

# An examination of concepts of school readiness among parents and educators in Ireland





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This study was commissioned under the Irish Research Council's Research Development Initiative, in conjunction with the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and the Department of Education and Skills from the Centre for Early Childhood Research at Mary Immaculate College, Limerick, and the Centre for Social and Educational Research, Dublin Institute of Technology.



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# Acronyms and Glossary

**CECDE:** Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education

**DCYA:** Department of Children and Youth Affairs

**DES:** Department of Education and Skills. The Department of Education was renamed the Department of Education and Science in 1997 and again renamed the Department of Education and Skills (DES) in May 2010.

**ECCE:** early childhood care and education

**FPSY:** free pre-school year

**IEA:** International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement

**IILT:** Integrate Ireland Language and Training

**ISCED:** International Standard Classification of Education

**ISCED Level 0 programmes** refer to early childhood education, and target children below the age of entry to primary education. There are two categories of ISCED Level 0 programmes, comprising early childhood educational development and pre-primary education. Early childhood educational development programmes include educational content appropriate for children in the age range of 0-3 years. Pre-primary programmes within ISCED Level 0 are designed for children from age three years to the start of primary education. These programmes are characterised by interaction with peers and educators, and promote children's language and social skills, logical and reasoning skills, alphabetical and mathematical concepts, exploration of the environment, and gross motor development.

**ISCED Level 1 programmes** refer to programmes of primary education. These programmes are designed to provide students with fundamental skills in reading, writing and mathematics (i.e. literacy and numeracy), and establish a solid foundation for learning and understanding core areas of knowledge, personal and social development.

**NCCA:** National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

**NCSE:** National Council for Special Education

**OECD:** Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development

**OMC:** Office of the Minister for Children

**Pre-primary:** Pre-primary programmes within ISCED Level 0 are designed for children from age three years to the start of primary education. They are characterised by interaction with peers and educators, and promote children's language and social skills, logical and reasoning skills, alphabetical and mathematical concepts, exploration of the environment, and gross motor development.

**Pre-school:** Pre-primary provision specifically (for the purposes of this research) to children availing of the free pre-school year.

**SENO:** Special Educational Needs Organiser

**UNESCO:** United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organization

**UNICEF:** United Nations Children's Emergency Fund





## Executive summary

## Background to research

In May 2012, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs with the Department of Education and Skills commissioned research through the Irish Research Council (IRC) to examine concepts of school readiness among parents of children availing of the free pre-school year. The views of early years educators, managers of early years settings, primary school principals and junior infant teachers were to be included. The contract for the research study was awarded by the IRC to a combined research team from Mary Immaculate College, Limerick, and the Dublin Institute of Technology.

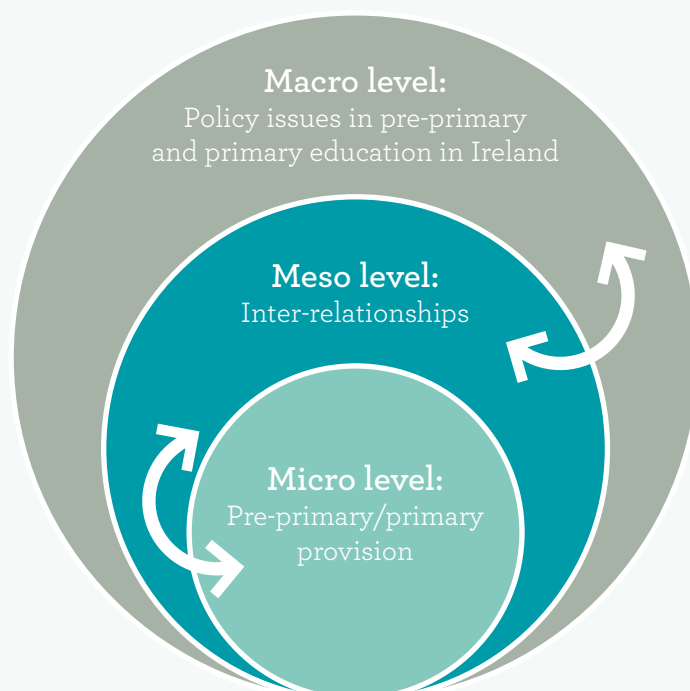
A review of the national and international literature on the subject of school readiness was conducted, and both qualitative and quantitative methods were used to investigate the concepts, motivations and perceptions of parents and educators in relation to school readiness and school starting age. Consideration was given to a range of factors influencing parental decisions around the timing of their child entering primary school, including the gender of the child, socio-economic grouping of the family, impact of regional/urban/rural factors, and parental concepts of school readiness. Capturing and including the voice of the child was also an integral component of the study. The research findings identify the attributes of school readiness valued by parents and educators, in addition to presenting pre-primary children's concepts of primary school, and have the potential to inform future policy and practice in early years education in Ireland.

## Literature review

The literature review was situated within an ecological framework by Bronfenbrenner (1979) that identifies overlapping spheres of influence on school readiness (*see diagram below*): the macro level (policy); the meso level (home/community/pre-primary/primary school interrelationships impacting on the concept of school readiness); and the micro level (pre-primary/primary school).

The white arrows in the diagram indicate the inter-connectedness of the levels that emerged from the literature review.

### An ecological framework for examining school readiness



## Macro level

Early childhood has been identified as the stage that can most effectively influence children's development. In recognition of the social, economic and educational potential of quality early years experiences for all children, Ireland introduced a universal free pre-school year in early childhood care and education in January 2010; this is available to children in the year before they enter primary school. The introduction of a universal free pre-school year has contributed to increased attention on the issue of quality and content in practice, and the provision of early childhood care and education.

UNESCO's International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) was used in this study. Programmes at ISCED Level 0 refer to early childhood education, and target children below the age of entry to primary education, which is identified as ISCED Level 1. Early childhood is widely recognised as the period from birth to compulsory school age. In Ireland, although six years of age is the compulsory school starting age, and represents the maximum age by which children must start school, almost all five-year-olds and half of four-year-olds are enrolled in infant classes in primary schools. The practice of four-year-olds in Ireland starting school can be traced back to historical, socio-economic and political contexts that no longer prevail, rather than being based on a rationale related to developmental, educational or child-led criteria.

## Micro level

Currently, in the pre-primary sector in Ireland, a prescribed curriculum does not exist. Two seminal initiatives – *Síolta: The National Quality Framework in 2006* and *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* in 2009 – were developed. *Aistear* adopts a thematic approach to children's learning and is based on the principle of 'child-centredness' and active, play-based learning. The importance of *Aistear* and *Síolta* lies in their potential to maintain the continuity of learning between pre-primary and primary settings. In 1999, the *Primary School Curriculum* was developed as a child-centred curriculum that emphasises the uniqueness of each child and enables each child to reach his or her full potential. It advocates, among other things, hands-on learning through guided activity and discovery. However, a number of studies have suggested that active learning methodologies are not consistently used in pre-primary settings or infant classes in Ireland, and that in some instances children engage in activities that require them to remain seated for extended periods of time.

Children in pre-primary programmes in Ireland benefit from adult-child ratios that are significantly lower than those they will experience in primary school, with the average adult-child ratio at 1:11 in pre-primary school and at 1:28 in primary school. This presents an additional challenge for young children in Ireland, compared with the majority of their European counterparts who do not generally make the transition to primary school until they are between five and seven years of age.

## Meso level

School readiness emerged as a concept with multiple meanings and connotations that impact variously on pre-primary and primary education. In many countries, including Ireland, pre-primary education was greatly influenced by the primary school model, and school readiness was typically measured by cognitive skills and a child's social and behavioural dispositions. The complexity of the concept of school readiness is encapsulated in four views of school readiness delineated by Dockett and Perry (2002) as follows:

- The **maturationist view** is associated with a biological view of development, and failure to demonstrate readiness is perceived to be a problem of the individual child rather than a result of the experiences provided for the child.
- The **environmental view** associates readiness for school with the behaviours and learning demonstrated by children, such as knowing colours, shapes, the letters of the alphabet, counting to 10, and behaving in a socially appropriate manner.

- The **social constructivist view** locates readiness in the child's social and cultural context, and perceptions of readiness are therefore generated in these contexts.
- The **interactionist view** regards readiness more broadly, and perceives a child's readiness for school as a relative term, which focuses on the interaction between the characteristics of the child and the characteristics stemming from the interrelationships of the range of relevant influences in the child's environment.

The literature has identified a range of factors that influence school readiness, with age not necessarily the only, or the best, predictor of school readiness. Such factors include race, socio-economic status, gender, health, family structure and parenting. Three interrelated dimensions of school readiness have also been suggested; these take cognisance of existing theoretical positions and are sensitive to culture, context and diversity, including the factors identified above. The three dimensions relate to the need for 'ready' children, 'ready' schools and 'ready' families, and focus, respectively, on children's learning and development, the school environment and supported transitions, and parent/caregiver attitudes and involvement. School readiness is conceived as a time of transition that necessitates an interface between these three dimensions. The importance of community support and involvement in school readiness is also highlighted in the literature, with the beliefs, expectations, understandings and experiences of those in the school identified as contributing to definitions of readiness; additional contributory factors include the community in which the school exists.

## Methodology

A two-phase sequential exploratory model was utilised in this study; it comprised a qualitative/quantitative mixed-methods approach in which research findings from Phase 1 (qualitative) informed the development of Phase 2 (quantitative), and involved data collection and analysis. Validity and reliability issues related to research consistently informed the process of the development of data collection instruments, data collection and analysis.

### Phase 1 – Qualitative research

The initial qualitative phase focused on exploring the attitudes, opinions and perspectives of parents, early years educators, early years managers, junior infant class teachers and primary school principals through conducting semi-structured interviews with education personnel (face to face) and parents (by telephone). Also during Phase 1, children availing of the free pre-school year participated in child conferences to explore their awareness and understanding of primary school. During these conferences, children were invited to draw pictures to express their ideas about starting school, employing methods used in the Mosaic Approach.

Sampling for Phase 1 involved a stratified random sample of primary schools selected from the listing on the Department of Education and Skills website. Primary schools were stratified using stratification criteria related to socio-economic grouping (mainstream schools involved in the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) initiative/mainstream schools not involved in this initiative); geographical location (urban/rural); composition (boys/girls/mixed gender); language (Irish/English-medium schools) and needs-based (special school). A purposive sampling technique was further applied to this stratified random sample related to access/proximity requirements. Seven primary schools were thus selected, based on these stratification criteria.

The school principal and one junior infant teacher from each of the seven selected primary schools agreed to participate in a face-to-face interview, and each participating primary school was invited to provide the names of two feeder pre-primary settings. In total, 14 pre-primary settings, representative of the community-based and private settings, were invited to participate in the research and 10 of these agreed (including three *naíonraí*, or pre-primary settings that operate through the medium of Irish). The pre-primary settings were asked to distribute an information letter about the study, together with an invitation to participate, to

parents of children availing of the free pre-school year. Parents were asked to indicate their consent to participate in a telephone interview; to provide a contact telephone number, and also to give permission for their child to participate. Materials for the Irish-medium schools were presented in both Irish and English, and interview participants could choose to respond in either language.

Thus, in total, 119 participants were involved in this qualitative phase of the study; they comprised 57 children, aged 3.2 years to five years; 30 parents; nine early years managers; nine early years educators; seven primary school principals; and seven junior infant class teachers. This sample was drawn from seven primary schools and 10 pre-primary settings.

## Phase 2 – Quantitative research

Based on the findings emerging from Phase 1, an online survey was developed for Phase 2, designed to examine the extent to which findings from the qualitative phase could be applied to larger samples of the target populations. Samples of the entire population of primary schools (N=3,299) and pre-primary settings participating in the free pre-school year scheme (N=4,201) were selected. A probability sampling technique (linked to the stratification criteria outlined above) was used in order to ensure that findings from the quantitative analysis could be generalised to the larger population of primary schools and pre-primary settings. Among the 500 pre-primary settings and 500 primary schools selected, the response rate was 29.6% (n=148) of pre-primary settings and 23.8% (n=114) of primary settings, with a dropout rate of 7.4% (n=11) and 5.3% (n=6), respectively.

The online survey included a range of question types and was administered using the PsychData® online survey development and hosting application. Following a pilot test and minor amendments for clarity, two versions of the questionnaire were released: one with 46 questions for pre-primary (early years) settings and another with 47 questions for primary schools. It took approximately 20 minutes to complete a questionnaire. An Irish-language version of the surveys for Irish-medium schools and *naíonraí* was also prepared using the SurveyMonkey® online survey development and hosting application; seven responses were received, all from *naíonraí*, and these were translated into English and the data were inputted into the main database.

## Data analysis

Qualitative data were analysed using a comparative approach in which categories were derived from the data through a process of inductive reasoning based on the principles of Grounded Theory. Nine discrete cycles of analyses were conducted. This process was informed by theories, themes and concepts that emerged from the literature review, as well as additional related themes that were significant to the project's focus of inquiry. NVivo software was employed in adopting this analytical approach, which allowed for close engagement with the data and enabled codes to be assigned to data segments electronically in an uncomplicated and effective manner. In order to further illuminate the analysis in the qualitative phase, corpus linguistics software (Wordsmith Tools) was used to identify concordances in the data and augment the research findings. The narratives and drawings by the children also provided rich insights into their perspectives on pre-school and 'Big School', as the pre-school children called primary school.

Quantitative data were exported into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) computer programme for statistical analysis. Data were presented primarily using descriptive statistics for the pre-primary and primary participant groups, and group differences were examined on matched variables. Statistically significant differences, where found, were identified between participant groups.

## Ethical responsibilities

Attention was consistently directed to ensuring that the range of ethical responsibilities associated with the research were considered and adhered to throughout the study. Ethical clearance was granted by the DIT Research Ethics Committee. Participants' rights and privacy were paramount, and they were advised that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw without consequence at any time. A full and accurate account of the purpose and process of the research was provided, and consent and assent obtained. All participants' confidentiality was assured, and data were anonymised and securely stored. The Research Team adhered to the principles of good practice for the protection of children and young people throughout the research project, and children's informed assent was also secured prior to their participation.

## Findings and discussion

The concept of school readiness as understood by parents of children availing of the free pre-school year, early years educators, early years managers, primary school principals and junior infant class teachers emerged as a multi-faceted concept, which was influenced by a number of interrelated macro- (policy), meso- (interrelationships) and micro- (pre-primary and primary) level factors. School readiness was clearly located along a maturationist-environmental continuum, where readiness was associated with a child's age as well as external evidence of the acquisition of specific skills.

### School readiness indicators

Interview participants articulated a range of school readiness indicators, with significant differences in some instances between the importance allocated to them by individual participant groups. The key findings from the study are summarised below in relation to school starting age; social and emotional skills; dispositions; language development; self-help skills; appropriate classroom behaviour; and pre-academic skills.

#### School starting age

A comparison of pre-primary and primary school survey respondents' opinions on the optimal school starting age indicated a difference in opinion, with significant differences between the groups in some cases. Educators in primary schools were significantly more likely to regard a school starting age of six years as 'too late' (49.5%); the comparable figure for the early years group was 21%. In a similar vein, the educators in the early years group (44.4%) were significantly more likely to regard a starting age of six years as 'about right'; the comparable figure for the primary school group was 16.2%.

#### Social and emotional skills

All respondents regarded children's social and emotional skills as being 'important' or 'very important'. Early years respondents gave higher rankings to skills such as children's ability to separate from parents, children's ability to empathise, and their ability to be part of a group. Primary school respondents ranked such skills as children's ability to work independently, to share, and to negotiate, lower than did early years respondents.

#### Dispositions

Children's dispositions to be creative, to persevere at a task and to be enthusiastic were viewed as moderately important by both the early years and primary school sectors. However, more early years respondents than primary school respondents gave higher ratings to children's ability to persevere at a task. Early years educators also tended to rate dispositions such as children's ability to be enthusiastic or to be curious higher than did primary school educators.



## Language development

Primary school staff (60%) attached greater importance to children's fluency in their mother tongue; the comparable figure for early years staff was 32%. There were also differences between the groups on the importance attached to children's fluency in the language of instruction, with early years staff (68%) rating this as more important than did primary school staff (59%). One junior infant teacher spoke about the importance of good language skills and about a deficit in language skills among some children.

## Self-help skills

In relation to children's self-help skills – such as hygiene, organisational skills and fine motor movement – both early years staff and primary school staff rated these in broadly similar ways, with somewhat higher ratings given by early years staff. Some concern was expressed about the availability of support for teachers in busy classrooms. While parents also recognised the importance of children's self-help skills, they did not consider them as important as social and emotional skills.

## Appropriate classroom behaviour

There was general agreement among early years and primary school staff on the importance of children expressing their needs, gaining their teacher's attention, listening and being attentive. Early years staff gave higher ratings to children's ability to work independently, to using their initiative, and to participating in learning activities.

## Pre-academic skills

There was a very noticeable trend in how early years and primary school respondents viewed children's pre-academic skills, with the early years respondents rating them consistently higher – by 10% or more. Early years educators rated children's skills in recognising colours and shapes, in recognising their own name, and in recognising letters and numbers higher than did primary school educators. They also thought that problem-solving skills were more important than did their primary school counterparts. The interviews showed that primary school educators did not agree with the emphasis placed on pre-academic skills in early years settings and in the home.

## Communication structures

Making the move to 'Big School' (as the pre-school children called primary school) was recognised by all interview participants as a major event in the life of a young child. Children's responses and drawings created as part of this research study process confirm that this is a significant event in their lives.

There was general agreement on the need for communication between early years settings and primary schools, but this does not happen in any systematic or comprehensive manner. Parents reported finding primary school open days particularly valuable because they provided a context for talking about the school to their child. Early years settings were significantly more likely to discuss school readiness with parents.

All interview participants considered parents to be the key decision-makers in relation to when their child should start school, and expressed a reluctance to advise parents in this regard.

## Free pre-school year

The most significant finding in relation to the free pre-school year (FPSY) is the noticeable increase in the number of children availing of pre-primary provision, including *naíonraí*.

The majority (58.7%) of early years respondents to the online survey across all types of pre-schools indicated that the FPSY had had no impact on their approach to school readiness, as they were already sufficiently focused on preparing children for school. Of those who reported having changed their approach, the majority referred to changes made at curriculum level. Conversely, qualitative findings indicate that changes at curriculum level often resulted in early years educators feeling under pressure to get everything done before children started school.

In addition, the qualitative findings suggest that the FPSY has helped to alleviate the 'financial burden' for parents. When asked whether or not the FPSY had had an impact on children's school readiness, 82% of early years educators and 63% of primary school teachers agreed that it had.

## Parental motivations and concerns

Parents voiced a number of concerns about their child starting school. The most significant concerns related to large class sizes in primary schools, teacher disposition and school culture, bullying, and the level of teacher care and supervision in primary schools. Parents also expressed concern about the availability of supports for children with specific health needs or special educational needs on enrolment in primary schools, and concern was also expressed with regard to recent reductions in the provision of additional teaching support in primary schools.

A number of parents felt that teacher disposition and school culture were critical factors in determining their child's ability to settle into and get on in school. It was felt that the role of the junior infant teacher was critical in terms of his or her ability to relate to children and engage with them in an appropriate manner. Whereas parents expressed the need for teachers to foster the child's sense of wonder, curiosity and individuality, they expressed concern that the infant classroom tended to be formal and inflexible.

## Curriculum continuity

Curriculum continuity refers to similar activities, programme structure and content between pre-school and infant classes. More than 83% of early years survey respondents and 60% of primary school staff agreed that there should be curriculum continuity between early years settings and primary schools. More than 86% of early years respondents and 42% of primary school respondents who implemented *Aistear* said they were basing their approach on building partnerships between parents and practitioners/teachers. This reflects a highly significant difference between the early years sector and the primary school sector. 89% of early years respondents and 83% of primary school respondents indicated that they promoted learning and development through interactions. 97% of early years respondents and 98% of primary school respondents reported promoting learning through play. A significantly higher percentage of early years respondents (80%), compared with primary school respondents (63%), stated that they supported learning and development through assessment. This discrepancy may be due to the emphasis in recent *Aistear* training on formative assessment, which interview participants may have linked directly to this question.

## Play

The majority of interview participants in both the early years and primary school groups stated that play was 'very important' during the FPSY; by contrast, early years survey respondents tended to rate it as 'very important' slightly more often than did primary school respondents. Children in both pre-primary and primary settings were reported as having access to a wide

range of play opportunities. Certain types of play were significantly more common in pre-primary settings; these included language-based play, pretend play, physical play and small-world play. This could be related to the fact that the primary school educators also reported fewer opportunities for play during the day, and were significantly more likely to report that play occurred at times when teachers were not engaged with the class, such as before the official start of school and during break-time periods in the school day.

## Children with special educational needs

Findings from the quantitative phase of the research indicate that children with special educational needs attended 75% of the pre-primary settings and 89% of the primary schools that participated in the study. It was clear that participants believed children with special educational needs were entitled to an appropriate education, indicating evidence of a move away from a 'caring perspective' of disability to an 'entitlement' frame of reference. Early years respondents were significantly more likely than primary school respondents to report that parents were concerned about the lack of support for children with special educational needs.

Findings from the online survey suggest that primary schools tended to have significantly more supports and strategies in place for children with special educational needs than did pre-primary settings; such supports and strategies included the availability of multidisciplinary services. The role of the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) and the Special Educational Needs Organiser (SENO) was positively affirmed by primary school participants during the qualitative phase of the research.

## Children from different cultural backgrounds

Lack of support and strategies for children from different cultural backgrounds was also evident in the study findings. More than half of the early years and primary school respondents indicated that they had no specific strategies in place for such children. The qualitative findings indicate that children were still being treated as 'the same' or 'like us', thus indicating a limited awareness and understanding of cultural diversity.

## School readiness and the role of the community

Children with special educational needs received support from a number of professionals in the community, including public health nurses, speech and language therapists, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, special education needs organisers, key workers, special needs assistants, and early intervention educators. Libraries, mother and toddler groups and sports facilities were also referred to as educational and recreational facilities within the community that contributed to supporting children's school readiness.

## Final observations and key recommendations

This report is published at a time of great change and development in early childhood education in Ireland. High-quality early childhood education at both pre-primary and primary levels is recognised as a valuable contributor to children's well-being and development, and the transition from early years settings to primary school is a major step in the lives of children and their families. The report identifies current perceptions of school readiness by early years educators, primary school staff and parents in a representative sample, together with qualitative detail and insights into children's ideas about going to 'Big School'. Positive and proactive initiatives at macro level (such as the FPSY, the development of *Aistear* and the National Council for Special Education) have been reported as impacting constructively on children's early education experiences.

A range of valuable findings emerge from the research; these have the potential to inform policy, practice, training and research in the future, and they include:

- In the context of the findings on school starting age in Ireland, child-led criteria rather than chronological age should be the key determinants of when a child starts school.
- Consideration should be given to introducing a phased reduction of junior infant class sizes to a maximum of 20 pupils per class, with a view to moving towards the maximum grouping that applies to pre-school settings.
- There is a need for the complexity of the factors contributing to a child's adjustment to school to be reflected in all relevant policy guidelines and pre-primary and primary training programmes.
- Materials that provide advice and strategies on an integrated approach to school readiness should be developed and made available to all settings providing the free pre-school year.
- Aspects of the interactionist approach to school readiness emerging from the literature should be considered as part of the conceptual approach at macro and micro levels, and the positive features of the approach to school readiness reported in relation to children with special educational needs should be disseminated.
- The limited understanding of issues related to cultural diversity should be addressed through training and awareness raising in both the pre-primary and primary sectors.
- Research findings in relation to the free pre-school year (FPSY) suggest that further clarification is needed regarding the purpose of the FPSY, and the desired curricular and pedagogical approach, in order to enhance the quality of early childhood education and care within participating settings.
- In this context, the pedagogic value of the free pre-school year programme for children should be evaluated.
- There is scope to explore the potential for *Aistear* to be used as a unifying mechanism on pedagogical content across pre-primary and primary settings.
- At the heart of the findings is the importance of fostering communication between all stakeholders and developing shared understandings of school readiness that are informed by child-led and developmentally appropriate criteria.



# 1. Introduction

In May 2012, the Irish Research Council (IRC) issued a tender to examine concepts of school readiness among parents and educators in Ireland. The specific requirements of the project were stipulated as:

- a review of national and international literature and policy in the area of school readiness and school entry;
- qualitative and quantitative research to investigate the motives and attitudes among parents and education personnel in relation to school readiness and school starting age.

In particular, the IRC stipulated that the project should investigate:

- the concepts of school readiness as understood by parents of children availing of the free pre-school year;
- the concepts of school readiness as understood by primary school principals and teachers of children in junior infant classes;
- the concepts of school readiness as understood by early childhood care and education providers.

In addition, the project was required to explore the main factors influencing parental decisions around the timing of their child entering primary school, taking into account the gender of the child, the socio-economic grouping of the family and the impact of regional/urban/rural factors. The IRC requested that the project examine the extent to which parental concepts of school readiness were a factor in this decision. The IRC also requested that the main factors influencing schools' decisions around age of enrolment/admission policies be investigated. Finally, key messages and items for consideration for policy and service provision in Ireland were to be identified.

## 1.1 Project process

The IRC awarded the contract, subject to specific conditions, to two groups that had submitted tenders: Mary Immaculate College (MIC), Limerick, led by Dr Emer Ring, and the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT), led by Dr Máire Mhic Mhathúna. The conditions attached to the contract included the recommendation that the two teams work together collaboratively in a consortium led by MIC, with DIT as a partner, and that the voice of the child be included in the research. It was suggested that DIT carry out the quantitative work, with the qualitative aspects carried out by MIC. Two research assistants were to be employed, one in each institution, and a revised budget was approved. The IRC also stipulated that the project should take account of parental motivation in deciding on their child's school-entry age, as distinct from parents' perception of their child's school readiness. As was the case with other projects funded by the IRC, ethical approval was mandatory, and IRC recruitment, reporting and financial procedures had to be followed. Following consultation, the teams from MIC and DIT agreed to the conditions, and project planning began in November 2012.

Two research assistants were appointed, and teams from each institution were established. Over the course of the project, eight joint planning meetings were held in Limerick and Dublin, and more frequent team meetings were held in DIT and MIC. A comprehensive multi-method approach was adopted as the project methodology.

## 1.2 Literature review

An extensive review of the Irish and international literature was undertaken. Initially, contextual factors related to school readiness were examined, and included the context and definitions of early childhood care and education in Ireland; school starting age; the curriculum in early years settings (i.e. in both pre-primary settings and primary schools); professional requirements for pre-primary and primary school staff; and adult-child ratios in pre-primary and primary settings. This was followed by a review of concepts of school readiness and factors influencing school readiness; theoretical approaches to school readiness; family, school and community readiness; and the perspectives of parents, pre-primary educators, primary educators and children on school readiness.

### 1.3 Methodology

The research methodology comprised qualitative and quantitative strategies, which were utilised in two phases. In Phase 1, a qualitative approach was used in order to capture individual participant responses in a series of semi-structured interviews and child conferences. In this phase, key stakeholders in seven primary schools and their associated pre-primary settings were interviewed in relation to their perceptions of school readiness. These stakeholders included primary school principals and junior infant teachers, managers of early years settings and early years educators, as well as parents of children availing of the free pre-school year (FPSY). Child conferences were conducted in order to capture the voice of the child. Particular attention was paid to obtaining both parental consent and child assent for child conferences. Details of all information sheets, consent forms and interview schedules are provided in the Appendices section of this report. The qualitative data were analysed in depth using NVivo software, and the main themes emerging from the data were identified and contextualised.

