



## **Athlone Institute of Technology**

From Preschool to Primary School. Ready or Not?

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## **Signed Declaration**

I hereby declare that the material which I am submitting for assessment for the award of MA Child and Youth Studies in Athlone Institute of Technology is entirely my own work. When the work of others is used, it is referenced according to the Athlone Institute of Technology referencing guide.

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# Abstract

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School readiness and transitions from preschool to primary school has become a much-discussed topic in the <sup>1</sup>Early Childhood Care and Education Sector (ECCE) of late. The aim of this research project was to gain an understanding of school readiness and to explore what contributes to successful transitions from preschool to primary school through parental and professional perspectives. The first objective of this study was to explore the concept of school readiness from a parental and professional perspective. The second objective set out in this study was to gain an understanding of what contributes to successful transitions from preschool to primary school from a parental and professional perspective. The final objective of this study was to identify what impact the free <sup>2</sup>ECCE scheme has on school readiness and transitions from preschool to primary school.

A qualitative approach was taken to gather data in the form of semi structured interviews with parents and a focus group with primary school teachers. The use of thematic analysis as a method of data analysis proved beneficial, as it allowed the researcher to group recurring themes together. The researcher is satisfied that the aim and objectives of the research study were met through the use of a qualitative research method.

The main findings conclude that school readiness remains a complex concept. The findings reflect the traditional view of school readiness as the participants locate school readiness along a maturanionist continuum which is concerned with placing

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<sup>1</sup> Early Childhood Care and Education - In Ireland Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) refers to the care and education of all children from birth to six years which is the compulsory school starting age.

<sup>2</sup> The Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Scheme is a national initiative introduced by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs in 2010 to provide early childhood care and education for children before enrolment in primary school (DCYA, 2010, 2016).

the responsibility of school readiness on the individual child. Findings from this study reveal that parents and primary school teachers have a shared understanding of what contributes to a successful transition from preschool to primary school. The recurring contributions included the support from teachers and parents, older siblings, the familiarity of the school through open evenings, the proximity of the primary school and consistent, professional communication between all stakeholders. Based on the findings, further exploration of the ECCE scheme and the impact it has on school readiness and transitions would be beneficial. The findings from the study reveal that many parents welcomed the introduction of the scheme. The parents and teachers found that the ECCE scheme has had a very positive impact on school readiness and transitions. The findings also conclude that there are some issues remaining with the ECCE scheme.

# Introduction

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There has been much international research on school readiness and transitions from preschool to primary school and over the past decade in Ireland, the topic of school readiness and transitions from preschool to primary school has emerged as an important construct in the ECCE sector. This recent shift in thinking explicitly acknowledges a vast body of research which argues the importance of investment in quality early years' education. This research study aims to add to the current body of knowledge in Ireland on the topic and also add to the limited research on school readiness, transition practices and the role of the free ECCE scheme has in relation to school readiness and transitions.

The literature review will explore past research on the research topic. It will refer to both international and national literature on the area of school readiness, transition and the ECCE scheme. The methodology section discusses the research design. It also details the participants chosen and materials used during the data gathering process. The methodology section will finish with discussing the ethical considerations the researcher took on board. Following on from this the results section will provide a descriptive summary of the results. The researcher will use quotes where applicable to illustrate the results of the research project.

Throughout the discussion section the researcher will explore the results and discusses their implications. The discussion section will examine the results of the qualitative research study with reference to the research and expert opinion discussed in the literature review. To finish, a conclusion will be offered describing the main findings of the research study and how they relate to the aim and objectives of the research study.

Based on the findings, the research will conclude by offering recommendations for future research, policy and training opportunities.



# Literature Review

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## Introduction

“The cultures of pre-schools and primary schools in Ireland are often very different” (Irish National Teachers Association [INTO], 2008, p.44).

This section will review the current literature on school readiness and outline what the current literature has already informed us about the key aspects of successful transitions. The literature review will refer to both Irish and International studies and research in the area of school readiness and transition in the early year's context. Finally, this section will evaluate the literature on the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) scheme and its relationship with school readiness and transitions. Although this literature review covers a broad range of expert opinion and discussion, the literature is reviewed through areas that specifically address the purpose of this research study. The main areas which will be explored are school readiness, transitions from preschool to primary school including parents and professional's perspectives on school readiness and transitions and the ECCE scheme.

## School readiness

Dockett and Perry (2005) explore the idea that school readiness means different things to different people. One of the primary objectives of this research study is to explore parents' and professionals' perspectives on school readiness. The largest body of work on school readiness has focused on children's readiness for school, as opposed to ready schools, ready communities or ready families (The United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2012). Snow (2006) suggests that recent interest and investment in early childhood education, as a means of promoting children's school readiness, has prompted the need for precise definitions of school readiness.

## Theoretical views of school readiness

Meisels (1999, p.52) discusses the idea that there are two perspectives in relation to understanding school readiness; the empiricist approach and the interactionist

approach. The empiricist approach relates to the concept that school readiness can be determined by external factors which are often out of the child and families control. Carlton and Winsler, (1999, p.138) take the empiricist approach by suggesting that preschools are positioned, to provide the children with the knowledge, skills and experiences needed to ensure their academic success. This approach, however, cannot be the sole approach used to assess school readiness as doing so would exclude children who do not attend preschool.

The interactionist approach to determining school readiness can be seen as a more holistic approach (Meisels, 1999). This approach deals with the idea that readiness is to be co-constructed by both the child and the school (Meisels, 1999, p. 49). This holistic approach allows for the child, the educational settings, the community and the parents to have a more cooperative and collaborative role in preparing a child for school thus taking the onus from the individual child to be school ready.

While Meisels offers a framework for understanding the complexity of school readiness, Dockett and Perry (2002) expand on his work through a theoretical approach underpinned by four views of school readiness. Dockett and Perry (2002) highlight the complexity of the concept, school readiness, as they discuss it through four different views;

- The maturationist view - This view relates to the biological aspect of development and focuses on the individual child.
- The environmental view - This refers to school readiness and the individual child's acquisition of social and pre-academic skills.
- The social constructivist view - This view associates readiness within the child's social and cultural context.
- The interactionist view - This view relates to school readiness in a broader sense regarding the interaction between the characteristics of the child and a range of important influences in child's environment.

Dockett & Perry (2002) offer an in-depth approach to understanding views of school readiness. This research study will assess the current views of school readiness through the perspectives of parents and professionals.

## Ready Child

The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development's (DEEDE) resource toolkit for transition (DEEDE, 2009) suggests that too often a focus is placed on whether the individual child is ready for school. As Rafoth, Buchenauer, Crissman and Halkothis (2004) point out, that the traditional view of school readiness places an undue burden on children by expecting them to meet certain expectations of the school. Einarsdottir (2013) suggests that caution must be taken when using the term school readiness. Proposing that a child must be school ready suggests that a school is an unchangeable unit to which the children have to adjust to. The Centre for Community Child Health (2008) outline that this traditional view of school readiness places an undue emphasis on the child. The responsibility of school readiness should not be placed exclusively on the individual child (Kagan & Rigby, 2003).

## Ready Schools

O'Kane (2016) highlights that while it is important that children are 'school-ready', it is equally important that we have 'ready schools' (O'Kane, 2016). Lombardi (1992) suggests that creating continuity and maintaining learning expectations for children between early learning environments and primary schools is a defining characteristic of a ready school. The greater the gap in the ECCE system and the primary school, the greater the opportunity for challenges to occur. The need for high-quality ECCE provision is discussed by Boethel (2004). High-quality ECCE programs can contribute to school readiness according to Boethel (2004). According to Pianta & Walsh (1996), ready schools should reach out to families to encourage communication and establish links.

## Ready Families

The ready family relates to parental and caregiver's positive attitudes, interaction and involvement in the children's early learning and development and transition to school (UNICEF, 2012). The Growing up in Ireland study (GUI, 2013) suggests that families who have a higher income are more likely to defer the start of school for their children. Janus & Duku (2007) carried out a study examining family, health and socio-economic factors associated with school readiness. The study found that the more siblings in the family, the lower the child's language skills would be. The 'Preparing for Life' evaluation also suggested similar findings as it discusses the number of siblings a child had, had an impact on children's language ability (UCD Geary Institute, 2012).

## Positive progress in the area

Internationally there is a vast range of research carried out on the concept of school readiness, but there are somewhat limited studies in an Irish context. Early Childhood Care and Education is becoming more recognised as an area importance. The work of Dr Mary O'Kane over the past decade is a definite starting point and has made a significant contribution to the topic of school readiness and transitions in an Irish context. In addition to the work of O'Kane, the recent research study conducted by Ring, Mhic Mhathúna, Moloney, Hayes, Breatnach, Stafford, Carswell, Keegan, Kelleher, McCafferty, O'Keeffe, Leavy, Madden and Ozonyia (2016) represents an explicit acknowledgement for the value in supporting school readiness and in supporting children making the transition to primary school. O' Kane along with Ring et al. (2016) have started a national discussion on the topic of school readiness and created tremendous awareness on issues relating to school readiness and transitions. This study will aim to build upon the foundation of the work carried out in the area of school readiness and transitions. This research will seek to be more specific in terms of taking into consideration the perspectives of parents and professionals on school readiness and the relationship it has with successful transitions.

