A Bio-ecological Perspective on Educational Transition

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Abstract
Experiences of educational transition have been identified in the literature as critical to the future educational success of children, and to their psychological and developmental well-being [1]. In spite of this, there is limited information on how families interact with educational establishments at times of transition, what measures encourage positive engagement, and how children and families experience transitions [2]. This paper reports the initial findings of a qualitative examination of two key periods of educational transition, preschool to primary school and primary school to secondary school. It explores the perspectives of children, teachers and parents in a case study primary school in Ireland, along with the three pre-schools that feed into it, and the two secondary schools into which it feeds. The theoretical framework for this research is provided by Bronfenbrenner’s Bio-ecological Model of Child Development, and presentation of findings is structured using Bronfenbrenner’s (1995 [3] Person-Process-Context-Time (PPCT) model.

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Selection and peer-review under responsibility of the Organizing Committee of PSYSOC 2013.

Keywords: Educational transition, Bio-ecological, Parents, Children, Teachers

1. Introduction
There is increasing recognition of the importance of educational transitions for children and their families, including those from pre-school to primary school [4], and primary school to secondary school [5]. Transition to the first year of schooling can be emotionally demanding for young children because of the challenges of their new role as a school-going child [1]. Equally, there is extensive evidence that difficulties during the transition from primary school to secondary school can have significant effects on educational and psychological outcomes for young people [6]. In fact, transitions can be quite demanding for the whole family, and are regarded by parents as significant
milestones in a child’s life that may be traumatic in some cases for the child, the parent or both [7]. For both transitions, research identifies the stress of adjusting to a new setting, with strange buildings and classrooms, as well as the challenge of new teachers, new expectations and a new, more diverse group of classmates [1]; [8]. There may be massive shifts in behavioural expectations for children in the course of transition particularly in terms of their levels of independence [1]. There may be significant changes in the nature of some important relationships between teachers and students also, contributing to a transitional "jolt in school climate" [5; p 413].

Some of these difficulties have been linked to wide-ranging changes in curriculum and pedagogy, both in the move from pre-school to primary school [1], [4], and in that from primary school to secondary school [8]. Children may experience academic difficulties during educational transition [6], and there is evidence of significant challenge in socio-emotional terms also [7]. However, children may equally enjoy the opportunities that transition affords them to make new friends and try new things, so they tend to experience a range of sometimes conflicting emotions [8], [6]. The complexity of these experiences for children is evident, with O’Kane (2007) [9] suggesting that influences are multi-level; from home, through schools and into communities. Therefore, it is important to move beyond a sole focus on the school if we are truly to understand children’s experiences of educational transition. Research has highlighted the importance of parental involvement for children’s successful transitions, as it is they who are usually the stable factor for the child at such potentially unstable times [4]. However, the concept of true ‘partnership’ between parents and schools may be problematic since in reality, parents are a far from homogenous group [10], [11]. Therefore, it is beneficial to identify a theoretical framework to allow sufficient structure to study the ‘messiness’ and ‘entanglement’ [12]; [13] that is a child’s life. This paper proposes Bronfenbrenner’s Bio-ecological Model of Child Development as an appropriate theoretical framework to do so.

2. Theoretical framework

Bronfenbrenner’s Bio-ecological Model [14] allows us to consider a child’s world on a number of levels, ranging from direct environmental impacts (‘micro-system’) to the influence of broader societal factors (‘macro-system’) while recognising the effect of relationships and interactions between levels (‘meso-system’ and ‘exo-system’) as well as the impact of time in both a socio-historical and personal sense (‘chrono-system’). The Bio-ecological Model proposes a research design called a person-process-context-time (PPCT) model [3], and analysis of the literature through the lens of PPCT reveals the influential nature of these elements on experiences and outcomes of educational transition. For example, quality of experiences can be determined by ‘person’ factors such as age [7], gender [15], self-esteem and self-efficacy beliefs [6], social skills, independence, communication skills and attention skills [1], special educational needs [16], behavioural difficulties [10], and ethnicity, religion or language [17]. Research has also identified the central role of relationships, or in Bronfenbrenner’s terms, ‘process’, in positive educational transitions [4], including relationships between children and their peers [8], between children and teachers [6], between parents and teachers [10], and between teachers at different educational levels [7]. ‘Context’-based factors, such as school structures, disciplinary procedures and climate [8] are also important. Lastly, the ‘time’ element of the model is represented in the current work through recognition of educational transitions as potentially crucial times in the lives of children and families, and analysis of the similarities and differences between transitions that take place early or later in children’s lives [6].