Following this qualitative phase, Phase 2 involved a quantitative approach utilising a detailed online questionnaire based on analysis of the interview data and insights gained from the literature review. This questionnaire was used to capture participants' statistically significant responses. Probability sampling techniques were employed to randomly select 500 representative primary schools and 500 pre-primary settings. E-mail addresses were sourced separately. Every effort was made to achieve a satisfactory response rate, including e-mailing reminders to research settings and engaging in extensive follow-up telephone contact. The questionnaires were uploaded using the relevant software, and were distributed to potential survey respondents. Replies were collated and exported to the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) computer programme for statistical analysis.

### 1.4 Qualitative findings

The qualitative findings, presented in Chapter 4, detail the analysis of the semi-structured interviews conducted with parents, early years educators, early years managers, junior infant teachers and primary school principals. The findings are augmented by corpus linguistics analysis of the transcribed interviews and child conference data. The findings are presented conceptually, with direct extracts from the data used to support the findings (in the form of verbatim quotes from interview participants). Findings are presented with reference to understandings of school readiness; school starting age; participants' views; birthdate effect; perspectives on European school starting age; parental concerns related to their children starting school; curriculum in the early years; how pre-school prepares children for school; the benefits of the FPSY; how pre-school benefits children; school readiness – children with special educational needs; cultural diversity and school readiness; exploring the concept of the ready school; the role of the community in supporting school readiness; and child conference data.

### 1.5 Quantitative findings

The quantitative findings, presented in Chapter 6, detail data on pre-primary and primary school survey respondents' views on many aspects of school readiness, including demographic information; adult-child ratios; approach to school readiness and the FPSY; school starting age; strategies to prepare and help children starting school; play; school readiness indicators; gender; communication between schools and pre-schools; *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* and *Síolta: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education*; parental motivation and concerns; and community involvement. The main themes were tabulated and illustrated with appropriate graphs and charts. A comparative analysis of perspectives among pre-primary and primary school staff was carried out with regard to the main themes. The full questionnaires in both English and Irish (for early years and primary respondents) and all supporting documentation are provided in Appendices 1-4 of this report.

## 1.6 Analysis of findings

The qualitative and quantitative data were analysed in depth and reviewed in light of insights gained from the literature review. The main themes that emerged are discussed in Chapter 7 and concern the FPSY; school starting age; gender differences; school readiness indicators; language issues; implementation of *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*; parental concerns; play; children with special educational needs; cultural diversity; and community supports.

The research findings indicate that the concepts of school readiness held by the participants in this study are complex and multi-faceted. These concepts are influenced by contextual factors, individual circumstances and other factors, rather than by educational, developmental or child-led criteria. Areas for future development were identified, and recommendations for policy, training, practice and research are provided in the final chapter.

## 1.7 Conclusions and recommendations

Following the range of insights gained from in-depth consideration of the wealth of material available to the project, conclusions are presented in Chapter 8 in relation to interview participants' concepts of school readiness; school starting age; the free pre-school year; curriculum continuity; indicators of school readiness; language; children with special educational needs; cultural diversity; and parental motivation and concerns. Recommendations are made regarding the potential positive contribution of the interactionist concept of school readiness to current understandings of school readiness; consideration of developmental and child-led criteria with regard to school starting age; promoting communication between pre-primary settings and primary schools in relation to curriculum and pedagogy; clarifying the pedagogic aims of the FPSY; providing training for pre-primary and primary school staff in *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*; the potential in developing a comprehensive list of school readiness indicators; training in child language development and cultural diversity; promoting formal communication between pre-primary settings and schools with regard to children with special educational needs; engaging in a review of adult-child ratios in junior infant classes; and reviewing policies relating to children's safety and well-being in pre-primary settings and primary schools. In conjunction with other developments in early childhood education, this report provides an evidence base for policy and practice decisions on school readiness.

## 1.8 Structure of report

Following this Introduction chapter, the report is organised as follows:

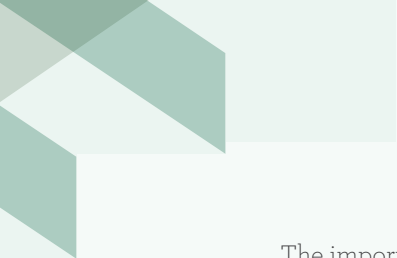
- **Chapter 2** reviews the literature on school readiness.
- **Chapter 3** details the mixed-methods research design of this study.
- **Chapter 4** presents the findings from the qualitative phase of the study.
- **Chapter 5** provides the voice of the child in this study, illustrated with direct quotes from children in pre-school on their views of going to 'Big School' (as they called primary school) and friendships.
- **Chapter 6** presents the findings from the quantitative phase of the study.
- **Chapter 7** presents a discussion of the main findings.
- **Chapter 8** provides a summary of conclusions from the study and some key recommendations.

A comprehensive **Bibliography** of sources used to inform the study is followed by a number of **Appendices**, detailing various aspects of the research, such as recruitment of participants, consent forms, interview schedules and online survey questionnaires.





## 2. Literature review



The importance of quality early childhood care and education (ECCE) to the development and learning of all young children has gathered increasing support over the past 20 years. Supporting ECCE as a critical period of development is also in line with the principles and spirit of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989). Quality early education models are characterised by principles that recognise the child as an active partner in the integrated and ongoing process of learning. The most important aspects of a child's learning in the early years have been identified as the affective and difficult-to-measure characteristics of development, such as aspirations, social skills, motivation, organisation, learner identity and confidence (Bruner, 1996; Laevers, 2002; Sylva *et al*, 2004). Rather than implementing a prescribed curriculum, the literature suggests that it is more effective to have a professional workforce which is capable of responding to the dynamic and individual nature of development in the early years, and which is also capable of implementing an emerging curriculum informed by the interests and experiences of children and the opportunities afforded by the environment (OECD, 2006 and 2012). Parental and community involvement in ECCE services can also further support children's achievements and adaptation (Sylva *et al*, 2004; Weiss and Stephen, 2009).

In recognition of the social, economic and educational potential of quality early years experiences for all children, Ireland introduced a universal free pre-school year in January 2010; the purpose of the free pre-school year is '*to make early learning in a formal setting available to eligible children in the year before they commence primary school*' (DCYA, 2013a). This policy decision has led to increased attention being directed to the issue of quality practice and provision at pre-primary level.

In this chapter, factors specifically related to developing an understanding of the concept of 'school readiness' in the Irish context are described. The concept and definition of early childhood care and education in Ireland are explored; the origin of school starting age is examined, and an analysis of curricula in pre-primary settings and in the junior infant classes of primary school is presented. Adult-child ratios and the professional qualification requirements of early childhood educators and teachers of infant classes are also detailed. These factors provide a context for the exploration of the concept of school readiness and the elucidation of national and international approaches.

## 2.1 Background and context

Early childhood is widely recognised as the period from birth to compulsory school age. While an integrated system of ECCE operates under a single Government Ministry (generally the Ministry of Education) in many countries (including the United Kingdom, Denmark, Finland, New Zealand, Norway, Scotland, Spain and Sweden), a split system of governance operates in Ireland. Primary school children aged 4-12 years in Ireland are under the aegis of the Department of Education and Skills. Although the statutory school starting age is six years (Government of Ireland, 1998), almost all five-year-olds and half of four-year-olds are enrolled in infant classrooms in primary schools (Taguma *et al*, 2009; Darmody and Smyth, 2012; Spotlight, 2012). Conversely, children under six years of age '*who are not attending a national school or equivalent*' are defined as pre-school children (Department of Health and Children, 2006, p. 31) and are under the remit of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA).

Irish society has undergone rapid economic, social and demographic transformation since the turn of the 21st century. This transformation has contributed to the ongoing societal debate around the role that the State should play in 'caring for families' and supporting them in meeting their childcare responsibilities, particularly in children's early years. Up until the mid-1990s, the Irish State had little involvement with childcare. This lack of State involvement in ECCE is strongly linked to historical, social, economic and political factors. It is also associated with the view that children's well-being can be provided for by mothers in the home, and that education begins upon the child's entry to primary school (Kennedy, 2001). This

position is echoed in the Constitution of Ireland (1937), which recognises the support given by women to the State by their life in the home, without which the common good cannot be achieved (Article 41.1). Article 41.2 further provides that the State shall endeavour to ensure that mothers are not obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour, to the neglect of their duties in the home. It has been argued that Articles 41.1 and 41.2 assign specific gender roles to parents, i.e. wife and mother *versus* the male breadwinner. In fact, these particular roles and responsibilities were reinforced through a Marriage Bar which was introduced in the 1930s and required women (primarily in the Civil Service) to leave paid employment upon marriage (Fahy, 2003). While the Marriage Bar was lifted for teachers in 1957, due to a shortage of teachers, it was not abolished until 1973.

There were limited employment opportunities for women in Ireland in the 1980s and early 1990s, due to economic recession. However, during the economic boom between 1998 and 2007 (the so-called 'Celtic Tiger' years), almost 300,000 women joined the labour market and the participation rate of women with children under five years of age increased by 6.4 percentage points – from 53.8% in 1998 to 60.2% in 2007 (Russell *et al*, 2009). As a result of the large numbers of mothers participating in the labour market, the child's place in society changed dramatically, giving rise to the need for out-of-home childcare arrangements (Devine *et al*, 2004; Hayes and Bradley, 2006b; NESF, 2004 and 2005; OECD, 2004 and 2006). Also throughout this period, Irish families and Irish culture were increasingly subject to global influences, including diverse family make-up, marital breakdown and migration (Inglis, 2008; Russell *et al*, 2009).

Between 2000 and 2010, the Irish State invested in excess of €1 billion through two major programmes to develop an ECCE infrastructure, perceived as central to social and economic progression (O'Donoghue-Hynes and Hayes, 2011). These initiatives were the *Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP), 2000-2006* and the *National Childcare Investment Programme, 2006-2010* (Hayes and Bradley, 2006a; OMC, 2006a). This investment by the State resulted in the establishment of 65,000 childcare places nationally, comprising both full-time and part-time places. The primary focus of the programmes was to facilitate parents, especially mothers, to return to employment, training and education. In terms of regulation, these programmes were initially associated with the provision of care; this was evident in the focus of the first *Childcare (Pre-school Services) Regulations* published by the Department of Health and Children in 1996, which legislated primarily for structural quality.

More recently, a myriad of policies and initiatives have been developed under the aegis of the Department of Education and Skills; such policies and initiatives include *Siolta: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* (CECDE, 2006) and *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009). These have underpinned the inextricable link between care and education for children aged from birth to six years, leading to some changes in the Childcare Regulations and allowing for more attention to be given to child development and well-being.

Notwithstanding these initiatives, the split system of governance in Ireland has contributed to diverse approaches and expectations (Hayes, 2006). In this context, as children begin formal schooling, they may experience a pedagogical shift away from play-based learning to a more formal subject-based curriculum, as well as larger class sizes and increased adult-child ratios. Such '*sector-based compartmentalisation of different aspects of children's services*' (p.4), as noted by UNESCO and UNICEF (2012), is '*limiting and can lead to fragmented or inconsistent delivery*' (p.4).

The Department of Education and Skills (DES) funds a number of specific pre-primary services, such as the Rutland Street Project and the Early Start Programme (DCYA, 2014a). In 1969, the Rutland Street Project was established as a two-year early intervention programme in a Dublin inner city community for children aged 3-5 years. In 1994/95, the DES established the Early Start Programme in 40 primary schools, with the aim of enhancing children's overall

development, assisting in preventing school failure, and counterbalancing the effects of social disadvantage (*ibid*). Although not part of the Early Start initiative, the Rutland Street Project was used to pilot many of the approaches later incorporated in the Early Start Programme (*ibid*).

With the exception of the above services, ECCE services in Ireland are delivered outside the formal education system in a diverse range of pre-primary settings. The universal free pre-school year (FPSY) scheme, introduced by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) in 2010, provides children aged between three years and two months and four years and seven months on 1 September in the relevant year access to a free pre-school year of appropriate programme-based activities in the year before they start primary school (DCYA, 2014b). The FPSY is delivered three hours a day, five days a week, 38 weeks a year, and the objective is to benefit children in the key developmental period prior to starting school (DCYA, 2013). Thus, the age requirement associated with the FPSY affects the age at which children begin formal schooling, depending on what age children are when they initially avail of the FPSY. An information leaflet is provided for parents to explain the criteria for eligibility (OMCYA, 2009a).

## 2.2 Defining early childhood care and education

The term 'early childhood' is universally recognised as a distinct period in a child's life and, within the Irish policy context, and in the main, has been taken to refer to the period from birth to the age of six years (Department of Education and Science, 1999; CECDE, 2006; NCCA, 2009). With regard to the widely used term 'early childhood care and education' (ECCE), UNICEF (2012, p. 4) defines it as '*a range of processes and mechanisms that sustain, support and aid in the holistic development of children, from birth to age 8 years*'. However, the diversity and complexity of terminology associated with ECCE are acknowledged. Consequently, terms such as 'early childhood care and development' (ECCD), 'early childhood development' (ECD), 'early childhood education' (ECE), 'early childhood education, care and development' (ECECD) and 'early childhood education and development' (ECED) are all variously used.

In recognition of this emerging diversity of terminology, UNESCO (2012) revised the *International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED)* in order to classify levels of education across different countries. Programmes at ISCED Level 0 adopt a holistic approach in supporting children's early development and target children below the age of entry to primary education, which is identified as ISCED Level 1. These programmes aim to develop children's socio-emotional skills, which are necessary for participation in school and society; they also aim to develop some of the skills needed for academic readiness related to children's entry to primary education, and provide an organised set of learning activities (which are not necessarily highly structured) that include creative and play-based activities. There are two categories of ISCED Level 0 programmes:

- **Early childhood educational development programmes**, which include educational content appropriate for children in the age range birth up to three years.
- **Pre-primary education programmes**, which are designed for children from the age of three years to the start of primary education. These programmes are characterised by interaction with peers and educators, and promote children's language and social skills, logical and reasoning skills, alphabetical and mathematical concepts, exploration of the environment and gross motor development.

In Ireland, children in ECCE settings outside of primary school are classified as working at ISCED Level 0 (Eurydice, 2014), whereas those attending primary school (including those under the compulsory school age of six years) are classified as within ISCED Level 1. At ISCED Level 1, programmes are designed to provide children with fundamental skills in literacy and numeracy, while also establishing a solid foundation for learning and understanding core

areas of knowledge, personal and social development. At this level, *'age is typically the only entry requirement ... the customary or legal age of entry is usually not below five years old nor above seven years old'* (UNESCO, 2012, p. 30). However, Sharp (2002) cautions that compulsory school age only tells part of the story, as many countries have pre-primary systems which are attended by the majority of children. Thus, even though the compulsory school starting age in Ireland is six years, children younger than six years are allowed to start school.

## 2.3 School starting age

Drawing on data from the DES and the *Growing Up in Ireland* study (GUI, 2013), a recent review of school starting age in Ireland found that, from 1994 to 2012, there was a steady decline in the number of four-year-olds starting school (Wolfe, 2014). The data indicate that Ireland differs from the majority of European countries, where most children are not admitted to school until the age of six years or older (see *Table 1*).

**Table 1: Compulsory school starting age in European countries**

Age	Country
4 years	Northern Ireland
5 years	England, Malta, Netherlands, Scotland, Wales.
6 years	Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, <b>Republic of Ireland</b> , Italy, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Norway, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Switzerland, Turkey
7 years	Bulgaria, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Poland, Sweden.

Source: Eurydice (2014)

Custom and practice – rather than debates related to developmental, educational or child-led criteria – appear to have exerted most influence on school starting age. In Ireland, the primary school system was established in 1831 (Coolahan and O'Donovan, 2009). Influenced by developments in Great Britain, Europe and the United States of America (USA), the Belmore Commission Report (1898) advocated a wider curriculum and a focus on kindergarten education, which was influenced by Froebelian principles (Walsh, 2005). The Revised Programme (1900) marked the first major policy to focus on the quality of ECCE in Ireland. Continuing with the Froebelian influence, the importance of the child's environment became a focus from 1913, and formal teaching was discouraged for children aged under five years. However, implementation of the programme was hampered by the lack of teacher training, resources, suitable classrooms and the political unrest of the period (*ibid*).

Following the Irish Civil War (1922-1923), the promotion of the Irish language was perceived as a political imperative and schools were identified as the means by which this could be achieved (Akenson, 1975). The role of infant classes in the linguistic revival was considered critical and central to the success or failure of the Irish language (O'Connor, 1987). In 1926, compulsory attendance was introduced for all children from age 6-14 years, in order to ensure that all children were in school and could therefore learn Irish (Walsh, 2005). In accordance with the societal custom that had developed, children younger than six years continued to attend primary school. The *Rules for National Schools*, published by the Department of Education in 1965, stated that provision for education in prescribed or approved programmes for children from the age of four years is made in schools recognised by the Minister as 'national schools'. This document remained the key regulatory framework for primary education up to the enactment of the Education Act, 1998 (Government of Ireland, 1998).

The age at which a child is expected to be ready to start school features prominently in school readiness discourse (Dockett *et al*, 2007; O’Kane and Hayes, 2010; UCD Geary Institute, 2012a and 2012b; House, 2012; McGettigan and Gray, 2012; McLean, 2012). Policies on school starting age across countries do little to reduce the confusion with regard to the most appropriate school starting age. For example, the situation in **Australia** mirrors the position in Ireland, where although the compulsory school starting age is six years, children start school from four years through to six years. The approach to the school starting age in Australia changed in 2014. In accordance with the changes (Department for Education and Child Development [Australia], 2014), if a child turns four years *before* 1 May, they will start pre-school on the first day of Term 1 in that year; if a child turns four years on or *after* 1 May, they will start pre-school on the first day of Term 1 in the following year. In addition, a child who turns five years before 1 May will start school on the first day of Term 1 in that year; if a child turns five years on or after 1 May, they will start school on the first day of Term 1 in the following year. In effect, the changes mean that every child will have four terms of pre-school and four terms of reception when they go to school, which, it is suggested, will result in a more stable environment for children, with fewer changes to groups throughout the year.

In **England**, the school starting age has been the subject of much debate. Key findings from the *Cambridge Primary Review: Children, Their World, Their Education* (Department for Children, Schools and Families [UK], 2009) rejected previous recommendations by Rose (2006) to allow all four-year-olds enter the reception class in the September following their fourth birthday, and proposed delaying formal education until the age of six years. In a recent review of research exploring the impact of school starting age, **Wales** has introduced a Foundation Phase between the ages of three years and six years (Palmer, 2009). The objective is to align the school starting age in Wales (i.e. six years) with practice in other European countries. The school starting age in **Scotland** is five years; in addition, the *Scottish Curriculum for Excellence Building* (Scottish Government, 2004) recommends active learning for young children.

In **Northern Ireland**, the compulsory school starting age was changed from five years to four years through the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order, 1989 (Parliament of Northern Ireland, 1989). This reflected the view that children would benefit from spending 12 full years at school (seven years at primary school and five years at secondary school) (Eurydice, 2013). As a result of this reform, children officially start school in Northern Ireland at four years of age – *the youngest statutory school starting age in Europe* (Eurydice, 2013; Morton, 2013). Recognising this, the Department of Education has published a play-based curriculum framework for the pre-school and foundation stages (Department for Education [Northern Ireland] (2012).

An emerging issue in the literature that is directly related to the compulsory school starting age is the concept of a ‘birthdate effect’ (Crawford *et al*, 2007; Sykes *et al*, 2009), where summer-born children are the youngest children in their year group and therefore start formal schooling at a younger age than their peers. In **the UK**, Crawford *et al* (2007) and Sykes *et al* (2009) indicate that while time in school benefits Key Stage One<sup>1</sup> assessment performance for older, autumn-born children in a year group, no such benefit exists for younger, summer-born children. In fact, Daniels *et al* (2000) claim that the length of time in school may only benefit children who are older than four years and five months at the time they enter school. McLean (2012) argues that there is no evidence to support the idea that starting school later than their peers is beneficial for children. Even though older children may make greater progress initially, this is no longer evident three years later (Stipek, 2002).

<sup>1</sup> In the UK, Key Stages are the groups that have been established to administer progressive standardised exams during a child’s education in England and Wales. Each Key Stage consists of a certain range of school years. Key Stage One refers to children aged 5-7 years.

Sykes *et al* (2009, p. 20) argue that the disadvantage for younger children lasts much longer and may even effect third-level entry as ‘*September-born students are 20% more likely to go to university than their August-born peers*’.

However, the establishment of a specific chronological entry age can present challenges. As children develop at different rates, some will satisfy the age criterion, but may not be as able as others to fulfil rigorous school requirements (Lewit and Schuurmann Baker, 1995). It is precisely because of these variations in development during early childhood that Dockett and Perry (2002, p. 75) claim that a child who appeared ‘unready’ for school at one point could very well demonstrate ‘readiness’ very soon afterwards. Thus, according to Edwards *et al* (2011, p. 1), the practice of ‘*academic red-shirting*’ (i.e. parents delaying enrolment in primary school for a year after their child is first eligible) is becoming increasingly common. At the heart of this practice is a belief that the ‘gift of time’ enables children to develop cognitively and emotionally, so that they become more school ready.

Delayed school entry doubles the age span represented in the primary reception class – from 12 months to 24 months – which presents challenges for teachers in terms of teaching across a broad age span (Lewit and Schuurmann Baker, 1995). Raftery *et al* (2004) suggest that having a generally older group of children enter the primary reception class can lead to an increase in teachers’ expectations for the whole group because older children ‘*tend to set the pace and establish the norms, causing those who entered when eligible to appear to be behind*’ (Zill *et al*, 1997, p. 4). As a result, children who are younger may seem even more different from their older classmates (Dockett and Perry, 2002).

## 2.4 Early years curriculum

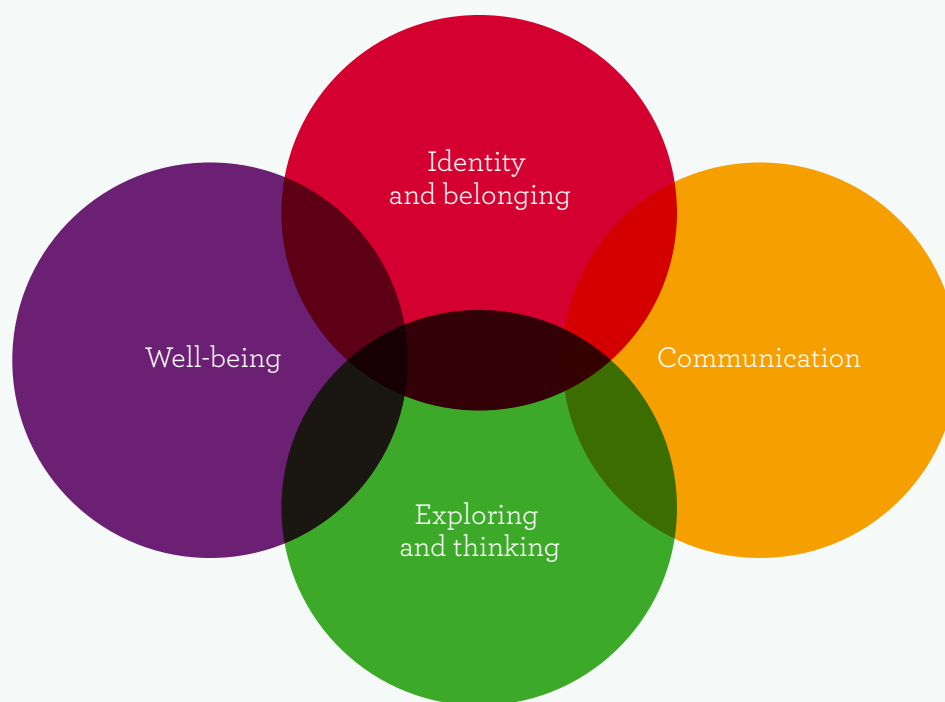
There are three curriculum documents specific to children’s early education in Ireland. As follows:

- *Primary School Curriculum* (NCCA, 1999) applies to children attending primary schools.
- *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009) applies to children from 0-6 years at pre-primary and primary levels. *Aistear* is non-statutory, but must be implemented by early years settings in the free pre-school year.
- *Síolta: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* (CECDE, 2006) also applies to children from 0-6 years at pre-primary and primary levels. Like *Aistear*, *Síolta* is non-statutory.

### Curriculum in early years settings

The impetus for the development of *Síolta: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* (CECDE, 2006) and *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009) came from the *White Paper on Early Childhood Care and Education – Ready to Learn* (Department of Education and Science, 1999). Designed for children from birth to six years of age, *Aistear* applies to parents, pre-primary settings and the infant classes in primary school. It has both implicit and explicit links with the *Primary School Curriculum*. *Aistear* adopts a thematic approach in presenting children’s learning through four broad themes, as illustrated in Figure 1.





**Figure 1: Thematic approach to children's learning and development, based on *Aistear***

Source: NCCA (2009)

*Aistear* is underpinned by 12 principles of learning and development (see Table 2).

**Table 2: *Aistear*'s 12 principles of learning and development**

Early childhood	Connections with others	Learning and development
1. The child's uniqueness	4. Relationships	7. Holistic learning and development
2. Equality and diversity	5. The adult's role	8. Active learning
3. Children as citizens	6. Parents and family and community	9. Play and hands-on experiences
		10. Relevant and meaningful experiences
		11. Communication and language
		12. The learning environment

Source: NCCA (2009, p. 7)

Unlike the *Primary School Curriculum*, which is presented with reference to curriculum content areas, *Aistear* is presented thematically. However, as with the *Primary School Curriculum*, *Aistear* is based on the principle of active learning, whereby children learn by doing, through play and hands-on experiences. These experiences are designed to allow children to explore social, physical and imaginary worlds, manage their feelings, develop as thinkers and language users, develop socially, creatively and imaginatively, while also laying the foundations for becoming effective communicators and learners.

Pre-primary settings participating in the FPSY scheme are required to implement the principles of both *Síolta* and *Aistear*. *Síolta* has been designed as a framework for children from birth to six years of age, and is based on the principle that early childhood pedagogy is expressed by curricula that promote a holistic approach to children's learning and development, and reflect the inseparable nature of care and education. Signifying the differences between ISCED Level 0 and ISCED Level 1 primary school, *Síolta* is intended to 'bridge many of the traditional divides

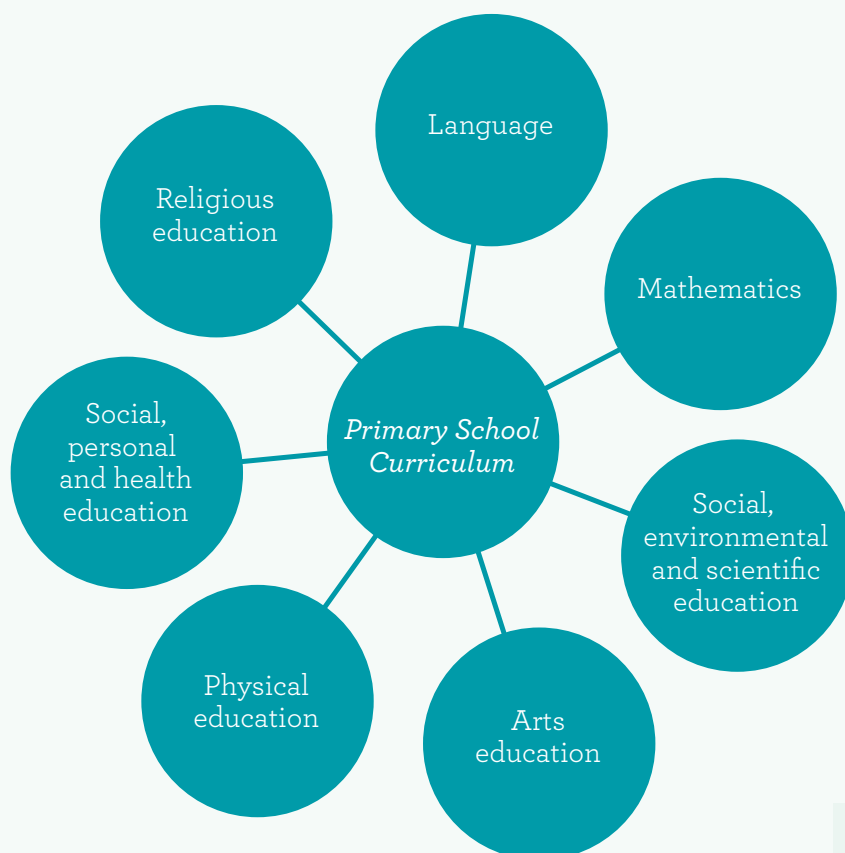


between education and care and between early years settings and the formal education system' (CECDE, 2006, p. 1). To achieve this, it is underpinned by a series of guiding principles and standards. Whereas *Aistear* and the *Primary School Curriculum* have commonalities, *Aistear* is a curriculum framework, rather than a curriculum. As a framework, it is seen 'as a scaffold or support which helps adults to develop a curriculum for the children in their setting' (NCCA 2009, p. 54) and outlines broad principles and curriculum guidance that affords teachers and early years educators discretion in relation to modifying their current practice within the *Aistear* guidelines.