## Transitions from preschool to primary school

A transition can mean a change in location, teacher, curriculum or philosophy (Margetts, 2009). Over the last number of years in Ireland, the transition to primary school for children is a growing area of research (O’Kane, 2007; Walsh, 2003). The White Paper Ready to Learn on Early Childhood Education (Department of Education and Science (DES), 1999) points out that a difficult transition to school will have a lasting impact on children’s development and can result in them falling behind their peers. According to Christenson (1999), the transition from preschool to primary school can be viewed as significant milestone and turning point for the child. Adding to this, many experts suggest that the transition to school usually sets the tone and direction of a child's school career (Kraft-Sayre & Pianta, 2000). The transition from preschool to primary school is described by Fabian & Dunlop (2007) as something much more than a mere physical move or the forming of new relationships. Fabian & Dunlop (2007) highlight that this is the case due to a difference in the curriculum in preschool and primary school in England. This research study will discuss to what degree this is true in an Irish context as the preschool curriculum <sup>3</sup>Aistear is designed to be carried on into the junior and senior infant classes of primary school. Evidently, this highlights the importance of continuity not only on an academic basis but in terms of learning experiences, forming relationships and class size. Starting something new can be difficult for even the most secure adults, therefore it is important to realise the complex issues and considerations surrounding children in relation to their transitions. Pianta and Cox (1999) suggest that while successful transitions to school can result in positive academic and social outcomes for children, poor transitions may lead to negative outcomes, with negative long-term consequences.

A degree of discontinuity can be expected at times of transition (O’Kane, 2016). O’Kane (2016) suggests that this period of uncertainty results in cognitive conflict and may be a basis for learning in itself. The focus of a smooth transition should be

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<sup>3</sup> Aistear is the curriculum framework for children from 0-6 years in Ireland. It provides information for adults to help them plan for and provide fun and challenging learning experiences National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009)

replaced with a focus on available supports for when the transition brings discontinuity. The White Paper Ready to Learn on Early Childhood Education compiled by the Department of Education and Skills (DES, 1999) discusses the idea of equipping children to manage transitions themselves allows them to benefit from the opportunities presented by new situations (DES, 1999). Understanding the transition process from preschool to primary school is a vital factor for informing and developing future policies and best practice around supporting transitions for children. This research will aim to gain a deeper understanding of what transitions mean for the child, the parents and educators. This research will also explore the process of the transition in an Irish context.

Children themselves have expressed that they expect changes as they make the move from preschool to primary school (Brooker, 2008; O’Kane and Hayes, 2010). Support must be provided to enable children to negotiate these changes (O’Kane, 2016). Children are more likely to succeed if connections and some level of continuity and alignment exist between preschools and primary schools. As well as considering supporting the child with the knowledge, skills and dispositions necessary to negotiate and manage transitions, it is also important to consider the individual contexts in which transitions take place. As Walsh, Sproule, McGuinness, Trew and Ingram, (2010) argue, establishing continuity in classroom activities is vital in ensuring a successful transition. Walsh et al., (2010, p.21) express the importance of developing mediating practices to bridge the gap between those found in the old classroom and those discovered in the new one.

### Stakeholders in the transition process

The level of communication between the children involved in the transition, early years’ educators, primary school teachers and parents plays a major role in ensuring continuity of care for each child. Snow (2006) highlights that there are many stakeholders in the discussion about school readiness and transitions. The stakeholders can include children, policymakers, teachers, parents, advocacy groups and researchers (Snow, 2006). Each stakeholder will naturally hold their views and conceptions about school the topic. While research-driven definitions may prove to

be useful, a range of definitions on school readiness and transitions must be considered when developing measures that will have value to all stakeholders (Snow, 2006). If the change will have an effect on the stakeholders, then it is empirical that the stakeholders are involved in the process of change.

### Parental and professional perspectives

The views and expectations of parents can have an effect on how the child who is going through the transition views it. Johansson (2002) reinforces this idea of how the parent's view of the transition process is highly influential on how the child adjusts to the new situation. Parents' academic expectations of their child can become more emphasised on the transition to school (Griebel & Niesel, 2001). Thus, the transition process poses challenges to children resulting in some children becoming more successful than other at meeting these challenges (O'Kane, 2007). O'Kane and Hayes (2006) carried out a study on the views of parents and teachers on the transition to school in Ireland. Part of this study included deciding factors for parents sending their children to school. These included childcare issues, parents working situations, family situations and the cost of childcare. The cost of childcare is an interesting factor to consider at present as one of the influencing factors. As this study was carried out some years ago, it will be interesting to discover if this is still the case especially with the current free ECCE scheme operating in Ireland. From a parental perspective, common factors can be described as the age of the child and developmental stage. Supporting this ideology is the results of O'Kane's and Hayes' (2006) research project. O'Kane & Hayes (2006) found that parents often chose to send their children to school based on their chronological age they had reached rather than the stage they were at developmentally. Interestingly, O'Kane (2007) found that preschool teachers' knowledge of school was somewhat vague and equally the primary school teachers' knowledge of preschool was also vague. In more recent years the Department for Education and Skills (DES) have used inspections to inform preschool providers and advise them on best practice. In 2016 the DES advised that information is to be shared between the early years setting and the primary school to ensure continuity of experiences and progression in children's



learning. The DES also outlined that policies and procedures have been developed to promote the sensitive management of transitions within and between settings. Parental and professionals' perspectives on what contributes to a successful transition will be examined in this research study.

## The ECCE Scheme

One particular focus of this study will be the ECCE scheme and the influence the scheme has had on the on school readiness and transitions. As this is a relatively new scheme and there has been little research carried out to date in this area in an Irish context, this literature review will refer to comparisons in an international context. This perspective of a universal preschool provision acknowledges a vast body of research that highlights the importance of early childhood education (Neylon, 2013). Ireland's change in investment in pre-school services can be seen as a reactive measure to the findings of *The Child Care Transition - A league table of Early Childhood Education and Care in Economically Advanced Countries* (UNICEF, 2008). This report compared and evaluated ten Early Childhood Education and Care standards in twenty-five OECD countries. The report found that Ireland's performance was one of discouragement and dismay while achieving only one standard (Neylon, 2013). The comparison of the Irish government to other European governments found that the latter guarantee a preschool place to all four-year-olds and 80% of all staff were trained (UNICEF, 2008, p.2). The 2008 annual Irish competitiveness report revealed that the number of children of three to six years of age attending pre-primary education programmes was less than 5%, ranking the second lowest in Europe. Both reports highlighted "that pre-primary education rather than childcare is found to have significant individual and social return" (Forfás 2008, p.106). Moving on from this it was clear from an Irish perspective that action to improve the results was a matter of urgency. International longitudinal research has established the value quality pre-school provision.

Comparing Ireland to a country such as Sweden who ranked second in competitiveness report offers an insight into how other countries stand in terms of free or affordable preschool. Sweden has had for many years a maximum-fee policy, which makes child care affordable for everyone. This idea deals with fees being

calculated according to income with low-income families paying nothing while the costs for more affluent parents are capped at 140 euro a month (Sweden.se, 2016). This means childcare costs in Sweden are a fraction of those in other nations. The ECCE scheme has been introduced in Ireland in 2010 and more recently in 2016 the introduction of a second free year catering for children three to five and a half years old.

### Aistear in the primary school setting

While <sup>4</sup>Síolta is a national quality framework for ECCE (Centre for Early Childhood Development, 2006), Aistear is the curriculum framework for children from birth to six years of age (NCCA, 2009). The Aistear curriculum framework provides information for educators working with children to help them plan for and implement enjoyable, fun and challenging learning experiences. Aistear provides guidelines on nurturing children's learning through partnerships with parents, interactions, play, and assessment (NCCA, 2009).

### Conclusion

In conclusion, it is evident that there is a vast amount of literature of an international context on the topic of school readiness and transitions. As both are so broadly defined by different individuals, it is unclear as to how this can offer a universal understanding of the process of transitions. The Ring et al., (2016) study is the first large-scale study carried out in Ireland examining the concept of school readiness. The study carried out by O'Kane (2007) was the first formal Irish research study on transitions and identified that the transition to school in an Irish context is an adaptive process for all stakeholders. This research will focus on the different understandings of these difficult to define terms and explore the various contributing factors to the broad understanding of the concept.

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<sup>4</sup> Síolta is the National Quality Framework for all settings who work with children from birth to six years in the ECCE sector in Ireland (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009).

Specifically, the objectives of this research study are to:

- Explore the concept of school readiness including ready children and ready school,
- Examine what influences successful transitions from preschool to primary school,
- Explore what impact the ECCE scheme and the primary school curriculum have on school readiness and transitions from preschool to primary school.

