaves 2000). This study also finds that what is 'put out there' and encouraged is the perception that points matter and the perceived importance of them is targeted at parents. The local cultural legitimacy for education appears to be strongly influenced towards students attaining high Leaving Certificate points, and their resulting attainment of college places. Primary schools who cannot align themselves with academic post-primary schools or post-primary schools that do not attain such points or places lack the ability to share in this dominant cultural legitimacy. This understanding of what post-primary school education offers parents and students is entrenched in sixth class primary school through the teaching emphasis within some primary schools.

## **Student Adjustment**

The majority of teachers, in this study, did not mention their relationship with students as a significant factor for students in student adjustment to post-primary school. There is little evidence in this study to suggest that teachers are aware of the distinctiveness of this point of adolescence and that its distinctiveness requires curriculum differentiation between students (Beane *et al* 2002). Teachers in Drum Coe (cccoD) did suggest that a link exists between weak literacy / numeracy and poor communication skills. It is suggested that these students experiencing difficulties may lack social competencies, have poor personal interaction and find it difficult to solve social problems.

While teachers do not perceive the teaching of content as a problem, socialising first year students for teaching is. A perennial task for teachers of first year students, therefore, is to change the way students initially behave within the classroom. In trying to change student behaviour they are also trying to change how students engage with each other in the classroom. The only engagement that is allowed is engagement with the text or activities organised by the teacher around the text. In this way students' speech, use of their hands and eyes are controlled by the teacher. They have to *learn* 'to sit and listen, that learning is a matter of sitting and listening and that answers come out of a text book or a teacher's head' Sotto (2007) , p. 24. In this study teachers in first year classes not only prioritise gaining control over students but actively change the behaviour students have used to assist them learn in Primary. Students it would appear have to be 'professionalized' (Gordon *et al* 1999) in that they must adopt roles that accept teacher control, authority and expertise.

This study finds that teachers index their teaching success with first years on the calmness and quietness they can maintain in their classroom space, rather than on student learning (Nespor, 1997). Having students of the right 'character' is judged important as a criterion of adequate participation (Apple 2004). Teachers teach 'defensively' (McNeil 1986), controlling and restricting the usefulness of knowledge to the context of the 'test'. There is an expectation among some teachers in this study that students in post-primary should be able to do post-primary classroom work and homework for themselves. This finding suggests that learning and teaching are not understood by teachers as interrelated, and the existence of a teacher belief that student attributes determine achievement. Teachers in this study also hold a 'bright-person' model of teaching (Sedlak 1987). It is also possible that behind this teacher need to 'professionalize' (Gordon *et al* 1999) students and to teach 'defensively' (McNeil 1986) there is a deficit of alternative teacher strategies to deal with non professionalized student behaviour and teachers inability to respond to student articulation of the possible non relevance of subject content. Schools may need to develop positive behaviour support systems that can assist students.

### **Curriculum and Learning in First Year**

#### **Ability**

The 'language of essentialism' (O'Brien 2004) and 'cultures of stratification' (Lynch and Lodge 2002) in the mindset of teachers in how they approach teaching first year students is evident in this study. Students are stratified and excluded on the basis of what they as individuals can or cannot do. This classification of students reveals a disposition that predisposes that educational development as having definite limits



with certain students (Drudy and Lynch, 1993). The constant referencing to 'wrong classes', 'appropriate groups' and 'best classes' in the study reveals not just a mindset that stratifies children around ability levels based on entrance assessments but that structural frameworks constructed around the notion of ability exist in primary and post-primary schools.

Teachers, while having mixed ability classes sitting in front of them appear primarily focused on what the class unit must know and / or what must be covered within a specific time frame. In this study the priority in teaching first year students appears to be centred on creating the classroom conditions that allow teachers to sequence and pace the work for all students in the same subject group in the same way. Teachers then interpret the resulting differences between students as differences in ability and use these differences as the basis for second year streaming. There is no evidence in this study of any teacher suggesting that the difference between students is as a result of poor teacher 'sequencing' or 'pacing' (Bernstien 2003). There is also no evidence that teachers engage in 'repair work' or are willing to relax their teaching pace for students in first year. The logic of pedagogic relations is regulative in that the student to be taught has to acquire the classroom conduct, character and manner that are judged as acceptable to the teacher. Students experiencing difficulties in following the post-primary school curriculum are perceived to be the sole responsibility of the special needs teacher.