3. Methodology

This research used qualitative methodologies within a PPCT approach to examine educational transition from the perspectives of parents, children and teachers associated with a case study primary school in Ireland, as well as its three ‘feeder’ pre-schools and the two secondary schools into which it feeds. Within the case study settings, extensive analysis of contextual factors was conducted, including observation of environmental factors and analysis of policy documents. Participants were interviewed either individually or in focus groups at two points in time: in May while they were anticipating and preparing for educational transition, and again in October / November just after the transitions had taken place. Respondents (n=192) included:

- Principal of the primary school (n=1) and secondary schools (n=2)
- Pre-school (n=3), primary (n=8) and secondary (n=16) school teachers involved in educational transition
- Children moving from pre-school to primary school (n=64) and primary to secondary school (n=51)
Parents of children moving from pre-school to primary school (n=24) and primary to secondary school (n=20)

Staff of community-based services including the School Completion Programme (n=1), the local Intercultural Centre (n=1) and the local area ‘Partnership’ (n=1)

4. Findings

In keeping with the Bio-ecological Model, initial findings from this research are presented in terms of the influences of ‘person’, ‘process’, ‘context’ and ‘time’ on experiences of educational transition.

4.1 Person:

A number of ‘person’ factors were identified by participants that facilitated or inhibited the success of transition for children, and these included age, disability, and language. In terms of age, in Ireland children are usually aged either 4 or 5 when beginning primary school, and participants, particularly teachers, concurred with research findings [1] in questioning the ability of 4-year-olds to benefit from the structure of primary school. One child very eloquently illustrated the exhaustion of the very young child in such structured settings – “You get tired, and you fall off chairs”. By the time children enter secondary school, the differences based on age appear to have diminished, with participants indicating little difference between 12 and 13 year-olds making the transition. Where age was deemed relevant in this later transition was with reference to the many other changes being experienced by children in relation to the onset of adolescence [16].

Disability and special educational needs (SEN) were also identified as ‘person’ factors potentially impacting on the experiences children and families [16], but participants were generally very positive about the supports received in making the move from one educational level to the next. Children at both transitional points also noted differences between home and school in terms of language, and parents from non-Irish backgrounds identified the barriers inherent in not having come through the Irish school system themselves [10], [11]. Consistent with the literature [18], teachers at all educational levels described potential barriers to communicating with parents whose first language was not English, but they also presented a number of creative strategies for overcoming such barriers, such as allowing children or friends to attend parent-teacher meetings to translate, and ensuring that handbooks and parent-guides were printed in a number of languages. Language was also identified as presenting a difficulty for some children in making friends, particularly during the transition from primary to secondary school, and both children and teachers described the potential for isolation.

In contrast to literature indicating that gender can significantly impact on experiences of educational transition [7], participants in the current research did not identify this as a particularly significant factor. Small children, consistent with their cognitive development [19], found it difficult to think beyond their own gender, with boys indicating that boys were ‘the best’ and girls maintaining that girls were, but older children, parents and teachers portrayed little difference between the genders in their experiences of educational transition. It is worth noting, however, that consistent with the findings of Hart (2011) [15], parental participation in this research was strongly skewed in relation to gender, with only three fathers and one grandfather participating, in spite of extensive efforts to ensure diversity of the sample. Analysis of the reasons for this are beyond the scope of this paper, but can be found in work by Hart (ibid) [15] and Potter et al., (2012) [20].

4.2 Process:

Significant factors identified with regard to ‘process’ included relationships between children and their peers, between schools and families, and between one educational setting and another. Consistent with the literature [8], children, parents and teachers involved in both transitions identified having friends as one of the most important mediators of difficulties during the move from one educational setting to another, and making new friends as one of the most important benefits. Before transition, both preschool and 6th class children, and their parents reported worrying about potential bullying. When asked about anything they were not looking forward to in ‘big school’, one 3-year-old spoke of his fear of being “punched by bigger ages”. Children in 6th class described the ‘urban legend’ of
‘first year beatings’ [8], and the fear that it instilled. There were a number of children for whom those fears became reality on making the move, but for the majority of children taking part in this research, their worries were largely unfounded, with junior infants describing a context where “we are all friends”, and 1st years speaking of how “[they say] you get first year beatings and all that, but you don’t, they just say that”.