My research will contribute to the current body of knowledge through the previously mentioned objectives through the perspectives of parents and professionals. The literature review has given an overview of the background of school readiness, transitions from preschool to primary school, the ECCE scheme and Aistear. The next section of this research will present the methodology used in the research study and allow the reader to follow the researcher through the path of this research process.

# Methodology

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## Introduction

The aim of my research project is to gain the views of parents and primary school teachers on the transition from preschool to primary school. The objectives include exploring the factors and experiences that inform and shape parents' and teachers' perspectives on school readiness and to explore the role of the ECCE scheme and the Aistear curriculum in relation to school readiness and transitions. In this section, I will outline the method that was chosen to be most suitable for gathering data in order to fulfil the research study's objectives. The methodology section will offer an insight into how the research was conducted. It will outline the approach that was selected for this research study and will provide details on the research design, participants, ethical considerations, and delimitations.

## Research Design

After exploring both qualitative and quantitative approaches to research and considering the benefits and challenges of both, I decided to choose a qualitative approach to the research. I have adopted a qualitative research approach as I feel it is the most appropriate method of gathering data from participants. Qualitative research can include interviews and focus groups with participants. In contrast to most methods of research, the research design in qualitative research remains flexible both before and throughout the actual research (Marshall and Rossman, 2011). Although I have followed a precise research methodology, the specifics of the approach evolved throughout the process.

The use of semi-structured interviews allowed for some control from the participants regarding the direction of the interview. As Hoffman (2013) points out, an interview should resemble more of a conversation than an actual interview.

The researcher felt that because two different groups of participants were involved in the study (parents and primary school teachers), it would be suitable to use a focus group with the primary school teachers. Dowling (2014) describes that a focus group is a traditional interview technique used to obtain data about a particular topic. A focus group can also be described as a series of group discussions which is

conducted to elicit perceptions from participants in a non-threatening environment (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

While interviews and focus groups can be time-consuming, they can offer an in-depth insight into the research topic. Through semi-structured interviews, the researcher attempts to elicit information from the participants by asking questions (Clifford, 2010). Clifford (2010) suggests that although the researcher prepares a list of predetermined questions, semi-structured interviews unfold in a conversational manner offering participants the opportunity to explore and add to issues or areas that they feel are important. According to Bell (1999), the use of interviews in an effective and efficient manner offers the opportunity to explore and examine areas of the participants' experience. Unlike quantitative research methods, the researcher can ask additional questions throughout the interview to clarify any misunderstandings or misconceptions. Guess, Benson & Sigel-Causey (1985) suggests that the interviewer must be aware of body movements, facial expressions and gestures as a form of communication during the process of an interview. This awareness is also applicable for focus groups. Both verbal and non-verbal communication is crucial to the success of any qualitative piece of research (Bryman, 2004). Non-verbal forms of communication can add depth and insight to the topic being studied.

## Participants

According to Trochim (2006), a sample is a subset of people that are interested in the research project. Due to the scale and time frame of the research study, the researcher selected a convenience sample method. Using a convenience sample means that those who participated in the study were accessible and conveniently available to take part in the research, and, therefore this is not a representative sample. The researcher approached a rural primary school, outlined the purpose of the study and spoke to the principal and junior cycle teachers about how the researcher expected to carry out the research. The principal of the school acted as a gatekeeper regarding choosing the teachers he felt were most suitable in helping to achieve the objectives of the research project. Information sheets (See Appendix A)

about the proposed research were provided to those interested. Junior cycle teachers were the ideal participants as they are working directly with children who have recently made the transition from preschool to primary school. A small sample of four teachers was obtained from the primary school. The researcher will refer to the teacher participants as T1, T2, T3 and T4.

The second set of participants were the parents of children who have gone through the transition from preschool to primary school. The participants were contacted, and the researcher provided information about the study. If the participants were interested in participating, an information sheet and consent form (See Appendix B) was sent to them. A small sample of three sets of parents was obtained. The researcher will refer to the parents as P1, P2, P3, P4 and P5.

The table below indicates a brief profile of the primary school teachers;

<b>Teacher</b>	<b>Number of years' experience as a teacher</b>
T1	13 years
T2	5 years
T3	6 years
T4	4 years

The following table indicates a brief profile of the parent participants;

<b>Parents</b>	<b>Family composition</b>
P1(Mother) & P2 (Father)	Two children in primary school
P3 (Mother)	Three children; two in primary school, one in preschool
P4 (Mother) & P5 (Father)	One child in primary school

## Materials

A tape recorder was used in the interviews and focus groups with participants. All participants consented to the utilization of a voice recorder which is outlined in the information sheet and consent form (See Appendix A, B and C). Before commencing the interviews and focus groups, the researcher explained why the voice recorder was being used and asked the participants to sign the consent form if they were in agreement. Throughout the interview and focus group the researcher made short written observations in the form of notes to support the data gathering process while paying attention to the participants through eye contact and gestures. The researcher compiled some draft questions for the semi-structured interviews. A pilot interview was carried out on a child and youth care practitioner to confirm suitability. An interview guide (See Appendix D) was also used throughout the interview with participants. For the focus group, the researcher used a similar approach. The researcher used a focus group guide (See Appendix E) for the focus groups with the teachers. The researcher also used a notepad to make short written observations throughout the focus group, when appropriate.

## Procedure

The researcher emailed the school and invited them to take part in the study. The principal of the school approached the teachers and informed them of the invitation. The principal of the school wrote a letter stating that he was happy to facilitate the researcher in her research project. This letter will not be included in the appendices for confidentiality reasons. An information sheet and a letter of consent were provided to the school and circulated to the teachers who were interested in taking part. The information sheet (See Appendix A) included my name and contact details if the prospective participants wished to communicate with me. The prospective participants were given a week to decide if they wished to participate and the researcher called back to the school a week later to collect consent the forms. The parents were contacted over the phone and on face to face basis. The parents were accessed through my professional contacts. The researcher gave them information about the study and the information sheet and consent form if they



wished to take part. All three sets of parents were willing to participate. Both the focus group and interviews took place at a time that was convenient for the participants. The qualitative interviews were then conducted with the professionals and parents during April 2017. The interviews involving the professionals took place at their workplace while the interviews with all parents took place in their homes. Before commencing the interviews and focus groups, the participants were informed that at any stage during the interview/focus group they could request to stop or take a break. The researcher also informed participants that they did not have to answer all questions if they wished. The researcher reassured the participants that their knowledge and experience was a vital part of the study and that the researcher was not looking for consensus on the topic. The interviews varied in length, and each lasted a duration of 20- 25 minutes. The focus group was 40 minutes in length. After each interview had been completed, I listened to the voice recording transcribed word for word. I also carried out the same process after finishing the focus group. The notes that the researcher took throughout the interview were also written up. The researcher listened to the tapes twice for clarity. The tapes were then destroyed for confidentiality purposes. The data analysis was then conducted. The researcher picked a number of key themes that arose from each interview that was relevant to the objectives of the study.

### Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are a widely discussed topic in research today. This is especially true when the research involves vulnerable participants. This study does not deal directly with children, but the topic, however, is child related. The researcher ensured that this study complied with the ethical guidelines set out by the Athlone Institute of Technology. Ethical approval was obtained from Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT) Masters in Child and Youth Care Studies Ethics Committee, the principal of the school, the teachers and the parents.

The researcher took appropriate steps to ensure that the participant's welfare was considered throughout the research project. The participants were made aware of the purpose of the study from the beginning. Confidentiality is a huge part of any research project, and the researcher ensured the participants that the data gathered

would be confidential. Anonymity was guaranteed by changing the names of all participants and destroying the voice recording after the interviews and focus groups were transcribed. The researcher also asked participants to avoid using the names of children or specific locations if possible. Where names were mentioned, the researcher used pseudonyms to protect anonymity. The researcher's notes, consent forms, and other relevant documentation were kept in a locked filing cabinet.

## Delimitations

The researcher notes that there are limitations regarding this research project. The small scale nature of the study is one of the main limitations of the research study. The results cannot be generalised for the wider population. A larger scale study could provide more representative responses as it would include more participants. The researcher unintentionally may also have an impact on the study. Factors such as experience, nerves and personal bias of the researcher may have an impact. According to Tracy (2010) self-reflexivity is one of the most celebrated practices in qualitative research. Self-reflexivity includes honesty, authenticity with one's self, one's research and one's audience (Tracy, 2010). While the researcher had previously studied the topic of reflexivity, a more in-depth knowledge and opportunities to practice such may have been beneficial.

## Summary

This methodology chapter outlined the research methodology used to conduct the research. It outlined how the researcher designed the research project to best fulfil the objectives of the research study. It highlights the particular research design and gives an insight into the participants involved in the research. It provides information about the procedure used in the interviews and focus groups. This chapter also discusses ethical issues that the researcher took into consideration and any recognised delimitations regarding the research. The following chapter will discuss the results of the data gathered and the themes that were evident in the results.