The function of these pedagogic practices is to produce a deliberate visible stratification between students. Seen in this way the rationale for mixed ability teaching is that it is a preparation for streaming. The curriculum challenge for post-

primary teachers appears to be how to teach students from different primary schools in mixed ability classes without using mixed ability methodologies. These practices of student stratification in post-primary are justified and supported on the basis that certain subjects, Irish, English and Mathematics enjoy a reputation as being more academically demanding than others. They are also justified by teachers on the grounds that the syllabuses they teach are structured as Higher, Ordinary and Foundation level.

### **Teaching and Learning**

There is no evidence in this study of any one dominant school culture operating in any school. There is evidence of teacher isolation and teacher individuality in all schools (Hargreaves 2000). Teachers sustain their own images and expectation of teaching and learning through reference to their own stated pedagogic aims. The administrative regulations that structures how and what teachers collaborate on result in teaching being predictable. Collaborating with colleagues in such conditions suggests the existence of contrived collegiality (Hargreaves 2000).

The exploration on how teachers start teaching first year students reveals three teaching perspectives, constructivist, constructivist / objectivist and objectivist. The research also reveals two different models of learning, reception and constructivist (Carnell et al 2002). While different models of learning and teaching co-exist in all schools, the dominant model of learning is the reception model and the dominant perspective of teaching is objectivist. However all schools place an emphasis on both types of learning models and teaching perspectives at different times. The dominance of the reception model over the constructivist model is maintained by

referring to the former as 'real'. The constructivist model appears to be tolerated as long as it supports the traditional model to 'gear them up' to be taught. There is evidence in the study that even constructivist teachers are aware that they are putting off the inevitable that they will have to revert to objectivist approaches. The expected outcomes teachers have of teaching and learning influence the teaching / learning process. Where the expectation of educational outcomes are less orientated towards students 'scoring points' teachers choose a starting point within their subject that corresponds with identified student past educational content attainment. In this way teachers actively establish a continuity of curricular content. Where the expectation of educational outcomes are more orientated towards students 'scoring points' teachers start in one of two ways, constructive manner in order to establish positive relationships with students, prior to commencing their orientation towards preparing students for the Junior Certificate or in an objectivist manner. What determines how they approach teaching first years is not their knowledge of the students but how they understand their job as a teacher in their school.

There is evidence of teacher 'patronizing' of students (Brooker 1999) in that there is little if no regard to include students with regard to decisions surrounding curriculum, working methods and how time is structured. There is also a strong emphasis on whole group instruction through using direct teaching methods. What takes primacy in the curriculum appears to be the elements of content and objectives over process and development. There is no mention of the development of thinking skills in students. An assumption exists among teachers that student exposure to subject content is sufficient to develop understanding (Ausubel 1963). There appears

little or no opportunity to develop thinking through substantive and meaningful discourse as most students are required to sit in silence (Keating 1993). How teachers start teaching first years indicates that poor 'stage environment fit' (Beane *et al* 2002) exists for adolescents in this study. This study finds that teachers are not focusing on curriculum continuity between primary and post-primary but on subject consistency within their own post-primary school. They deliberately establish a close alignment between the subject content that they and their colleagues teach and the requirements of school and junior certificate assessment procedures. Because of this, the sequencing of the subject knowledge content is dependent either on the text book being used and / or the subject department's arrangement around summative assessments at Christmas and Summer.

### **Teaching first years**

With regard to teaching first years the selection of text books and designing of summative assessments are what teachers' state they *collaborate* on. The text book is an important instrument in how teachers start and sequence teaching. It is chosen by the subject department. Text books are also chosen on the basis of the level of course being taught. This suggests that subjects other than Irish, English and Mathematics are also taught on the basis of perceived student ability. In schools where streaming is practised different text books are used for different streams suggesting that there is no agreed curriculum plan between levels. In this way there are very poor linkages between Ordinary and Higher level subjects to facilitate student movement in both directions.