In many ways, the importance of *Aistear* and *Síolta* lies in their potential to maintain the continuity of learning between ISCED Level 0 (pre-primary) and ISCED Level 1 (primary school). As noted by Fabian and Dunlop (2007), frameworks may act as a bridge between formal and informal education settings, thus strengthening curriculum and pedagogical continuity. In order to progress the implementation of *Síolta* and *Aistear* at pre-primary level, DCYA committed €2.5 million to introduce a new mentoring service (Better Start) in 2014 (DCYA, 2014c). This service employs graduates in ECCE to work directly with services to implement the *Síolta* and *Aistear* frameworks.

### Curriculum in infant classes in primary school

The *Primary School Curriculum* (NCCA, 1999) provides for children aged 4-12 years, and is presented with reference to four bi-class groupings, the first of which caters for junior and senior infant classes. The *Primary School Curriculum* is presented in seven subject<sup>2</sup> areas, comprising 12 subjects, all of which feature in the infant classes and are detailed in Figure 2.



**Figure 2: Areas of *Primary School Curriculum*: junior and senior infant classes**

Source: NCCA (1999, p. 40)

<sup>2</sup> To date, the development and implementation of the seventh subject area – religious education – remains the responsibility of the relevant patron bodies.

The *Primary School Curriculum* is a child-centred curriculum that emphasises the uniqueness of each child. It recognises that learning is developmental and should be based on children's prior experience, and within the context of their immediate environment. It advocates hands-on learning through guided activity and discovery methods. Although the importance of play for young children is emphasised in the *Primary School Curriculum*, research in Ireland suggests that children are required to sit for long periods of time in infant classrooms (Murphy, 2004; Hayes, 2004; Moloney, 2011; McGettigan and Gray, 2012). Murphy (2004) examined the degree to which the *Primary School Curriculum* was followed in 16 senior infant classrooms. The findings from this study suggest that teaching methodologies observed were not consistent with those recommended by the *Primary School Curriculum* for infant classes, i.e. play and activity-based practice. Although this study was conducted in the early 2000s, more recent studies identified similar issues a decade later (Moloney, 2011; McGettigan and Gray, 2012).

## 2.5 Professional qualification requirements

### Early years education: Professional requirements

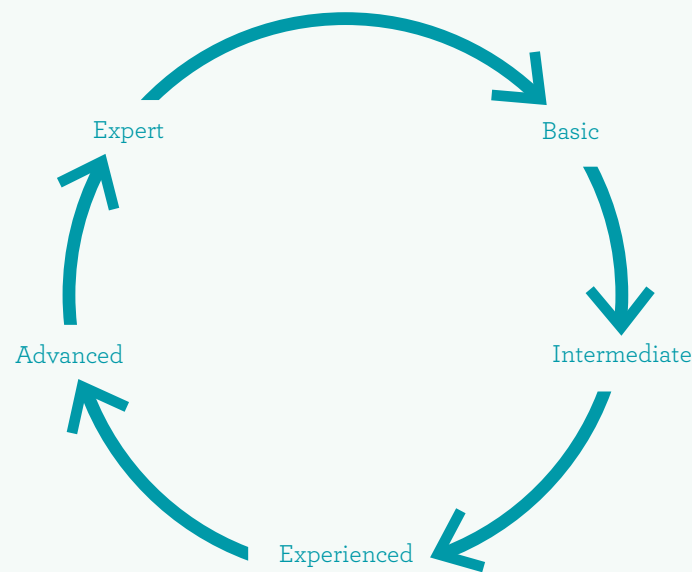
Early years educators working directly with children in the FPSY scheme are required to hold a qualification that is located at Level 5 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). A higher capitation rate was available for services in which all pre-school leaders held a Level 7 qualification or higher, and all other staff working in the scheme held a Level 5 qualification.

For others working within the broader early years sector, there has not been a requirement, up until 2015, to hold a qualification (*see below*). As a result, the sector is characterised by qualified, semi-qualified and unqualified staff, who may or may not have specialist qualifications to work with young children (NESF, 2005; OECD, 2006; DES, 2010; Moloney and Pope, 2011). However, in recognition of the complexity of working with young children, steps have been taken recently to address the issue of professional qualifications within the early years sector.

Since September 2015, all FPSY staff in new services are required to have a Level 5 qualification in ECCE, and team leaders are required to have a Level 6 qualification. From September 2016, all staff in existing FPSY services will be required to have a Level 5 qualification in ECCE, and team leaders will be required to have a Level 6 qualification. While these standards, limited to those early years educators who are providing the FPSY, are set below those internationally recommended for the sector, the revised qualification requirements represent an important recognition that quality is firmly linked to professional qualifications (DCYA, 2015).

In this regard, the OMNA Early Childhood Training Project established at the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT), with funding from the European Employment Now (New Opportunities for Women) initiative, has been particularly relevant. The project ran, in two phases, from 1995 to 1999. OMNA [Phase II] was also supported by the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform. The objectives of both OMNA I and OMNA II included the creation of a mutually agreed framework and quality standard for ECCE training and assessment; the development of a system of accreditation of prior learning (APL) that offered accreditation against a national standard; the establishment of APL cluster groups in various regions throughout the country, and the development of a system of work-based training (WBT).

Building on the OMNA Project, the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform published the *Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development in the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector* in 2002. This framework proposed a range of skills and knowledge considered essential for practitioners at different stages of professional development. In recognition of the need for progression within the sector, five professional development profiles were devised (*see Figure 3*).



**Figure 3: Professional development profiles in Model Framework for ECCE sector**

Source: Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (2002)

While increasing occupational coherence, the Model Framework did not specify any minimum level of training required to work in an ECCE setting (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, 2002). On the other hand, and congruent with the Department of Education and Science (1999) and the Department of Health and Children (2000), the framework endorsed the necessity for highly trained and qualified personnel, provided a practical progression route, and set the minimum standards required in order to work successfully with young children.

In 2010, the Department of Education and Skills published a *Workforce Development Plan for the ECCE Sector* in Ireland (DES, 2010). This plan identified the type of workforce required for developing high-quality pre-primary school services in Ireland, and acknowledged that the skills and qualifications of adults working with young children were critical factors in determining the quality of young children's experiences in ECCE. The complexity of working with young children prior to school entry is increasingly recognised at macro (policy) level in Ireland. The NCCA (2009, p. 19) notes that the descriptive nature of the four themes within *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* 'expressed through a total of ninety-six broad learning goals necessitates a high level of expertise on the part of the adult'. Similarly, the *National Strategy to improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People, 2011-2020* (DES, 2011) calls on early childhood educators to provide young children with the experiences necessary to support children's communication skills; in addition, it acknowledges the link between these early learning experiences and children's acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills.

In order to provide incentives for ensuring higher skills levels among personnel in FPSY settings, capitation funding is paid according to the qualifications of staff in the setting (DES, 2010). All FPSY settings must be led by staff holding a nationally accredited Level 5 major award in childcare/early education. These FPSY settings receive the standard capitation rate per child; a higher rate is payable where settings' rooms are led by staff with a relevant bachelor's degree at Level 7 (Ordinary) or equivalent. Recent figures indicate that in 2011 a total of 4,162 ECCE services were contracted to provide the FPSY to 65,592 children, i.e. 97% of eligible children in Ireland. Of these 4,162 settings, 84.5% received the basic capitation rate and 14.6% received the higher capitation rate.

## Primary school teacher education: Professional requirements

Primary teaching is a highly desirable career option in Ireland, attracting high-performing students into teacher education; in addition, primary teachers enjoy high professional status. Since the 1970s, primary teaching in Ireland is an all-graduate profession. There are two entry routes to primary initial teacher education (ITE) – undergraduate and graduate programmes. Until recently, ITE programmes were either a three-year or four-year concurrent model of education at undergraduate level, leading to an Honours Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) degree (Level 8) or, alternatively, an 18-month postgraduate diploma leading to a Graduate Diploma in Education (Primary Teaching) (Grad. Dip. EPT).

In 2006, the Teaching Council was established under the Teaching Council Act, 2001 as a statutory body to regulate the teaching profession and promote professional standards in teaching (Government of Ireland, 2001). This Act requires that all teachers must register with the Teaching Council and all teacher education programmes must receive professional accreditation from the Teaching Council. A review of international programmes of ITE by the Teaching Council (2011) concluded that in high-performing education systems, teacher education policy is given high national priority. Taking this and other factors into account, the Teaching Council announced that, from the 2012/13 academic year, all undergraduate ITE programmes for primary teachers would be of four years' duration, and from the 2014/15 academic year, all graduate programmes would be of two years' duration.

## 2.6 Adult-child ratios

### Early childhood care and education settings

Adult-child ratios and group size are strictly enforced within the pre-primary sector by means of the *Childcare (Pre-School Services) (No. 2) Regulations 2006* (Department of Health and Children, 2006). These ratios are detailed in Table 3.

**Table 3: Adult-child ratios and space requirements for 3-6 year-olds attending ECCE services**

Age range	Service type	Adult-child ratio	Space requirements
3-6 years	<b>Full day care</b> – offering a structured day care service for pre-school children for more than five hours per day.	1:8	2.3m <sup>2</sup> per child
3-6 years	<b>Part-time day care</b> – offering a structured day care service for pre-school children for a total of more than 3.5 hours and less than five hours per day.	1:8	2.3m <sup>2</sup> per child
3-6 years	<b>Sessional pre-school</b> – offering a planned programme to pre-school children for a total of not more than 3.5 hours per session.	1:10*	2 m <sup>2</sup> per child

\* 'Where a full day care service also caters for children who do not attend on a full-day basis, the adult-child ratio and group size for sessional services should apply as appropriate' (Department of Health and Children, 2006, p. 31).

Source: Department of Health and Children (2006, pp. 45-59)

The maximum number of children allowed in any room in a sessional group is 20, subject to the area/space required being available. The HSE, with responsibility for regulatory enforcement within the pre-primary sector, may fix the maximum number of places for the different classes of pre-primary services, taking into account the age range of the children, the adult-child ratios, the group size and the space per child (Department of Health and Children, 2006). In Budget 2012, changes to the staffing ratios and space requirements under the FPSY were announced. Table 4 details the revised staff ratios that apply in respect of the pre-school session for those services participating in the FPSY from September 2012.

**Table 4: Revised staff ratios for children availing of the free pre-school year**

Number of children	Staff requirement
Up to 11 children	One pre-school leader
12-22 children	One pre-school leader and one pre-school assistant
23-33 children	Two pre-school leaders and one pre-school assistant
34-44 children	Two pre-school leaders and two pre-school assistants

Source: DCYA (2013a)

Children in pre-primary programmes in Ireland benefit from adult-child ratios that are significantly lower than those they will experience in primary school. It is suggested that this presents an additional challenge for young children in Ireland compared with the majority of their European counterparts, who do not generally make the transition to primary school until they are between five and seven years of age.

## Primary schools

The general average class teacher-pupil ratio recommended for primary schools in Ireland is 1:28 (DES, 2013a). A pupil-teacher ratio<sup>3</sup> of 19.2 pupils to one teacher was reported in all national schools, and an average class size of 24.7 pupils for mainstream classes was reported for the 2012/13 school year in Ireland (*ibid*); by contrast, the EU average is 20 pupils per class. The DES advises that school authorities should, where possible, use their autonomy under the staffing schedule to implement smaller class sizes for Junior classes. The Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO) asserts that class sizes in Ireland are the second highest in Europe, slightly behind those in the UK (INTO, 2013). Moreover, the INTO argues that smaller classes are most important when children are young, when they are learning how to be pupils in classrooms for the first time. This issue is exacerbated by the increasing numbers of pupils from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds within classrooms. According to the DES (2010), in the 2009/10 academic year, some 10% of primary school students came from a migrant background. These children represented more than 160 countries and, collectively, they spoke up to 200 languages. Furthermore, an estimated 70%-75% of these students did not speak English as their first language. Commenting on class sizes in Ireland, the OECD (2006, p. 357) argues that they '*are extremely difficult for teaching staff and are unfavourable to child initiative or to individual attention being given to children*'.

Many studies in Ireland have found that, overall, large class sizes are problematic, as they constrain teachers' capacity to use the active teaching methodologies proposed in the *Primary School Curriculum* (NCCA, 2009; Dunphy, 2009; Murphy, 2004; Moloney, 2011; Darmody and Smyth, 2012; INTO, 2013). This finding is supported by a large UK study by Blatchford *et al* (2003, p. 710), who found that '*in smaller classes there was more individual teacher contact with pupils and more support for learning, and in larger classes there was more pupil inattentiveness and off-task behaviour*'.

<sup>3</sup> The pupil-teacher ratio (PTR) is calculated at each level by dividing the total number of pupils by the total number of teaching posts (classroom teachers and support teachers) (DES, 2013a).

Differences of opinion on the implications of research related to the impact of class size on teachers' and children's experiences persist (Biddle and Berliner, 2002; Graue *et al.*, 2007). Positive correlations between class size, student achievement, classroom processes, and teacher and student attitudes have been identified (Glass and Smith, 1979; Smith and Glass, 1980; Finn and Achilles, 1990; Ellis, 1984; Biddle and Berliner, 2002; Blatchford *et al.*, 2003). In general, research findings demonstrate that smaller classes are most likely to benefit children in elementary school, children who are economically or educationally disadvantaged, gifted children, and children with special educational needs (Ellis, 1984; Biddle and Berliner, 2002). However, Blatchford *et al.* (2008, p. 1) contend that '*small classes can be a valuable educational initiative right through school, but could be particularly targeted at lower-attaining pupils at secondary level*'. Recent research findings suggest that in addition to reducing class size, attention should be directed to teacher quality, pedagogical practice and school culture (Graue *et al.*, 2007). From these perspectives, class size emerges as a complex issue, with its potential to affect student achievement inextricably linked to discrete elements of the education system, both at macro and micro levels.

In order to prioritise and address the needs of children and young people stemming from educational disadvantage in Ireland, the Department of Education and Science (2005) developed and published an action plan for educational inclusion. The plan, *Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools* (DEIS), '*focuses on addressing the educational needs of children and young people from disadvantaged communities, from pre-school through second-level education*' (*ibid.*, p. 15). A core element of the DEIS plan was the introduction of the School Support Programme (SSP), which targets early childhood education provision and provides for early intervention classes and lower child-adult ratios in infant classes.

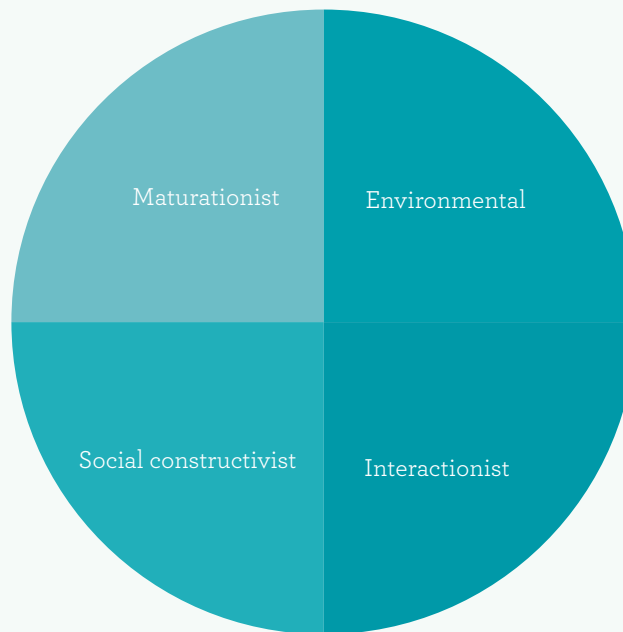
## 2.7 Defining 'school readiness'

School readiness has multiple meanings and connotations (UCD Geary Institute, 2012a and 2012b) and means different things to different people (Saluja *et al.*, 2000; Dockett *et al.*, 2007). According to the OECD (2006), many countries (including Australia, Canada, France, Ireland, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and the USA) adopt a concept of pre-primary education that is greatly influenced by the primary school model. In these countries, school readiness is typically measured with reference to a child's cognitive skills and a child's social and behavioural dispositions (Cooper *et al.*, 2009). Within this construct, pre-primary provision is characterised by a knowledge transfer primary-education model and is conceived chiefly as a 'junior school' (OECD, 2006, p. 61).

The OECD (2006, p. 63) suggests that the "*readiness for school*" model is a powerful one, *holding the promise to Education Ministries of children entering primary school already prepared to read and write, and able to conform to normal classroom procedures*'. However, Choi (2006) argues that pre-primary education should not be equated with early schooling, but rather on building the '*psychosocial foundations*' necessary to undertake abstract learning later in primary school. Similarly, the OECD (2009, p. 15) suggests that pre-primary programmes that utilise inappropriate methodologies (such as teacher-led and sedentary table-top activities) and that provide little outdoor discovery play and a limited choice of activities '*are poorly suited to the psychology and natural learning strategies of young children*'. In the absence of national or international agreement on what constitutes 'school readiness' and how it can be measured (Dockett *et al.*, 2010), readiness for school remains a complex issue (Dockett and Perry, 2002).

## 2.8 Theoretical approaches to school readiness

The complexity of the concept of school readiness is encapsulated in four views of school readiness that have been delineated by Dockett and Perry (2002). These are the maturationist, environmental, social constructivist and interactionist views (see Figure 4).



**Figure 4: Views of school readiness**

Source: Dockett and Perry (2002)

### Maturationist view

The maturationist view sees children as having ‘inner time clocks for development and readiness that is influenced ... by biology’ (May and Kundert, 1997, p. 74). Preparing children for school involves allowing children’s natural potential to unfold. Moreover, as the process of unfolding cannot be accelerated, there is little to be done to facilitate readiness. Accordingly, if development is biological, then the cause of any problem must lie within the individual, rather than the environment or those around the child. Failure to demonstrate readiness is therefore perceived to be a problem of the individual child.

### Environmental view

The environmental view associates readiness for school with the behaviours and learning demonstrated by children in relation to knowledge of colours, shapes, counting, the alphabet, and behaving in a polite and socially appropriate manner (Meisels, 1999). Contrary to the maturationist view (see above), the environmental view concentrates on what the child can do and how the child behaves. It focuses exclusively on external evidence of the acquisition of specific skills and knowledge, which can be directly related to preparing children for the experience of school.



## Social constructivist view

The social constructivist view steers away from the perspective that readiness is inherent in the child (maturationist view) or the demonstration of a set of behaviours (environmental view) and locates readiness in the child's social and cultural context. In this way, perceptions of readiness are generated in a specific context and have meaning only in that context (Dockett and Perry, 2002). Thus, the beliefs, expectations, understandings and experiences of those in the school, and the community in which the school exists, largely determine definitions of readiness for that context. This view accepts variability in a child's development without regarding it as a deficit, and sees learning as being affected by the child's particular social and cultural context.

## Interactionist view

The interactionist view regards readiness as a relative term which focuses on the interaction between the characteristics of the child and the characteristics of the environment in which the child lives. Readiness is a product of the interaction between children's prior experiences, their genetic endowment, their maturational status and the whole range of environmental and cultural experiences they encounter (Meisels, 1996). Consequently, relationships between the child and the school are instrumental in promoting readiness. Mirroring ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), in the interactionist view, the environment and those within it are credited with having a reciprocal influence on the child.

## 2.9 Factors influencing school readiness

Research clearly indicates that age is not necessarily the only, or the best, predictor of school readiness (Graue, 1993; Bowman *et al*, 2001; Meisels, 1999; UCD Geary Institute, 2012a). Many studies have examined the factors that influence school readiness and children's school outcomes. These factors include **race** (Currie, 2005; Duncan and Magnuson, 2005; Fryer and Levitt, 2005); **socio-economic status** (McMunn *et al*, 2001; Duncan and Magnuson, 2005); **gender** (Childs and McKay, 2001; Janus and Duku, 2007; Matthews *et al*, 2009; Blythe, 2011; UCD Geary Institute, 2012a; Isaacs, 2012; Son *et al*, 2013); **health** (Currie, 2005; Janus and Duku, 2007); **family structure** (Ramey and Ramey, 1999; Duncan and Magnuson, 2005) and **parenting** (UCD Geary Institute, 2012a).

Two of the strongest influences on a child's readiness for school have been identified as the family's socio-economic status (SES), measured by household income, and the parents' level of education (particularly the mother's level of education), i.e. completion of second-level or third-level education. Children from lower SES families have been identified as being less ready for school (Janus and Duku, 2007). Studies have identified that these parents may be less able to provide the necessary resources and supports to help their children (Bradley and Corwyn, 2002; Hill *et al*, 2004). Lapointe *et al* (2007) suggest that these families are more likely to live in poor neighbourhoods, and that their children are less likely to be exposed to the behaviours and attitudes which are necessary for school readiness.

Aspects of family structure have also been identified as factors in school readiness. Having more siblings may mean less resources and fewer one-to-one interactions with parents, which have been found to support cognitive and language development (Ramey and Ramey, 1999). Research also indicates that boys are more negatively impacted by family breakdown than are girls (Kerr, 2004; Shaw *et al*, 2011). Sylva *et al* (2004) maintain that parenting and the home learning environment are more important for intellectual and social development than are either parental occupation or education. The authors assert that '*what parents do with their children is more important than who parents are*' (*ibid*, p. 4).



A vast body of literature emphasises gender differences in the context of school readiness and academic attainment within educational systems (Childs and McKay, 2001; Janus and Duku, 2007; Matthews *et al*, 2009; Blythe, 2011; UCD Geary Institute, 2012a; Isaacs, 2012; Son *et al*, 2013). Janus and Duku (2007) examined school readiness in terms of the main 'at risk' factors: socio-economic status, family structure, child health, parent health and parent involvement in literacy development. They contend that in terms of school readiness, '*being a boy carries with it a 2.3 times higher likelihood of vulnerability than being a girl*' (*ibid*, p. 395). This is supported by Isaacs (2012), who examined the school readiness of poor children in the USA using data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Birth Cohort (ECLS-B). She found that '*girls are markedly more school ready than boys; the average 5-year old girl is 16 percentage points more likely to be school ready than the average boy*' and claims that the gender gap is '*driven by behavioural differences*' (*ibid*, p.8). Other studies have also identified behaviour as an issue with regard to the gender differences observed upon school entry, with boys from low-income families displaying more problems with behaviour than were displayed by girls (Miech *et al*, 2001; Raver, 2004; UCD Geary Institute, 2012a).

In relation to school readiness, research findings suggest that gender difference are driven primarily by behavioural differences (Miech *et al*, 2001; Raver, 2004; UCD Geary Institute, 2012a; Isaacs, 2012; Son *et al*, 2013). Specific behaviours required in school include initiative, curiosity, cooperativeness, engagement and persistence, all of which affect school readiness since they refer to the child's inclination to use these specific skills, knowledge and capacities (Fantuzzo *et al*, 2007). Similarly, Conn-Powers (2006) identifies other key aspects to learning in school and includes enthusiasm, curiosity and persistence on tasks, as well as gender, temperament, cultural patterns and values.

However, girls' advantage over boys in terms of school readiness may be culture dependent.

Al-Hassan *et al* (2010) looked at school readiness of First Grade children in Jordan, using an adapted version of the Early Development Instrument (EDI), and noted similar findings to Western studies in all variables except gender. Their findings indicate that '*boys had higher levels of school readiness than did girls*' (*ibid*, p. 6). They attribute this to cultural differences in Jordanian society compared to Western society.

Son *et al* (2013) in their study of children in South Korea examined behavioural regulation in terms of attention, working memory and inhibitory control, and its relationship to school readiness skills. The research findings indicated that gender differences did not exist for behavioural regulation, and that behavioural regulation could not be used to predict school readiness outcomes. However, the findings suggested that boys' early reading skills tended to vary, depending on behavioural regulation, whereas girls' early reading skills were not so strongly related to their behavioural regulation skills. These research findings (from South Korea) contrasted with those of Matthews *et al*'s (2009) US study, which found that behavioural regulation could predict school readiness.

Other studies indicate that the gender gap can often be perpetuated by adults' beliefs, values and behaviour. In their study, Childs and McKay (2001) examined whether teachers' ratings of children's classroom learning behaviour and their perceptions of achievement by children from low- and middle-income backgrounds differed at the start of primary education at age five years, and later at age seven years. They found that teachers had lower expectations of children coming from the lowest SES categories, especially for boys. This research suggests that teachers (being mostly female) showed very fixed and rigid perceptions of boys who found it difficult to settle in class. Evidence from other studies highlighting the differences in adults' interactions with boys and girls supports this view (Chaplin *et al*, 2005; Clearfield and Nelson, 2006). Other studies, however, contend that schools cater to learning styles that favour girls over boys (Zill and West, 2001) and suggest the need to make changes that would better meet boys' learning needs (Spence, 2005). In a study evaluating an early childhood intervention programme in Ireland (UCD Geary Institute, 2012a), findings showed that

teachers rated girls' school readiness higher in relation to physical health and well-being, social competence and emotional maturity, language and cognitive development, communication and general knowledge.

Other studies suggest that there may be a link between child health and maternal health and school readiness. Currie (2005) examined race and child health and maternal health, and surmised that child health and maternal health can account for at least some of the racial differences in school readiness. Janus and Duku (2007) also found links between child and parent health and school readiness; they reported that children with poor health had higher risks of being vulnerable in terms of school readiness than children without health issues. In terms of parent health, they contend that '*parent smoking emerged as the strongest parent health indicator and increased children's likelihood to be vulnerable almost 1.3 times*' (ibid, p. 397).

## 2.10 Current approaches to school readiness

In 2012, UNICEF published a conceptual paper on school readiness, entitled *School Readiness: A Conceptual Framework*, in which it proposed three interrelated and equally important dimensions of school readiness: 'Ready Children'; 'Ready Schools' and 'Ready Families'. However, the paper failed to consider the role that early years environments may have on children and the importance of the wider community. In the context of this research study, it is suggested that in examining school readiness, an ecological approach encapsulating the following factors should be considered: family and school readiness; ready society/ready community; ready pre-schools; ready schools; and ready educators. Each is discussed in more detail below.

### Family and school readiness

The nature of the relationship between children and their parents, and the quality of parenting, exert a strong influence on children's learning and development, including school readiness (Centre for Community Child Health, 2008; Weiss and Stephen, 2009). Despite the evidence suggesting that parents' beliefs, attitudes and commitment to education are crucial to children's school success (Melhuish *et al*, 2008; Alexander *et al*, 1994), parents often underestimate the influence they can have on their children's educational outcomes (Arnold *et al*, 2007). Findings from the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) project in the UK indicate that the experiences and interactions parents have with their children are highly significant in terms of educational outcomes (Sylva *et al*, 2012). Parents also benefit from having a say in what is offered in the programme and what goes into the curriculum (Best Start Expert Panel on Early Learning, 2007). The EPPE study found that attending a high-quality pre-school, together with having a stimulating early years home learning environment, leads to better development outcomes and later school success for children. Siraj-Blatchford (2010, pp. 466-67) concludes that '*families do have the capacity to support their children in different ways when they have the will, the means and an understanding of the need to do so*'.