# Results

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## Introduction

This section presents the research findings as they relate to the study aim and objectives. As mentioned in the methodology section, the parent participants will be referred to as P1, P2, P3, P4 and P5. The teacher participants will be referred to as T1, T2, T3 and T4. The findings are outlined under headings relating to each research objective, and explore the main themes that emerged during the interviews and focus group.

## The method of Analysis

The method of analysis chosen by the researcher is thematic analysis. According to Boyatzis (1998), thematic analysis assists the researcher to move their analysis from a broad exploration of the gathered data, towards discovering patterns and developing themes. For Attride-Sterling (2001), thematic analysis seeks to unearth the themes salient to the data. The researcher acknowledges that numerous themes emerged during the focus group and interviewing process. This research study focused primarily on the recurring themes and those that were related to the aim and objectives of this research.

The researcher reviewed the transcripts from the semi-structured interviews and focus group to identify recurring themes that the participants had discussed. The researcher also read over any notes that were taken throughout the process of the interview and focus group. As there are two different groups of participants included in this research study, parents and primary school teachers, the researcher has discussed the views of the parents first and then added the views of the professionals. Quotations from the participants have been used to identify the emerging themes. As I have outlined in the previous section, the parent participants will be referred to as P1, P2, P3, P4 and P5. The primary school teachers will be called T1, T2, T3 and T4.

Both the interview schedule and the focus group guide were divided into three headings to explore the objectives of the research study. The semi-structured interview guide and the focus group guide varied slightly. For example, the researcher did not explore Aistear and Síolta in great detail with the parent

participants. The themes that emerged will be presented under the following headings:

- The concept of school readiness,
- Transitions from preschool to primary school,
- The ECCE scheme and its impact on school readiness and transitions from preschool to primary school.

## School Readiness

School readiness is a complex term and means different things to different people. The researcher explored parents' and primary school teachers' perspectives on school readiness.

The parents' perspectives on school readiness are illustrated through the following quotes:

*"I think the children need to be confident if they are shy it will be harder to go to school" (P1)*

One parent drew upon the importance of children having the opportunity to go to preschool:

*"Like it would be good if they had the chance to spend time in the preschool because that would help them be ready for school. In <sup>5</sup>Anna's case anyways they were great, and she was really ready for school, and she wanted to go" (P2)*

*"I don't really think age was something I thought of, like when I think of school readiness I think when I was deciding to send my children to school, they were able for school, but now with my daughter, I've*

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<sup>5</sup> Pseudonyms are used throughout the research project to protect anonymity.

*kept her longer in preschool so that she will be a bit older because I have more experience now” (P3)*

The response from the participants differed, as they all had their opinions and ideas around the concept of school readiness. One parent suggested that children are ready for school when they have had the ‘*opportunity to interact with other children and to be social*’ (P5). While socialisation was necessary for this parent regarding school readiness, another felt that it was important for their child to be ‘*old enough*’ (P4) to go to school.

*“I think it was helpful to have my sister around, she advised me to keep Sue in preschool for another year, she was only after turning four in April, so I kept her in preschool for another year, and I think at the end of the second year she was really ready” (P4)*

Not all parents saw the age of the child as being so relevant to discussing the concept of school readiness, as one participant added:

*“I don't think the age of the child is as important as how they are developmentally and socially” (P3)*

All of the parents brought up social skills as being of vital importance when children are starting school. As one parent points out, the ability to ‘*make friends and socialise*’ (P4) is so important, and if children have that in place, they will feel more secure and are ‘*more ready*’ (P4) to learn. While social and emotional maturity seemed important in determining school readiness, the parents also stressed that pre-academic skills were also important in determining school readiness. Another parent added that their child’s preschool experience had a significant influence on their child’s school readiness as they ‘*learnt their alphabet and numbers*’ (P3). One parent suggested that ‘being able to hold a pencil’ was an important aspect of school readiness.

The researcher asked the parents what skills/competencies do they think the primary school teacher will be looking for when a child is starting school. Over half of the parents offered similar responses. One parent added that they '*weren't really sure*' (P1) what the teacher expected the children to know. Another parent explained that what her children had learnt in preschool and at home contradicted how the teacher taught the children:

*"It might have been useful for us as parents to know which way they were going to teach the letters for example because I would help the children at home to practice their letters, so if there were an information evening it would have been helpful maybe". (P3)*

One parent spoke about primary school teachers' expectations involving '*sitting and listening for longer periods of time*' (P5). Another added to the consensus of uncertainty as she stated that they were '*unsure really*' as to what was expected (P4).

When exploring the concept of school readiness with the primary school teachers, the researcher found that '*social skills*' were mentioned numerous times. One teacher respondent added:

"Social skills are so important. Maturity is a huge thing, I can see it this year like there are a couple of boys who are nearly a year younger than the others, it's really obvious. And even for learning the age would be a huge thing" (T1)

*"I agree with T1, social skills are so important, for me as well I really think language is important, and motor skills as well, I do think it's all developmental as well, so it will always be worked on. Having all of these basic skills will help the children be ready to learn, and it will all play a huge part" (T2)*

When the idea of school readiness was discussed, many teachers mention the impact preschool (playschool) has had on school readiness:

*"I think the contribution of playschool has been massive, for example dealing with conflict, you can see that some children are better able to manage it than others and even sharing, and getting on in groups, it's all part of school readiness" (T3)*

Similarly, another teacher discussed the home environment concerning the impact it has on school readiness:

*"I think sometimes it depends on what is done for children at home in terms of organisation skills like you can see the children who have everything done for them at home and you can see the children who are independent and potter around and are organised" (T4)*

*"Skills that are practical are really important" (T3)*

A teacher participant noted that '*practical skills are so important for school readiness*' (T4). Practical skills were discussed and generally understood as self-care skills. One participant explained how she '*at the start of the year helped the children put on their coats, and then I realised that they are able to put on their own coats. They are actually able to do it like if you keep doing it, they are becoming less independent*' (T1). In addition, another teacher reported that these types of skills are '*far more important*' than cognitive abilities (T3). The teachers were in general agreement that it would be too time-consuming if they had to help the whole class with tasks such as dressing or toileting. One teacher added that when the children have '*mastered these skills*' the whole class are ready to learn and the teacher is also ready to teach and does not have to spend extended periods of time helping the entire class.

There was one particular area where the parental and teacher perspectives coincided. One such area related to a child's level of confidence, which was raised by both a parent and a teacher:



*“Confidence is really important, I think anyways, like to have an open mind to learning and just the view that I can do this, and not to be afraid to give everything a go and not to be afraid to make mistakes” (T2)*

*"I think the children need to be confident if they are shy it will be harder to go to school" (P1)*

### Current legislation in Ireland allowing children from four years of age to enrol in school

The primary school teachers were asked about their views and opinions on the current legislation in Ireland which allows children to attend school from the age of four. In their responses, there was some consensus as two teachers agreed that children should be at least 4 and a half years old starting school. Another teacher offered the following insight:

*"I would agree with that, that they should be around five starting school, it's hard because in one class you could have such a stretch, you could have one child that is five and one child that is seven at the same time. So even if they were four starting it would be better if they were all four starting. So I definitely think that if they are older, it will stand to them, even when they go to secondary school. But there is another school of thought where they think that children are too old on the other end of education, in secondary school" (T2)*

One teacher spoke about how she remembers many people talking about how children are ‘well able for school at four’ and that children ‘need the challenge’ junior infants offers them (T2). However, another participant felt that in her experience:

*"I've never seen a child bored in school, you can do so many activities with children and engage them in so many ways like I've*

*never seen a child that is too old for a class, but I've often seen a child that is too young and struggling" (T4)*

The body language from all of the participants in the focus group showed that they were in agreement with the above statement. One teacher who was nodding added 'Yeah that's a really good point actually' (T1). Another teacher suggested that 'some children are perfect' to go to school at four, it really all depends on the child' (T4), and another teacher concurred stating 'yeah some of them are dying to go to school' (T3).

According to the data gathered, the position of the child in the family has a significant influence on parental decision-making around when to send their child to school. One respondent added that it is a tough decision and that it is particularly difficult for parents when it is their first child:

*"You sometimes hear parents regretting it where they are all saying they wished they kept them longer, and didn't send their children to school so soon, and then further down the line they don't want to keep their children back. I think parents do kind of regret it, especially if it's their first child, whereas with the second child the parents might have a better idea" (T4)*

### Transitions from Preschool to Primary School

Dunlop and Fabian highlight that 'a shared language to describe transitions may not be a mutual one' (2002, p.146). This is evident throughout the data gathered from the interviews with the parents and the focus group with the primary school teachers. Many of the parent participants felt that older siblings were a huge help in the transition period.