Text books are used not only to guide the coverage of course content but to direct teachers as to how much must be completed each year in order to ensure Junior Certificate course completion. In this way how text books are used dictate not only the sequencing of content but the pace of teaching content. Text adherence therefore not only prioritises what the class unit must know by a certain time but also restricts the freedom of the individual teacher to digress away from the schedule. It places an imperative on teachers not only to cover specific course areas but also assess specific course content by a specific time. This practice of covering a certain number of chapters by teachers within a specific timeframe operates on a subject department level. Teachers therefore appear to *collaborate* on procedural elements with regard to the content of teaching and timing of summative assessments.

While this procedural *collaboration* makes teachers aware of the content that binds them together, in that it sets common goals for teachers, there is no evidence that such a procedural *collaboration* facilitates the development of or the pursuit of a common understanding on how students learn. Neither does it allow teachers to take time to engage with students who fail to meet the sequencing requirements or who fail to cope with the teaching pace. Teachers are therefore still working in isolation with a narrow repertoire of teaching skills (Joyce et al 2002). Their teaching strategies may also be unbalanced (O'Boyle 2004) in that they can only develop out of their own classroom experiences. There is evidence in this study that the meaningful material contained in text books is rendered meaningless by segregating and compartmentalizing it through rote learning, (Ausubel 1963). Teaching processes in these schools appear to be informed by norms of privacy, autonomy and

non interference (Lortie, 1975, Johnson 1990, A. Hargreaves, 1994). As long as the common goals around content coverage are met there is no need to evaluate or reflect on teaching and learning. Meeting these goals is interpreted as teacher academic success.

## **Student perceptions**

### **Induction**

All the post-primary schools in the research have various methods and ways of inducting students into post-primary schools. When students were asked to recall what assisted them they remembered scant details of the school's efforts. This study highlights that not alone are induction programmes of short duration but that students report that they have little impact on the classroom environment and are in many ways 'banal' (Gordon *et al* 1999). Not impacting on the classroom environment results in a 'disconnectedness' (Tochon and Munby 1993) between the students and subjects. The research also concurs with Delamont and Galton (1986) that the difficulties students are having are schooling problems rather than transition problems. A possible reason for this is that because of unbalanced design of induction programmes. The cause of this unbalance is due to the lack of awareness of the multilayered nature of school (Gordon *et al* 1999).

Similar to the findings of Smyth *et al* (2004) students focused on their own ability to make the geographical and social transition through forming friendships. Students' engagement with other first year students appears to assist them to cope with this transition. Students are therefore not just integrated into the school on the basis of formal school structures; they integrate themselves by actively looking towards their

classmates. In this way they negotiate the first few weeks of post-primary school with an emotional and psychological sense of togetherness and belonging.

### **Subject choice**

The reasons behind choosing subjects vary from liking a subject, to choosing a foreign language because of the summer holiday destinations and to needing it for a future career. Subjects are also not chosen for a variety of reasons. Reasons include the students perception of subject utility, subject difficulty, personal preference is also clearly influenced by parental guidance and familial familiarity. While the sampling of subjects for some students positively challenges previously held notions about what subjects are for others students it delays making subject choices they had already decided on. In keeping with Smyth *et al*, (2004) this study has not found that sampling subjects leads to transition difficulties. For some student's practical subjects are totally new and they enjoy not only their novelty but that they appeal to a skill they never knew they had and that they can build on and learn through. However this study has found that having to do Irish and two Modern languages as part of subject sampling is a source of confusion and frustration for students. With regard to Irish students experience discontinuity with relation to how Irish is taught at post-primary. With regard to modern languages students have an initial perception of repetition of what had been done previously. This initial perception lulls them into a security that is short lived and highlights the need for greater continuity in teaching to support students learning experiences in this area. A significant choice for girls between Home Economics and Science causes them problems with regard to subject

choice. The students are aware that the choices they make may affect them meeting the matriculation requirements for Third Level.

