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Title of paper: Bridging Children's Early Education Transitions through Teacher Collaboration.

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Abstract

A longitudinal study of continuity and progression in children's early education reported the significance of the transition from preschool to elementary education for later school success. It was found that the nature of this particular transition is influential for children, parents and educators and therefore for the educational system. An ecological framework was used in order to embrace the complex nature of educational transitions.

Educators in 8 preschool and 4 primary school settings, and their managers, were interviewed to explore beliefs about early education. The same educators were observed as the 28 focus children in a cohort of 150 children were tracked during their final year before school and their first year of school, and their written documentation including planning and reports were scrutinised. It was found that despite the similar language used by early educators in early years preschool and primary settings to describe their intentions and motivations for children, there can be major discontinuities between settings, relationships, pedagogy and curriculum and that consequently there are increased challenges for children and for their parents and educators. It is proposed that educators need to collaborate more and to move on from a shared use of terminology to shared meanings, in order to develop a shared conceptual framework which attends to cognitive, social and emotional aspects of children's learning in transition.

Certain measurable elements of school progress were noted as part of the local authority's value-added record keeping and it has been possible to make links between educational attainment and other variables. The cohort of children is now entering the last year of primary school education and a number of focus children will now be involved in a study of their transition to secondary education.

Key words: Educational transitions, conceptual frameworks, teacher views, teacher collaboration.

Introduction

This paper discusses the transition from preschool to school in the light of the views early years teachers hold about the children they work with and the systems within which they work, and reflects on ways in which improved collaboration between teachers might help young children to bridge this transition. The paper is one of a series of three which look at the transition to school from the perspective of children (Dunlop, 2003a), parents (Dunlop, 2003b) and teachers, and considers the agency of each set of actors in the process. Teachers from eight preschools and four primary schools in one local authority in Scotland took part in a study of continuity and progression in early educational transitions.

Summary

This longitudinal study of continuity and progression in children's early education reported the significance of the transition from preschool to elementary (primary) education for later school success. It was found that the nature of this particular transition is influential for children, parents and educators and therefore for the educational system. An ecological framework was used in order to embrace the complex nature of educational transitions. Fifteen teachers in eight preschool and four primary school settings, their managers, and 15 nursery assistants supporting the preschool teachers, were interviewed to explore beliefs about early education and the transition to school. A selection of the structured interview topics and responses are considered in terms of their possible effect on the transition to school.

The same educators were observed as the 28 focus children in a cohort of 150 children were tracked during their final year before school and their first year of school, and their written documentation including planning and reports were scrutinised. It was found that despite the similar language used by early educators in early years preschool and primary settings to describe their intentions and motivations for children, there can be major discrepancies in what practitioners in different sectors mean by the same words. It is proposed that educators need to collaborate more and to move on from a shared use of terminology to shared meanings, in order to develop a shared conceptual framework which attends to cognitive, social and emotional aspects of children's learning in transition.

Background

All three to five year old children in Scotland are entitled to a funded preschool place for 12.5 hours a week, usually over five mornings or afternoons. Children start primary education at the start of the school year nearest to their fifth birthday: some children are therefore 4.5 years old, and others are 5.5 years old on the day they all start school. Each sector of education has its own curriculum guidelines: 'The Curriculum Framework for Children 3-5' (Scottish Consultative Council on the Curriculum, 1999) applies to preschool education, whereas the '5-14 Curriculum and Assessment Guidelines' (Scottish Office Education Department, 1990 onwards) apply to primary education. Both are

national guidelines used throughout Scotland. Teachers hold an honours degree in education or a first degree with a post-graduate certificate in education. All teachers train to work with children aged three through to twelve years of age. In preschool provision teachers are supported in their work by nursery assistants who commonly have a two year post-school training.