One parent suggests that the transition was smooth for their youngest daughter:

*“if she needed her older sister, she could be sent for; the teacher would get her. So things like that helped” (P2)*

Another parent also noted the importance of siblings throughout the transition period. All of the parent participants mentioned *‘preschool’* as being important when discussing the transition from preschool to primary school (P3). One parent suggested that *‘having friends’* and being familiar with the *‘classroom setting’* really helped the transition (P4). Another parent respondent recalls the transition process for their youngest child as being *‘smooth’* (P1). While this was the case for the respondents first child, they also discussed how it was *‘a difficult time’* for their first born child:

*“I think it was harder for our oldest child, she did have friends in preschool, but we were the only couple with a small child in our group of friends, so she was really used to hanging around with adults and older people and not children” (P1)*

One parent participant added that they felt that uniforms or *‘even jumpers’* for preschool would have helped in creating a smooth transition (P4). The parent suggested that jumpers would have been helpful as the children would be *‘getting used to wearing a uniform’* like they do in primary school.

The teachers spoke about transitions to primary school as a positive process, remarking that they usually did not have any children who were experiencing difficulties throughout the transition process. One teacher spoke about the importance of the *‘open evening’* and the need for extra staff during the first few days (T4). Another teacher respondent also mentioned the open evening being crucial as the children will get to meet their new teacher (T1). One teacher spoke about the *‘familiar’* setting for the majority of children as they transitioned from a preschool setting (T2). Continuity was mentioned by the majority of the teachers as being an important factor concerning transitioning from preschool to primary school. One teacher offered her experience, where in the last year there was only one child who

experienced difficulty with the transition (T1). The teacher added that she felt it might have to do with 'coming from a different preschool than the other children' (T1). Another teacher then went on to discuss that nearly all of the children starting in their school come from the same preschools.

*"We have two preschools that usually supply us" (T3)*

One teacher supports the consensus among the parents, and as she talked about how '*preschool has had a significant impact*' on the transition process (T3). T2 speaks about the importance of relationships, commenting that children, more often than not, are coming to school from the same preschool, so they already have friends moving with them, and that makes the transition easier.

One teacher added that '*even picking up their older brother/sister*' helped with the transition as the children were becoming '*familiar with the environment*' and '*eager to start school themselves*'. According to another participant, children usually, want to grow up and '*get bigger and bigger and go to big school*'. Children love being told they are '*getting so big*' one teacher explains. The teachers were in agreement, as they spoke about the children themselves wanting to go to '*big school*', and it is an important aspect of transitioning from preschool to primary school.

Another topic which emerged from the focus group, as being essential for successful transitions, was the support from the parents. If parents are encouraging their children to come to school, helping them to do their homework and are '*on the same page as us*', children will settle much better in school. While communication and cooperation with parents were important, the teachers felt that communication with the preschool teachers was critical. One teacher spoke about the use of a booklet which is designed by one of the preschools close to the school:

*"I know this year I had about ten children who had this little booklet, where it said for example, can the child put on their own coat, and then there would be a tick or an x beside it" (T1)*

Another teacher added that:

*"I know my own Mom is a preschool teacher and she goes to the schools in her own time, to meet with the junior infant teachers" (T2).*

### The ECCE scheme and its impact on school readiness and transitions from preschool to primary school

The parent participants discussed their opinions on the ECCE scheme. There were somewhat mixed reviews about the ECCE scheme as one parent highlighted that the ECCE scheme is *'great in a way, at least you don't have to pay for the preschool part'*, however, one parent continued to say *'but what about before and after preschool?'* (P3). The majority of the parent participants echoed the same concern that the ECCE scheme only allowed three free hours for each child every day. The parents were concerned with the cost of childcare and the implications of being a working parent:

*"You have to get somebody to look after your children before and after preschool, like I was lucky my father picked my child up for me from preschool every day, otherwise I would have to send the child to a crèche, and I know it's expensive so it might not even be worth my while working" (P5)*

Another parent added that even if they were thinking about sending their child to a crèche after preschool, the closest one was *'a 10-minute drive'* and *'who would be responsible for dropping the child over'* (P4). While logistics were a major concern for some parents, other parents add that the cost of childcare can be a deciding factor when making the decision to send your child to school, with one respondent stating that:

*"I know parents who sent their children to school because they couldn't afford not to" (P3)*

A parent who spoke about the free ECCE recalled that it had not been implemented when her first child was attending preschool but adds that *'I would have sent them to preschool anyways, even though it was very expensive, I know how good it was for her'* (P1). Many of the parent participants emphasised how the preschool teachers *'did so much with the children'* and how, by doing so, really prepared them for school. One parent made the comparison that when her older child was in preschool, it was so different:

*"With my youngest child now in preschool, they talk about their feelings and things like that with them, there was none of that before, and they do so much of Aistear with them, they are trying to bring it into the primary schools now too"* (P3)

The free ECCE scheme was discussed mainly with the parent participants, as they and their children are the primary beneficiaries of the scheme. However, the free ECCE scheme did come up in conversation in the focus group with the primary school teachers. One teacher spoke about the free ECCE scheme and how it may have an effect on the number of children starting primary school:

*"The second free year was introduced last year, and it might be a complete coincidence, but the numbers were considerably lower this year in junior infants"* (T1)

Another teacher suggested that perhaps parents are availing of the second free year.

### Using Aistear in primary school

The primary school teachers discussed how they used Aistear in their classroom. They also spoke about how they have recently attended a training day on Aistear. The participants then talked about Aistear in a positive manner. Two teachers spoke about how, although they found it difficult at the beginning to understand it and

implement Aistear, they are getting better at making time for play during the day. One teacher suggested that Aistear was really good because the children who attended preschool were familiar with *'that way of learning'* (T1). Another teacher expressed that they found *'Aistear difficult to incorporate at the beginning'* but with the help of the course they attended, could see how it can be *'easily incorporated with good planning and organisation skills.'* (T2)

*'It's a lot of work to plan according to both curriculums, that's what I found most difficult at the beginning when it was first introduced, I couldn't figure out how you could get all of your subjects taught, but now I know that you just need to take time out of other subjects, like they are learning a huge amount from it, there are so many subjects that can be taught through play.'* (T2)

Adding to this, one teacher suggested that you need to be organised to ensure that you are getting the most out of both curricula:

*"There's definitely a lot of organisation in it and a lot of forward planning is needed"* (T3)

The need for a change in the individual teacher's' mind-set also emerged as one respondent explained:

*"I sort of needed to change my own mind-set and sort of realise how important play skills and life skills are as well, but you also can do a lot of academic work through it as well"* (T4)

Some teachers reported that to effectively implement Aistear in their classroom they needed to *'shift the way they were teaching'* (T2). One teacher felt that they were not *'giving enough time in the day to Aistear or play'*, but once they had a better understanding of the benefits of Aistear, they *'put aside a set time'* for it each day and took time from other subject areas (T4). One teacher discussed that using Aistear was also a means for the teacher to monitor how the children were progressing and interacting socially:

*“Before I would be relying a lot on what teachers in the yard were telling me about how the children were interacting socially, because I wouldn't be out there every day myself, but now I have around 45 minutes of Aistear in the classroom, and I can see a lot more, you can really see their play skills and social development and see how they are settling in the new environment” (T2)*

## Summary

In this section, parents and primary school teachers offered many insights into their concepts of school readiness, transitions from preschool to primary school and the free ECCE scheme. Both sets of participants cited the importance of children's social and emotional development in relation to school readiness. The parents also discussed behaviours such as sitting and listening, as being important, in addition to a range of pre-academic and self-help skills. The perspectives of both the parents and teachers on transitions to primary school were discussed. The results depicted a consensus on what contributed to a successful transition from preschool to primary school. Preschool was highlighted as one of the most significant contributors to school readiness and successful transitions. The discussion on the free ECCE scheme brought about different responses from both sets of participants. While many parents remarked that it was a useful scheme, they also highlighted issues with it concerning the hours it provided for children and the cost of childcare before and after the ECCE scheme. The use of Aistear as a means of curriculum continuity for children was discussed with the primary school teachers. Curriculum continuity was one important factor in relation to successful transitions. The overall consensus was that the early year's curriculum was a positive and helpful tool for both children and teachers as it created a familiar learning environment for the children and a means for observation of social skills for the teachers. The level of communication between preschool teachers and primary school teachers varied depending on the preschool and was somewhat limited. The teachers and some parents welcomed the idea of the more consistent communication model between all stakeholders involved



in the transition process. Based on the responses in this research study the parents welcomed more communication with the teachers, and the teachers welcomed more communication with the parents and preschool teachers. Overall the responses gathered from the participants offer a great insight into the topic of school readiness and transitions and form a compelling basis for the following discussion section.

# Discussion

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## Introduction

This research study set out to explore parents' and professionals' perspective of school readiness and transitions from preschool to primary school. It also sought to examine perspectives of the impact of the free ECCE scheme in Ireland. This section discusses the key findings which emerged from the qualitative research with reference to the research questions posed at the outset. The results are considered below with reference to the researcher's experience as an ECCE practitioner and the expert opinions and views offered throughout the literature review.

## School Readiness

Recent interest and investment in early childhood education, as a means of promoting children's school readiness, has prompted the need for precise definitions of school readiness (Snow, 2006). Understanding parents' and professionals' perspectives, ideas and opinions of school readiness was one of the main areas of interest in this research study.