Participants also emphasised the vital nature of good communication and the formation of positive relationships between home and school, consistent with Bronfenbrenner’s emphasis on the ‘mesosystem’ [14]. Parents reported varying experiences, with some examples of difficult communication reported, particularly at secondary level, and even at pre-school and primary levels, some teachers reported feeling intimidated by ‘aggressive’ parents. Overall, however, teachers in the case study schools and pre-schools expressed strong recognition of the vital role of parents in their child’s education, and parents spoke positively, sometimes glowingly, about their relationships with schools. Teachers also emphasised the importance of school-to-school communication in supporting children in their transitions, although it is worth noting that in reality, communication between pre-school and primary school levels appeared to be somewhat minimal [7]. On the other hand, communication was quite strong between primary and secondary levels, and was in the process of being strengthened and formalised, with the newly instituted transfer of information relating to standardised testing of students. The limited nature of such information [21] was noted by teachers however, and communication also focused on holistic aspects of the child such as “family situation… the type of learner the student is… are they motivated about special interests or hobbies” (1st year teacher).

4.3 Context:

A number of participants identified changing academic expectations from one educational context to another [7], [6]. This was a particular issue for children moving from primary school to secondary school, regarding increased levels of homework. However, consistent with previous research findings, children experiencing both transitions also expressed excitement about the new educational and academic experiences involved [8]. Children starting in primary school talked about looking forward to ‘big school’ because “you can read real books”, and those starting secondary school reported “looking forward to it, because you get to do woodwork and other classes that you never did in primary school”. In contrast to the findings of Topping (2011) [6], the majority of students interviewed expressed strong academic self-concepts that survived the transition. Expectations of children also changed in different educational contexts in terms of independence. Preschool and primary school teachers identified the need for young children to have a greater level of independence in looking after themselves and their belongings in primary school, and they concurred with the literature [7] in noting the difficulty that this can sometimes cause for small children. Equally, almost all children transitioning to secondary school spoke of difficulties with organisational skills in the new context. Lockers in particular seemed to cause difficulty, with one child vividly describing the chaos between lessons as all students tried to get to their lockers and access books for the next lesson – “it’s like a big shoe sale! Everyone just wants to get there so you are really pushed”. Both parents and children described extensive levels of stress related this, but while teachers did acknowledge the potential for problems around organisational skills, they seemed somewhat unaware of the sheer extent of the experiential impact of these difficulties on children, and when children sought support, they were sometimes seen as ‘needy’.

Small children were very fluent in portraying the new disciplinary context of primary school, and older children also noted the increasingly strict disciplinary context in moving from primary to secondary school [6]. Parents worried about their children’s experiences of disciplinary changes, with one parent identifying her child’s behaviour in the wake of a family crisis as a challenge in his experience of moving from pre-school to primary school, and many others speaking of the fear of ‘getting in trouble’ experienced by their children in the move to secondary school, consistent with the idea of a “jolt in school climate” [5] between educational levels. However, surprisingly in many cases, primary school was seen by parents as more emotionally supportive than pre-school, a finding contradicting the general literature on transition [7] and perhaps reflective of the exceptionally caring and highly personalised atmosphere of the case-study primary school. School-based supports for transition were seen as very important by participants [8], and all of the schools involved had extensive support systems in place for transition. Visits to their new schools ahead of transition were particularly enjoyed by children, with young children speaking of “reading books and sitting on cushions”, and older children benefiting from ‘taster courses’ in the subjects they would be doing in 1st year. Other supports included Open Days and ‘treasure hunts’ for both parents and children,
and mentoring systems whereby older children could support the younger ones coming into their schools for the first time. Children identified by schools as ‘at risk’ during the process of transition from primary to secondary also had access to a School Completion Programme provided by the State.