### Ready society/Ready community

Support for school readiness must be evident at both the broader societal level and at community level through Government policies and programmes that support investment in the early years sector (Dickens *et al*, 2006; Mustard, 2006; Farrar *et al*, 2007; UNICEF, 2012). The importance of community support for, and involvement in, school readiness is highlighted by the report from the Stronger Smarter Institute (2010, p. 4), which states that '*there can be no school readiness without community readiness*'.

In order to address the learning and development needs of children prior to starting school, a wide range of community-based services, including high-quality early education and health

services, needs to be put in place, and communities must communicate to policy-makers the supports necessary for their young children (Dockett *et al*, 2010; Halle *et al*, 2008). Kagan and Rigby (2003) conclude that ready communities provide safe, supportive and nurturing environments for children and their families. Links between community environments and measures of children's school readiness highlight the importance of community culture, stability and heterogeneity in promoting preparedness for school (Lapointe *et al*, 2007).

## Ready pre-schools

The 'schoolification' of early childhood education refers to a trend whereby in preparing children for transition to school, a focus is maintained on the development of academic skills, stressing the importance of reading and writing rather than the development of social skills, independence, curiosity and child agency (PACEY, 2013). There are also growing concerns that mixed-age groupings typically found in the infant classes of a primary school lead to an escalation of the first year of the school curriculum, as teachers teach the older and more knowledgeable students (Rafoth *et al*, 2004; Dockett *et al*, 2007).

This, in turn, creates an expectation that children in pre-primary education settings should be ready to engage in formal academic activities on entry to primary school. Ultimately, therefore, this process results in the 'schoolification' of pre-primary education, where early childhood programmes are underpinned by primary school academic activities and children spend much of their time indoors, learning their letters and numbers in preparation for primary school (OECD, 2006; Moloney, 2011; Pantazis and Potsi, 2012). Indeed, in the Irish context, specific pre-primary education settings in the research were compared to a 'scaled-down' version of school (Moloney, 2011). While play methodologies may be utilised in the pre-primary setting, these are often confined to table-top games, with little of the outdoor discovery play and wide choice of activities that are features of the Nordic system (OECD, 2004, 2006 and 2009; Moloney, 2011; PACEY, 2013). Lewis (2010) observes that in Sweden there is little signage or labelling of items in the environment to promote literacy and numeracy; rather, the environment provides unrestricted floor space where children can play and express themselves creatively. It is also the case that Nordic countries offer mixed-age early years services as the norm (OECD, 2006).

It has been pointed out that an early introduction to academic learning is unnecessary and can impact negatively on children's development (Claxton, 2008; House, 2012). House (2012) observes that most children under six years of age need lots of time to play, to develop social skills and to learn to control their impulses. Palmer (2009) cautions against the potentially negative impact of fast-forwarding children's education during their early years.

## Ready schools

There is an emerging consensus regarding the importance of schools' readiness for children (Pianta and Kraft-Sayre, 2003; Dockett and Perry, 2007a; Dockett *et al*, 2010; UNICEF, 2012). This recent addition to the school readiness model (which is rapidly gaining momentum, e.g. see Arnold *et al*, 2007) is closely related to the interactionist view of school readiness, whereby relationships between the child and the school are instrumental in supporting readiness (see Section 2.8 above). Dockett *et al* (2010, p. 1) suggest that '*lack of readiness is not a problem of children being insufficiently skilled to learn at school, but instead it is where there is a mismatch between the attributes of individual children and families, and the ability and resources of the school and/or the system to engage and respond appropriately*'.

Pianta and Kraft-Sayre (2003) perceive schools' readiness for children as a relative term that focuses on the interaction between the characteristics of the child and the characteristics of the environment in which the child lives, is cared for, and is educated. Based on this concept – that schools should be ready for children, as much as children are ready for school – Child Trends (2001) proposes 10 characteristics of ready schools (see Table 5).

**Table 5: 10 characteristics of ‘ready schools’**

Characteristic
› Attention is directed to the transition between home and school, sensitivity to cultural differences is demonstrated, and schools actively and meaningfully support parents.
› Continuity between pre-primary and primary settings is fostered.
› High-quality instruction and appropriate pacing of learning are core features of practice.
› Schools understand that learning occurs in the context of relationships.
› There is a commitment to enabling the success of every child, and sensitivity to the needs of individual children (including the effects of poverty, race and disability) is evident.
› Consideration is given to the success of every teacher and every adult who interacts with children during the school day, and teachers are supported in developing their skills.
› Practices and programmes are revised if they do not benefit children.
› There is a commitment to professional teacher preparation and development.
› Supportive and welcoming learning environments, including appropriate class sizes and quality curriculum, are a feature of practice.
› Family engagement is promoted.

Source: Child Trends (2001)

UNICEF (2012) suggests that ready schools focus on characteristics that are most beneficial for children’s holistic development and comprehensive learning. In order to ensure coordination of, and continuity between, the pre-primary and primary curriculum, ready schools develop curricula and instructional practices that meet children’s interests and promote family engagement (Henderson and Mapp, 2002). The power differentials between schools, individual families and community-based settings require that schools take an active role in leading such development.

## Ready educators

Teacher quality is linked to high standards in curriculum implementation and student outcomes in early childhood (Early *et al*, 2006; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2005). Ready schools promote a social learning environment where the relationship between teachers and children is critical for the development of social, ethical, emotional, intellectual and physical competencies (UNICEF, 2012). The specific aspects of the teacher-child relationship might vary across cultures, but it has been proposed that responsive, mutually respectful and reflective teaching is always a central element for enhancing child learning outcomes (CECDE, 2006; UNICEF, 2012). Positive teacher-child relationships are noted as key factors in children’s school success (Hamre and Pianta, 2001; Early *et al*, 2006 and 2007). Teacher-child relationships are bi-directional, with teachers and children contributing to the nature of the relationship (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Rudasill *et al*, 2006; Hayes, 2008). Strong emotional support from teachers has been linked to enhanced engagement and academic performance (Curby *et al*, 2009); in addition, school policies and programmes that promote positive teacher-child interactions are reported to facilitate children’s school readiness (Mashburn *et al*, 2008).

## 2.11 Perspectives on school readiness

Research indicates that those children who experience a stressful or disruptive school entry are more likely to have difficulty settling into the new culture, and may need more assistance in adjusting to the school environment. One protective dimension that mitigates against stress at school entry is the extent to which there are shared understandings and expectations about school – and what it expects of young children – across the range of key adults in children's lives, i.e. parents/carers, early years educators and primary teachers. In its document *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*, the OECD (2006) found that early learning experiences are more likely to be of high quality and beneficial to children where there is 'service integration' across settings, and it notes that 'conceptual integration is also desirable, which involves shared goals and values, as well as common understandings of children, children's services and learning' (*ibid*, p. 230). The following section reviews the current literature on perspectives of school readiness from the viewpoint of parents, educators and children themselves.

### Parents' perspectives

In 1999, Kernan and Hayes published the findings from their study on *Parent and Teacher Expectations of 4-year-olds in Ireland* from the IEA Preprimary Project, a large cross-national study of pre-primary education. In total, 113 teachers and 382 parents completed questionnaires in relation to their views or beliefs about the relative importance of areas of development identified as commonly associated with pre-school-aged children. These areas included self-expression skills; language skills; social skills with peers; social skills with adults; self-sufficiency skills; and self-assessment skills. The findings demonstrate that parents selected 'social skills with peers' as the most important skill for young children to learn. However, parents in both pre-schools and primary schools designated as disadvantaged ranked 'pre-academic skills' highly (such as pre-reading and pre-writing activities). In examining the least important skills, there was consensus among parents that motor/physical skills were the least important for children to learn. Overall, two major points of agreement between teachers and parents were (i) the importance assigned to the development of social skills with peers and (ii) the low regard for the development of motor/physical skills. The findings indicate that 'teachers and parents present a low to moderately coherent set of expectations for early education' (Kernan and Hayes, 1999, p. 26). This presents as a challenge in view of the authors' suggestion that 'the greater the convergence between attitudes, aims and objectives of parents and teachers for early learning, the better for the child' (*ibid*, p. 35).

A further perspective on school readiness has been reported by McGettigan and Gray (2012). Their study explored school readiness in rural Ireland from the perspective of 145 parents who were asked about their child's pre-primary experiences and readiness for school. The authors found that 78% of the full sample (n=113) started school at four years of age, with a further 22% (n=22) starting at five years of age. Of the parents (n=137), 92.5% initially believed their child was ready for school, but on reflection, 23% (n=32) believed they were too young. Before starting school, the majority of children (89%, n=129) attended some form of pre-school. Findings indicate that 96% (n=124) of the children who attended some form of pre-school were considered ready for school. Conversely, a high percentage of the children who remained at home (n=16) were reported to be not ready for school (n=13).

In terms of their perceptions of school readiness, parents ranked 'looking forward to starting school' and 'making friends' more highly than 'sitting still'. Similarly, being able to 'talk to other children' was considered more important than 'following rules'. Interestingly, 'knowing the alphabet', 'being able to write their name' or 'hold a pencil' were not rated highly by parents. Social and emotional abilities were also ranked more highly than the ability to 'hold a conversation', 'enjoy looking at books' or 'catch a ball' (McGettigan and Gray, 2012, p. 21).

## Educators' perspectives

The literature suggests that teachers, early years educators and parents have different expectations of children at school entry. Arnold *et al* (2007) found that teachers want children to be healthy, confident, active and attentive, communicative, enthusiastic and curious about new class activities, while also having the ability to follow directions and show sensitivity to others. Other research indicates that primary school teachers value children's abilities to adjust to school, fit in with other children and function in class (Moloney, 2011; Perry *et al*, 2000). It appears that teachers place less emphasis on the cognitive domains (such as reading and writing) than on the physical/motor, self-help and language domains (Abu Taleb, 2013).

Achieving a consensus of expectations in the pre-primary sector is more challenging. For example, Perry *et al* (2000) claim that early years educators stress personal development, action competence and general skills in preparing children for school. Conversely, a range of literature suggests that parents and early years educators focus on pre-academic knowledge and skills, such as identifying sound-letter relationships, number and counting relationships, colours and shape recognition, holding a pencil and writing one's name, opening a lunch box and putting on and taking off a coat (Diamond *et al*, 2000; Arnold *et al*, 2007; O'Kane and Hayes, 2010; Moloney, 2011; UNICEF, 2012). Meisels (1999, p. 21) asserts that readiness is more than a checklist of skills; rather, it is '*something demonstrated by the child "in situ" and over time*'. Despite this, Farran (2011) argues that definitions of school readiness tend to involve assessments of children prior to school entry, in order to determine their relative readiness. This approach may potentially place an undue burden on children and their families by creating an expectation that children are required to meet pre-determined school targets and aspirations. It further reinforces the environmental view of school readiness (see Section 2.8 above) and contributes to what has been identified as the '*schoolification of early childhood services*' (OECD, 2006, p. 138).

In the IEA study (Hayes *et al*, 1997), there was considerable agreement among teachers with regard to the two most important skills for children to learn between the ages of three and five years. These were identified as 'social skills with peers' and 'language skills'. In relation to the third most important skill, some variability was found, with teachers in schools designated as disadvantaged ranking 'pre-academic skills' as important, whereas teachers from schools not designated as disadvantaged identified 'self-expression'; groups from both settings ranked 'self-sufficiency' as also important for children. In examining teachers' lower rankings, the authors note that while '*there is not the same level of agreement across settings as was evident for the most important skills, there is some level of consensus*' (*ibid*, p. 32). 'Social skills with adults' and 'motor/physical skills' were ranked among the least important for all setting types. Moreover, early years educators in both pre-schools designated as disadvantaged and those designated as not disadvantaged ranked 'pre-academic skills' among the three least important skills for young children to learn.

As part of the Preparing for Life (PFL) Early Childhood Intervention Programme, the UCD Geary Institute has been conducting the 'Children's Profile at School Entry' (CPSE) survey to assess the levels of school readiness of junior infant children attending local primary schools in several communities designated as areas of socio-economic disadvantage (UCD Geary Institute, 2012a). This annual representative survey began in 2008 and continued through 2013 (covering a six-year period), and has been carried out each year between October and December. It gathers information from parents/caregivers and teachers via a survey questionnaire, and response rates to date have yielded a total CPSE cohort of 448 children. Using the Short Early Development Instrument (S-EDI, a 104-question checklist measuring children's readiness to learn at school before entry to Grade 1), data were collected across five domains of school readiness: physical health and well-being; social competence; emotional maturity; language and cognitive development; and communication and general knowledge. Teachers in Waves 2, 3 and 4 of the CPSE cohort indicated that approximately 50% of children were definitely ready for school when they started in September. This finding is consistent with



teacher ratings in a linked project for the 2004-2005 cohort (Kiernan *et al*, 2008), and suggests that few improvements were made in children's school readiness, as reported by teachers, in the PFL communities over a six-year period.

Examining the importance placed on the five school readiness domains of the S-EDI revealed differences in teacher and parent/caregiver perceptions (UCD Geary Institute, 2012a). In particular, although the largest percentage of teachers (34%) indicated that 'emotional maturity' was the most important domain, 37% of teachers indicated that 'physical health and well-being' was the least important domain for a child's school readiness. By contrast, parent/caregiver ratings showed a distinctly different pattern: the largest percentage of parents/caregivers (39%) rated the 'physical health and well-being' domain as the most important for a child's school readiness, and 30% rated 'language and cognitive development' as the least important developmental area. According to the UCD Geary Institute (2012a), the divergence in teacher and parent/caregiver values may indicate that different capabilities are focused on in the home and in the school environment. In common with the OECD (2004 and 2006), the report suggests that *'exposure to diverging messages about the skills which are important for school success may adversely affect children's school readiness'*.

Similarly, a study by Moloney (2011), seeking views on school readiness from a sample of stakeholders including 10 primary school teachers and 15 early years educators, found differences in perceptions of school readiness. As with the UCD Geary Institute (2012a) and McGettigan and Gray (2012) studies, Moloney found that junior/senior infant teachers rated 'social and emotional development' as more important than 'cognitive development' upon school entry. Thus, from a teacher's perspective, school readiness was about children being *'able to process orders or directions, able to understand that you need to sit down, take turns, and understand direct orders'* (Moloney, 2011, p. 243). On the other hand, even though early years educators highlighted the social and emotional aspects of school readiness, they tended to place considerable emphasis on *'helping children to build up their concentration levels ... get them used to sitting down like in school ... give them worksheets ... teach them to colour inside the lines, teach them their numbers and A, B, Cs ... get them used to routines and schedules'* (Moloney, 2011, p. 238). Again, these findings point to a difference of opinion between early years educators and parents, who prioritised children's social and emotional development rather than their being able to write their name or hold a pencil (McGettigan and Gray, 2012). According to Moloney (2011), the focus on letters and numbers in particular may be associated with an increasing focus on literacy and numeracy at pre-primary level, which early years educators believed to be embedded in national policy. Therefore, not only were these activities associated with translating macro (policy) requirements into practice within settings, they were also perceived as 'concrete evidence' of learning where parents could see the results (*ibid*, p. 234). Early years educators further linked these activities with addressing perceived shortcomings in the infant classroom, such as large class sizes, teacher-child ratios and didactic pedagogy.

## Children's perspectives

In research conducted on transitioning to school, O'Kane (2007) and O'Kane and Hayes (2008 and 2010) sought the views of 60 young children. They found that children in both early years settings and infant classes were clearly able to express their opinions on school. Children in early years settings were comfortable describing the differences they expected when they moved on to what they called 'Big School'. They spoke in concrete terms about school bags, lunches and homework. Some expected that 'Big School' might be a bit like pre-school. Similarly, junior infant children could clearly and confidently discuss life in primary school. They explained the rules governing school life and cited these as being important for the pre-school children to understand. They could confidently describe their own world view and they provided insights into life as junior infant pupils which were both perceptive and informative. They recognised that they were in school to learn 'stuff,' including spelling, sounds, words and numbers.

McGettigan and Gray (2012) also accessed the perspectives of a small sample of children. Children reported that they were expected to sit for long periods of time, to be quiet, to solve mathematics problems, to write, to know their letters, and to complete their homework. Failure to comply led to a telling-off or being placed in 'the naughty corner'. By contrast, the children remembered pre-school as a happier place where they could engage in a range of play-based activities of their own choosing (*ibid*, p. 26).

## 2.12 Summary

While there are many similarities between pre-primary provision and primary school, considerable differences exist in relation to curriculum, qualifications, adult-child ratios and class sizes. The research indicates that junior infant teachers' expectations of children transitioning to primary school may differ from those of early years educators. Notably, it is recognised that the *Primary School Curriculum* (NCCA, 1999) was designed for children starting school at four years of age with limited, if any, experience of out-of-home educational settings. However, much has changed in relation to children's early education since 1999. Significantly, the introduction of the universal free pre-school year in 2010 has made pre-primary experiences increasingly accessible to children in the year before they start formal schooling. In addition, the past 10-15 years have brought significant advances in our understanding of how children learn, which in turn has informed the development of *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009). All of these factors impact on school readiness in Ireland and create varying expectations of children within both pre-primary and primary school contexts.





### 3. Methodology

This chapter presents the methodology designed by the Research Team to gather data, including the perceptions of school readiness among parents and educators and the views of children availing of the free pre-school year.

### 3.1 Research design

The study utilises a sequential exploratory research strategy where diverse types of data are generated to provide an understanding of the research issue (Johnson, 2008; Creswell, 2009). The research was therefore conducted in two phases, with research findings from the first phase informing the development of a second phase of data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2013). Accordingly, Creswell (2013, pp. 47-48) notes that the qualitative phase *'may be used to build an instrument that best fits the sample under study, to identify appropriate instruments to use in the follow-up quantitative phase, or to specify variables that need to go into a follow-up quantitative study'*. The findings from Phase 1, which was concerned with exploring the views of a range of interview participants, were therefore used to develop a quantitative online questionnaire administered in Phase 2 to gather baseline data from a broad sample of early years educators and junior infant class teachers. Both datasets were then integrated during the subsequent analysis and interpretation phase.

### 3.2 Phase 1: Qualitative research methods

The initial qualitative phase used face-to-face and telephone interviews to explore the attitudes, opinions and perspectives of parents, early years educators, early years managers, junior infant class teachers and primary school principals (see Table 6). In addition, the Mosaic Approach (Clark and Moss, 2011) was employed to explore pre-primary children's awareness and understanding of school by (i) encouraging children availing of the free pre-school year to draw pictures to express their ideas about starting school; and (ii) participating in child conferences where their awareness and understanding of the primary school were explored. The sampling frame and research instruments employed in the study are described in the following sections.

**Table 6: Overview of research participants in Phase 1**

Participants	Number
Parents of children availing of the free pre-school year	30
School principals	7
Junior infant class teachers	7
Early years managers	9
Early years educators	9
Children	57
<b>Total</b>	<b>119</b>

#### Phase 1: Sampling

In order to select **pre-primary settings** for participation in the study, details of all settings participating in the free pre-school year (FPSY) were obtained from the Early Years Education Policy Unit in the Department of Education and Skills (DES). This list included both private (N=3,099) and community (N=1,102) settings. In its guidelines for the study, the Irish Research Council had stipulated that the research should focus on the FPSY scheme and that pre-primary settings involved in other initiatives should be excluded. Consequently, 92 pre-primary settings

were excluded since they were involved in Early Start programmes,<sup>4</sup> the roll-out of *Síolta* and/or the National Early Years Access Initiative.<sup>5</sup>

A list of all **primary schools** was obtained from the DES website. This list included both mainstream (N=3,158) and special schools (N=141) as of September 2011. As with any population, primary schools comprise a number of identifiable sub-groups or strata (Gideon, 2012; Gravetter and Forzano, 2012). In ensuring that each sub-group was adequately represented in the study, a stratified random sample was selected from the primary school listing. As shown in Table 7, primary schools were stratified using stratification criteria related to socio-economic grouping (mainstream schools involved in the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) initiative (DES, 2005)/mainstream schools not involved in this initiative); geographical location (urban/rural); composition (boys/girls/mixed gender); language (Irish/English-medium schools); and needs-based (special school). This stratification ensured that the sample of primary schools was representative of the total population of primary schools in Ireland. Further details on the selection of the stratified random sample of primary schools are given below.

### Purposive sampling

Having established the stratified random sample for the **primary schools** for inclusion in Phase 1 (qualitative data collection), a purposive sampling technique was further applied to the sample. As the term suggests, a purposive sample meets specific needs (Cohen *et al*, 2007; Gideon, 2012), requiring the researcher to make theoretically informed decisions as to whom to include in the research sample (Lampard and Pole, 2001; Hardy and Bryman, 2004). The seven primary schools detailed in Table 7 were purposively chosen from the stratified random sample in accordance with the stratification criteria outlined above and with reference to the access/proximity requirements of the study related to the geographical location of the Research Team.

**Table 7: Overview of purposive primary school sample**

School	Location	Grouping
1	Urban	DEIS
2	Urban	Gaelscoil
3	Urban	Mainstream
4	Urban	Special school
5	Rural	Mainstream co-ed
6	Rural	Gaeltacht
7	Rural	Mainstream single-sex

The school principal and one junior infant class teacher from each of the seven selected schools agreed to participate in a face-to-face interview. Each participating primary school was invited to provide the names of two feeder **pre-primary settings**. In this way, 14 pre-primary settings were invited to participate in the research and 10 settings were agreed. Although purposefully selected, these settings were representative of the overall sample of pre-primary settings participating in the FPSY, since they were selected from both community-based and privately run centres. This sample also included three *naíonraí*, or pre-primary settings that

<sup>4</sup> The Early Start Programme is a pre-primary initiative funded by the Department of Education and Skills in designated areas of urban disadvantage. The programme is for children aged between three years and two months and four years and seven months in September of the relevant year, who are at risk of not reaching their potential within the school system.

<sup>5</sup> The National Early Years Access Initiative is a collaborative partnership between The Atlantic Philanthropies, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, the Early Years Education Policy Unit in the Department of Education and Skills, and Pobal. It is a tailored initiative that funds 11 projects nationally to bring about improved outcomes for children and families in areas of designated disadvantage.

operate through the medium of Irish. The pre-primary settings were asked to distribute an information letter, together with an invitation to participate in the research study, to parents of children accessing the FPSY in the setting. Parents were asked to indicate their consent to participate in a telephone interview; to provide a contact telephone number; to identify a suitable day and time when they could participate in an interview, and give permission for their child to participate in a child conference. Subsequently, nine early years managers and nine early years educators were interviewed face to face, whereas 30 parents of pre-primary children participated in telephone interviews. In addition, 57 children attending the FPSY in these 10 settings participated in child conferences.

## Interviews

### Face-to-face interviews

Face-to-face interviews were undertaken with nine early years educators, nine early years managers, seven junior infant class teachers and seven primary school principals. A semi-structured interview schedule was used (see *Appendix 3*); the schedule comprised a list of issues to be discussed, while also allowing freedom to follow up on points if necessary, thus enabling the researchers to gain '*access to the thoughts and perceptions*' of interviewees in relation to school readiness in Ireland (Thomas, 2009, p. 164). This format facilitated two-way communication between the researchers and the interviewees, enabling participants to speak freely and openly about their attitudes, opinions and perceptions of school readiness (Roberts-Holmes, 2005).

### Telephone interviews

While cognisant of concerns in the literature regarding the 'unnatural nature' of telephone interview conversations (Irvine *et al*, 2012), the Research Team considered that telephone interviews were particularly useful in research involving parents, because scheduling the time of the interview could be more easily aligned with competing demands on parents' time. Moreover, telephone interviews enable researchers to interview large numbers of participants in different geographical locations over a short timescale (Scott and Morrison, 2005; Ary *et al*, 2010). As the data collected from telephone interviews are comparable with those gathered from face-to-face interviews (Irvine *et al*, 2012), telephone interviews were therefore considered an appropriate means of engaging parents in the research. Like the face-to-face interviews, the telephone interviews were also guided by a semi-structured interview schedule (see *Appendix 3*). The interviews were undertaken with 30 parents, and provided a unique insight into parental perceptions of school readiness as well as parents' aspirations and concerns for their child upon entry to primary school.

## Children's involvement: the Mosaic Approach

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) offers a vision of the child as an individual and as a member of a family and community, with rights and responsibilities appropriate to his or her age and stage of development (UN, 1989; Fabian and Dunlop, 2006). Clearly influenced by the UNCRC, Ireland's National Children's Strategy, entitled *Our Children - Their Lives*, published by the Department of Health and Children in 2000, states that consulting with children is increasingly perceived as each child's human right. In terms of current policy and early years discourse (Fraser *et al*, 2004), the notion of the child as a researcher is emphasised, encouraged and valued.

In order to provide for pre-primary children's meaningful contribution to this study, the Mosaic Approach was utilised (Clark and Moss, 2011). This method was developed with three-year-old and four-year-old children in an attempt to find practical ways to respond to the voice of the child. Children's representations of their world through visuals (such as photographs, maps or drawings) can be combined with interviews and/or observations in order to gain a deeper

understanding of their lives. In this way, children are co-constructors, with adults, of meaning, in an integrated way that combines verbal and visual methodologies.

By seeking the child's voice, this study sought to include a reflection of what matters most to children when going to primary school (Dockett and Perry, 2002). Thus, following a review of the various parts of the 'mosaic', it was decided, given the age profile of the pre-primary children in this study, that child conferencing and 'draw and tell' were the most appropriate strategies to use for exploring their views.

**Child conferences** (Clark and Moss, 2011) were undertaken with children who were availing of the FPSY scheme. Dupree *et al* (2001) describe child conferences as a particular form of informal structured interview, devised for the express purpose of finding out about young children's views. While child conferences mirror discussion groups, they are inherently flexible and responsive to children's needs (Clark and Moss, 2011), combining opportunities for children to talk in a structured way or through a play-based approach (Clark *et al*, 2003). In this study, 10 child conferences were undertaken with 57 children, and between four and six children participated in each conference; all were conducted within the children's pre-primary settings. The researchers utilised a semi-structured discussion format (*see Appendix 3*), together with the children's commentary on their drawings (*see below*) to collect data related to the children's perspectives on starting school.

**Drawing** is increasingly recognised as an important means of expression for children (Lewis, 1995; Malchiodi, 1998), including those who do not have the vocabulary or developmental ability to express themselves. It is therefore also appropriate for children with special educational needs or for children from diverse cultures (Holliday *et al*, 2009). Drawing is much more than a simple representation of what children see before them; like writing, it can be better understood as one way in which children make sense of their experiences, and express and communicate their thoughts, beliefs and ideas (Cherney *et al*, 2006; Trautner and Milbrath, 2008; Einarsdottir *et al*, 2009; Lambert *et al*, 2014; Dyson, 1998; Anning and Ring, 2004). Drawings were therefore used in this study to engage pre-primary children in discussions about their awareness of, and understanding of, primary school, and to augment the research findings.

Participating children were encouraged to talk about their drawing and to share their meaning with the researchers – 'draw and tell'. This occurred in two ways: where children were facilitated in expressing their ideas through imagery and visual spatial memory, and where children described the drawing's characters, objects, events, sequencing, graphic details or other relevant characteristics (Wright, 2013).

### 3.3 Phase 2: Quantitative research instruments

This section provides the rationale for the chosen sampling format and for developing and administering an online survey. It also presents details of the construction of the survey instrument, which comprised a self-administered questionnaire.

#### Phase 2: Sampling

As it was not practical to collect data from every single primary school (N=3,299) or pre-primary setting (N=4,201) in Ireland, samples of the entire population of primary schools and pre-primary settings participating in the FPSY were selected. A probability sampling technique was used to ensure that findings from the quantitative analysis could be generalised to the larger population of primary schools and pre-primary settings.