While the participants did talk about school readiness in a broader sense, some participants placed emphasis solely on the child's individual skills. This finding lends support to the idea put forward by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development's resource toolkit for transition (DEEDE, 2009). The DEEDE (2009) suggests that too often a focus is placed on whether a child is ready for school. As Rafoth et al. (2004) point out, the prevailing philosophy of children being ready for school places an undue burden on children by expecting them to meet certain expectations of the school. This idea is also evident in literature put forward by Einarsdottir (2013), where she suggests that caution must be taken when using the term school readiness. Proposing that a child must be school ready suggests that a school is an unchangeable unit to which the children have to adjust.

A noticeable trend among the primary school teachers was the onus they felt regarding the contribution to school readiness. According to Snow (2006), characteristics of ready schools include links with early years' services, transition support initiatives for children commencing schools, a range of supports available to cater for children with diverse needs during the early years of schooling, and

teachers with an excellent understanding of early childhood development. The teacher participants discuss how they need to be prepared and organised to implement the Aistear curriculum which reflects a recognition of the need for ready schools. Lombardi (1992) suggests that creating continuity and maintaining learning expectations for children between early learning environments and primary schools is a defining characteristic of a ready school. The teacher participants spoke about how prepared and organised they need to be when the children are starting the school year with one teacher adding, *'using Aistear is really good, but you have to be organised regarding planning for it to get the most out of it'*. By discussing school readiness in this manner, the respondents showed to some degree, a recognition that schools and teachers have a role to play in school readiness. This lends support to the findings in O'Kane's (2016) research on transitions to school, where she highlights that while it is important that children are school-ready, it is equally important that we have ready schools.

The home environment is crucial as it can influence school readiness. Rafoth et al. (2004) suggest that children from low-income families may display poor readiness. According to Rafoth et al. (2004) children from stable two-parent homes are more likely to have stronger school readiness than children from one-parent homes. Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford and Taggart (2004) point out that there are many activities that parents do with their children that promote school readiness. One parent speaks about how they prepared their children for school by talking to them about it and helping them with writing skills and letter work. The other parent respondents did not refer to ways in which they (the family) prepared children for school. Snow (2006) suggests that, although there is general agreement about the nature of school readiness at its most abstract level, the real debate is the determination of the critical components of child development that contribute to school success. The interview and focus group participants articulated a range of school readiness indicators. The findings display some differences in opinions. The parents spoke more about the acquisition of pre-academic skills, while the teachers expressed the importance of social and emotional maturity. One teacher participant suggested that *'if a child is able to play and interact with other children in a positive manner, the academic learning will follow'*. Another teacher added that preschool teachers often place a large focus on academic skills, but *'I always start at a very*

*basic level because not all children have the same knowledge starting school*'. While Snow (2006) suggests that there is an increasing emphasis by preschool teachers in the USA on pre-academic skills, it is also evident in an Irish context through many research papers including Ring et al. (2016) study and O'Kane's (2007) study. The findings in both of these studies are similar to the view that early years' educators regard pre-academic skills as being highly relevant to school readiness.

Self-help skills were also held in high esteem by the teacher participants concerning school readiness. The teachers rated children's ability to manage tasks such as toileting and dressing and undressing as highly valuable in relation to school readiness. Although parents also recognised the importance of these skills, they did not rate them as highly as the teachers did. According to current legislation in Ireland, children can be enrolled at primary school from the age of 4 years upwards and must have commenced formal education by the age of 6 years (DES, 1999). According to the Growing up in Ireland study (GUI, 2013), deferring school start seems to be more common among more advantaged families. The decision to send children to school can be closely linked to the high cost of childcare in Ireland. There was a noticeable trend among both sets of participants regarding the optimum school starting age. Both parents and teachers suggested that children needed to be at least four and a half, or five years old when starting school. One parent participant suggested that we (Ireland) should follow other European countries such as Sweden where children do not start school until they have reached six years of age. Some concern was voiced by participants regarding optimum school starting age. One teacher, when speaking about the current legislation in Ireland regarding the school starting age, added an insightful comment which led to an overwhelming consensus among the teachers:

*"I've never seen a child bored in school, you can do so many activities with children and engage them in so many ways...I've never seen a child that is too old for a class, but I've often seen a child that is too young and struggling" (T3)*

After exploring the concept of school readiness with both sets of participants, it is clear that school readiness remains a complex issue and means different things to

different people. As previously discussed in the literature review section, Dockett and Perry (2002) offer an approach to understanding the complexity of school readiness. Dockett and Perry (2002) suggest four views of school readiness, comprising; the maturationist view, the environmental view, the social constructivist view and the interactionist view. This study found that the participants conceptualised school readiness from the maturationist viewpoint. These views as proposed by Dockett and Perry (2002), relate to the idea that school readiness is the child's responsibility with the help of biological development. The maturationist view proposes that failure to demonstrate school readiness is thought to be a problem of the individual child rather than a result of the experiences provided for the child (Ring et al, 2016). The implication of this view places an undue emphasis on the child and suggests that ECCE settings and communities do not have any role to play in promoting school readiness, nor do schools have any responsibility in terms of getting ready to meet the child's needs (Centre for Community Child Health, 2008). Kagan & Rigby, (2003) say that school readiness should not reside solely in the child, but reflects the environments in which children find themselves including their families, ECCE settings, schools and communities. Ring et al. (2016) argue for greater awareness for a shift away from the maturationist approach and a move towards more of an interactionist approach. Ring et al. (2016) stress that the importance of the adult-child relationship and the role of those in the child's environment must be of paramount consideration when discussing school readiness in Ireland. The Centre for Community Child Health (2008) suggests that when designing school readiness strategies, it is important to include strategies that build and strengthen relationships between all stakeholders. O' Kane (2016 pg.49) highlights that such an approach would 'safeguard against a narrow focus on readiness'. However, some of the respondents viewed the role of preschools as important in terms of school readiness which reflects an interactionist view. The interactionist view on school readiness relates to the characteristics of the child and the environment in which the child lives (Dockett and Perry, 2002). Both the parents and primary school teachers spoke about how beneficial preschool was in terms of getting children school ready which reflects the understanding that school readiness was occasionally located along the interactionist continuum. This is evidence of a small yet significant shift in the understanding of the concept of school readiness as the responsibility of

school readiness is not entirely down to the individual child. However, the idea that school readiness is the child's responsibility remains prevalent throughout the findings.

### Transitions from preschool to primary school

Transitions are understood as a move from one educational environment to another. Margetts (2009) suggests that transitions can mean a change in location, teacher, curriculum and philosophy. The present study set out to explore parents' and primary school teacher's perspectives on what contributes to successful transitions. The participants in this study recognised the importance of organised, structured, well-supported transitions. There were some similarities and differences between both sets of participants' opinions on what contributes to a successful transition from preschool to primary school. Communication between stakeholders was rated 'very important' by both the parents and teachers with regard to successful transitions. Many parents suggested that talking to their children about school contributed to a successful transition and helped them to '*prepare for the change that was coming*'. Talking to the children about how school was going to be different in terms of class size, longer days, less help from the teacher and more academically focused, were of vital importance to the majority of the parents. Other parents attached greater importance to uniforms in preschool and the proximity of the preschool to the primary school. Margetts (2009) discusses the importance of building on the commonality between environments. This idea is echoed by one parent's comment on uniforms; 'it would be good if they had a uniform or a jumper in preschool to get them used to the idea of wearing a uniform'. Síolta under standard 13 suggests that "continuity of experiences for children requires policies, procedures and practice that promote sensitive management of transitions" (NCCA, 2015).

Fabian and Dunlop (2007) refer to the transition to school as a process, rather than one single event. One parent demonstrates a similar understanding, as they speak about the importance of doing activities at home with their children when they are younger and providing opportunities for play with other children. As Fabian and Dunlop (2007) suggest, the transition process begins before the child starts school, at home or in preschool, continuing through the settling-in period, and continuing

until the child is well settled into the school environment. Both sets of participants regarded preschool as being very important during the transition process. Parents and teachers ranked *'the opportunity to make friends and socialise'* in preschool highly. This finding coincides with past literature on the importance of high-quality ECCE provision. Boethel (2004) suggests that high-quality ECCE programs can contribute positively to children's development in the early years of their life and, therefore, can contribute to their school readiness.

Unlike findings from past research, such as O'Kane's (2007), the teachers in the current research study, did not cite parents as a source of pressure for academic achievement. This could be related to the culture of the school and or community and parents. A more in-depth profile of the school and community may offer more insight here. The Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO) conference on early years' education explored what factors contributed to pressures facing junior cycle teachers to adopt a more formal approach to learning (INTO, 2008). Parents were cited to add extra pressure in terms of providing an academic curriculum for children in the junior infants. In addition, surprisingly, the teachers in this study, did not mention class size when discussing transitions. This finding conflicts with many past research studies such as O'Kane & Hayes, 2010; Mhic Mhathúna, 2011; and Ring et al. 2016. Each teacher who took part in the focus group had a Special Needs Assistant (SNA) in the classroom with them throughout the day, which may have contributed to the lack of emphasis on class size. Only one of the parent participants mentioned class size when discussing transitions to preschool.

