

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

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

A Pedagogy of Voice and a Pedagogy of Listening

Article 12 of The United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) states that children have the right to have their opinions taken into account and their views respected in decision-making that affects them (UN, 1989). However, while including the voice of the child is articulated as a key principle in international education policy and practice contexts, ensuring that the child's voice is meaningfully included and responded to, continues to challenge education systems (Deegan, 2015). Deegan poses the question whether we are truly convinced of the value of child voice in our practice (ibid.). A democratic education system acknowledges the importance of child voice and recognises that prioritising “participation” enhances children's self-esteem and confidence, promotes their overall development and develops children's sense of autonomy, independence, social competence and resilience (Dewey, 1916; Lansdown, 2005). If we believe that a democratic education system presupposes that the voices of all children, irrespective of age or ability are included and listened to, it requires us as researchers to develop innovative and creative ways to capture and respond to the voices of all children.

Transition from Preschool to Primary School

Research nationally and internationally indicates that high quality early years education impacts positively on the social-emotional, cognitive and academic aspects of learning and

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

Research Methodology

The research adopted a sequential exploratory mixed-methods methodological approach, comprising semi-structured face-to-face interviews (14 principals and junior infant teachers; 18 early educators and managers); semi-structured telephone interviews (30 parents), an online survey (distributed to 500 early years settings and 500 primary schools) and child conferences. This paper focuses specifically on the fifty-seven children, aged between three and four, who participated in ten child conferences (Clark and Moss, 2011).

In selecting preschools for participation in the study, details of all primary schools were obtained from the Department of Education and Skills (N=3,158) and a stratified random sample was selected from the list with reference to the grouping criteria detailed in Table 1. below. Each of the seven primary schools selected was invited to provide the names of two feeder preschools and ten out of the fourteen preschools nominated agreed to participate in the research. Parents were asked to indicate their consent to their children's participation in the research and children's assent was secured through eliciting their response to the questions detailed in Table 2.

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

The questions detailed in Table 3 were used to prompt discussions with the children and differentiated by the researchers as required. The children's drawings, were conceptualised as a representation of the manner in which children make sense of their experiences, and express and communicate their thoughts, beliefs and ideas (Lambert et al., 2014). The analysis of children's drawings therefore was linked with the Nvivo (QSR International, 2013) data analysis in which categories were derived from the data through a process of inductive reasoning informed by theories, themes and concepts that emerged from the literature review.

Children’s Perspectives on Transitioning from Preschool to Primary School

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

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

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

Play has been identified as intrinsically motivating for young children and its relationship with initiative, engagement, persistence, curiosity, cooperation with others and self-regulation identified in a range of research (Whitebread, 2013; O’Sullivan and Ring, 2016). While a number of children did state that they looked forward to playing with toys in primary school, there were also clear indications that some children perceived that there would be limited availability for play with a greater focus on structured activities. Children variously remarked that “they only get a tiny bit of playtime”; “there’s going to be more work”; and “you have to go inside [when the teacher rings the bell]”. Children associated school with homework and often referred to numbers, noting that “Ah, am doing homework there”; “You do lots of homework there” and “You do your numbers”. These findings in relation to children’s perceptions of play in school are congruent with earlier research which indicates that young children make clear work-play distinctions (Howard, 2010). Given that children tend to perform better when they perceive learning activities as playful, this has powerful implications in terms of their motivation to engage in learning in school (Whitebread, 2013).

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

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

bring with them a wealth of prior knowledge in relation to teaching and learning (Brooker, 2010). Clearly, tapping into to this prior knowledge can play an important role in supporting transition.

Conclusion

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

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

Note

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

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