## Probability sampling

Babbie (2012) holds that while the number of people selected in a sample is important, it is less important than *how* people are selected. Probability sampling is the best way of ensuring that the sample represents the population at large, is free of researcher bias, and that the resultant research will stand up to scrutiny (Sekaran and Bougie, 2010; Babbie, 2012). Probability sampling entails drawing the sample in such a way that every member of the population has a known, non-zero probability of selection. This requires, firstly, a list of the entire population (which acts as the sampling frame) and, secondly, selection from this list using methods of random selection. In the version of probability sampling used here, which comprises simple random sampling within a proportionally stratified sampling design, every school and pre-primary setting for inclusion in the study has a known and equal probability of selection (Sekaran and Bougie, 2010). Selection from the DES sampling frames was carried out using random numbers generated by the website [www.random.org](http://www.random.org)<sup>6</sup>

In order to improve the representativeness of the samples, and thereby increase the precision of estimates derived from them, random selection took place within a stratified random sampling design. In this study, proportional stratified sampling was used – in other words, the number of items selected from each stratum was proportional to the total number in that stratum.

With a complex questionnaire covering many different topics or variables, it can be difficult to identify appropriate stratifying variables. In addition, information on all desirable stratifying variables may not be available in the sampling frame. For the sample of **primary schools**, the stratifying variables chosen were (i) composition (boys/girls/mixed gender); (ii) level of needs (mainstream/special schools); (iii) socio-economic grouping (DEIS/non-DEIS); and (iv) size of settlement in which the school is located (city, large, medium or small town, or rural area). Information on the first three attributes was obtained from DES sources. The assignment of primary schools to settlement categories was based on geocodes for all schools, which were obtained from the All-Island Research Observatory (AIRO) based in NUI Maynooth. Using the geocoding information, schools were mapped and assigned to settlement categories on the basis of settlement boundaries defined by the Central Statistics Office (CSO) for the 2011 Census of Population. For the **pre-primary settings**, there was no geocoding information readily available, and neither gender composition nor level of needs is a relevant stratifying variable. This sample was stratified on the basis of ownership/management structure (private/community) only, which might be considered a proxy variable for socio-economic status.

Finally, the sample size was determined. It was decided to sample 500 schools and 500 pre-primary settings. In implementation, the sample size for primary schools was slightly smaller, at 496 (477 mainstream schools and 19 special schools). The reason for this is rounding effects when determining the number of schools in each stratum of the sample.

From the sample of 500 pre-primary settings and 496 primary schools contacted, the response rate was 29.6% (n=148) of pre-primary settings and 23.8% (n=114) of primary school settings. The dropout rate was 7.4% (n=11) in pre-primary settings and 5.3% (n=6) in primary school settings.

With the proliferation of Internet usage, electronic surveys have become a valuable tool for obtaining information from respondents living in different parts of a country; this is facilitated by the ease of access to such surveys, coupled with their low cost (Evans and Mathur, 2002; Bryman, 2008). Furthermore, online surveys can be '*administered in a time-efficient manner, minimising the period it takes to get a survey into the field and for data-collection*' (Evans and Mathur, 2002, p. 198). Consequently, for this study an online survey was considered an efficient method for building on the qualitative data gathered in Phase 1 of the study.

<sup>6</sup> [www.random.org](http://www.random.org) is operated by Randomness and Integrity Services Ltd. and provides a service to generate truly random numbers. The random functions built into most statistics applications normally generate pseudorandom numbers.

## Development of research questionnaire

Having decided on an online survey format, the questionnaire was administered using the PsychData® online survey development and hosting application (Locke and Keiser-Clarke, 2014). Two English-language versions of the online questionnaire were developed: one for pre-primary settings and one for primary schools. The online questionnaires comprised 46 questions (pre-primary/early years) and 47 questions (primary) and each took approximately 20 minutes to complete. An Irish-language version of the two questionnaires for Irish-medium schools and *naíonraí* was prepared and administered using the SurveyMonkey® online survey development and hosting application; seven responses were received, all from *naíonraí*, and were translated into English and the data were inputted to the main database. The full list of questions in all four questionnaires (English and Irish) is provided in Appendix 4 of this report.

## Designing the survey questions

The research questions used in the online survey were influenced by the research findings from Phase 1 of the study. For example, children's age emerged as one of the key determinants of the age at which children start school in Ireland. In order to determine the prevalence of this particular aspect of school readiness, a question relating to school starting age was included in the survey. To ensure consistency and compatibility of the data collected in both surveys, the same questions were asked in the both the pre-primary and primary questionnaires.

A range of question types was included (see Figure 5). Five different types of **closed questions** were asked:

1. **Dichotomous questions**, where respondents choose between two alternatives, commonly 'Yes' or 'No', thus preventing ambivalent answers.
2. **Attribute questions**, to gather information relating to those participating in the research study, e.g. type of school; numbers of children in infant classes; location of early years settings.
3. **Multiple-choice questions**, which indicate the categories that were relevant to participants from a list of several alternatives.
4. **Likert Scale questions**, which measure either positive or negative responses to a number of statements associated with the concept of school readiness.
5. **Rank order scaling questions**, which determine the intensity of attitudes towards school readiness.

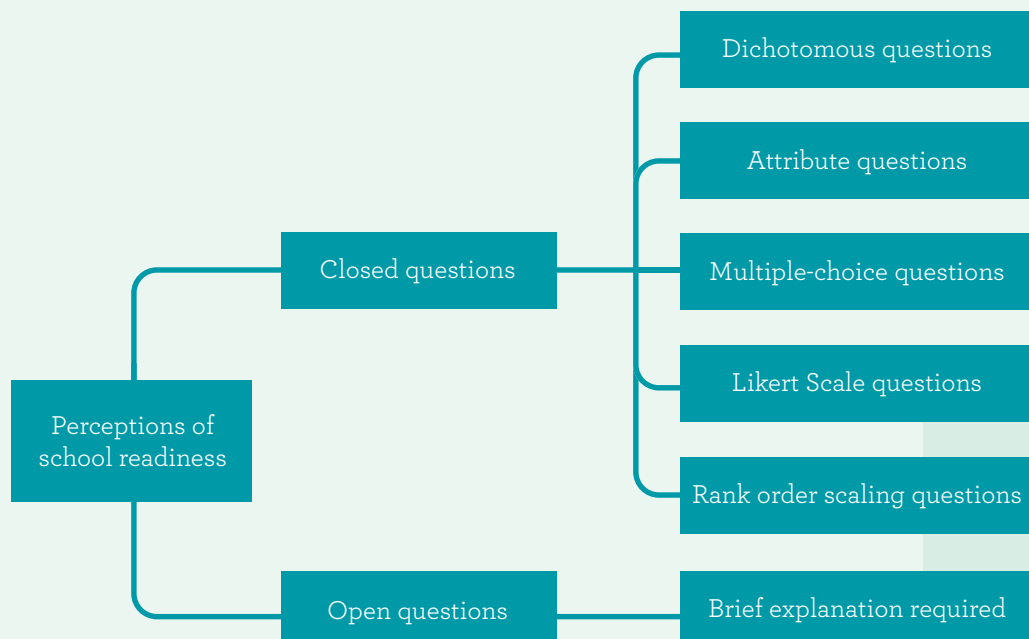


Figure 5: Overview of online survey question types



In addition to closed questions, a number of **open-ended questions** were also included, in order to gain access to additional information unattainable through the use of closed questions.

### Piloting the research questionnaire

A pilot test was carried out, based on online survey piloting guidelines detailed by Andrews *et al* (2003) and Dillman (2000). The questionnaires and the usability of the survey system were reviewed by the Research Team and by colleagues in MIC and DIT (see *Appendix 4*). Following this, the survey was piloted (i) with students enrolled on the Bachelor of Arts programme in Early Childhood Care and Education (BA ECCE) at DIT and (ii) with volunteers in the target population of pre-primary settings and primary schools in the Limerick region (10 volunteers completed the survey online and gave feedback in order to test usability and minimise measurement error). Following this initial piloting, minor format, spelling and wording changes were incorporated into the final version of the questionnaires.

## 3.4 Data analysis

### Qualitative data analysis

A qualitative comparative approach to data analysis was adopted, based on the techniques and procedures recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006), Glaser and Strauss (1968) and Miles *et al* (2014). NVivo software was employed in adopting the analytical approach; this allowed for close engagement with the data, and enabled codes to be assigned to data segments electronically in an uncomplicated and effective manner (QSR International, 2013). Importantly, NVivo also serves as a tool for transparency in that its logging of data movements and coding patterns, and mapping of conceptual categories and thought progression, rendered all stages of the analytical process both traceable and transparent.

Nine discrete cycles of analyses took place, involving three separate cycles of coding; three cycles of managing codes (one for the initial categorisation of open codes and two for data reduction through consolidating codes into a more abstract theoretical framework); and three cycles that used writing itself as a tool to prompt deeper thinking about the data, and from which the findings and conclusions were drawn (Bazeley, 2009).

In order to further illuminate the analysis in the qualitative phase, corpus linguistics software in the form of Wordsmith Tools was used (Scott, 2011). Corpus linguistics involves the principled collection of empirical data in spoken or written form; these data are stored in electronic format and are available for analysis using search and analysis software such as Wordsmith Tools (O'Keeffe and McCarthy 2010). Typical functions of the software are its ability to instantly generate concordances of a search word, which allows for the identification of patterns of use and categorisation of these patterns (see *Figure 6*).

r what the child brought out whatever they had done 'oh yes they're **at school**'. So now I think because it's a free service that the parents attitudes have then know that they are able to do the things that are expected of them **at school** so I suppose so a lot of areas. So they are the most important areas for you it id 'we hope it won't actually interfere with what are doing with them **at school**' now Montessori programme is a teaching programme so we do teach them how here two children that had been in the nannies and had done a year **at school** they came and gave me a huge hug. I was so surprised to see them in the cch in morning in the junior infants classroom where they will be **attending school** and we have a talk with the parents and tell them a little bit about the school. ? Ammmm again I think it really depends on what they are doing **before school**. So before school if they are four five or six and they haven't gone to Montessori So it really depends on the child and also I think what went on **before school** as well. So I would say five provided that they had a bit more input from the for link it really depends on what they are doing before school. So **before school** if they are four five or six and they haven't gone to Montessori or done like the i ne children you know they would achieve as much in their year **before school** it hasn't made any impact on it. Ok do you think that services and supports in are trying to raise a couple of themes. the age at which children **begin school** the preparation for school and the thoughts you have as principle how best to p you want to say. Okay. Thinking about the age at which children **begin school** what age do you say is best for children to begin school at? I personally think i children begin school what age do you say is best for children to **begin school** at? I personally think that children starting at five or close enough to it are better that it will be but that those classes will be much more ready to **begin school** at four and a half or five. Is your early intervention class after the preschool you re back to them but I think the more parental input we have the **better school** we are. Have teachers communicated their views to you on school readiness at g to do something else than at? There is about a lots of toys in a **big school** because is very big school its a very big school Because there is two two two

**Figure 6: An extract of the concordance of play in the transcribed interview data using Wordsmith Tools**

Source: Scott (2011)



Corpus linguistics software also allows for the generation of word frequency lists, where the rank order of words in sub-sets of the data can be compared. Word frequency lists can be used to generate keyword lists. Keywords are those which are most unusually frequent in a set of data when its word frequency list is compared with a baseline frequency list (the baseline corpus is referred to as the reference corpus). The Limerick Corpus of Irish English was used as a baseline corpus in this research for the generation of keywords (Farr *et al*, 2004).

In relation to the data generated through the 10 child conferences, Whitehead's (2010) overview of the value of narratives, and how they can assist in the interpretation of qualitative data, provided three analytical lenses through which the child's voice was analysed:

1. The narratives were viewed as commentaries in which the children were sharing their understanding of something that has happened (e.g. a recent visit to 'Big School') or their expectations of something that was about to happen (e.g. starting 'Big School').
2. The narratives contained important '*autobiographical information about the children's encounters with the world of social and cultural norms and conventions, including how things are done*' (Whitehead, 2010, p. 116).
3. The narratives contained information about how the children felt about going to 'Big School', including the things that they value, their anxieties, their aspirations and their fears.

The findings from the child conferences are presented in Chapter 5 in a composite manner, grouping individual children's responses together thematically rather than isolating individual participants. Direct quotes from the interview scripts are selected and children's drawings are used to augment the findings.

### Quantitative data analysis

Data were exported from the PsychData programme (Locke and Keiser-Clarke, 2014) and SurveyMonkey (SurveyMonkey Inc., 2015) into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) computer programme (IBM, 2014). Quantitative data were analysed using the SPSS software, after being coded, cleaned and cross-validated by two independent raters. Data were presented using descriptive statistics (i.e. means and frequencies, as applicable) according to the relevant participant group (pre-primary sample or primary sample, or both, where data were matched across samples). Where possible, between-group differences were examined and statistical significance levels for such differences were reported. As the quantitative survey was designed to include matched questions for both the pre-primary and primary sample, it was possible to examine between-group differences on the variables that matched across groups. For these variables, frequencies from the cross-tabulation were presented according to participant group, and Pearson's chi-square test (Pearson, 1900; Fisher, 1922) was run to test whether there was a relationship between type of setting (pre-primary or primary) and a given outcome variable, such as familiarity with *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*.

## 3.5 Ethical considerations

### Phase 1 – Qualitative

In qualitative research, ethical issues may arise from the complexities associated with researching people's private lives and placing their accounts in the public arena (Miller *et al*, 2012). Consequently, ethical clearance was sought from, and granted by, the Research Ethics Committee at the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) prior to the commencement of the research.

## Adult participants

Adult participants were given clear and extensive information about the study (see *Appendices 1 and 2*). They were advised that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw without consequence at any time. They were further advised that their anonymity and the confidentiality of the information provided by them would be maintained through the use of identification codes. Participants were also informed of the purposes for which the research would be used. Based on the provision of all relevant information and participants' understanding of the nature and purposes of the research, participants voluntarily agreed to participate in the study (Roberts-Holmes, 2005; Shaw *et al*, 2011). Thus, informed consent was sought from, and given by, participants (see *Appendix 2*) prior to participating in the research (Lodico *et al*, 2010).

## Child participants

DCYA (2012) asserts that a key ethical consideration in research involving children is the level of risk or potential harm (physical, psychological or social) to which children may be exposed. Lansdown (2011) further suggests that for children's participation to be effective, ethical, systematic and sustainable, certain principles and standards must be complied with. In this study, the Research Team adhered to the principles of good practice developed by DCYA (2012) for the protection of children and young people. Each researcher working directly with children was Garda-vetted, and a child-centred inclusive approach was consistently adopted (Clark and Moss, 2011; Department of Health and Children, 2000; DCYA, 2012). Detailed information about the study was provided to parents of all eligible children, and parental consent for their child's participation was sought and obtained. Children's informed assent was also secured prior to their participation in the research.

## Informed assent

DCYA (2012) asserts that a child's agreement to participate in research should be sought independently of a parent consenting to his or her child's participation in the research. A child's ability to understand the consequences of participating in research is influenced by the type and context of the research (Medical Research Council, 2004). However, as noted by DCYA (2012), if information is presented in a child-appropriate manner and if children are supported throughout the decision-making process, it is possible for children to assent to participate. Thus, for this study, full and frank information about the study's aims, methods and outcomes were provided in a child-accessible format to all participating children (see *Appendix 2*). Prior to engaging children in 'draw and tell' activities and child conferences, the researchers informed children that their participation was entirely voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time, without consequence.

Drawing on Lewis (2002), Loveridge (2010, p. 5) highlights the need to acknowledge children's right to exercise '*informed dissent ... [where they] consciously decline to engage or respond to particular questions or activities*'. Loveridge suggests the need for ongoing dialogue with those who know participants well, as a way of checking whether or not the child is assenting to ongoing involvement. In this study, researchers remained vigilant at all times during child conferences by being attuned to the children's verbal and non-verbal communication, and being alert to any clues which indicated that they did not wish to continue.

## Phase 2 – Quantitative

Ethical issues pertinent to the quantitative phase of the research were also considered. In this regard, participants were asked to read an information statement and consent form (see *Appendices 1 and 2*) prior to entering the online survey. They were also asked to print a copy of both documents for their records.

Furthermore, to ensure privacy, the PsychData programme (Locke and Keiser-Clarke, 2014) places data in a secure environment that prohibits responses being viewed by clicking the 'back' button. The survey was loaded directly from the server and was not a prior cached version. Temporary history files associated with the survey were automatically eliminated on completion of the survey. PsychData encrypts all responses when they are being transmitted to the PsychData database. Data are then stored safely in an isolated database, which is backed up daily, and which can only be accessed by the researcher using the correct username and password.

Participants' responses were anonymous and confidential as soon as they were submitted to the PsychData server. Forced-choice question and answer options were kept to a minimum. Debriefing information was presented to respondents on completion of the survey. Identical considerations applied to the Irish version of the questionnaires hosted by SurveyMonkey.

### 3.6 Research validity and reliability

This study adopted a sequential exploratory approach to the research process by utilising qualitative and quantitative methods; moreover, it provided a transparent account of the procedures adopted in relation to the aim and purposes of the research, the development of the research instruments, data collection and analysis (Schwandt and Halpern, 1998). The validity and reliability of the data were also supported by methodological triangulation, which allows results from surveys, focus groups and interviews to be compared in order to see if similar results are emerging (Guion *et al*, 2011). Given that the data emerging from both phases of this investigation into perspectives of school readiness have revealed broadly consistent findings, this sequential exploratory approach to the research methodology has resulted in enhanced confidence in the data emanating from the study.

### 3.7 Summary

This chapter has presented the rationale for the research methodology adopted in this study on the perspectives of school readiness as they are understood by parents, early years educators, early years managers, primary school principals and junior infant teachers. It has also provided a rationale for the research methodology selected to capture the voice of the child. The blend of a qualitative and quantitative approach, through the adoption of a sequential exploratory model, allowed for multi-perspective and meta-interpretations of the findings, and deepened the understanding of the multiple concepts of school readiness which emerged from the diversity and scope of the findings (Harwell, 2011; Olsen, 2012).

Detailed data from the qualitative and quantitative phases of this research study are presented in Chapters 4-6, and are followed by a discussion of the emerging issues in Chapter 7.





## 4. Analysis of qualitative data

School readiness is a multi-faceted and complex concept, influenced by and entwined with a range of interrelated factors at macro (policy), meso (interrelationships) and micro (pre-primary and primary) levels involving the child, the family, the early learning sites and the local community. The findings from Phase 1 of this study are presented here conceptually and textually under a number of themes reflecting this complexity and dynamic, with extracts from the data employed to demonstrate the emergent themes and to support claims of authenticity.

## 4.1 Understandings of school readiness

Drawing on the theoretical approaches to school readiness as proposed by Dockett and Perry (2002), this study found that respondents primarily conceptualised school readiness from the maturationist and the environmental perspective (see *Section 2.8*). At one end of this continuum, children are perceived as having inner time clocks for development (May and Kundert, 1997) where they are ‘ready to learn when they are ready’ (Meisels, 1999, p. 47). In this view, the child’s natural potential cannot be accelerated and there is little to be done to facilitate readiness. Accordingly, if development is biological, then the cause of any problem, and its resolution, must lie within the individual, rather than in the environment or those around the child. At the other extreme of this continuum, school readiness is also linked to external evidence of the acquisition of specific skills and knowledge: *‘Knowing colours, shapes, one’s address, and how to spell one’s name ... and with counting to 10, saying the letters of the alphabet, and behaving in a polite and socially expected manner’* (Meisels, 1999, p. 47).

There was considerable overlap between the two approaches and neither emerged as more significant than the other. Consequently, while all participants<sup>7</sup> agreed on the need for children to demonstrate social and emotional maturity upon entry to school, they also associated the concept of school readiness with *‘the mechanics’*, as one parent put it, of being able to sit down, follow instructions, take direction, obey rules, hold a pencil, listen, concentrate, complete tasks and recognise colours. In many cases, children were also expected to know letters and numbers, and in some instances to be able to write short sentences. The findings are presented in greater detail below.

## 4.2 Approaches to school readiness

While all 62 adult participants spoke of the need for social and emotional maturity on school entry, they also recognised the importance of independence, which was primarily associated with self-care skills. One principal of a primary school summarised this requirement in terms of the child’s *‘ability to do various tasks for himself or herself ... as in maybe opening and closing their bag, hanging up their coat, putting up and down their chair’*. Similarly, junior infant teachers felt that mastery of these skills was essential for children prior to school entry. One teacher noted that if children *‘can take their coat off and hang it up, then that is a great thing because if I have to take it off and unbutton thirty coats, that takes an awful lot of time out of the day’* [junior infant teacher]. Another teacher stated that being able to go the toilet independently is *‘a big thing in junior infants ... You can’t just decide “I have to go to the toilet with Johnny now”, but what about the other 24 children. It’s not on ... and it’s quite upsetting for children if they can’t manage’* [junior infant teacher]. In the context of class sizes in Ireland, which are among the highest in Europe (INTO, 2013), mastery of these and other skills was considered essential for children on entry to school: *‘It’s a hard job ... for the teacher in junior infants ... they [children] should be able to do those things for themselves’* [principal, primary school].

<sup>7</sup> Sample comprised 62 adult participants: school principals (N=7), junior infant teachers (N=7), early years managers (N=9), early years educators (N=9) and parents (N=30).

Early years managers and educators also agreed that self-care skills were essential for children progressing to school:

‘Children should be able to look after themselves and look after their own belongings, be aware of what’s theirs and others ... go in and out to the toilet themselves, be able to open up lunch boxes, general things that they are going to have to do for themselves on a daily basis.’ [early years manager]

Another early years manager characterised a child who was not ready for school as:

‘Playing, busy moving around from one thing to the other all the time, and a little lack of maturity yet. They are just not ready to sit down to actually work ... their concentration wouldn’t be there ... they would be moving, moving, moving.’

While parents also believed that self-care skills – such as ‘go to the toilet themselves, wash their hands’, ‘hang up their coats’, ‘open their lunch boxes and manage their school bag’ – were important aspects of school readiness, a primary concern for parents related to social and emotional maturity.

All 30 parents spoke of the need for children to make friends. As one parent put it, ‘the academic side comes after [emotional readiness] ... it’s more important that the child is secure and has the ability to mingle and make friends ... it’s down to the emotional maturity of the child’. Another parent agreed that children need to ‘be able to interact well with other children’ and felt that if ‘it was going to be too difficult for them I wouldn’t send them’. These views were supported by early years managers, one of whom stressed the importance of children’s ability ‘to speak for themselves, as well as being able to make friends, to share and play, as well as being able to ask and tell the teacher when you are upset’.

Participants emphasised the centrality of emotional maturity and independence, where children were ‘independent enough to leave their parents’ [principal, primary school] to come into school and ‘wave bye-bye to Mum and say “see you later”’ [junior infant teacher]. One teacher described how she had three or four children in her class ‘who cried and cried, and you have to leave them after a while and let them get a grip on the basics of it ... [They] weren’t mature enough. They had no independence in any way ... you have to do everything for them’ [junior infant teacher]. One early years manager emphasised that children need to ‘be able to say goodbye to their mums, to walk in, to sit down, to be able to get into a new classroom environment’. This point is supported by a primary school principal who expected children to be able to ‘look after themselves and their things in a controlled environment ... listen to the teacher ... pay attention to the teacher ... articulate their needs ... get on with others and share’.

While parents were concerned about social and emotional maturity, they felt that acquisition of pre-academic skills also acted as an indication of readiness for school. More than 66%, or 21 of the 30 parents interviewed, mentioned the need for children to know letters, numbers and sounds and to be able to hold a pencil and write, before starting school. Parents variously suggested that children should know ‘all the letters of the alphabet’, ‘words and numbers’ and ‘be able to hold the pen and write’. One parent believed her child was ready for school because ‘she knows her numbers. She can spell her name. She can nearly write her name’.

A focus on the skills necessary for school entry at this early age is a point of concern raised in a report by the OECD (2006), which noted that Ireland, along with Australia, Canada and France, adopts a concept of pre-primary education that is greatly influenced by the primary school model. In these countries, school readiness is typically measured by reference to a child’s cognitive skills, such as maths, reading and verbal ability; and a child’s social and behavioural dispositions, such as externalising and internalising behaviour, attention problems and social problems (Cooper *et al.*, 2009). Such a focus on preparing children for school has been identified as contributing to the ‘schoolification’ of pre-school, where the development of social skills, independence, curiosity and child agency is overshadowed by an emphasis on

academic skills (PACEY, 2013). The impact of this downward pressure to prepare children for school entry is evident from the findings of this study.

A number of primary school principals and teachers referred to the need for children to understand the basic rules and structures that govern the school day, observing that children who are 'not willing to accept that there are rules and there are structures throughout the day [and] want to just do what they want to do ... don't seem ready as such to come in and just get on with the school day' [junior infant teacher].

One primary school principal observed that 'we don't expect anything academic, and teachers prefer that', adding:

'It's more organisational skills and social skills that we expect. We do expect that they'll be at a point where they're ready to learn and follow the curriculum ... children aren't ready to learn, not ready to start writing, they can't read paragraphs, they can't do colouring, they aren't ready for the level of the curriculum we have in place.'

Results suggest that a number of early years settings responded to this expectation by introducing children to programmes that are used in the infant classes in primary school as a preparation for transition to the junior infant classes. For example, one explained how the children 'would use some of the junior infants reading books, like the Jolly Phonics® [Lloyd, 1992] books. We would also use the Figure It Out Maths® [Roche, 2009] programme and we'd use the Treasury Skills English® [Deegan, 2006] programme' [early years educator]. The rationale for using 'a few books that are used in a lot of the junior infants primary schools' [early years educator] is to provide the children with an 'introduction to those books and the kind of things they'll be doing when they move on to junior infants' [early years educator]. In another setting, the early years educator indicated that Jolly Phonics may not be suitable for pre-school children as it is a 'little bit of a tongue twister'. Consequently, she used Letterland® (Wendon *et al*, 2003), which is also used in infant classes in primary school, because it is 'the only one that teaches them good, proper pronunciation of the sound'. These findings indicate that early years educators are both aware of and sensitive to the structure within primary school and how it might impact on a child's school readiness.

Parents were also concerned about academic preparation in pre-school settings. One parent summarised this by pointing out that 'in general terms, [children must] be able to concentrate, to listen, to sit down, to handle school ... [and if children are] not able [to do these things], they're not ready for school'. Another parent described how her three-and-a-half-year-old son 'has 10 minutes of homework every evening'. This parent had been approached by the educators in her son's early years setting and informed that 'over the last few months he has been falling behind a little bit ... on small things, you know, because he wasn't paying attention ... is already getting prepared in a small way for school ... from doing [homework]' [parent]. This parent was concerned that if concentration is 'a difficulty for him, it will concern me that he is not ready'.

The most critical skill identified across all stakeholder interviews was the child's 'ability to work and their ability to sit down to do work' [early years manager]. 'They need the patience to be able to sit' [early years educator], 'to sit for a long time' [principal, primary school]. The majority of participants also expected children to have attained a broad range of academic skills, as seen in the following comments from parents and staff alike: 'reading, writing, numbers' [early years manager], 'recognise the start of their names or how to write their names - phonics - be able to hold the pencil and they are able to concentrate on and finish tasks' [early years manager], 'writing your name ... a little writing ... definitely able to sit, not to be walking around the room and put up the hand if they have a question' [junior infant teacher], 'listen to the teacher ... can pay attention to the teacher, listen to instructions and carry out instructions' [parent], where children are able to 'sit down and be able to do their numbers and their colours ... [you are giving children] a good start' [early years educator].