### **Student perceptions**

#### **The lack of difference between Primary and post-primary**

Student accounts identify that the differences between primary and post-primary learning processes are not dramatic. The findings of this study suggests that method of instruction used in sixth class mimics to some degree the method of instruction used in post-primary. This challenges Naughton (2003) claim of differences between instruction in primary and post-primary and supports Sugrue (1990) queries of the child-centred camouflage of the primary curriculum which hides the 'tyranny of the whole group instruction' p. 9. Students in this study, state that learning in 6<sup>th</sup> class Primary and 1<sup>st</sup> Year post-primary is centred on book knowledge and is concerned with the reproduction of text-book content or teachers input. They also state that primary and post-primary schools are cultures of testing. The major difference between the culture of primary and post-primary is its intensity; learning in post-primary is now something that has to be completed for testing and by testing. Students' comments suggest that subject departments organize their curriculum for assessment purposes which takes precedence over individual student learning.

#### **Academic Integration**

This study reveals that students within the first term in post-primary students experience a type of 'immobilisation' with regard to academic integration into post-primary school (Becket 2002). The new academic emphasis, the work and the expected new student behaviours associated within post-primary school challenges



student's ability to organise themselves and maintain equilibrium and school / social life balances. The new academic emphasis is related to their awareness that they are now being taught in a competitive academic environment, and the growing awareness that there are winners and losers impacts on students self esteem. Students perceive and compare themselves with others in formal and informal assessment. This study finds that students very early in their first year in post-primary school are articulating the expectation that 'exam stuff' matters. This highlights that students as they start first year already have come to know something about what is expected of them in education, they must perform.

### **Students' perceptions of teachers**

Students' perceptions of teachers are that they are intentionally strict in order to create an environment in which teachers can teach without disruption. This is students describing their experience of being taught as 'defensive' teaching. This dominant style of teaching at both primary and post-primary discourages personal ownership of learning and possibly inhibiting the enhancement of personal identity (Muuss 1986). Experiencing defensive teaching suppresses any alternative interpretation other than the teachers and the purpose of it is to facilitate 'quantifiable testing' (Paechter 2000, p. 140). Expressing one's individuality can be interpreted as deviance.

### **Ability**

Students in this study realize that there are consequences for them as a result of perceived differences in ability. Students claim that teachers expecting all student's to be at the same level is unrealistic. Not being able to live up to teacher's

expectations of what they should be able to achieve results in them being labelled. For students this is described as pressure and unbalanced expectations. Students are also increasingly aware of differences between them and their peers and see competition among them as the inevitable consequence of these teacher expectations. Female students are very aware that there is competition to get into Honour level classes and use assessment results themselves to compare themselves with each other. While there is no suggestion that teachers explicitly encourage this competitive comparison there is the suggestion by students that it is implicitly supported by them, in that competition enhances teachers teaching and facilitates student study. The Junior Certificate is also highlighted by students as a way teachers endeavour to motivate them and as a focus given by teachers for student learning.

### **Classroom environment**

The study finds that first year post-primary students' experience of being taught in classrooms is one of isolation / separation from their classmates. They are in an environment that insists that they are now dependent on their own abilities and personal qualities to learn. Silent classes restrict the development of thinking skills in that no substantive and meaningful discourse is taking place (Keating 1993).