The importance of early educational transitions

Transitions occur in many different aspects of people's lives: transition to parenthood (Cowan & Cowan, 1995), transitions from family to work (Campbell-Clark, 2000), family transition occasioned by separation and divorce (Fthenakis, 1998). Each such transition may bring about changes in relationships, roles and identity. For young children the first major transitions are often heralded as entry to early education settings looms. For many children the entry to primary schooling brings a more significant change than, for example, entry to preschool, as they find structures and expectations more suddenly different from their previous experience. Researchers in the field suggest that success in later transitions maybe influenced by the extent to which children's early transition experience is positive for them (Broström, 2000. Fabian & Dunlop, 2002. Fthenakis, 1998), however in terms of educational transitions evidence of such effects over time are to date sparse.

The role of teachers in the transition to school

Children's experience of transitions to school can be viewed from a range of perspectives (Fabian & Dunlop, 2002): most commonly those of parents and teachers are reported. Increasingly studies address the views of children and report that experience at first hand (Dockett & Perry, 1999. Griebel, & Niesel, 2000). Gaps in the perspectives of the different protagonists, a recognition of the very particular culture of schools and of boundary effects between home and school combined with the changing practice & the role of practitioners demands a wider understanding of learning cultures by teachers is needed (Brooker, 2002).

Perry, Dockett & Tracey's (1998) investigation of parents, children's and teachers' views of transition to school included a content analysis that revealed 5 major categories of response: knowledge, adjustment, skill, disposition and rules. Comments were analysed in terms of frequency with teachers and parents focusing more on the category of 'adjustment' than any other, whilst children focussed on 'rules'. For the adults 'disposition', 'knowledge' and 'skill' followed 'adjustment' in that order of importance..

Teachers in a number of studies commented that children's capacity to concentrate, sit for periods of time and use initiative were important. They report that for teachers, being ready for school involves the ability to be part of a large group competing for the attention of the one adult. Teachers report that those who are ready for school are children who do not demand constant attention not take the teacher away from the group focus of their classroom.

It can be seen that transitions are complex and diverse. Margetts, (2000) notes that transition programmes should be based on a philosophy that children's adjustment to school is easier when children are familiar with the situation, parents are informed about the new school and teachers have information out children's development and previous experiences. Certain continuities should be aimed for: of peers, of expectations between settings, including teacher and child behaviours, of programming for children's learning, and gradual preparation with good communication. By contrast, Corsaro and Molinari (2000) consider that many school priming events are embedded in the preschool experience.

Teachers views of children's experience are more frequently addressed than are their accounts of their own experiences of children's educational transitions or their views of the value of various types of what Fabian (2002) calls transition activities. In a survey which asked teachers to reflect on and judge a number of transition activities (Boström, 2000), educators were asked to rate a range of transition activities in order to judge which they most valued, and to express any possible barriers. Whilst many of the responses were positive, a contradiction between 'meeting to discuss educational ideas', and 'co-ordinating education practice' emerges. Co-ordinating educational practice may be seen as 'too binding' (p.14). Here lies a real barrier to successful school transition, as educators whilst enjoying the opportunity to meet and talk, may use the same language to describe rather different concepts, and may not share either joint meanings, or be able to co-ordinate their practice.

It is therefore important to set such enquiries into educators' views into an embedded approach which allows them to be considered in relation to existing practice, as well as a range of influences on that practice: the nature of this particular transition is influential for children, parents and educators and therefore for the educational system.

The study

The present study set out to investigate whether improved curricular and pastoral continuity would result in giving children a successful start in Primary Education, which builds on previous learning to give the best possible chance of progression. The enquiry led to a number of research aims:

1. to explore, describe, and contrast current practice in curricular and pastoral continuity from pre-school into primary education
2. to establish how far current practice provides primary school entrants with continuity of educational and pastoral experience from pre-school into the school curriculum
3. to establish how far current practice provides primary school entrants with progression in educational and pastoral experience from pre-school into the school curriculum

4. to explore whether the improvement of continuity practice enhances children's educational opportunities and achievements
5. to take account of the part that parents play in continuity.