One primary school principal empathised with children ‘who find it very hard to settle down’ and expressed ‘so much pity for them because it’s just not natural for them to be sitting at a table, and colouring, and paying attention to things ... they like to move’. This point was also raised by a parent, who noted that ‘in school, there is that pressure to conform, whereas if they can be themselves for a bit longer that is good for them too ... school is [not] necessarily the best place for children ... [since once they] are in school, it’s unstoppable ... they are in the system and on a journey that they can’t get off’.

Some participants noted the importance of communication as a skill necessary for school readiness. A teacher suggested that school readiness is not about ‘who knows their numbers and their letters ... [rather] language is key’ [junior infant teacher]. Another teacher elaborated on this, saying children should have ‘a reasonable level of language – good speech, good language, good organisation skills ... a certain level of concentration’ [junior infant teacher]. The need for language and communication skills was reiterated by another teacher who believed that children’s ‘language and communication skills are very important when they come in [to school ... so that they can] understand what I’m teaching or what’s happening on a day-to-day basis. [Children] need to have the language first of all to understand me’ [junior infant teacher].

Directing attention to supporting children’s fluency in language was highlighted by a principal in a rural Gaeltacht school, who described children as being like ‘little sponges and ... it seeps in, it’s kind of like osmosis, and they don’t know, they haven’t a clue that something so different is happening, and if Irish starts [in pre-school], it is much easier for us going through the school and the teacher in the middle classes if the infants have Irish ... immersion should be happening in the infants ... for the most part, you know, just using Gaeilge, Gaeilge, Gaeilge all the time’.

An early years educator also endorsed the importance of learning in early childhood, suggesting that ‘we really underestimate their potential and their ability to just soak it all in’. She emphasised the importance of a child’s holistic development, observing that ‘primary [school] sometimes forgets the other aspects of the children’. While this educator indicated a certain dissatisfaction with how a child’s learning and development may be supported in infant classes, she went on to state that ‘the higher the standard we have for them the better’.

A small number of participants worked with children with special educational needs. One primary school principal observed that ‘we don’t have any level we would have expected a child to have reached. Wherever they are on their own continuum, we are happy to take them and we work from that’. However, she also noted that children with special educational needs should be ‘learning to take instructions, learning to follow instructions and building up their vocabulary’. Concurring with this perspective, an early years educator working with children with special educational needs described the approach to increasing their concentration and attention span in her setting: ‘You gradually increase your circle time, and you’d start with a few minutes and now some of them will sit for 45 minutes, which is huge for children with autism and to have that attention span, so I think that developing those things are the big thing’. This educator also observed that children with special educational needs are required ‘to follow direction, how to sit and how to follow rules’.

In this scenario, readiness is viewed as a product of the interaction between children’s prior experiences, their genetic endowment and their maturational status. However, the impact of the child’s environmental and cultural experiences, and the importance of the relationships between the child and the school in promoting readiness, were not often referred to.

As with the maturationist view of school readiness, where the development of children’s independence was identified as impacting positively on the junior infant teacher’s ability to implement the curriculum, the environmental approach was also linked to the teacher’s ability to begin to implement the curriculum from when the child starts school:

'If all the pre-work is done ... the colouring, the turn-taking, being independent, all of that is very important, because the primary school teacher can start on what she wants to do straightaway ... so that solves a lot of problems for us.' [principal, primary school]

Findings from this study indicate that the demands of the primary school in relation to the delivery of specific curriculum content, and the high adult-child ratios, exerted a powerful influence on the perceptions of all participants. This resonates with the findings from related research, confirming that children are required to sit for long periods of time in infant classrooms in Ireland (Moloney, 2011; McGettigan and Gray, 2012).

Few respondents specifically acknowledged the value of play as a learning mechanism for young children. Play is recognised as a learning methodology particularly suited to the development and learning needs of young children in both the *Primary School Curriculum* (NCCA, 1999) and in *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009). Learning and developing through play is one of the four central 'Guidelines for Good Practice' identified by *Aistear*. It states that '*much of children's early learning and development takes place through play and hands-on experiences. Through these, children explore social, physical and imaginary worlds. These experiences help them to manage their feelings, develop as thinkers and language users, develop socially, be creative and imaginative, and lay the foundations for becoming effective communicators and learners*' (NCCA, 2009, p. 11). Similarly, the *Primary School Curriculum* (NCCA, 1999, p. 30) is '*based on the uniqueness of the child and the particular needs of children at this stage of development. The informality of the learning experience inherent in it, and the emphasis it gives to the element of play, are particularly suited to the learning needs of young children.*' Despite this, references to play tend to be less about the value of the process to learning and development, and more about the general play behaviour of young children, which was not considered relevant to school readiness.

As emerged from the literature review (see *Chapter 2*), early years educators and primary teachers highly rate children's abilities to adjust to school, fit in with other children, and function in class (Moloney, 2011; Perry *et al*, 2000). However, unlike Abu Taleb (2013) who found that teachers place less emphasis on the cognitive domains such as reading and writing than on the physical/motor, self-help and language domains, the findings from this study indicate that teachers and principals do emphasise the cognitive domains such as reading and writing.

In accordance with a maturationist-environmental view of school readiness, early years managers and educators in this study stressed the importance of personal development and general skills in preparing children for school (Perry *et al*, 2000), while also emphasising the importance of pre-academic knowledge and skills, such as identifying sound-letter relationships, number and counting relationships, colours and shape recognition, holding a pencil and writing one's name (Diamond *et al*, 2000; Arnold *et al*, 2007; O'Kane and Hayes, 2010 and 2013; Moloney, 2011; UNICEF, 2012). These findings reflect a view of school readiness across all respondents that is influenced by expectations of which skills will enable a child to be regarded as compliant in the classroom (Farran, 2011; Meisels, 1999). This approach may place an undue burden on early years settings, children and their families by creating an expectation that children are required to meet pre-determined school targets and aspirations, and may contribute to the 'schoolification' of the FPSY.

### The words used by participants

Corpus linguistics keyword<sup>8</sup> analysis reveals differing concerns and priorities among the participants interviewed. For example, the statistically significant key nouns used by the early years managers and educators, primary school principals and teachers differed in number and form from those used by parents when talking about readiness for school.

<sup>8</sup> Keywords are those which are unusually frequent when statistically compared to a baseline.

Key nouns used by primary school principals and teachers, early years managers and educators	Key nouns used by parents
language; skills; learning; strategies; expectations; continuity; transition; communication; policy; independence; difference; environment; concentration; enrolment; maths; writing; indicators; boys; colouring; phonics; ratios; routine; disability; toilet; autism; transitions; progress	libraries; services; sports; teacher; preparing; supports; homework; concern; facilities; bullying; confidence; skills; learning; concerns

Similarly, a comparison of key adjectives and adverbs, as highlighted in the following table, also brings to light differing concerns and priorities among the various stakeholders.

Key adjectives and adverbs used by primary school principals and teachers, early years managers and educators	Key adjectives and adverbs used by parents
social; emotionally; emotional; academically; culturally; independent	socially; social; academically; prepared; mature; excited; strict; nurtured; emotionally

### 4.3 School starting age

#### Participants' views

Each separate group of adult participants showed a preference for five years of age as the optimal school starting age. When aggregated, a considerable majority of all respondents (47 of 62) identified five years as the preferred school starting age (see Figure 7). However, it is acknowledged that the size of the sample is very small and thus cannot be considered as representative in terms of the views of stakeholders in relation to school starting age.

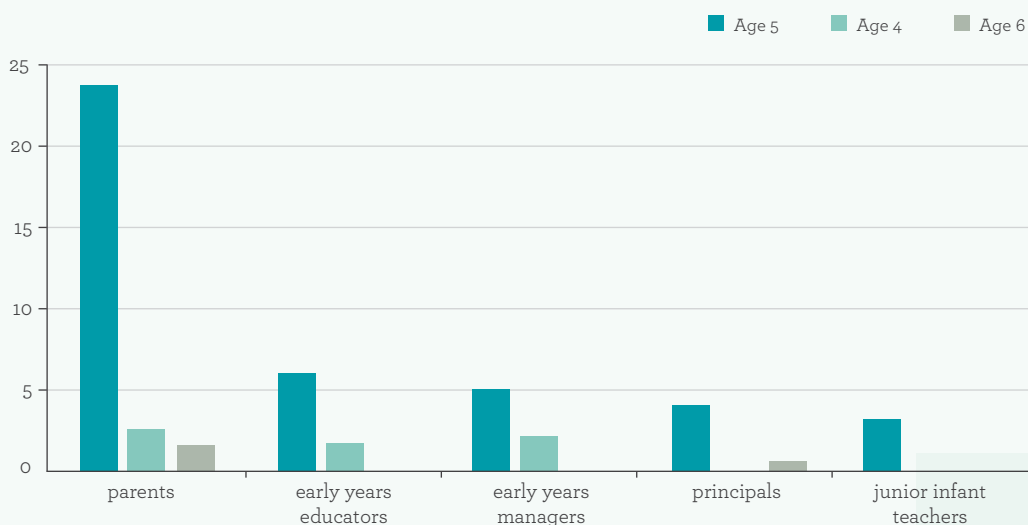


Figure 7: Participants' views of optimal school starting age

Figure 7 shows that seven of the nine early years educators identified five years as the optimal school starting age, and two early years educators identified four years as the minimum school starting age. Six of the nine early years managers identified five years, and three identified four years as the minimum school starting age. One early years manager suggested that four and a half years was the ‘perfect age’. All those who identified four years as the preferred minimum school starting age worked in designated disadvantaged areas, which had a number of targeted early intervention programmes for children and families from birth. This may explain their preference for four years as the minimum school starting age. The rationale for identifying five years as the preferred minimum school starting age is consistent with the maturationist approach to school readiness, where participants considered that maturity, concentration and independence would be better established by five years of age.

Twenty four of the 30 parents identified five years as the minimum school starting age, whereas some indicated that children being ‘as close to five years as possible’ [parent] – was also acceptable. Justification for identifying five years as the minimum school starting age was encapsulated in the responses of parents: ‘You know when they are ready. They are ready socially and they want to do more academically ... it’s down to age really and I just think that five is a very good age’ [parent]. Three parents identified four years as the preferred minimum starting age, although one parent did note that ‘to be honest, it [school starting age] depends on the child’. Another observed that children need to ‘be able to stand on their own two feet’ and not be bullied. Two parents considered six years as the preferred minimum school starting age. In both cases, they explicitly drew on personal experiences. In one case, an older child was 20 years of age and in fourth year at third level, which the parent considered to be too young. In the other case, the parent herself had started school at age six and considered this to have been a positive experience.

Half of the parents (15 of 30) identified personal experiential factors as being influential in identifying what they perceived as the minimum school starting age. These factors related to parents’ own experiences as children, their siblings’ experiences, and experiences that parents had with their older children, as outlined by one parent:

‘Well, I suppose I made a mistake with the first guy ... you know the way people say he is four and he’ll be going to school and I just sort of went along with it. But if I had just known that the other three were so much older than him, I wouldn’t have started him. But the other fella I just think he is ready.’

Another factor to emerge that influenced school starting age was the impact of the child’s position in the family. One early years manager referred to this as follows: ‘It all depends on where the child is situated in the family. If it’s a first child, it’s very hard. But if it’s a middle child or a third child, it’s easier for them because they have a leader in the eldest child.’

Five parents considered children’s ‘physicality’ at five years of age as an important determinant of a child being ready for school. In four cases, this specifically referred to children’s size and in the fifth case, children’s resistance to ‘tiredness’.

Of the seven junior infant teachers, five identified age five as the minimum school starting age, as did five of the seven school principals, while two teachers and one principal identified four years as the minimum school starting age. In common with parents and early years educators, the views of the junior infant teachers and school principals on the minimum school starting age were interspersed with acknowledgements that every child is different and that school starting age should vary from child to child and on their maturity. In an interesting difference to the responses of the early years participants from disadvantaged areas, one principal identified six years as the minimum school starting age, provided that a robust early years education system was in place.

Although the compulsory school age in Ireland is six years, teachers and principals felt influenced by the traditional school starting age of four years, and this was referred to in all school enrolment policies. One primary school principal noted: ‘We are bound by the Government, you know by Department rules of children having to be four when they start school. So we stick with that rule.’ In accordance with the statutory requirements of the Education Act, 1998 for all schools to have an enrolment policy and a School Plan, all school principals stated that ‘four years’ was identified as the age at which children could be enrolled in school, according to the schools’ enrolment policies. Factors related to school readiness were not detailed in enrolment policies. From a primary school perspective, therefore, the research findings indicate that the historical origins of school starting age, combined with custom and practice – rather than the statutory school starting age of six years and developmental, educational or child-led criteria – continue to be the main determinants of when children in Ireland are first enrolled in primary schools (Department of Education, 1965; Rogers and Ross, 2007). One principal referred to the school’s policy of prioritising on its waiting list for enrolment any children who are aged more than four and a half years. There was also a view that children’s capacity to learn is highest the younger they are. One principal observed that ‘nobody learns as quickly as an infant and I think that the graph is going down then after that ... after four’.

While school readiness was primarily linked to chronological age, age was associated with particular behaviours exhibited by children. As discussed above, these behaviours included being able to hold a pencil, being able to recognise letters and to count, putting on a coat and sitting down. The intersection of the maturationist and environmental approaches is encapsulated in the words of one early years manager who believed that children were too young at four years, and not ready for ‘sitting down’. She described children as being ‘busy’ between birth and five years, and provided a graphic depiction of their disposition and agency during early childhood:

‘They are busy at home and then they come in at two and a half here and they are like little porters, fetching and bringing and carrying and fixing things and putting things together and building. And then as they come as far as three, they begin to settle and at three to four they are improving their learning, their hand is developing for their pincer grasp and their gross motor skills. All children are different. Some mature a little earlier than others, but then they are still very young at four. I think every child going to national school should be five plus.’

In relation to who decides when a child is ready for school, all interview participants considered parents to be the key decision-makers, and they expressed a reluctance to advise parents in this regard. As one early years educator explained:

‘It is really down to the parents and we do go with that ... All we can do is express our views on what we have seen and then ... once it is said, it is up to the parent. We don’t really get involved in that at all. We leave the decision solely up to the parents.’

This was further corroborated in interviews with parents, where only one parent referred to talking to the child’s educator with regard to when the child should start school. However, for children with special educational needs in a targeted special education early years setting, the educator referred to parents consulting with the setting on when the children should start school. In general, results suggest that parental decisions to send a child to school are influenced primarily by ‘age’. This, in turn, was linked to a parent’s autobiographical experiences and captured in a number of parents’ observations, such as ‘I think the parents will know’ [parent] and ‘I think you kind of know yourself whether your child is ready for school’ [parent].

Gender emerged as an issue in the literature related to school readiness, with indications that girls are markedly more ‘school ready’ than boys (Doyle *et al.*, 2009; Isaacs, 2012). In this research however, there were few references to gender as an issue and, where it was referred to, it specifically related to the perceived behavioural differences (and in one case learning styles) between boys and girls, and the impact of these on children’s school starting age. One early years educator referred to gender with reference to school starting age:

‘Only one or two [parents] asked – and more a few years ago – especially if it was a boy, and that the boy was at an age that they could keep him back a year, or do the second year instead of keeping him back.’ [early years educator]

The manager of an early years setting referred to the potential impact of gender on school starting age and observed that ‘you could get a girl who could be four and she would be way ahead of the boy of five ... but girls are that bit more forward than the boys’ [early years manager]. This manager suggested that boys needed an extra year ‘to fall into the work frame when they do go to school’ as otherwise they may fall behind in senior infant class; the manager concluded that ‘I do think the boys should be five, and girls four and a half to five’. A school principal expressed similar views and considered that ‘if you come across parents with a boy born in April and a daughter born in April, they’ll recommend to wait until the boy is five. I think that they mature later.’ [principal, primary school]. Children’s different learning styles associated with gender were described by a junior infant teacher and point to the importance of accommodating individual children’s learning styles in the early years, irrespective of gender:

‘I will say that if I decided on the first day that I wanted to do Lego® and ... was designing a building with blocks or a building with boxes, and I was designing and counting with batteries or ... constructing something, then the boys would be better at that. If I bring out the copy books and get them to colour, the girls are usually better.’ [junior infant teacher]

### The words used by participants

Corpus linguistics analysis was used to elucidate the references to ‘boys’ and ‘girls’ in the interview data. When ‘boys’ are referred to generically in terms of readiness for school in the interview data, negative attributes and indicators are commonly used. Conversely, when ‘girls’ are referred to generically, in terms of readiness for school, positive attributes and indicators are commonly used:

References to ‘boys’ in interview data	References to ‘girls’ in interview data
<p>The <b>boys</b> are a little bit immature.</p> <p>The <b>boys</b> are kind of ... a little bit more immature.</p> <p>The <b>boys</b> are more babyish.</p> <p>The <b>boys</b> are so competitive.</p> <p><b>Boys</b> can be very easy to upset.</p> <p>The <b>boys</b> love the active learning, like making things.</p> <p>The <b>boys</b> might be more wriggly.</p> <p>The <b>boys</b> need that extra year.</p> <p>It takes longer for <b>boys</b> to ‘get it’.</p> <p>The <b>boys</b> do catch up.</p>	<p>The <b>girls</b> are better.</p> <p>The <b>girls</b> are very different.</p> <p>The <b>girls</b> are just more independent.</p> <p>The <b>girls</b> are more prepared.</p> <p>It’s not that the <b>girls</b> are quicker, but they mature earlier.</p> <p><b>Girls</b> would be a little bit more mature.</p> <p><b>Girls</b> mature faster.</p> <p><b>Girls</b> are that bit more forward.</p> <p>The <b>girls</b> are usually better [<i>talking about colouring</i>]</p> <p>The <b>girls</b> love the writing.</p> <p>The <b>girls</b>, they love to draw.</p> <p>The <b>girls</b> have more confidence.</p> <p>The <b>girls</b> might take on school routines quicker.</p> <p>The <b>girls</b> seem to be well able to settle in.</p> <p><b>Girls</b> show far more readiness.</p> <p><b>Girls</b> tend generally to be better prepared for school.</p> <p><b>Girls</b> usually show more kind of readiness.</p> <p><b>Girls</b> would be [more ready] – they are tougher.</p>

## Birthday effect

The concept of 'birthday effect' also emerged as an issue related to compulsory school starting age, with participants specifically linking a later school start to the 'birthday effect', as summarised by one early years manager: 'They might be four in October so, obviously, they have to stay because the schools won't take them because they're not four in September. That's usually the main reason why they don't go' [early years manager]. Another early years manager reported that they were inclined to keep on children with special educational needs for an additional year, in order to ensure that they were ready for the mainstream, a practice also reported in another early years setting. Another early years manager noted that 'it depends on the child and their capabilities ... I think four and a half is the perfect age, I think five sometimes is a tiny bit too old ... I know the schools are bringing back ... [the rule that children] have to be four before March or April or whatever. So, you know, I think that's a good indication of the importance of age for school readiness as well' [early years manager].

Reference to some schools requiring children to be four years old before March or April prior to enrolment was referred to by a principal who noted the school's policy of prioritising on the school's waiting list for enrolment any children who are aged over four and a half years. The 'birthday effect' as it impacts on children's curricular experiences in their junior infant year was highlighted in an account by one junior infant teacher:

'I had a little girl last year and the parents wanted her to come at three and they begged us to let her in. Now she was turning four in October, and so, what they did was they kept her at home for the month and then sent her in when she turned four. Now in fairness, she was taller than all the class, but all I wanted to do was wrap her in a blanket and give her some play dough and let her play for the day.' [junior infant teacher]

A child's birthday can influence parental decisions on school starting. One parent, whose eldest son's birthday was in the middle of September, explained: 'I didn't really have much of a decision because his birthday is in the middle of September. I couldn't start him this year because you have to be four on 1 September.' Another parent noted: 'Overall, it's better when they are all five. The twins are June and the others are July, so they were all five starting. They were all summer babies and it worked very well.' Parents understood the impact of the 'gift of time' (Edwards *et al*, 2011, p. 1), as captured in the following comments from two parents: 'Three months can make an awful difference at their age' [parent] and '... if they were four after March, I wouldn't send them. I would keep them for another year' [parent].

Parents' prior experiences relating to the 'birthday effect' influenced decisions with regard to subsequent children. One mother noted: '[Son's name] was only just four. He wasn't five until a good eight months after the other three [children] and it really showed. This mother had decided to send her next child, whose birthday was in October, to school at five. She explained that her other child had to be 'kept back' and concluded that 'if we had known, we would have kept him back and he would have only started last year'. Another parent compared the Irish system to the German one, with which she was familiar; she suggested that there should be 'a deadline, like there should be a thing where they should say children have to be four by the end of January if they want to start that September ... [This approach would ensure that] children are close to the five and not just four in the summer.'

In summary, findings from this research study indicate that, in the main, chronological age is the primary determinant of when children start school in Ireland, and the 'birthday effect' is a feature of this determinant. While children may satisfy the age criterion, they may not be as able as others to fulfil schools' expectations in relation to school readiness, because all children develop at different rates. Dockett and Perry (2002) observe that a child who may appear 'unready' at one point could demonstrate 'readiness' very soon afterwards – a point supported by one of the early years managers in this study:

'Children develop so fast ... I'd be thinking "Oh, I don't think you'll be ready for school" and then by Easter, you have a totally different child on your hands and you'd be thinking "My God, you'd be wasting your time back here for another year" ... They just change so fast.'



## Perspectives on European school starting age

When asked for views on the prevalence in Europe of a school starting age of six years, participants gave diverse opinions. Three early years educators agreed with a school starting age of six years. In two cases, this was seen as important because children would be more independent and mature, while in another setting it was felt that if the children were attending a Montessori setting before the age of six years, they would be doing ‘structural stuff’ [early years educator] and would be ready for school. However, five early years educators disagreed with six years as a starting age, in three cases because they felt that children would be ‘too old’, in one case because they would ‘be bored’ and in the final case it was argued that they might miss ‘a window’ by not starting earlier. Finally, one early years educator suggested that school starting age depended on the individual child.

Eight early years managers considered six years to be an appropriate school starting age, with one manager disagreeing and querying what the children would do from age four years to six years. Of the eight early years managers who agreed with the European school starting age, five explicitly suggested that the current Irish system would have to change to accommodate this in relation to greater State involvement in pre-primary provision and re-conceptualising the current pre-primary and junior and senior infant cycle.

Two junior infant teachers agreed with a school starting age of six years, while five considered it to be too old for a child to start school. Interestingly, six primary school principals suggested that six years was an appropriate school starting age and, in common with the early years managers, stated that it should be supported by a national pre-primary system. One school principal, however, described six years as ‘too old’.

Of the 21 parents who expressed a view on the European school starting age of six years, one agreed that this was an appropriate school starting age, one stated that she did not know, and 19 considered six to be too old for a child to start school. Of those parents who considered six to be too old, one felt that children would be ‘physically bigger than others’ in the class and subject to ridicule from other children; two suggested that children would ‘be bored’; one felt that six was ‘way too late’; and one parent suggested that there was ‘no benefit by leaving it a year later’. Many of those who considered six as too late for starting school often located their responses in the context of the current pre-school and school structure.

## Other influencing factors

At a macro level, a number of influencing factors emerged, including teacher retention in primary schools and issues related directly to parents’ motivation, such as the prohibitive cost of childcare for parents and the perceived impact of an earlier or later school starting age on children’s trajectory through subsequent levels of education. Two early years managers and two early years educators identified pressure on children to start school at an earlier age. In two instances, reference was made to pressure being applied from primary schools in relation to teacher retention, and in the remaining instances the prohibitive cost of childcare for parents was referred to. One parent noted that ‘sometimes the schools are only looking for numbers’. The issue of teacher retention and falling pupil numbers related to rural settings in particular was explained by an early years manager: ‘To be honest, they just want numbers. They are trying to keep teachers. The whole ethos is wrong and it’s not their fault. It’s the way it’s done from the Department down, but that’s the way it’s done.’ The issue of teacher retention was also referred to by a school principal who explained in relation to the school’s enrolment policy:

‘Every number here is very important for us ... we have 54 [children] at present. In a couple of years, we will have only 40 or something like that and we’ll be in trouble ... so we take all children, irrespective of their age (well, they must be four). Even though I think myself that they would be better off being a year older, you know.’  
[principal, primary school]



One early years educator considered that the financial constraints on parents were impacting negatively on the advice that early years educators offered parents. She pointed out that ‘if we advise them that they aren’t ready and they should wait until the following year, a lot of them would say that they couldn’t afford to do that. They can’t keep them in pre-school for another year ... they send them regardless.’

The impact of an early school starting age on later school experience was identified by a small number of participants, who pointed to the likely need to retain children for an additional year in Fifth or Sixth Class in primary school because otherwise they would be too young on leaving secondary school at 15 or 16. One parent suggested that a later school starting age would result in children being ‘a bit old’ going into secondary school. Another parent suggested, rather more positively, that it would be of benefit when children were doing the Leaving Certificate.

## 4.4 Parental concerns related to their children starting school

Education in Ireland is compulsory from the age of six, with schools accepting children from the age of four. Parents variously described school as ‘compulsory by law ... [children] have to [go]’ and as ‘a natural progression’. Of the 30 parents interviewed, 27 expressed a range of concerns with regard to their children starting school (see Figure 8), with one parent reflecting that her son would ‘be shocked by the reality of school’. Research findings in relation to each concern are presented in Figure 8.

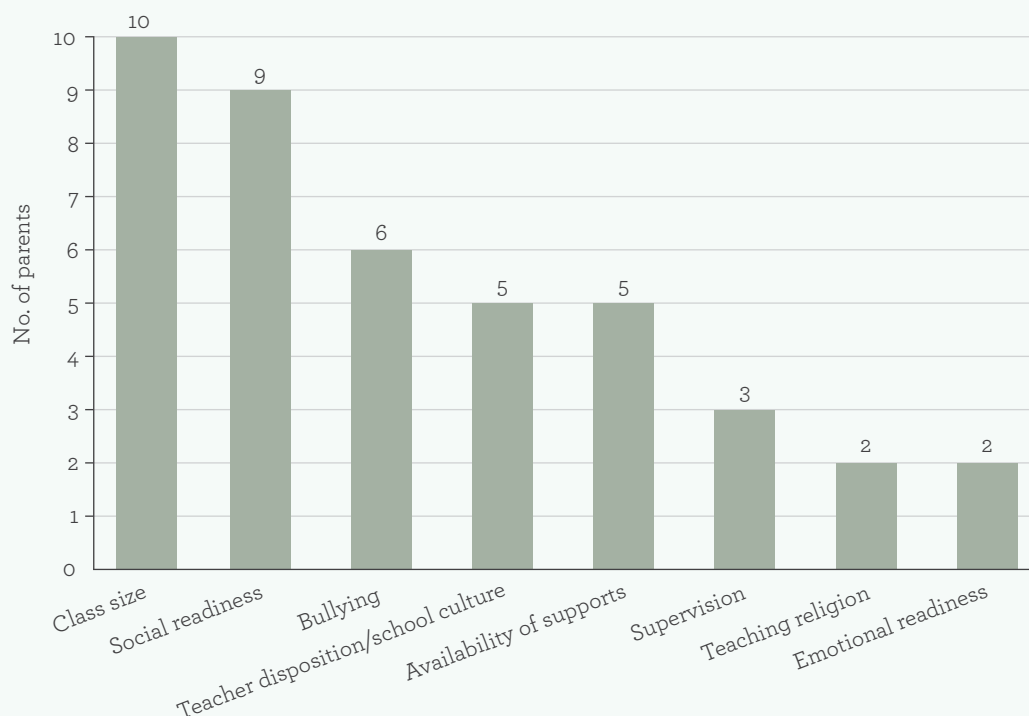


Figure 8: Overview of parental concerns related to children starting school

### Class size

The EU average class size is one teacher to every 21 pupils, with Irish teachers teaching on average three more children per class than their EU colleagues (INTO, 2013). Ten parents expressed concern about class size, with one parent articulating how there was ‘going to be 32 children’ in her son’s junior infant class. She considered this ‘quite [a] large class. It’s above average [and] just worried about him ... Will he cope well? ... If he copes that is OK.’ Another parent said ‘I don’t want to think of him struggling.’ This viewpoint was shared by other

parents, who stated that ‘when they go to class with 28 kids, [the] teacher can’t spend so much time with those kids approaching them from different ways’. The view was that class sizes of ‘28, 29, 30’ prevent children from getting ‘one-to-one help’. A range of literature and research in the Irish context suggests that large class sizes may constrain teachers’ capacity to use the active teaching methodologies proposed in the *Primary School Curriculum* (Dunphy, 2009; Moloney, 2011; Darmody and Smyth, 2012; INTO, 2013).