The study finds that students are aware early in first year that they are expected to approach class work as 'serious' and to act as 'passive receivers of information', (Kinchin 2004; O'Brien 2004). Students are also aware of their teachers' desire for student docility and how such docility will be rewarded through allowing teachers to focus 'on the transmission of a set of curriculum content that is organized in routine

ways' Clark *et al* (1999, p. 158). Student experience of being taught means listening to a teacher talk without necessarily understanding what the talk stands for (Sotto 2007). While students indicate that they are working by 'writing', they have a sense that their present written work is illusory learning when they compare it to prior experiences of learning in Primary. In their work in Primary it was possible to connect it to their emerging experiences of the world. Their work in post-primary is disconnected from their experiences of the world, they are now learning subjects. Post-primary subject learning is understood by students as more 'serious' in that it has an 'academic orientation' (Hargreaves 1999, p. 25), that there is an 'emphasis on external expectations and disciplinary rigor' (Beane *et al* 2001, p. 1158). This research also concurs with previous research on the 'prioritising' (Lynch *et al*, 2002) of academic achievement in both the single sex girl schools and that students, both boys and girls, evaluation of themselves against these expectations are becoming more critical of their academic ability (Smyth 1999). While the boys do not identify the prioritising of academic achievement, boys do identify the pace of teacher instruction as too quick (Smyth *et al*, 2004). Teachers expectations of what a student can acquire within a given amount of time are unrealistic. These unrealistic expectations results' in student disinterest, disengagement and in some cases hostility towards teachers. This study finds that in the boys' accounts a prevalent teacher attitude that expects students to misbehave and not to tell the truth exists. This negative evaluation of boys and overt surveillance of girls creates barrier for students developing trusting relationships with teachers. In Primary school students state that their teachers knew them better and this effected teachers' expectations of

them and how they were disciplined. Not being known by your teacher in post-primary is a common experience for students. Students claim that this experience of not being known by teachers gives them a sense that they do not belong. The experience of not being known explains why they experience some of the discipline as being indiscriminate and unfair. This lack of a positive formal and informal climate results in the educational environment being uncomfortable and stressful for them. This may account in some way why 'student attitudes to school and their teachers are somewhat less positive at the end of first year than at the beginning' Smyth *et al* (2004, pg. 258). This study suggests that at the time adolescents are in need of close adult relationships outside the home the possibility of establishing such relationships with teachers is being inhibited by teacher's educational practice. These findings show that the changes that occur in student attitudes to school and teachers commences early in first year.

### **Student's perceptions of teachers**

Students sense that there exists for teachers a hierarchical scale of worth based upon a year groups position with regard to Junior or Leaving certification. Students despite their awareness of the difficulties they are experiencing are aware that they are dependent on 'good' teachers to get through this. This typifying of teachers by students reveal that before Christmas in first year students had formed clear ideas about what teacher behaviour does and does not facilitate learning. Students, however, are not necessarily describing a 'good' teacher but are describing a 'good' teacher for the context they find themselves in. The context they find themselves in, in this study, is more centred on subject coverage rather than on student caring

(Hargreaves *et al* 1996). I conclude that they are not looking for teachers with a constructivist / objectivist perspective to teaching and a concurrent constructivist model of learning. Rather they are looking for teachers that assist them in ‘mastering [the] strategies to help them over examination hurdle rather than developing mastery of subject matter and honing lasting competencies’ Kelleghan *et al* 1996 (cited in NCCA 1999, p. 50). This means that any notion of the ‘good’ teacher must be understood within the context the teaching takes place in. The good teacher in this context is a teacher whose lesson content and lesson activities are appropriate to the examination being prepared for. What informs the students notion of the ‘good’ teacher are therefore the ‘adult centred goals of productivity’ Devine (2003, p.49). I also take the stance that the students cannot have learnt this within three months exposure to post-primary school methods of instruction. There is strong evidence to suggest that students in this study are indicating that primary schools are as highly structured as post-primary schools, (Sugrue 1996).

### **Homework and examinations**

In such an environment students prioritise the homework of teachers that they know will test them. Students state that teachers share in this understanding of how and why students prioritise their homework and may manipulate the homework system by testing regularly. The constant use of tests is understood by students as a way of teachers checking up on them. For students the purposes behind tests are connected to student recall, teachers teaching and are used by teachers as an indicator towards student progression in subject areas. All students describe the experience of in class testing as being uncomfortable, causing stress, by being placed on a spot by a

teacher in full view of everyone else. This sort of testing is random, in that it can happen at any time. It is this which motivates students to learn rather than a love of learning, 'the material of the lesson is rendered interesting in contrast with some alternative experience' Dewey (1934, p. 28). Students are also suggesting that assessment regulates students' involvement through continuous observation (Paechter 2000). Students under this pressure wonder will they be able to keep pace with such a high work rate for three years. These statements by students of being overloaded and their awareness of their reliance on direct teaching methods indicate that students are not experiencing discontinuity in their education experience rather they are finding it hard to cope with their new experiences of education. While Marton et al (1976) claims that 'how one learns determines the process', (cited in Tuomey 1999, p.371) this study suggests that the process involved in the learning determines how one learns.