An embedded framework

None of the factors in educational transitions considered so far operates independently from the others: consequently the different elements and participants in transitions need to be studied in context, that is in pre-school settings, at home and in primary school settings. Further, educational settings are also context bound: affected by outside factors which are not usually in the control of those who occupy each setting (Bourdieu in Webb, Schirato, & Danaher.2002), but which nevertheless they are often in a position to interpret. For example, local and national education policies, family housing, the value base of a particular community might each have an influence on the attitudes, principles or sense of well being of the educators or the attitudes, involvement and well-being of their pupils. An ecological framework based on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1989) was developed in order to embrace such complexities. The detail of this approach is described elsewhere (Dunlop, 2003c), and illustrated in figure 1 which follows.

Bronfenbrenner (1989) makes eight propositions. They include a proposition that "wherever possible studies in context should include a contrast between at least two macrosystems" (p.231): in the case of the present analysis, this means considering the wider system which influences the life and perceptions of the preschool teacher, and separately to consider those which influence the life and perceptions of the school teacher. The preschool and the primary represent two very different traditions (Dahlberg & Lenz Taguchi, 1994), by using an ecological framework it is possible to view each as part of its own macrosystem. However such macrosystems overlap, and there are many common influences on these two sectors of our education system: thus it is also possible to reflect on the probable overlaps between preschool and school viewed as two microsystems, as envisaged in figure 1, so meeting proposition two, that the subcultures we each inhabit are part of a larger , a macro, system.

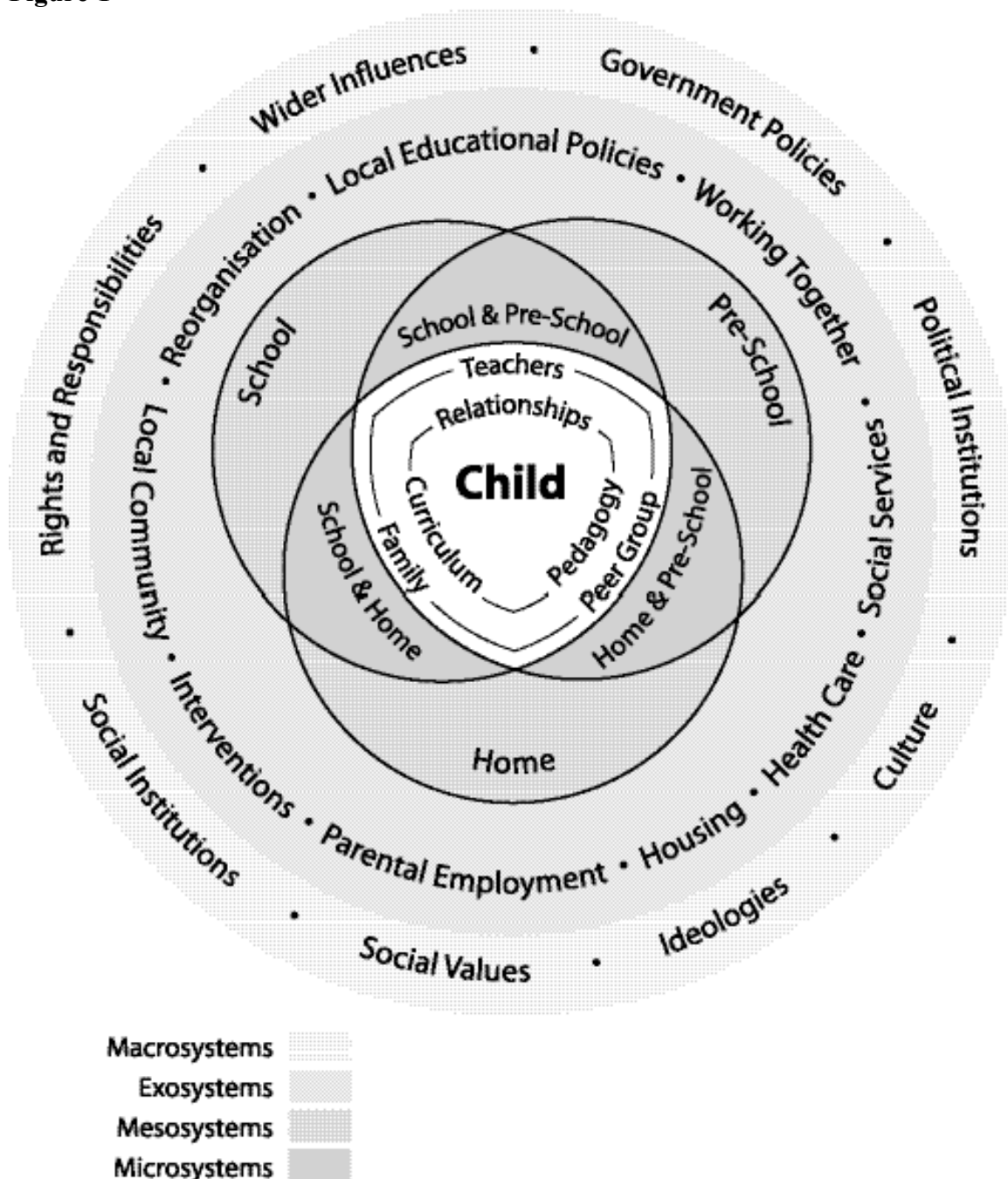
A further proposition asserts that the resources, life styles, social exchange patterns, belief systems and power to act are embedded into each of these systems. By comparing the experience preschool and primary practitioners hold of transition, we can hope to come to a better understanding of whether a vision of a mutual view and shared meanings about transition can be held by teachers. Accordingly, a research design which takes "the beliefs systems and expectations existing in each setting about the other" (p.238) will be needed.