Two parents were happy with class size, with one describing how her daughter ‘is going to a small school and there are only 30 pupils’. By contrast, a third parent stated that her daughter ‘is actually lucky she has a small class, between 16 or 18 in her class from September’. However, she felt that ‘if it was a big class, then I would be worried about the size and numbers. But 16 to 18 is not big really when you think some classes might have 30.’

Parents did have concerns that class size may limit the availability of supports for children with specific health or special educational needs. This concern is supported by the literature, indicating that smaller classes in primary school are most beneficial for children who are economically or educationally disadvantaged; for gifted children, or for children with special educational needs (Ellis, 1984). One parent expressed concern at recent reductions in supports as follows:

‘There has been a cut in my child resource hours, so that is my huge concern. I think, realistically, that should be a concern for anyone with a child because a lot of people won’t know whether their child might need additional resource hours during school.’

This concern was echoed by other parents who were anxious that where children ‘have any special needs ... they will be looked after’. The NCCA (1999) asserts that consultation with parents helps teachers to develop a greater appreciation of children’s needs, and to plan more effectively for them, as was the experience of one parent who was happy when, following consultation with the principal and junior infant teacher, she was ‘assured that they will help her as much as they possibly can.’ Similarly, a parent whose daughter will be attending a school of ‘only 30 pupils’ has ‘regular contact with the teachers’ and therefore has ‘great confidence and I know if there was a problem ... they would say “We don’t feel she is ready” or “she is not settling in.”’ [parent]. Clearly, ongoing regular communication with parents facilitates ‘easier transition from home to school’ (NCCA, 1999, p. 22).

The INTO (2013) argues that smaller classes are most important when children are young – when they are learning, for the first time, how to be pupils in classrooms. Given the importance of early childhood as a foundation for future learning, there is merit in parental concerns that children would not ‘be overwhelmed in that environment, that [teachers] are seeing the children as individuals’ [parent] and that children’s ‘individuality is nurtured’ [parent]. Overall, however, parents felt that a class of ‘30 children is too big, enormous’ [parent].

## Teacher disposition and school culture

Graue *et al* (2007) assert that, apart from class size, attention should also be directed to teacher quality, pedagogical practice and school culture. In Ireland, children attending primary school (including those under the compulsory school age of six years) are classified within ISCED Level 1 of UNESCO’s International Standard Classification of Education. This level is designed ‘to provide students with fundamental skills in reading, writing and mathematics (i.e. literacy and numeracy) and establish a solid foundation for learning and understanding core areas of knowledge, personal and social development’ (UNESCO, 2012, p. 30). At this level, ‘age is typically the only entry requirement ... the customary or legal age of entry is usually not below five years old nor above seven years old’ (*ibid*).

In Ireland, many children attend primary school before they reach five years of age. At this level, one teacher is responsible for a group of children and facilitates learning, which is organised around specific subject areas, through units, projects or broad learning areas with an integrated approach. Parents in this study, however, were concerned that school may be ‘too strict’ [parent] or ‘regimented’ [parent]. As shown in Figure 8, five parents (out of a total of 30) were concerned about ‘teacher disposition/school culture’. In the words of one parent:

‘The role of the primary teacher is very, very important. He or she should be able to relate to the kids and talk to them at their level, rather than being really ‘teachery’, and be able to get their lessons across at their level. [Important that] it’s not sort of talking at them.’

Parents were anxious that their child’s junior infant teacher would not be overly strict. One parent stated that she would not send her child to school ‘if the educational system was too strict, if the teachers were too strict’. Drawing on ‘a very bad experience this year just gone’ with a child who had started primary school, another parent felt that ‘the teacher just wasn’t suitable for the smaller [children] ... expected them to sit there ... she wasn’t very interesting.’

Similarly, while describing the junior infant teacher in her child’s future school as ‘very enthusiastic’, another parent was worried that ‘she is expecting a bit too much of the infants [as she] gives loads of homework to the tiny ones and I feel like “Oh my goodness, she is expecting a lot”, like reading and knowing all the letters ... They are only four or five. They can’t know all that.’

Although one parent felt that ‘kids seem to work around it and live with it ... it’s too much and that depends on the teacher’, another parent disagreed and described the impact of school culture on her children: ‘I had two starting and they hated it because the teacher was so strict ... she wouldn’t let them do this or do that. We had a very rough start.’ These findings support previous research conducted in Ireland, which found that learning in the infant classroom tends to be formal, restricted and goal oriented (OECD, 2004 and 2006, Moloney, 2011; McGettigan and Gray, 2012).

In articulating her expectation of a junior infant teacher, one parent unwittingly referred to a number of the principles of learning and development that underpin both *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009) and the *Primary School Curriculum* (NCCA 1999), such as a sense of wonder and curiosity, individuality, social and emotional learning. She described a junior infant teacher as somebody who would treat her child:

‘... with respect and that her individuality is nurtured [and] if she’s a bit slow at something, that she is encouraged and I am informed that she is allowed to be who she is and that her creativity is nurtured ... confidence is nurtured because for me all the academic stuff is secondary. I think the most important gift a child can have is self-belief.’

Referring to her own primary school education, this same mother said that ‘the old educational system knocked [self-belief] out of you’. Consequently, her desire was that the current educational system ‘will nurture that side and won’t destroy it. That’s the most important thing to me – that her self-belief and sense of self is nurtured.’ [parent].

## Bullying and supervision

In general, parents simply wanted their child to be ‘happy getting along with the other children and not stressed in any way’ [parent]. Parents were especially concerned about the times when children ‘are not supervised’ [parent], especially in the school yard. Parents stated then when children ‘are in the classroom and they have a teacher with them, that’s all fine. I wouldn’t have any concerns about that necessarily, but just the unsupervised times’ [parent]. The parents did, however, appreciate that even ‘in the best school in the world, children can’t be supervised at all times’ [parent].

Parents made subtle references to bullying. Five parents were specifically worried about bullying, with a further three also expressing concern about supervision in school. Notwithstanding her concerns about bullying, one parent did ‘not think that it happens in Juniors’ as ‘they are the blissful years’ of school. According to one parent, ‘bullying is a big thing ... everyone is really conscious of bullying ... it affects children and you hope that my child wouldn’t be a bully or be bullied’. One parent mentioned two concerns she had about junior infants mixing with older children in the school yard: ‘[Children] could be hearing things that are not age-appropriate for them ... [and] there would be peer pressure from other children to get certain things or to do certain things.’ Two other parents were concerned about the level of supervision in primary school in comparison to pre-school. As one explained, ‘In Montessori, they are very well minded and everything is picked up on. But when they go to school, the care is not going to be as competent, even in Juniors.’ Similarly, another parent noted: ‘I know they put a teacher in the yard, but it’ll be different from play school.’

As a result of concerns about bullying, one parent expressed the need for children to be ‘more or less able to stand on their own two feet ... they would be able to fight their corner and that kind of thing.’ Another parent had ‘heard some harrowing stories’ about bullying, and consequently urged teachers ‘to watch out for it.’

## 4.5 Curriculum in the early years

A range of findings emerged in relation to curriculum in the early years, both in terms of curriculum in pre-school and in the junior infant class.

### Implementation of *Aistear*

Frameworks that bridge informal and formal education settings provide opportunities for strengthening pedagogical continuity and help to maintain enthusiasm for learning and school attendance (Fabian and Dunlop, 2007). *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009) is designed to support children’s learning experiences and consolidate the curricular links between pre-primary and primary school for the child. Given that primary schools implement the *Primary School Curriculum* (NCCA, 1999), it came as no surprise in this study that there was a significant difference between the numbers of early years settings and primary schools implementing *Aistear*, with more early years settings stating that they were implementing the early childhood curriculum framework. Early years educators and managers displayed a greater familiarity with *Aistear* than did primary school principals and junior infant teachers.

Eight of the nine early years educators and seven of the nine early years managers stated that *Aistear* was being implemented in their settings. It was unclear from the responses whether *Aistear* was being implemented in the other three settings. Typical observations on *Aistear* were: ‘I like the framework. It’s very interesting’ [early years educator]; ‘It’s a great way of helping children’ [early years educator] and ‘It’s a great tool to have and ... it covers such a wide frame of things’ [early years manager]. Early years participants demonstrated an awareness of the importance of curriculum continuity and learning approaches for children: ‘I think that goes with running the curriculum through, that they can see the learning and that they are learning in the same style, so I think that is good for them’ [early years manager]. However, early years educators and managers were unsure whether *Aistear* was being implemented in junior infant classrooms: ‘Is it being continued in seniors and juniors?’ [early years educator]; ‘I don’t think the primary schools want *Aistear*. They have their own curriculum that they are following at the moment and I do think it would be hard for them to suddenly change from what they have learned in college to suddenly take on ours’ [early years manager] and ‘I don’t know much about the use of *Aistear* in the infants class, to tell you the truth’ [early years educator].

Three of the six junior infant teachers and three of the seven principals stated that *Aistear* was being implemented in their schools. The *Aistear* framework was described by teachers and principals as reaching children at all levels, teaching social skills and promoting play. However, teachers and principals also referred to the challenges of implementing *Aistear* with large class sizes and restricted classroom space. This view was encapsulated by one junior infant teacher: 'I wouldn't have been able to introduce it this year with 25 children, because I couldn't have been at five different stations watching and interacting with them.' Another junior infant teacher expressed a view that *Aistear* and *Siolta* were based on similar principles to the *Primary School Curriculum*, while reiterating the tension between the demands of the curriculum and providing time and space for children to play:

'You know, people are also going on about *Aistear* and *Siolta*, but I don't think there is anything earth-shattering in them ... At the end of the day, they [children] have to know their sounds after 12 months at school and you want them to have a reasonable level of writing, a reasonable level of Irish, and some kind of number sense, and literacy and numeracy ... so you can't be playing all day either. But there is a place for it and we do do it.' [junior infant teacher]

These findings resonate with other Irish research (Murphy, 2004), which found that while teachers often wish to implement a pedagogy of play in the classroom, class size, lack of resources and the curriculum are identified as inhibiting factors. It is clear, therefore, that a curriculum may endorse playful learning, but internal and external factors may militate against teaching through play (Hatch and Freeman, 1988; Murphy, 2004; Dunphy, 2009).

## Junior infant curriculum

Primary school principals and junior infant teachers described activities in the junior infant classroom by reference to the principles of the primary curriculum, the child-centred nature of the curriculum and the central role of active learning approaches in the junior infant class. Their expectations of early years settings varied and included preparing children for school by developing their social skills, such as taking on and off their coat, putting up their hand if they had a question, being able to sit down and not walk around, toileting skills, organising their school bag, and managing their lunch box. Teachers and principals also expected children to be able to participate in social activities, share, take turns, be independent and able to do their work, concentrate, manipulate toys, understand how to do a jigsaw, have language skills and correct pencil grip, be able to write, and be able to say goodbye to parents at the school door.

One junior infant teacher summarised her expectations of pre-school as: 'All I want them to do is play, you know. They come in and they say I know all my letters and all my numbers and I think that's secondary because they are going to learn that anyway' [junior infant teacher]. The issue of incorrect pencil grip was raised by a number of teachers and one principal who observed: 'I find sometimes that they come in with ... a variety of techniques on how to write and hold their pencil, and it would be nice if that was done rather than us trying to unteach what was done already.' [principal, primary school]

## The role of play in children's learning

There is a large corpus of research on the role and benefit of play in children's learning. Play provides a rich context for oral language development and the development of emergent literacy skills (Fisher *et al*, 2011). Object play, symbolic play and pretend play all provide children with opportunities to experiment with concepts such as shape, space and measurement, and to engage in mathematical ideas and thinking (Carruthers and Worthington, 2005; Hirsh-Pasek *et al*, 2008; Worthington, 2010).

Ashaibi (2007) refers to '*functional barriers*' in terms of inconsistency between beliefs about play and behaviour. Educators, for example, may be unable to implement a programme that is consistent with their theoretical and personal beliefs, due to setting constraints (Hatch and Freeman, 1988). This seems to be the case in infant classrooms in Irish primary

schools, where teachers often wish to include play in their curriculum, but identify a number of constraints to using a pedagogy of play, such as class size, lack of resources and the curriculum (Murphy, 2004).

Few participants in this study referred specifically to the pedagogical role of play. One primary school principal noted that junior infant year is ‘all about play ... learning through play is the only way children learn really.’ However, in relation to the implementation of *Aistear*, a junior infant teacher explained: ‘We don’t do play for a full hour every day. We try to break it up, but we would do a good, say, hour to 40 minutes of play, and then there’s other bits of play kind of throughout the day’. Drawing on her knowledge and experience of the central European education system, this teacher described how children there ‘don’t start formal school until they are seven, so they have two years of fabulous play and I would be totally in favour of play’. She went on to say: ‘[In spite of doing] *Aistear* ... some [children] just need more and more play. [They] are just not ready to concentrate ... ready to learn ... ready to hear ... play is hugely important and ... children who come into school and who have played for a few years are ready to learn. They are more ready to learn.’

While *Aistear* endorses play as a key context for learning in the early years, it does not guarantee that practitioners are equipped to implement an effective pedagogy of play. In fact, the findings in this study further endorse the suggestion by Wood and Attfield (2005, p. 9) that ‘the commonly held view that early years teachers encourage learning through play is more myth than reality’. One early years manager in this study cautioned that children ‘can’t just be playing in sandpits, you know. They have to be taught something’ and explained that ‘it would be wrong of me to just let him play all day and then go into the primary school without having even introduced him to numbers or something.’ She suggested that letting children play ‘would be the easy way out ... and that isn’t fair and his mum doesn’t want that either’.

Of the four parents who commented on play, two drew a distinction between ‘play school’ and ‘Montessori settings’. Activities in the ‘play school’ were described as ‘mostly playing with toys, whereas the Montessori did work with them ... [and children] had folders of work done and they did their names and they were able to paint pictures’; her own children could ‘spell their own name and they know most of the songs and they can paint and write’. Another parent articulated a similar perspective, saying ‘in the last place [play school] there was a lot more play ... [while the Montessori setting has] a lot more routine and they sit down. It’s a lot more learning and they have a format and they have different times for different things and that’s what school is all about as well.’ Another parent, while not criticising play per se, was critical of the variation between settings and highlighted the lack of communication between pre-school and primary school. She expressed concern that ‘all the different pre-schools are at such different levels’ and she described some settings as being ‘like a play school’ [while in others, children] ‘are almost reading’.

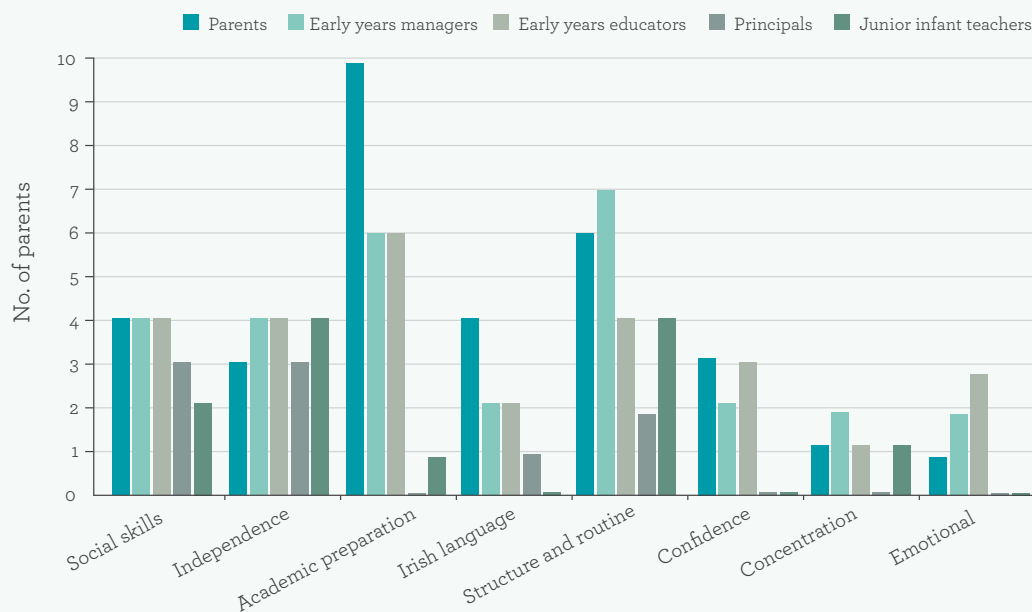
The research findings indicate that primary school principals and infant teachers appeared to be more pro-play than parents or early years educators expected. This may be attributable to the roll-out of *Aistear* training workshops for teachers. For example, up to the end of 2012, 322 two-hour workshops provided support to 5,977 teachers and principals, and 827 teachers were supported through 38 summer courses in 2011 and 2012. To date, only limited training in *Aistear* has been made available to early years educators.

## 4.6 Perceptions on how pre-school prepares children for school

The introduction of the free pre-school year (FPSY) scheme has meant that all children have the opportunity to access pre-school in the year before starting primary school. According to DCYA (2013), the overall objective of the FPSY scheme is to benefit children in the key developmental period prior to starting school. A UNESCO report (2012, p. 26) notes that pre-school programmes should aim to ‘develop socio-emotional skills necessary for participation in school and society [and] also develop some of the skills needed for academic readiness to

*prepare children for entry to primary education*. Participants in this study identified a range of benefits for children associated with attending the FPSY related to supporting children's overall development and preparation for school, the favourable adult-child ratios and the positive impact of the supportive environment of the pre-school on the child.

Findings from the qualitative data in Phase 1 of this study indicate that stakeholders perceive that pre-school prepares children for school in multiple ways, ranging from social development and independence to structure, routine, concentration and certain literacy and numeracy skills (see Figure 9). As with understandings of school readiness, the ways in which stakeholders believe that pre-school prepares children for school also reflects a combination of the environmental and maturationist approach to school readiness.



**Figure 9: Stakeholders' perspectives on how pre-school prepares children for school**

Overall, early years managers and early years educators reported that they adopted a holistic approach to preparing children for school:

*'Caring, really caring and understanding the child's development and where they are at and their social skills and just helping them along. You don't want it to be so different that they just can't cope. And I do think in our setting that we do prepare them very well before they move on.'* [early years manager]

Equally, there was a strong emphasis on academic preparation within the participating early years settings. Parents, early years managers and early years educators identified and agreed on four key ways in which pre-school prepared children for school: developing children's academic skills, helping children to become accustomed to both structure and routine, and supporting children's development of social skills. In addition, a number of parents whose children attended *naíonraí* felt that *'there is a big focus, being a naíonra, on Irish language ... they would want them to know a little bit of Irish ... they have the basic understanding of Irish'*.

While the participating school principals and junior infant teachers did not refer to the role of pre-school in terms of academic preparation, they agreed with other respondents in relation to how pre-school prepares children for the structure and routine of school. As shown in Figure 9, of the six school principals who expressed an opinion in relation to how pre-school prepares children for school, two associated pre-school preparation primarily with the development of social skills, and a further two associated it with independence. Conversely, of the five junior infant teachers who expressed an opinion, four emphasised the role of pre-school in helping children adjust to structure and routine.



The perception that pre-school has a role in preparing children academically for school can be linked to the environmental approach to school readiness. Ten parents, six early years managers and six early years educators believed that pre-school plays a role in preparing children academically for school. One parent noted that ‘they do some daily teachings. They show them how to ... their colours, their shapes. He has 10 minutes of homework every evening’, while another parent observed that ‘they recognise say 1 to 10 ... they would know their colours ... colouring within the lines.’ Parents also described the advances children had made in terms of general knowledge and cognitive development: ‘They were doing all about the solar system ... it’s not like a babysitting service’ [parent]. One parent suggested that by the end of the FPSY, children had already ‘covered most of the stuff in junior infants.’ One early years manager provided insight into the range of academic activities within her setting, where everything is ‘covered between flashcards now and we do it and they are ready, alphabets songs, it’s all there in it. We have the dot to dotting done and ABCD ... and the phonics’. Similarly, an early years educator described how ‘you always want to do things with them that will help them and that will give them the skills that would be needed at school, even join-the-dots colouring pictures related to nature.’

Of the 12 participating ECCE settings, five implemented a Montessori programme described as ‘a teaching programme, so we do teach them how to do things’ [early years manager], where ‘everything is preparation for the future, the next step which is primary school’ [early years educator]. One early years educator detailed what is involved in their Montessori programme and how it prepares children for school:

‘You develop their senses, their motor skills ... You prepare them indirectly, first for holding the pencil ... it’s a preparation for school, because they have 10 fingers and they would be counting them.’

Findings suggest that parents perceived that attending a Montessori setting prepared children for school ‘academically’ [parent]. One parent observed that ‘certainly, they are prepared academically.’ It was suggested by another parent that ‘children going to Montessori don’t find school a big thing at all.’ According to one Montessori educator, ‘the Montessori curriculum ... is very regulated [with] a strong routine [and] that in itself gets them ready for school’. There was some evidence that early years educators feel under pressure to fit in everything they want to do with the children. This was encapsulated in the following quote from one Montessori early years educator:

‘It’s hard ... only ... three hours a day, five days a week ... if we want to cover our Montessori aspect of things. Our Montessori time will go on for maybe an hour to an hour and a half every day ... You want to get some outside time for them to play and mix with their peers ... We also have circle time ... and try to fit all that in and then fit a craft activity or a baking activity or things like that. It can become quite hard to fit it all in.’

The evidence suggests that the FPSY may be contributing to this perceived pressure to provide specific curriculum content for children in pre-school. One early years educator was conscious that ‘sometimes it might reduce elements of crafting, baking or exercises because it’s an educational grant. You need to make sure they are getting all the educational-based activities ... in the morning.’ Another early years educator believed that the FPSY scheme ‘was a wake-up call for pre-schools in that all children [should be] ready and independent ... able to hold a pencil [and] manage their lunches ... especially when they are meeting other children who have had a pre-school year.’

Despite the fact that there is no specific content outlined for the FPSY, the perceived pressure to implement specific curriculum content was referred to by a parent who explained how staff in her child’s setting ‘have to finish everything and get through it, and they said even though the weather is fine, they would still be going every day until they finish, because they have to get everything done right to the end.’ The findings indicate that school principals and junior infant teachers do not want pre-schools to focus on academic preparation, since this can lead



to problems in junior infant class. Participants recognised that ‘a lot of pre-schools are driven into teaching them ‘b’ ‘a’ ‘t’ – ‘bat’. When really they would be better off to say “this is a bat, this is what it looks like” ... because ... you are going to do their sounds anyway’ [junior infant teacher]. The importance of hands-on experience with concrete materials was also noted, so that children become familiar with and understand mathematical concepts: ‘Like maths isn’t about number. It’s about the concept of number and it’s about understanding number sense’ [junior infant teacher].

One junior infant teacher cited the example of the potential difficulties caused by introducing children to Letterland (Wendon *et al*, 2003) in pre-school, where children associate the letter C with ‘clever cat. But that’s not what you want them to say. It’s C or c [sounds it out] and what sound does it make’ [junior infant teacher]. Another junior infant teacher stated that she does not want children ‘to be doing numbers and spellings ... [Rather] through playing, they [children] learn so much, you know’ [junior infant teacher]. One primary school principal felt that pre-school should ‘be for free play’ and she ‘would like to think that children were not in the education system at two and a half or three years of age. I would like it to be quite informal.’ This view diverges from the predominant belief among parents, early years managers, early years educators and junior infant teachers that pre-school prepares children for the structure and routine of the school classroom.

In this study, six parents, seven early years managers, four early years educators, two school principals and four junior infant teachers suggested that pre-school prepared children for classroom structure and routine. Typically, early years managers saw the FPSY as ‘guiding the children towards lengthening their periods of concentration’ and preparing them ‘to sit and work, to concentrate on and finish tasks’. Parents also saw the FPSY as preparation for school. One parent commented that being part of a smaller group of children with higher adult support was valuable because ‘every day they had a routine ... they knew where to put their bags and coats ... and how to take their lunches out ... they were very well prepared for primary school.’ Another parent noted that her child ‘has a structure of a classroom ... when she is there in crèche, she knows when to sit down, she knows that she has to sit down at her desk and stuff.’ Junior infant teachers agreed that the FPSY ‘makes them independent and ready to come into school ... to take off the coat ... put down the school bag. All those things are so important when they come into school’ [junior infant teacher].

Adult-child ratios (1:11) are strictly enforced within the ECCE sector by means of the Childcare (Pre-School Services) (No. 2) Regulations 2006. The favourable adult-child ratio of the FPSY was perceived as impacting positively on the child’s experience in pre-school, as reflected by one early years manager: ‘We keep our number one to eight.’ The challenge for children in moving to primary school, where large class sizes are a feature of practice, was captured by one early years educator: ‘When they go to school, it’s different. They get one teacher and they might have 20 to 30 children in a room ... At least in pre-school you have two or three teachers.’ Higher adult-child ratios in pre-school were described as facilitating ‘a lot of one to one’ in comparison to the primary school, where ‘the teacher hasn’t got the time. She has a curriculum to follow [and] can’t give that one to one [and] that’s a big transition for them.’ [early years educator]

Parents also favoured the ‘nice routine and gentle approach’ [parent] of pre-schools and viewed them as a ‘home from home’ [parent]. This ‘homely approach’ [parent] was reassuring and mitigated the anxiety experienced by some parents in leaving their child in the pre-school: ‘At the end of the day, you are walking out of there and leaving them. But what choice [do] you have? You’ve got to earn a living. It can cause a lot of stress for parents’ [parent]. The flexibility of pre-schools was commended by an early years manager, who concluded that children are always active and ‘when the weather comes, we avail of it. We take the work out with us. We have sand and water, loads of gross motor movement equipment out there, like cycling and climbing and sliding ... [This approach provides the opportunity to] go with what they are ready for and interested in. If a child doesn’t want to do letters and he wants to do pouring and screwing off lids, he can do that’ [early years manager].

## 4.7 Benefits of the free pre-school year (FPSY)

Participants identified a range of benefits associated with the free pre-school year (FPSY). The early years sector identified the increase in the number of children attending pre-school as the greatest effect of the FPSY: 'The free pre-school year has been a great thing. We've had children come to us that may not have had the opportunity otherwise' [early years educator]. One early years manager noted:

'We have 40 children leaving this year ... if the free pre-school wasn't there, we would probably have 20, and that means 20 children would never have been in a big group, sharing, playing outside, taking turns, listening and manners ... not everyone has that at home.'

The FPSY has also meant that parents have been relieved of the 'financial' [early years educator] burden associated with sending their children to pre-school. An early years manager providing a service for children with additional needs expressed the view that 'the year that children have spent with us has improved their lives and their parents' lives'. Another early years educator noted that the FPSY was of benefit especially during times of economic distress when parents are 'eager not to pay for childcare'.

Further benefits associated with the FPSY related to the professionalisation of the early years sector. Reference was made to the changing nature of the early years landscape and the importance of being familiar with compliance issues and qualification requirements: 'Everything has changed. All the rules have changed ... and every year there are new policies ... the staffing and the qualifications ... You have to be sure that everything is above board' [early years manager]. Another early years manager observed that 'any new training is great ... and the networking since the ECCE [another term for FPSY] programme started is good ... The County Childcare Committee organises a lot of the workshops' [early years manager].