### The position of the child in the family

Parents spoke about older siblings and the positive impact they had on the transition process. Similarly, the teacher participants regarded siblings as being important during the transition process. This has been particularly evident as one teacher respondent added that, *'even at home time at school, the younger brother or sister would be at the gate waiting for them and saying they can't wait to come to big school'*. In a similar vein, parents mentioned that seeing their older siblings 'in a uniform' and seeing them going to *'big school'* encouraged them (the child) to go to school. This finding is in contrast with that of Janus and Duku (2007) where they



maintain that the more siblings in the family, the lower the child's scores in the Language and Communication domains. This suggests that having many siblings can have an adverse impact on children in terms of school readiness. Supporting this research is the 'Preparing for Life' evaluation which found that the number of siblings a child had, had an impact on children's language ability (UCD Geary Institute, 2012).

### Communication between stakeholders

Síolta recommends communication between all parties involved with the child (CECDE, 2006). The White Paper Ready to Learn also emphasises the importance of communication between all parties (DES, 1999). It is clear that both parents and teachers in this research study rated communication highly. Encouragement, and a positive attitude towards learning were key according to one teacher. One teacher placed emphasis on the need to have the parents on the same page as them, stressing that communication between parents and teachers is important throughout the transition process. Another discussed the importance of parents helping with homework and invoking a love for learning in their child. Parents, too, also rated communication highly, as they spoke about how useful it would be to know what way the teachers would be teaching the letters of the alphabet. One parent talked about how she spent time practising letters of the alphabet with her children but subsequently found out that the teacher was going to do it in another way. The parent added that it would have been useful to know this in advance to avoid confusion. Pianta and Walsh (1996) emphasise that the relationship between the home and school environment has a significant impact on the child's adjustment to school. Thus, a consistent professional relationship between the home and school environment can provide additional support to children and families.

While communication between teachers and parents was held with high regard, the teachers attached greater importance to communication between themselves and the preschool teachers. The primary school teachers reported some inconsistency in communication between them and the preschool teachers, with one teacher stating that 'it depends on the preschool'. Another teacher discussed information booklets she received from some preschools as a means of communication. While one teacher found it useful to have a general background on the child's pre-existing

knowledge and skills, another concluded that it is sometimes unhelpful to have a preconceived idea of the child. Over half of the teacher participants agreed with the idea that they would like to *'make their mind up'* about a child. The consensus from the group was that while it may be useful to have an idea of areas where children need extra support, *'you must also be aware that preconceptions might be misconceptions'*. The teachers also drew upon the idea that children change, grow and develop in such a fast manner, and that *'a lot can change over the three months of summer'*. Supporting this idea, Dockett (2007) discusses the difficulty in finding the right time for sharing information between preschool teachers and primary school teachers. Dockett, (2007) suggests that children grow and develop in short periods of time and that regular ongoing communication should be part of a professional relationship between preschool teachers and primary school teachers. To date, communication between preschool and primary school teachers remains somewhat fragmented and inconsistent in Ireland. The issue continues to be discussed by many researchers, as both a valuable tool to support children throughout the transition process, while also helping to improve curriculum and pedagogical continuity (Dockett and Perry, 2007).

The study revealed parents and teachers placed value on practices such as open evenings and shorter days at the beginning of the school year. One parent felt that *'open evenings were so important'* as the child could visit the classroom and meet their new teacher and classmates. These findings are similar to that of a recent study carried out in Ireland on the concept of school readiness among parents, early years' educators and primary school teachers (Ring et al., 2016). The study carried out by Ring et al. (2016) reported that parents found primary school open days particularly valuable because it provided an opportunity for them to speak to their child about school in an appropriate context.

### The ECCE scheme

One of the objectives of this study was to explore the impact of the free ECCE scheme on school readiness and transitions to school. The ECCE scheme, which was introduced in 2010, sets out to make early learning in a formal setting available to eligible children (DCYA, 2016). Since September 2016, children are eligible to avail of the scheme from the age of three years to five years of age (DCYA, 2016).

The parents discussed their opinions on the free ECCE scheme, with many mixed reviews. Some concerns were expressed about the free ECCE scheme in terms of the hours per day it offered children and issues with the location of preschools providing the service. A major concern for almost all of the parents was that the free ECCE scheme only provides three hours a day for their children at preschool. Parents were concerned with the cost associated with providing alternative care for their children before and after preschool. In addition to this, parents were concerned about the location of the preschool as they were not always located close to a crèche or after-school setting. Parents acknowledged the benefits of the free ECCE scheme and welcomed the new second free year. One parent concluded that they were happy that they didn't have to pay for the preschool program. The teacher participants spoke briefly about the second free year, with one teacher making a connection to it and the number of children she had in her class. This particular respondent felt that as the second free preschool year has recently been introduced more parents may decide to keep their children in preschool for a longer period. Include references to any research on the scheme, or other relevant literature. According to the INTO, (2008) preschools and primary schools have developed independently of each other and can vary widely in their approaches to education. Continuity was considered 'very important' throughout the transition process by the teachers. Creating continuity involves building on children's prior and current experiences, to help them feel confident and secure (Margetts, 1999). Einarsdottir (2013) and Dunlop (2013) support this idea as they suggest a need for future policy documentation to keep a focus on continuity in children's education and build on the knowledge, experience and skills of children. The most significant finding in relation to continuity was the use of Aistear in the junior and senior infant classrooms. Aistear was discussed mainly by the teacher participants. However, one parent added that '*they (the preschool teachers) are using Aistear and they are trying to implement it in the primary schools too*'. Through its themes, Well-being and Exploring and Thinking, Aistear highlights the importance of transitions (O'Kane, 2016). The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment developed the Aistear Síolta Practice Guide in 2015 (NCCA, 2015). This online resource is designed to guide ECCE practitioners and settings in Ireland, when using the Aistear and Síolta frameworks together, to improve children's experiences. The guide includes a section, Supporting Transition, which places particular emphasis on the transition to

primary school, referring to the transition as a 'major transition' (NCCA, 2015). The guide highlights the need for transferring information from the preschool teacher to primary school teacher.

The NCCA (2015) suggest that Aistear can work as a guide for primary school teachers in planning practical learning programmes for children in the junior cycle. Aistear, together with the primary school curriculum can be used to plan fun and challenging experiences for the children (NCCA, 2015). Using Aistear in the primary school setting required lots of change according to the primary school teachers. Many of the teachers spoke about workshops and training days they had attended for Aistear and Síolta. Other changes included changes to the physical environment within the classroom, a change in materials and, most significantly, a change in mind-sets. Although one teacher reported that the change in mind-set for her, was challenging at the beginning, she also added that using the Aistear curriculum was of vital importance.

### Limitations of the research study

Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989) stipulates that children should be given a voice in 'matters which affect them and that their views would be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity'. Many researchers such as Ring et al. (2016) and O'Kane (2007) have included children as participants in their research studies. The present study has not included children as participants due to various restrictions relating to time restrictions and ethical approval. Children who have gone through the transition process can inform future transitions through their opinions and experiences. However, the researcher felt that the primary decision-maker regarding the decision to send children to school are the parents of the child. The researcher decided to include parents as participants to gain a clear understanding of their perspectives in relation to school readiness and transitions and to explore the influencing factor. Including children and preschool teachers as participants would have expanded the scope of the study.

## Evaluation of methodology

A qualitative research design method was used to conduct this study. The researcher considered other methods of carrying out research but concluded that the qualitative approach was most suitable to explore the objectives of the study. The use of semi-structured interviews worked as a useful tool for gathering information for this research study. The use of thematic analysis as a method of data analysis proved beneficial, as it allowed the researcher to group recurring themes together. The researcher is satisfied that the aim and objectives of the research study were met through the use of a qualitative research method. While the utilisation of a qualitative research method offered an in-depth insight into the research aim and objectives, it was time consuming given the time frame of the research study.

## Conclusion

The primary aim of this research study was to explore concepts of school readiness and transitions from preschool to primary school as they are understood by parents and primary school teachers. School readiness remains a complex, multi-faceted concept (Ring et al., 2016). It is evident, based on the findings from the present research study, and that of past national and international studies, that there are many understandings of school readiness. This study revealed that the concept of school readiness remains to be understood mostly through a maturationist viewpoint by which school readiness is the child's responsibility. For us to fully support and contribute to school readiness, we need to understand the concept fully.