Methods

A total of 15 teachers, 15 nursery assistants and 6 heads of schools and preschools were interviewed using a semi-structured interview schedule containing 40 items (table 1).An

interpretive methodology (QSR N5 Nudi*st, 1991-2000) was used iteratively to identify themes and analyse concepts. Additionally evidence from video observations and field notes of classroom practice over 54 preschool visits and 53 primary school visits provided a background to consider what the apparently common language actually meant to practitioners in terms of day-to-day action, and thus to explore any gap or discrepancy in such descriptions. Teacher record keeping was also shared. The discussion which follows rests on these forms of evidence: evidence which was subsequently coded and entered into SPSS to provide statistical validation of empirical evidence (Dunlop, 2003d).

Figure 1



Preschool educators and primary educators comments were presented by percentage & then the mean rating of each sector group was compared using independent t-tests. Statistically significant differences were found to be a matter of degree not direction.

Semi-structured staff interviews

Interviews were held with preschool practitioners before the transfer to school. Primary teachers and their head teachers were interviewed before and after transition. Almost identical categories were used for all interviews: slight variations to questions or discussion topics were used where relevant with primary staff (Table 1).

Table 1: Categories for discussion in semi-structured staff interviews.
(differences in primary interviews shown in brackets)

Preschool/ Staff Interviews	Preschool/Primary Staff Interviews
1. School	1. How would you describe your intentions during/at end Pre School years? <i>(How would you describe your intentions during start up days in P.1?)</i>
2. Teacher	2. What skills do you think the children have when they leave? <i>(What skills do you think the children have when they start?)</i>
3. Class	3. What routines do they need to learn for Primary School? <i>(What routines do they need to learn at entry to primary school?)</i>
4. Setting	4. Do you think Primary School staff are able to take account of differentiated experience children have on arrival in school? <i>(If nursery experience was differentiated would this affect arrival in school?)</i>
5. Local Area	5. What information do you pass on to school? <i>(What information was passed on from the nursery?)</i>
6. Links with Primary. <i>(Links with pre-five/primary)</i>	6. What other information would you like to have/Give?
7. Age Band.	7. Would you like to visit Primary School? <i>(Would you like to visit nursery?)</i>
8. Qualifications	8. What is the significance of pre-school learning and experience?
9. Aims/Philosophy.	9. Liaison.
10. Responsibilities.	10. Contact with Parents.
11. Practice.	11. Knowledge of Individuals.
12. Describe approach.	12. Any individual child identified: Does this mean you vary your approach?
13. Teaching style.	
14. Classroom organisation	
15. Effects of draft curriculum. <i>(effects of / 5-14)</i>	
16. Methodology. <i>(within 5-14)</i>	
17. Structured play /Variety of activities/choice.	
18. Staff assessment and record keeping.	
19. Planning.	
20. Pastoral Continuity.	
21. Curricular Continuity.	
22. Who is important in transition?	
23. Who is important in continuity?	
24. Knowledge of 5-14. <i>(Knowledge of pre-school curriculum)</i>	
25. Knowledge of primary practice <i>(Knowledge of pre school practice)</i>	
26. Nursery Nurse help(in Primary School): Use/Expectations.	
27. Preparation for using n/n support	
28. Other possibilities? Could it be different?	