This study clearly shows that part of the process of educating students in individual schools is influenced by how the concepts of culture, curriculum and continuity are understood and engaged with locally. The study also shows that the local schools share in national 'socio-cultural-political processes that shape the content and orientation of curriculum, and legitimize what good teaching practices are, and to what ends'. Callan (2006, p. 7). Primary and post-primary schools claim they operate out of different centres, subject versus child, and this study supports this in that it has found little shared sense of educational purpose exists. However despite these differences the student experience of being taught in sixth class primary and first class post-primary are stated as similar. This is the dilemma that this study has

found, despite the purposes and functions being understood as different by teachers the experience of the student is not one of difference but of similarity. This study clearly shows that the similarity is not that the post-primary has become more child-centred. The study suggests that similarity could be accounted for by sixth class teachers purposefully and mindfully preparing students for the transition. However it is also possible that the similarity in teaching methods is also due to teachers in primary and post-primary having a shared cultural understanding of teaching that is not based on the emerging and developmental needs of adolescents. It is therefore possible that schools inadvertently share in a wider socio-cultural understanding of the education of adolescence that influences the shape, the content and orientation of primary and post-primary teaching.

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## **Appendix 1**

### **Interview schedule 1**

Principals of Primary schools and teachers of sixth class

#### **General discussion starter**

What would be the skills and abilities you would like to see being developed in your 6<sup>th</sup> class students as they leave your school?

#### **Discussion Topic 1**

The first thing I am interested in is what procedures are in place in your school that monitor the continuity of a child's education as they move from class to class, and within a class in primary school. By continuity I mean the prevention of gaps or duplication in their education.

#### **Discussion Topic 2**

Does the educational profile that has been developed on pupils transfer with the pupil when they transfer to secondary school?

I am also interested in what information is and is not passed on, how it is passed on and the rationale behind that thinking.

#### **Discussion Topic 3**

The third area of interest is what sort of communication takes place between primary and secondary schools, how is it instigated, who facilitates this contact, and what is the purpose and content of these communications?

**Discussion topic 4**

I would like to hear your thoughts on whether the Revised Primary School Curriculum (1999) prepares children to engage effectively in secondary school.

## **Interview schedule 2**

Principal / First Year Yearhead and other key personnel involved in pupil transfer from primary to post-primary school

### **General discussion starter**

How many primary schools do students in this school transfer from?

### **Discussion Topic 1**

An area of interest to me is what sort of communication takes place between primary and secondary schools, how is it instigated, who facilitates this communication and what is the purpose and content of these communications?

### **Discussion Topic 2**

What factors could you identify that might ease the transition between primary and post-primary school?

### **Discussion Topic 3**

The third area of I am interested in is when students transfer from primary to post-primary school what type of information do you seek about them from their primary school?

### **Discussion Topic 4**

The fourth area I am interested in is the whole notion of continuity in education. By continuity I mean the prevention of gaps or duplications in their education. How does this school monitor continuity when students are transferring from their primary schools to this school?

### **Interview Schedule 3**

Teachers of first year post-primary schools

#### **Discussion Topic 1**

What information do you think is necessary for you to know about your first year students as you begin to teach them?

#### **Discussion Topic 2**

What I am interested in is what factors inform, guide how you start teaching first years that have just transferred from primary to post-primary school?

#### **Discussion Topic 3**

It I often stated that students have problems transferring from primary to post-primary school.

I am interested to know have you encountered problems when you are teaching first year students that are in your opinion directly related to student transfer.