4.4 Time:

As indicated by the literature [8], [6], many children participating in this research experienced mixed emotions during the process of transition. Children preparing for the transition to primary school described it as ‘scary’, but also ‘happy’, and children moving from primary to secondary school spoke about being “nervous and excited at the same time”. Also consistent with the literature [6], many children experienced the sense of being a ‘big fish in a little pond’, identifying the sense of shock involved in going from being one of the biggest children at one education level to being one of the smallest in the next. The participants of this research also identified the problem of curricular discontinuity during educational transition [7]. Preschool teachers reported knowing little about the primary school curriculum, and junior infant teachers reported either not knowing much about Aistear (Irish early childhood curriculum framework) or not using it due to lack of time. Equally, 6th class teachers said they knew little about secondary school curricula, and secondary school teachers reported knowing little about the primary school curriculum upon which they were expected to build. Rather, teachers indicated that they accessed such information informally from children, by asking them what they already knew about a particular subject. There was however, much positivity about potential for learning from each other, with one secondary school teacher indicating, “I’d love to observe in a primary school and pick up some tips (on active methodologies)”. The viewpoint of parents is a perspective largely missing from the literature on educational transition to date [2]. Parents contributing to the current research described their experiences as very intense and emotional – one parent described her husband as ‘heart-broken’ watching their daughter struggle with the transition to secondary school. Both teachers and parents described difficulties around the changing role of the parent as their child progresses through the education system. The experiences of parents during the transition to post-primary in particular confirmed existing literature [7] in identifying the increasing formality of interactions at secondary level, and the increased alienation of parents from the education system. Parents sometimes even felt alienated from their children as their independence developed and they needed their parents less. As one parent of a 1st child plaintively articulated, “I feel like I’m losing her to the secondary school.”

A final area of interest in terms of time is how children’s experience of transition to primary school compares and contrasts to experiences during the transition to secondary school. While some differences existed regarding the impact of specific factors such as age, what was most striking in the current research was the similarity between the worries (e.g. bullying) and the hopes (e.g. new friends, new academic experiences) of children at both levels. Of course, the ability to express those worries and hopes varied according to developmental stage. The ability of very young children to describe their experiences was impressive [22], but there was a clear difference over time in children’s ability to analyse those experiences [19]. Small children focussed on physical details – for example when asked about the differences between pre-school and primary school, children’s answers included “The walls”, and “Two slides and one tunnel”. When asked about similarities and differences between parents and teachers, one junior infant replied that they were different “because they have different faces... and they have different hair”. In contrast, older children showed greater capacity for analysis of aspects of context such as school climate, and relationship factors such as the potential tension between wanting the support of their parents, and yet wanting to strike out on their own and develop their own independence.

5. Conclusions and Initial Recommendations

The current research reinforces previous findings identifying transitions as crucial in the educational and socio-emotional lives of children. It extends such findings to highlight the important role played by parents at these times, and the potential impact of educational transition on parents. Initial findings yield some preliminary recommendations:
• Pre-schools and schools should continue to provide and further develop extensive supports for children experiencing educational transition.
• Pre-schools and schools should recognise the potential impact of educational transition on parents and where possible support them both directly and indirectly through offering support to their children.
• In particular, schools should be mindful of issues of ethos, and the changing atmospheres potentially experienced by children and parents as they move through the educational system. The need for emotional as well as academic support at all educational levels must be recognised, and this is especially noteworthy for secondary schools.
• Ongoing curricular discontinuity across educational levels is a matter needing urgent attention in Ireland. Schools should build on the apparent goodwill of teachers in developing greater communication between educational levels on a local level. At a broader policy level the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) should continue to prioritise its work on curricular integration.
• Schools should support children to develop the independence skills required at the next educational level – pre-schools should prioritise helping children to master the skills of looking after themselves and their belongings above academic skills. Primary schools should support 6th class children in developing appropriate organisational skills ahead of the move to secondary school.
• Secondary schools should recognise the extent of the experiential impact of organisational issues and support children through initiatives such as base classes for 1st years so they do not have to traverse an unfamiliar school, and support in organising lockers through sticker systems or folders.

In this way the adults who care most about children, their parents and their teachers, can work together through strong connections in the ‘meso-system’ [14], to ensure that times of educational transition provide the foundation for their future academic, social and emotional well-being.

Acknowledgements

The research reported here draws on work towards the award of PhD through Dublin Institute of Technology, Dublin, Ireland. The lead author would like to acknowledge the extensive contribution of her PhD supervisors, Prof. Nóirín Hayes and Dr Máire Mhic Mhathúna, and to express her heartfelt gratitude for their ongoing support. The research has been carried out with the support of funding provided by Marino Institute of Education, Dublin, Ireland, and the lead author would also like to extend most sincere thanks to its Board of Management and its President, Dr Anne O’Gara.

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