Those nursery assistants who supported children in their new classrooms, discussed the experience in open narratives with the researcher following the transition. Their insightful responses reflected the ways in which they had supported children, or had found it difficult to do so in their preferred ways, because of their own lack of status in the primary school settings. It is interesting to note that in the Main Study, the schools which had also been part of the pilot and were retained in the main study, were given the opportunity for an extended period of nursery assistant support in the start up to primary, as a result of which new styles of support were developed.

Teacher style and dispositions

It has been said that in order to teach effectively one must have an understanding of how people learn: not the kind of generalised mythologised understanding that Watt & Flett (1984) identified as being held by teachers of the incoming 'infant' children, in their study of the role of parents in transition, but, it may be argued, a much stronger and closer look at what school entrants are actually like and what this means for teachers in carrying out their role.

If learning, as is claimed in 'Teaching for Effective Learning' (SCCC, 1996), is "the most important outcome of what happens in schools" (p.iii), then it is useful to turn to children's learning in pre-school, home and the early years of Primary school education, in order to try to better understand what makes a difference for them. Significant elements of teaching identified by McCail (1999) in her study of continuity in early education are: content and planning; responsive teaching; enabling dialogue; using stories as catalysts; modelling; awareness of Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (1986 p187 "Experience has shown that the child with the larger zone of proximal development will do much better in school"); the teaching of techniques; the importance of observation, liaison and assessment . These elements profile the warm, sensitive, and well informed teacher who effectively supports stimulates and expands children's learning.

The underlying assumption here is that if teachers are more focused on children as learners, they will be more effective in promoting learning. The prime instrument advocated for teachers' to have a better knowledge of children's learning is of course assessment (Dunlop, 1998a): but this raises exactly the same questions again: unless we really get underneath the strategies and tools for packaging children, their learning and their curriculum, we will not be able to inform our approaches by the rich material that children offer us daily if we let them. Whilst accepting the practical need for focus in assessment, the 'habit' of observation can support a wider concept of assessment which is needed in order to take full account of the range and diversity present in any group of young children.

Differences between assessments undertaken in late preschool and early primary stimulate interesting discussion. Teachers at both this early transition and subsequently in the transition to secondary education, are noted to be sceptical about the validity of nursery, and primary teachers' (respectively) assessments of children's attainment (HMI, 1999). This can be seen in elements drawn from Mairi's preschool and primary profiles: the preschool staff describe her as having "a positive attitude to learning.", and in communication and language, as "Listens to and follows complex instructions. Recounts events or experiences. Asks questions to find out things."

Aspect	Preschool Comment
Attitude to learning	Mairi has a positive attitude to learning.
Emotional, personal, social	Has a good self image and inner confidence. Beginning to develop particular friendships. Cares for and considers others.
Communication and Language.	Listens to and follows complex instructions. Recounts events or experiences. Asks questions to find out things. Recognises own name and others. Beginning to make letter shapes.
	Primary One Comment
Attitude to learning (6 mth at school)	Whether in a group or class situation, Mairi has to be reminded to be attentive. She is usually more interested in what others are doing. Effort fluctuates
Personal and Social Development.	Mairi is a very cheerful girl. She is aware of the needs of others and is always willing to help.
Language. (end of year report)	Talking. Mairi is always ready to take part in all discussions and express her opinion. She talks with confidence. Reading. Mairi's reading has progressed well. She must continue to work hard at her sight vocabulary. Writing. Mairi enjoys writing. Her stories are developing well. She is unsure of some letter formation. Listening. Mairi is very easily distracted. She finds it very difficult to sit still and listen to stories. She often misses instructions.