#### **Discussion Topic 4**

I am also interested in finding out whether you as a teacher in secondary school have any professional contact with the primary school first year students have transferred from?



#### **Interview schedule 4**

Interview schedule with students that have transferred from Primary to post-primary school.

##### **Question 1**

Did you all come to this school in September?

Can you tell me how you felt in the first days and weeks here?

What was it like to be a first year student in [Name of post-primary school]?

##### **Question 2**

How would you describe how you settled in?

What helped / did not help you settle in?

##### **Question 3**

Are there any similarities between what you are learning now and what you learnt in primary school?

Are there any differences? Can you tell me about them?

##### **Question 4**

I want you now to think about how you were taught in primary school and compare it to how you are taught in secondary school? Are there differences/ similarities?

##### **Question 5**

Would it be possible to compare the things you learnt in primary school with the subjects you now have in secondary school? When you compare them is

there anything that was easier for you in primary school that is now less easy in secondary school? If there is why do you think that is?

## Appendix 2

### Letters seeking parental / guardian permission

Name

Address

Telephone Number

Date

Dear (Parent / Guardian)

I am a PhD student of Education Dept. NUI Maynooth and undertaking educational research in (town name). Permission to undertake this research was given to me by the Principal (Name). [and, in keeping with School Policy I have sought, and been given approval from the Parents Council to proceed with this stage of the research]

The research also involves interviewing staff of primary and post primary schools.

I am writing to you to seek permission to allow your (daughter / son) to participate in a focus group interview in connection with educational research I am undertaking in (School) this year. There will be no more than five students in each focus group.

The research question is focused on the identification of what factors, if any, are affecting student's educational experience as they transfer from primary to post primary school.

Initially there will be a short conversation about what primary school they came from, their favourite subjects, what subjects they dislike. The aim of the focus groups are to find out;

- How they as pupils experienced the transfer process from primary school

- To encourage them to compare what they liked and disliked in primary with what they are doing now.

Depending on the progress of the conversation there is a strong possibility that there would be additional questions asked to assist students expand on what they are talking about.

A detailed outline of the interview schedule has been given to (Principal / nominated teachers name) which can be seen if required.

Yours sincerely,

\_\_\_\_\_

Padraic O'Dowd

\*\*\*\*\*

#### Parental Permission

I agree that my daughter (Name ) may take part in research into pupil transfer from primary to post primary school and be interviewed by Mr. Padraic O'Dowd as part of the research.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ Parent / Guardian

\_\_\_\_\_ Parent / Guardian

Date \_\_\_\_\_

School letter that accompanied my letter

Dear Parent / Guardian,

Mr. Padraic O'Dowd, is a Career Guidance teacher in Ashbourne Community School who is studying in University College, Maynooth. [He has given a presentation to the Parents' Council on his research project. The results of the research should help us and other school improve the induction of First Years and on that basis] I am happy to recommend that students would take part in the research project.

Thanking you for your co-operation.

Yours sincerely

\_\_\_\_\_

(Principals / Nominated Teacher Name)

\*\*\*\*\*

Parental Permission

I agree that my daughter (Name ) may take part in research into pupil transfer from primary to post primary school and be interviewed by Mr. Padraic O'Dowd as part of the research.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ Parent / Guardian

\_\_\_\_\_ Parent / Guardian

Date \_\_\_\_\_

### Appendix 3

#### Transcript review letter

Name

Address

Telephone

Email

Date

Dear (Interviewees name),

Please find enclosed the transcript of your interview you undertook with me recently.

I would appreciate if you would look over the transcript. The transcript may not flow like a text you are in the habit of reading as it is a record of an interview. There may be things you would like to add in, amend, omit or expand upon, please feel free to do so.

I can be contacted on my home phone number or by email if there are any questions or queries. If you wish to speak to me face to face I can meet you at any time that is convenient to you. I have enclosed a stamped addressed envelope for you to return the script to me.

I appreciate your interest, cooperation and assistance.

Yours sincerely,

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Padraic O'Dowd