The research also examined participants' perspectives on transitions from preschool to primary school. The views of parents and primary school teachers on the ECCE scheme in relation to starting school were also explored. Children have often experienced transitions before the transition from preschool to primary school. Children may have experienced transitions from home to a crèche, from room to room in the crèche or significant transitions such as moving house can all before they reach primary school. The transition process also needs to be understood as just that, a process. The process usually begins before the child has started primary school and typically continues for a time after the physical transition has been made. The participants of this study recognised many factors as important for a successful

transition from preschool to primary school, including support from parents and older siblings, the familiarity of the school through open evenings and proximity and communication between all stakeholders. The views of parents and primary school teachers on the ECCE scheme in relation to starting school were also explored. Based on the findings, further exploration of the ECCE scheme and the impact it has on school readiness would be beneficial. As the scheme is a relatively new and with the introduction of the second free year in its infancy, the researcher believes that there is scope for further exploration regarding the ECCE scheme and its impact on school readiness. As the study indicates, the free ECCE scheme in Ireland was viewed as having strengths and weaknesses. The overall consensus is that while have a positive impact on school readiness and transitions it did not elevate the financial burden associated with childcare costs for families in Ireland.

# Recommendations

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The following section includes recommendations based on the research findings. The recommendations are made with considerations for policy, training and future research.

## The concept of school readiness

1. The concept of school readiness should be explored with an interactionist view at a national level. The interactionist view should be used to inform future training and discussion for educators.
2. The school starting age should be revised by the Department of Education and Skills.

## Transitions from preschool to primary school

1. A national framework or guideline should be developed to offer guidance for parents and educators on the transition process.
2. An open evening/day should be a mandatory requirement for primary schools to hold for the children who are starting school.
3. A national communication mechanism should be devised and implemented for preschool and primary school teachers with professionalism being central.

## The ECCE scheme

1. A longitudinal study on children who uptake two free preschool years through the ECCE scheme would offer a broad range of insights.

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# Appendices

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## Appendix A



### ***Information letter for Teachers***

Dear teacher,

My name is Rachel Collins. I am currently studying a Masters in Child and Youth Studies in Athlone Institute of Technology. As part of my Thesis I am carrying out research in an area of child and youth care. I have decided to explore the area of school readiness and transitions from preschool to primary school. The purpose of my study is to examine the topic of school readiness and the factors that contribute to successful transitions. If you decide to take part in this research, I would like to interview you. The interview will last for no longer than 45 minutes and will take place at a location convenient for you. I will not ask you about anything unrelated to the topic. With your consent I would like to audiotape the conversation, however I am willing to take notes if you are not comfortable with being recorded. Your participation in the interview is completely voluntary and you are free to stop or terminate the interview at any time. In my report, I will give a summary of what has been said by all the participants in this study. Your name and the name and the name of your workplace will not be put into the report. I may use some direct quotes from you but your name will not be provided if you wish to take part. Once the study is complete you may read the report if you wish. If this sounds like something you would be interested in taking part in, please read and sign the attached consent form. If you would like additional information or have any questions, please feel free to contact me on (087-7514175) or [rachelmkcollins@gmail.com](mailto:rachelmkcollins@gmail.com).

Thank you in advance for your consideration,

Yours sincerely,

Rachel Collins.

## **Appendix B**



### ***Information Letter for Parents***

Dear Parents,

My name is Rachel Collins. I am currently studying a Masters in Child and Youth Studies in Athlone Institute of Technology. As part of my Thesis I am carrying out research in an area of child and youth care. I have decided to explore the area of school readiness and transitions from preschool to primary school. The purpose of my study is to examine the topic of school readiness and the factors that contribute to successful transitions. If you decide to take part in this research, I would like to interview you. The interview will last for no longer than 45 minutes and will take place at a location convenient for you. I will not ask you about anything unrelated to the topic. With your consent I would like to audiotape the conversation, however I am willing to take notes if you are not comfortable with being recorded. Your participation in the interview is completely voluntary and you are free to stop or terminate the interview at any time. In my report, I will give a summary of what has been said by all the participants in this study. Your name and the name and the names of your children will not be put into the report. I may use some direct quotes from you but your name will not be provided if you wish to take part. Once the study is complete you may read the report if you wish. If this sounds like something you would be interested in taking part in, please read and sign the attached consent form. If you would like additional information or have any questions, please feel free to contact me on (087-7514175) or [rachelmcollins@gmail.com](mailto:rachelmcollins@gmail.com).

Thank you in advance for your consideration,

Yours sincerely,

Rachel Collins.

## Appendix C



### **Consent Form for Participants**

I have read the information letter regarding the research project about school readiness and transitions from preschool to primary school. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and request any additional details I wanted about the research project. I acknowledge that all of the information gathered on this project will be used for research purposes only and will be confidential. I am aware that I have the opportunity to withdraw from the research at any time.

I wish to participate in the research project (circle appropriate):      Yes                  No

Full Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

I agree to have the interview audio recorded (circle appropriate):      Yes                  No

Full Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix D**

### **Semi-structured interview guide**

Before beginning, remind the participants:

- *They can take a break or stop the interview completely at any stage*
- *They do not have to answer all questions*
- *All information is confidential and the names will be changed when transcribing data*
- *The tape recorder will be destroyed once the data has been transcribed*

Section A: General information

1. General information about the child/children - name, age?
2. General background on the family - how many in the family? older or younger siblings? Have the family been living in the area for long?

Section B: The child's preschool experience

1. Did your child/children go to preschool? Can you remember how that experience was for your child/children? How was it for you?
2. Was the free Early Childhood Care and Education scheme (ECCE) available to you at the time?
3. How long did your child attend preschool for?

### Section C: School Readiness

1. What things do you think your child learnt in preschool that would support your child's school readiness?
2. What does the term school readiness mean to you?
3. What were the influencing factors for you in deciding that \_\_\_\_\_ was ready for school? Probes (Use as required) - Age, skills, intellectual abilities.
4. What do you think primary school teachers are looking for when a child is starting school?

### Section D: The transition from preschool to primary school

1. Did you talk to you \_\_\_\_\_ about starting primary school?
2. Was there an information evening for parents and children at the proposed primary school?
3. Any particular strengths that \_\_\_\_\_ had that you think stood to him/her when making the transition?
4. Did \_\_\_\_\_ start school with a friend?
5. Was \_\_\_\_\_ looking forward to starting school?
6. Did you have any concerns about \_\_\_\_\_ starting school?

## Section E: Conclusion

1. In hindsight, were you happy that you sent \_\_\_\_\_ to school when you did?
2. Is there anything else you would like to add in relation to the topic of school readiness, transitions from preschool to primary school or the free ECCE scheme?

## Appendix E

### **Focus group discussion guide**

- *Consent Process - Participants have previously signed the consent form (See Appendix C). Signed consent forms will not be included for confidentiality reasons.*
- *Introduce myself*
- *Allow participants to introduce themselves*

### *Before beginning -*

- *Thank you for your time and offering to participate in my research study. I am really interested in hearing your opinions and experiences on the topic of school readiness and transitions from preschool to primary school.*
- *As outlined in the information sheet for participants (Appendix A) the purpose of this study is to examine the school readiness and the factors that contribute to successful transitions from preschool to primary school.*
- *As you all have consented to the voice recording of this focus group I would like to remind you that any names or places mentioned will be changed and if you can avoid using names of children or places that would be great. The voice recording will be destroyed once transcribed.*
- *You may wish to pause or terminate the focus group at any point. You do not have to answer all questions.*
- *I will learn a great deal from you through this focus group and I am not trying to achieve consensus. I appreciate your honest opinions.*

## **Discussion questions**

### Section A: General information

1. How long have you been working as a junior infant/senior infant teacher?
2. Tell me a little bit about the dynamics of your class? Probes (use as required): more boys than girls, Junior and Senior infants mixed, number of pupils, any other adults working in the room?

### Section B: School readiness

1. What factors do you consider to be most important in determining school readiness? Probes (use as required): Knowledge of Literacy Numeracy, Self-Care, Independence.
2. Can you list your top three most important in your opinion?
3. Do you think the age of the child is important in terms of school readiness?

### Section C: Transitions to Primary School

1. In your experience, what factors influence the transition from preschool to primary school? This can be discussed for example in terms of the child, the preschool, the primary school, parents.



2. Are there any children in your opinion who would have little or no difficulty with the transition from preschool to primary school?
3. Probes (use as required): children with good social skills, children with older siblings, children with good communication skills.
4. Are there any policies in the school that deal specifically with transitions to school or starting school?
5. Do you hold information evenings for prospective parents and children?  
(Welcome evening)

#### **Section D: The use of Aistear and Síolta**

1. Can you tell me a little bit about how you incorporate Aistear and Síolta into your classroom?
2. What impact, if any, does Aistear and Síolta have on school readiness transition from preschool to primary school? Probe (as required): Part of the curriculum will be familiar to the children as they have experienced it in preschool.

### **Section E: The Preschool Setting**

1. Are there any official communication methods that you use to communicate with the preschool teachers? For example, the 'This is me booklet'?
2. How important is communication between the preschool teacher and the primary school teacher?
3. In your opinion, have you seen any changes in the dynamics of the junior infant classes since the introduction of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) scheme?

### **Section F: Conclusion**

1. Are there any changes you would like to see that you feel would influence the successful transition from preschool to primary school? For example, raising the entry level of children for junior infants?
2. Are there any other points you would like to add that you feel are important?