Table 2: Mairi

This contrasts markedly with her new primary teacher's view of her attitude to learning: "Whether in a group or class situation, Mairi has to be reminded to be attentive. She is usually more interested in what others are doing. Effort fluctuates", or in listening, "Mairi is very easily distracted. She finds it very difficult to sit still and listen to stories. She often misses instructions.". Is Mairi so very different in preschool and primary, is the fact that she was one of the youngest entrants significant in terms of the suitability of the primary one programme, or perhaps talk is valued more in one setting, and quiet attentiveness in the other? Turning to a comparison of some of the interview responses made by Miss Thornton, Mairi's primary teacher, and Charlotte, head of her preschool, there is clearly a difference in expectation of the children, but observations of classroom

practice reinforce the view that the expectations of a four and a half year old in preschool are very different than the expectations placed on her in her early months in primary school. (Table 3)

Discussion Point	Charlotte	Miss Thornton
Aims and philosophy of teachers	A philosophy of enabling staff, children, parents, liaison, primary, curriculum: always working towards others developing refection, co-operation, ability to develop and to become autonomous. Deep seated belief in the importance of the child.	No half measures - education is the key to everything. Would like our school to raise expectation amongst our children and the staff too, to be everything they could be - reaching full potential. A place where they want to be. "I love the job. I really love it. I'm doing everything I can to make this place of learning". They need to be happy too.
Views on practice, approach and teaching style	Recall time before they go home. Girls put into planning - from what children tell you e.g. new baby/pet/visit - build into planning. What did you do today? Did they do what they said they'd do - Why? Try to give as much freedom of choice. Some areas never put things out/children ask. Other areas got to be set up. Apprenticeship: staff working alongside the children at all times.	Started out differentiating based on what came from the nursery - Now children have settled and further along than this time last year. Main focus on language and on settling them into school routine and behaviour. In particular to raise their hands, and to speak only when requested.
Organising childrens' time	All 3-5 year olds together: key worker system for beginning and end of session. Children instrumental in forming groups according to what they choose to do.	A lot of class lessons to establish order and to establish children's understanding of more than 1 task at a time. Some skills wrongly developed. Not like nursery: sitting, not moving about, having to listen more. Listening, quiet attention, not speaking out of turn.
Staff Planning, Assessment and record keeping	Were using a tick list- what did they tell us? Observation informs assessment better. Started using the stickies. In a book everyday. At end of week - put it on a bit of paper/write it up. The keyworker will write it up. Is it the true picture? "Our main weakness here is recording it. Where's the evidence? photos help". Know why - "Not just because we suddenly dreamt it up".	When I got the reports, I went through them, grouped according to what was there. Odd individual reports were totally wrong. I keep ongoing, detailed and thorough notes of progress based on schemes more than independent review but personal notes are important on how they are learning

Table 3. A comparison of some of Mairi's preschool and primary teachers' responses.

Curriculum and Learning

Curriculum is designed to have an impact on children's learning. Bruner (1960) has asked the question "Who is curriculum for? The child or the adult?". In exploring concepts of curriculum it is useful to think in terms of curriculum as a framework and to reflect that it may be a framework that the youngest children in our education system are unaware of. The extent to which the adults take account of previous learning is important and may affect whether children's classroom experience is one of passing through the curriculum as documented and planned for, or whether it is approached in terms of what the child can bring to the curriculum, that is in terms of the child's progression in learning. Watt and Flett (1984) showed that at entry to primary school, in curricular terms teachers "build on the learning of the previous stage. It is however, an internal continuity, based on professional assumptions, determined by professionals in relation to the traditional norms of the school or preschool group". In Mairi's case, Miss Thornton's ongoing assessments are less to do with as an individual and more focused on her passage through the reading and number "schemes".

Curriculum Documentation: 5-14 Curriculum

The Scottish 'Curriculum and Assessment National Guidelines 5-14' determined the following balance of allocation of time: 15% on Mathematics, 15% on Language, 25% on Environmental Studies, 10% on Religious and Moral Education, 15% on the Expressive Arts, with 20% leftover being labelled "flexibility time." Research shows that the latter time is often taken up by the internal horizontal transitions of the school day (McPake, Harlen, Powney & Davidson, 1999). This required distribution of time raised at least two important issues regarding the organisation of learning for our youngest children. The first relates to the imposition of a subject centred model of learning, the second to the resulting fragmentation of learning. Revised guidelines on the structure and balance of the curriculum, issued in 2001, have emphasised the wisdom of looking at balance over more extended periods than days, weeks or even one year of school education (Learning & Teaching Scotland, 2001). It is only teachers with the experience and confidence in practice of Katie's teacher, Mrs Devine (Table 3) who feel able to justify a different interpretation of the guidelines.

Links between the Pre-school Curriculum and 5-14 Curriculum

It has been established that the transition from primary school to secondary school is important. The whole development of the Curriculum and Assessment Guidelines 5-14 was predicated on 5 principles including those of continuity and progression. Harlen (1996, p 85-86) reported that "The 5-14 programme had been a stimulus to liaison between primary and secondary school staff and to some extent between nursery and primary staff." whilst progression "was being facilitated by the use of the guidelines by individual teachers in their forward planning, and by more whole school or departmental planning."

Table 4 Katie's teachers' views.

Discussion Point	Mrs Drummond	Mrs Devine
Aims and philosophy of teachers	First priority - influence of staff who work with children. Pleasant, welcoming bright environment. Emotional side comes first before you can do any teaching. Broad, well balanced and well thought through - trying to use what motivates children). Make it exciting. Planning, evaluating, leading the team, extending children's learning.	Helping each child to do their best in as stimulating as possible environment to the best of my ability. Being happy, reassured, not going to be asked to do anything outwith capabilities and understanding at the start.
Views on practice, approach and teaching style	Evaluating - what children get out of what's going on. Definitely base don child's interests. Child centred - sounds a bit jargony , but really do start with them. Do of course make decisions about areas. Do act on interests in child, but if there seems to be an opportunity - e.g. now woodwork Interactive. Building on children's interests and needs. Not frightened to teach in response to direction children observed to need or be interested in. Responsive.	Quite structured. Organisation is a key. Have to have a sense of humour. Have to know when to let children speak and knowing when you've got to stop what's in the plan and let instinct take over. Recognising when they've had enough.. Like any stage need time to get to know children and them to know you. Bound to be a settling in time.
Effects of curriculum innovation	Used to a framework: builds on this	Kind of pressure on teachers makes it harder to respond to your instinct. More like a secondary teacher. Clock watching. Got to be seen to be doing it. . Could use time worrying how to complete record keeping to think about "How can I improve the maths groups/make reading more fun! Compartmentalised learning!
Play as a medium for learning	Play as medium of learning. Observation and awareness of children's interests and strengths is important.	Feel strongly about the room: making it attractive for wee ones. Makes me feel quite critical. Construction, jigsaws. water and sand, house area but changing activities - making them more structured to progress. Baking. Art Computer Storytelling group.

Here Katie's two teachers are much more in tune about the kinds of learning opportunities offered, without advocating that preschool and primary have to be the

same. In this sense continuity is a concept that embraces progression in learning, and implies a building on shared information. These teachers planned together, shared ideas and resources and spent time building trust and confidence in each other. Their classrooms looked very similar at the point of transfer, and children suffered no loss of independence in the transition.

Aspect	Preschool Comment
Emotional, personal, social	Has a good self image and inner confidence. Independent in self help skills. Plays co-operatively and shares resources. Takes the lead with other children. Willing to share experiences with others. Negotiates with others. Self reliant. Takes turns.
Communication and Language.	Follows simple and complex instructions. Listens to the sounds of words in stories, songs, music and rhymes. Recounts events or experiences. Makes up a story and tells it with details to small group and listens to other stories. Uses books to find interesting information. Matches labels from shopping package. Can read some signs and logos. Can write first name.
Knowledge and Understanding of the World.	Asks questions, experiments, designs, makes and solves problems. Enjoys technology. Identifies and uses numbers up to 10 during play. Can write numbers 1-10. Uses maths language appropriately. Investigates and seeks solutions.
	Primary One Comment
6 months into school	Katie is a happy little girl who has settled in well to school. She is confident in everything she does and works steadily through any task which she is given. Her reading is coming along nicely and she knows all her vocabulary. She is in the top reading and number group. Her writing skills are good so far. Each letter is correctly formed and well spaced and sized. She is obviously not very fond of colouring in but is beginning to make more effort with it. She enjoys listening to stories and has good concentration. She remembers details well and can put events into the correct sequence. Her phonics skills are very good and she enjoys all kinds of phonological activities. She is confident with her number work and is in the top maths group.
Language. (end of year report)	Katie is an interested and willing pupil who has made a good start with her reading. Her letters are well formed and all her work is neatly presented. She listens attentively to instructions and completes her work accurately. She is a keen participant in all class discussions.
Mathematics. (end of year report)	Katie is very confident with her maths work and tackles everything with enthusiasm. Working at level A.

Table 5: Katie's preschool and early primary profiles.

Both primary teachers reported feeling a lack of confidence over their knowledge of preschool and preschool curriculum, both would have liked more personal contact with the children before school start-up. Miss Thornton shared that she would feel quite nervous about going into preschool, Mrs Devine on the other hand had swapped with Mrs Drummond, but would have liked more opportunity to work alongside her, and to

shadow preschool practice. Every teacher in their school had visited the preschool, and the head teacher was a frequent visitor, and endorsed Harlen's (1996) view that:

“An important purpose of liaison is to ensure a smooth and confident entry into primary school for children. Meetings with parents and visits to primary school help to familiarise children with their new school and its teachers and allow discussion between staff. Visits by primary school teachers to pre-school settings allow them to meet and observe children in their familiar surroundings and to discuss their observations with staff.”

Key issues

It was found that despite the similar language used by early educators in early years preschool and primary settings to describe their intentions and motivations for children, there was a need to get behind the language to probe meanings. Teachers who were given time to build relationships with colleagues in the “other” sector, brought benefits to the children in transition and felt empowered in that process themselves. Their own sense of agency is important: too often primary teachers are classroom bound and have little opportunity to know first hand what the incoming children have experienced, or the context to which the written information refers. It is little wonder then that despite wishing in principle to know more about the knowledge that children bring to school (Munn & Schaffer, 1996), such information is not always valued.

This study found there can be major discontinuities between settings, relationships, pedagogy and curriculum and that consequently there are increased challenges for children and for their parents and educators. A developed relationship between teachers at the different stages is pivotal for a good start in school (Broström, 2000). Part of valuing collaboration at transitions may mean finding ways for the various stakeholders' perspectives to be taken into account (Fabian, 1998). It may also mean the development of positive planning for transitions at all levels of the system: two of the teachers mentioned here had support from their head teacher, who in turn was encouraged by her involvement at staff development on transitions held in the local authority.

Such a positive picture becomes possible when instead of seeing child development as an inevitable linear trajectory, we see it as complex interactive process which reflects the imbalanced, irregular, transforming process which merges development with learning, individual qualities, with cultural influences, through an intricate weaving of internal and external factors which coalesce in the overcoming of difficulties and adaptation. Such a view of childhood development then demands that children's learning and development is not viewed in some pre-determined way, but rather that it is viewed as a time of possibility, and that the challenges which the child encounters through transition to school, will provide a new forum for learning, one in which the culture of the pre-school and school is as much part of the process as is the nature of each participating child and

adult. A shared conceptual framework of the child as a learner who is about to enter school is badly needed in early education (Broadhead, 1995): shared between educators at pre-school and primary stages and taking account of both.

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