Despite this, some participants expressed a view that pedagogical practice in early years settings remains largely unchanged. Some comments from early years managers included: 'It hasn't really changed in the classroom ... the paperwork has changed'; 'We still do things the very same way'; and 'We didn't change a thing. Same thing, year after year'. This reported lack of change may be due to the fact that children availing of the FPSY can be integrated with those who have or have not already availed of the scheme: 'They are not treated any differently, apart from their hours and their weeks ... They do the same activities as all the children. So no, it hasn't changed' [early years manager]. The data also suggest that early years providers believed that they were already preparing children for school prior to the introduction of the FPSY: 'It doesn't matter if they're here full time or part time or on a free scheme. You still need to prepare them for school' [early years manager]. One early years educator observed that 'the difference is that the children are here five days ... for three hours every day'.

The potential for the FPSY to impact on the age at which children start school was also identified. One early years educator pointed out that 'some children take FPSY when they could take it the following year, and sometimes that has worked against the child' as they start school at a younger age. An early years manager suggested that 'some children just aren't ready at four ... they need that extra year in pre-school definitely'. An early years educator advised that in the event of a second FPSY becoming available, 'another experience [should be provided] for the children' because, as another early years educator noted, 'some of them start getting a little bit bored. The routine has become so familiar, especially if they've been here two years.' In the event of a second FPSY being introduced, one early years manager proposed having 'the first year as just pre-school, where it is just fun and play ... based on the social side, and then the Montessori ... it's quite strict and there is a lot of learning. So then the two years would go hand in hand and they would be totally ready for school'.

From a primary school perspective, it was felt that the FPSY has resulted in 'more people attending the *naoínra*', which has positively impacted on the use of 'Gaeilge especially'

[principal, primary school]. One parent stated: 'It's just brilliant ... they have so much Irish learnt.' One junior infant teacher noted the advantages of the FPSY as 'the children who have availed of it definitely come in a lot more able [for] school. They socialise and they're able for the routine and structure of school and the idea that there is somebody up here teaching. They're involved and participating better' [junior infant teacher]. Another junior infant teacher saw particular advantages of the FPSY for children from 'less literate and numerate homes'. She felt that 'if this child had not attended pre-school, he would not be where he is today. A child coming from a home that is disadvantaged ... benefits 600% more than a child coming from an advantaged background ... You just can't measure what he is getting'.

## 4.8 Children with special educational needs and school readiness

In Ireland, a raft of legislation has enshrined the rights of children with special educational needs to an appropriate education and the provision of support services (Government of Ireland, 1998; DES, 2005). In this study, it was evident from participants' responses that they were aware of the importance of providing an appropriate education for children with special educational needs. Positive practices were reported with regard to liaising with the local primary school, adopting an individualised approach, and collaborating with parents and early years educators. The benefits of providing early intervention for children with special educational needs was noted by participants. One early years manager pointed out that 'Montessori actually began with special needs children and then they integrated it into the normal child. So the structure and the programme itself would be geared towards special children'.

One early years manager described the practice whereby the special needs assistants (SNAs) and/or the resource teacher from the primary school visited the early years setting prior to the children starting, in order to identify 'what games and stuff they would be interested in ... just so he had a way to communicate with them and expand on it.' Shared continuing professional development sessions with the local primary school were also reported in relation to children with special educational needs. In one instance, depending on the needs of the child, an assistant was provided for a number of hours each week to facilitate the inclusion of children in a number of FPSY settings. One early years manager referred to the practice whereby local schools would contact the setting by telephone to seek advice on whether the child would require an SNA when they enrolled in the school: 'Just trying to make the changeover as familiar as possible for them' [early years manager].

Another practice described how the local agency liaised with the early years setting to identify the child's needs prior to starting school: 'We have very good contact with the [local agency] inside ... There is a lot of contact between us and it's a good thing. If you know a child coming to school who needs an SNA, you can apply for one beforehand' [principal, primary school].

The principal of another primary school described inviting children with special educational needs to visit the school on two or three occasions, so that they got used to the layout, and so that any anxiety they might have about school was allayed. The principal noted that 'we had a child in yesterday with her parents ... she was able to go out to the yard and just see the other children ... and she'll be coming back again next week and might sit in on a story time, just to help her for September'.

Communication with parents and relevant professionals was reported as a key feature of practice in one special pre-school and a number of primary schools. Three school principals referred to relying on parents prior to children coming to school to provide them with details of their child's special educational needs, so that an application for additional resources could be applied for. Adopting an individualised approach to meeting the needs of children with special educational needs was a feature of practice in both early years settings and primary schools.

Two teachers referred to ‘differentiation’ as a specific strategy to include children with special educational needs. One junior infant teacher expressed the need for children with special educational needs to ‘be able to concentrate for a certain length of time’. Concurring with this, an early years educator described the approach used to increase children’s concentration and attention span in her setting:

‘You gradually increase your circle time ... you’d start with a few minutes and now some of them will sit for 45 minutes, which is huge for children with autism ... I think that developing those things is the big thing.’

However, one respondent criticised the lack of support available to early years settings, noting that ‘the Classroom Assistant is a very important job, but I don’t think it’s taken seriously at all’ [early years manager].

## 4.9 Cultural diversity and school readiness

All interview participants articulated an awareness of the importance of accommodating both linguistic and cultural diversity. Participants did not, however, refer to specific strategies or approaches to accommodate cultural diversity in the context of school readiness. Early years settings referred to organising ‘cultural days’ during which specific cultures were celebrated, advising parents with regard to the importance of supporting their children in acquiring proficiency in English, supporting children’s acquisition of English in the setting, attending professional development programmes and using multi-cultural materials, such as toys, books and equipment, to augment children’s learning. One early years manager referred to having a specific written policy in place; three managers referred to adopting a policy of treating all children ‘the same’; two managers stated that there were no strategies in place since there were no children from culturally diverse backgrounds currently in the setting; and three managers described a range of specific strategies related to accommodating cultural and linguistic diversity that were used in their settings. One early years manager associated her experience of cultural diversity with the Traveller population and observed:

‘Oh sure, I have them, the Travellers and ... they just come through here like any ordinary child. They are just children, aren’t they? ... They just go the normal way like everybody else ... and these are the modern mothers ... Travellers who are housed ... they are one of us.’

Four early years educators stated that there were no specific strategies in place to accommodate cultural diversity. Six of the nine school principals and five of the junior infant teachers expressed views on cultural diversity. The current policy, whereby language support is now provided through the learning support/resource teaching allocation, was referred to and encapsulated in the words of one principal:

‘Until recently, we had a teacher specifically assigned to this school to teach English to children ... but this scheme has been virtually removed for financial reasons ... So we were then asked ... to try and compensate, which we do. But the problem that creates for us is that we are taking time from children who have learning difficulties.’ [principal, primary school]

Another principal considered that it was beneficial for non-national children to have more than one language and that this helped the children in the acquisition of the Irish language: ‘It is much easier in the infants because they come in with every other child and usually we find that they are better with the Irish. They are really, because they have perhaps a number of languages [already]’ [principal, primary school]. This principal also referred to the positive impact that parents’ attitudes can have on children’s acquisition of Irish and observed that ‘it’s a negative sort of attitude. Now everyone hasn’t this attitude ... but ... it is very hard because the children have the same attitude then. They learn from that.’ [principal, primary school]. One teacher noted that she had no experience to date of accommodating cultural diversity. Two principals argued that the school was open to all children, and while not having specific strategies, all children were accommodated. One of the principals expressed this approach as ‘we consider that we are open to all children. We don’t see the colour of their skin when they come in. We just see what their needs are and what their personalities are. So we haven’t any

particular strategies’. Two junior infant teachers referred to the potential of the curriculum to support children’s understanding of cultural diversity through the ‘Learn Together’ programme in Social, Environmental and Scientific Education (SESE) operated in Educate Together schools, and the use of the Lámh signing system in special schools.

While it is clear that the educator participants were well-intentioned, the absence of strategies to specifically address the changing nature of Irish society can impact negatively through causing diversity to become invisible, and therefore not adequately addressed. Many theorists believe that as countries like Ireland become more diverse in terms of culture, religion, nationality and ethnicity, it is essential that this diversity is not ignored, but is both explored and celebrated in classrooms (Gannon, 2002; NCCRI, 2008; Banks, 2008; Dolan, 2014).

#### 4.10 Exploring the concept of the ‘ready school’

There is an emerging consensus in the literature on the need to consider the importance of schools being ‘ready for children’ (Dockett and Perry, 2009; Dockett *et al.*, 2010; UNICEF, 2012). This recent conceptual addition of the ‘ready school’ to the school readiness model (Arnold *et al.*, 2007) is closely related to the interactionist view of school readiness, where relationships between the child and the school are instrumental in supporting readiness. Child Trends (2001) has proposed 10 characteristics of ‘ready schools’, namely: transition from pre-primary to primary; continuity; high-quality instruction; relationships; equality; teacher training and support; implementation and evaluation of programmes; teachers’ professional development; appropriate learning environments; and familial involvement.

The idea that schools should be ready for children, as much as children should be ready for school, was referred to by 40 of the 62 adult participants in the qualitative phase of this study. These responses referred to five interrelated features of ready schools: supporting the transition from pre-school to primary school; ready school environment; ready teacher; adult-child ratios in junior infant classes; and communication (see Figure 10). Each of these features is discussed in detail below.

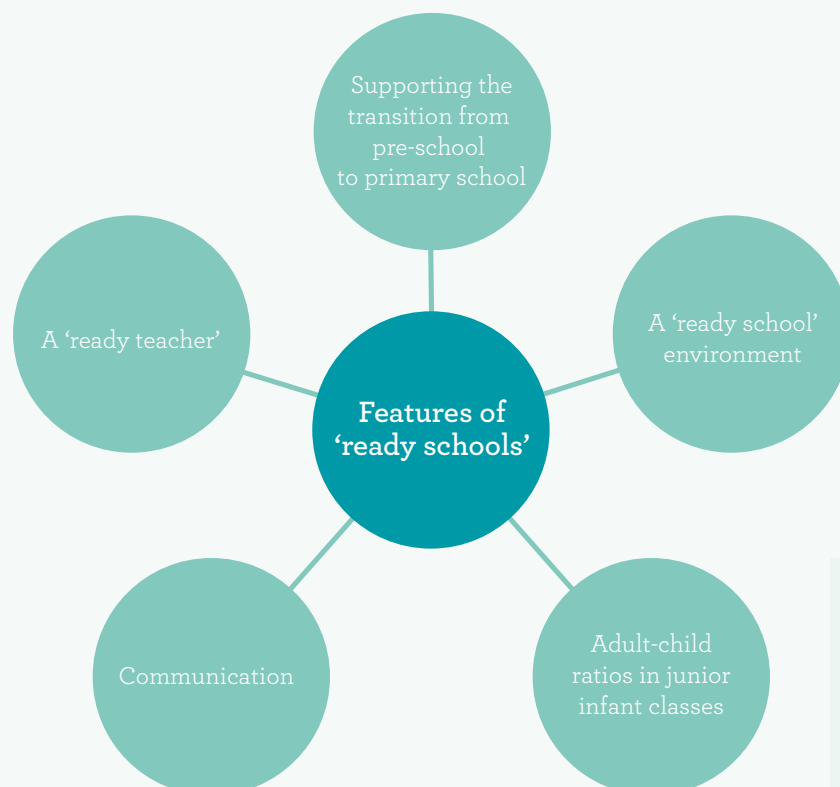


Figure 10: Participants’ perceptions of the features of ‘ready schools’

## Supporting the transition from pre-school to primary school

Fabian and Dunlop (2006) describe educational transition as a process of change that children make from one place or phase of education to another over time. Similarly, it was understood by participants in this study as a process of ‘support from the pre-school to the infants classroom’ [junior infant teacher]. A successful, ‘well-supported’ transition to school is a key component of school readiness. As one teacher commented: ‘It’s really important ... junior infants is one of the most important years for the child’ [junior infant teacher]. Participants expressed a belief that children who experience continuity as they enter the formal world of primary school are more likely to be successful in school, as captured in the words of a junior infant teacher. ‘If they start off happy in school, it’s likely that they’ll continue like that. So it’s important to have the transition thought out’.

The transition from one place or phase of education to another involves changes of relationship, teaching style, environment, space, time, contexts for learning, and learning itself; when combined, these factors can make for intense and accelerated demands (Fabian and Dunlop, 2006). In this context, one principal explained ‘that’s why we have our induction programme. We try and ease the whole mystique of Big School’. According to UNICEF (2012), the greater the gap between the early childhood education system and the primary school system, the greater the challenge for young children to adjust to the primary school environment. Participants demonstrated an awareness of strategies to mitigate these challenges for children, and noted that a successful transition to school ‘can make a big difference’ [principal, primary school], be less ‘daunting for them’ [early years manager] and assist the child in understanding ‘where he or she is going’ [principal, primary school].

Effective transition programmes that provide opportunities for children to experience the school environment impact positively on children’s adjustment to school (Hirst *et al.*, 2011). Primary schools demonstrated an awareness of this concept and referred to providing open days, information evenings, shortened school days, summer camps and, in one case, a targeted transition programme with an on-site *naíonra* to facilitate the transition process.

### Open days

Six out of seven primary schools in this study provided an annual open day for incoming junior infants. (The seventh school arranged family visits on request or following referral.) One parent described the positive outcomes associated with attending an open day:

‘We met the teacher and all the other children ... we got a tour and now if I talk about school, it’s not an abstract concept. He knows what the building [and] classroom look like.’

The length of time dedicated to, and the purposes of, the open days varied between schools: ‘We have an infants morning ... in May or June ... The infants meet the teacher and the other children ... They see all the different things they can play with ... They do some arts and crafts and they have a very positive experience’ [principal, primary school]. On the other hand, another school noted that ‘it’s very small, it’s not a long day’ [junior infant teacher]. More specifically, another junior infant teacher described an open hour process:

‘We have an open hour ... We wave Mammy and Daddy over to the staff room ... the Master goes over enrolment forms [and] codes of behaviour ... I go over a few bits on the white board and they [children] learn a song or a poem and then the mummies come back and we do a little performance.’

According to the principal of one primary school, this time gives the children an ‘opportunity to meet their teacher ... get used to listening to her [and] to the school environment, and at the same time separate from their parents’ [principal, primary school]. Participants observed that teachers can use this time to ‘make contact with the parents’ [principal, primary school] and observe the children ‘to see ... if there are any difficulties that might need to be addressed before they come in’ [junior infant teacher]. One junior infant teacher in a rural, single-sex



school expressed a view that the transition process can be overemphasised: ‘They get their uniform and they come on 1 September. Children are very adaptable and they get used to things quickly. So sometimes you can make too much of a song and dance about the whole thing’ [junior infant teacher]. This view is not reflected in the literature, which suggests that transition to formal school sets the tone and direction of a child’s school career, making it a critical time for young children, their families and educators. Furthermore, children’s initial academic and social success at school can affect their long-term adjustment, achievement and success (Dockett and Perry, 2001; Fabian and Dunlop, 2007; Giallo *et al*, 2010; Good Beginnings Interdepartmental Council, 2004).

### Information evenings, shortened school days and summer camps

In addition to open days for children, five out of the seven schools in this study held separate information evenings for parents of incoming junior infants. A junior infant teacher described this process: ‘We had different classrooms doing science, maths, computers, singing, art ... then they came to see the junior infants class ... I go through the curriculum and how to get your child ready for school’ [junior infant teacher]. According to one principal, ‘the parents were fascinated ... [and] are dying for information on what is going on in school’ [principal, primary school]. Another junior infant teacher suggested that this time ‘educates parents ... on how they can help the children ... It creates an easy link between the two.’

Planned activities prior to and during the commencement of school assist children in familiarising themselves with the new school environment (Hirst *et al*, 2011). The practice described by one principal reflects this process:

‘[We have a] three-part induction programme for junior infants classes ... We meet the parents initially in April/May and we talk about our expectations of the children ... We then meet the children prior to them starting school ... They meet the teacher and go into the class situation ... and then at the end of September we have a class meeting of parents where we talk and address any concerns.’ [principal, primary school]

Shortened school days and summer camps were described as two additional strategies used to welcome, prepare and familiarise the incoming junior infants with the school environment. An early years manager reported that ‘we give them a half day for the first two weeks ... they get to know the other children and their teacher [and] avoid the hustle and bustle’ [early years manager]. A principal described a summer camp provided by the school: ‘We do a junior summer camp [in] July ... two to three hours in the morning ... They do art in the infants classroom ... sport in the hall, drama and go to the library ... they get to know four or five teachers. The mystique is gone’ [principal, primary school].

One early years educator described the benefits of being involved in a specific transition programme entitled *An Traein* (‘The Train’) (Mhic Mhathúna, 2011):

‘Since the pilot scheme started last year on transition, there is a lot of contact between the local primary school and the *naíonra* ... We visit the school and the teachers come back to the *naíonra*.’

Similarly, benefits were mirrored by the primary school:

‘*An Traein* is the biggest thing – all the information is in there. We sit down before they start and read what’s coming in on the Child Snapshot profiles ... I’d never had infants before so it was helpful ... We looked at the list and added the rhymes they had learned in the *naíonra* to our plans. It was interesting to see what they had learned.’ [junior infant teacher]

It is clear that effective transition to school programmes has the potential to help children, their families, the school and communities to feel comfortable, valued and successful in the process. Moving from a known, comfortable environment to one that is different and unfamiliar is challenging, especially if careful attention is not given to the transition. As such, a well-planned transition process benefits children, families and teachers, and builds trust and relationships for the whole school community (Good Beginnings Interdepartmental Council, 2004).

## ‘Ready school environment’ – resources, materials, facilities

The study findings highlight participants’ appreciation of supportive and welcoming learning environments: ‘[They] help build a child’s confidence and give them a good impression of a learning environment’ ... the physical environment has a huge impact on their experience ... it’s about making the children happy’ [junior infant teacher].

Primary school principals and junior infant teachers described several aspects of a school’s physical environment that positively impact on the junior infant experience. They mentioned the importance of the classroom itself: ‘It’s newly built and all ground floor’ [junior infant teacher]. ‘Our classrooms are very spacious ... so we have a lot of ancillary materials’ [principal, primary school] and ‘nice play areas’ [principal, primary school]. Others highlighted the importance of the junior infants’ ease of access to the school’s facilities ‘from the point of view of safety’ [principal, primary school] and ‘the halla [school hall] is about a two-minute walk away and they have toilets in the classroom’ [principal, primary school]. Access to the outdoors was also a prominent feature of a ready school environment: ‘They’re quite near to outside access, looking out on a lovely green area’ [principal, primary school], which gives them ‘plenty of space to run’ [junior infant teacher]. Other schools were able to ‘go into the local park and go for nature walks into the field’, as well as having access to ‘a bus’ which allowed them to go on ‘school tours’ [junior infant teacher]. One principal described children’s access to the beach: ‘The strand is great ... they do their letters on the sand. They love it. They have plenty of space.’

## Adult-child ratios in junior infant classes

Positive correlations have been identified between class size, student achievement, classroom processes and teacher and student attitudes (Finn and Achilles, 1990; Biddle and Berliner, 2002). The majority of primary school participants interviewed believed that class sizes were excessive: ‘Too high in comparison with other countries in Europe ... crazy ... terrible really’ [principal, primary school]. There were widely held views that the ‘current pupil-teacher ratio is huge ... there are 30 children in the class’ [junior infant teacher]. On the other hand, one teacher pointed out that ‘we have 6 teachers and 8 classes ... 145 pupils, [but] we could safely have another 22 without getting an extra teacher’ [junior infant teacher].

It is not unusual for teachers in Ireland to find themselves alone in classes of 25-39 children (OECD, 2004 and 2006; O’Kane, 2007; Moloney, 2011). The difficulties associated with these increasing class sizes were expressed by junior infant teachers who ‘found it very hard to give everyone the attention they deserve ... It certainly is tough trying to negotiate 25 children’ [junior infant teacher] and ‘it just means there isn’t enough individual attention ... It’s like the cake – the more slices, the smaller the slice’ [principal, primary school]. Early years educators recognised the difficulties associated with the adult-child ratios in primary school: ‘There would have been a lot of one-to-one with us ... It’s a big transition for them [children] to suddenly realise that they’re in this classroom with one teacher and loads of children all looking for attention ... She hasn’t got the time. She has a curriculum to follow’ [early years manager].

Parents also expressed concerns, such as ‘the only thing is numbers’ [parent] and ‘there are going to be 32 children in his class, which is quite large ... above average’ [parent]. Parents reported that they try to ‘explain that there will be a lot of children and one teacher at the table’ [parent] and that ‘there’s going to be a bigger class and your teacher is going to be at the top and you are going to have to sit there and listen and actually do lessons and learn things’ [parent]. Other parents questioned whether their children would be able to ‘manage on their own in a large class’ [parent] and questioned whether their children could ‘get on with other children, do their coat, take instruction and follow directions’ [parent].

Findings on class size and adult-child ratios emerged in this study as an element of a complex system in schools, the potential of which to affect student achievement is inextricably linked to discrete elements of the education system, both at macro and micro levels.



## Communication with families and society

Family engagement has been identified as a key element in children's educational success (Henderson and Mapp, 2002). Mutual partnership contributes to establishing harmony and continuity between the diverse environments the child experiences in their early years (CECDE, 2006). Critically, schools need to be ready to work together with families and communities to develop such engagement. The power differentials between schools and individual families require schools to take an active role in leading such development.

The early years sector affirmed the importance of developing partnership with parents and encouraging parental involvement within their settings. It was acknowledged that parents 'are the primary educators' [early years manager] and early years educators 'are always open to get parents' input. We encourage it' [early years educator]. As such, there is 'a very good communication line with the parents throughout the year' [early years educator]. In fact, providers believed they did their best to communicate with parents on a daily basis: 'I talk to most parents every morning [and] there is no parent that I wouldn't have spoken to at least once a week' [early years manager]. Regular communication with parents was facilitated in a number of ways, including the use of an 'open door policy' [early years educator]. One early years manager reported that 'parents can come any time they want [to] talk about their child'. Having an open door policy allowed for 'daily updates on how the children [were] doing' [early years educator], as well as 'communication around different activities ... and programmes ... so they can tie in with it at home' [early years manager] and thus encourage the continuity of learning from pre-school to the home. Various strategies were described to communicate with parents, including telephone calls and text messages ('If any child has a blip, I'll always ring or text them' [early years manager]); documentation ('We send little sheets home saying what they did ... and they take work home every week' [early years manager]); and parent meetings ('We hold parent-teacher meetings two to three times a year [to] talk about their development' [early years manager]).

Findings indicate that parents are satisfied with the amount of communication they receive from their child's pre-school setting. However, one parent noted that she 'would like to know more ... they don't have enough time to tell you what is happening ... but if there is a problem I'll hear about it'. To alleviate problems arising from time constraints, another parent suggested that 'a newsletter once a month would be nice to be kept up to date with what the kids are learning'.

Conversely, findings indicate a lack of communication between primary schools and FPSY settings: 'I don't think the primary schools want to know' [early years manager]. 'We don't have any communication with the teachers' [early years manager] and 'It's like a division ... primary is just on its own' [early years educator]. That said, primary schools acknowledged the importance of the concept of communication and collaboration with FPSY settings: 'You are getting a child from a setting that has had that child for the past 12 months, so surely their information would be important' [junior infant teacher] and 'There could be things that we are missing' [principal, primary school].

A number of early years educators indicated that they would value opportunities to communicate with primary schools: 'That's an area where there is huge room for improvement ... We have never gotten feedback on how our children are doing. We'd love to hear it' [early years educator]. An early years manager described attempts to form a partnership with the local primary school: 'We had our folders [of children's work], but they didn't have the time to actually listen to what we were saying, to even look at our folders. They have a totally different curriculum and way of doing things ... It's a barrier that we have to break' [early years manager]. One early years manager suggested that 'correspondence between the pre-schools and the schools [would allow early years educators] set up a better plan [because ultimately primary schools and early years settings] are on the same side. It's all for the child and how they can get the best out of this.'

An example of collaborative practice was reported in relation to children with special educational needs, with primary school personnel visiting the pre-school. Attempts to communicate were facilitated by virtue of proximity to the school: 'We [are] linked. We've a gate through to the primary school ... We do a lot of work with them and most of our children go there' [early years educator]. An on-site early years setting facilitates a closer working relationship between the sectors, and promotes opportunities for collaboration: 'We compared the equipment in the *naíonra* and in the classroom. We sat down and read a story, ate lunch [and] we went out to the yard [with] the other children' [early years educator].

One junior infant teacher reported how involvement with outside organisations promoted communication between the school and the early years settings: 'We're involved with [local college]. They do curriculum priority weeks [and] we've really been integrated with pre-schools for these activities' [junior infant teacher]. The role of informal/personal relationships between early years settings and primary schools in facilitating communication was also raised. A junior infant teacher stated: 'We have a personal relationship with our pre-school teacher. If we are covering the handwriting programme, I might bring her in and show her [it] and ask her if she'd like to do it. That's not the same [for everyone], as our children would come from three different playgroups.' One primary school principal noted: 'No, the infant teacher doesn't visit the pre-school. The infants come here with their parents ... Our SNA is very friendly with the manager ... There is sort of contact between us, but nothing formal.'

Parents reported mixed feelings on communication between the sectors (primary and pre-school). Five parents explicitly stated that communication should be encouraged: 'Yes, definitely ... the pre-school teacher should do a report of how she feels the child is in certain activities, and maybe a sample of things the children do' [parent]. Parents also considered that communication would particularly benefit children with special educational needs: 'Having been through the process with my kid with special needs, there is a very good hand-over of information both academically and personally' [parent]. One parent noted: 'It probably would be helpful if the school had records of how the children [are] getting on in pre-school.' However, another parent cautioned that 'I am not sure how it would benefit, unless there was a specific need.' Three parents expressly stated that they would prefer little or no communication between the sectors because 'it would give preconceived notions to the new teacher of what to expect from the child' [parent] and 'it's nice for the teacher to take the child as she sees it and not to have any influence on the child' [parent].

The majority of communication between primary schools and parents took place prior to children starting school. As well as open days, parent information evenings were offered in five schools: 'We bring them in to speak about school and activities [the children] will be doing. We give a question and answers-type session and any worries they have can [be brought] up there' [principal, primary school]. During the transition phase in September, two schools had significant contact with parents: 'The school would meet the parents this time of year, and in September there's another meeting to explain the curriculum, the reading programme and the child's day' [junior infant teacher]. Scheduled and unscheduled parent-teacher meetings or conversations were described by three schools: 'The parents are always coming with things they're worried about [and] things they're happy about. There's a very good flow of communication' [junior infant teacher] and 'They [parents] can come in any time' [principal, primary school]. Some specific challenges were identified by one junior infant teacher where the parents 'come and go on buses so [they] would probably be asked to bring and collect them for the first couple of weeks to get to talk and communicate' [junior infant teacher].

Schools described a number of strategies used to impart advice/information to parents, including 'welcome packs' [principal, primary school] and 'enrolment books [containing] information on being ready for school' [junior infant teacher]. In one school, a 'communication

diary’ was used to inform parents about how their child’s day went, ‘what [the children] did, or if there was a task [they] had to do’ and how they felt ‘if they were tired’ [junior infant teacher]. Another school developed a website to maintain regular communication with parents: ‘We upload everything we do in class ... Parents can help the child at home ... So there’s a connection to be made between the homework and the class website’ [junior infant teacher]. Some schools described how they advise parents to contact the school electronically: ‘We tell them if they have any questions to ring or send an e-mail’ [principal, primary school].

In general, these various events and means of communication facilitated discussion in relation to preparing children for school and supporting children with special educational needs. Parents are interested in understanding how their children develop and learn (Melhuish *et al.*, 2008) and their understanding is greatly enhanced through professionals’ observations and information about how to support learning and recognise how their children are doing (Best Start Expert Panel on Early Learning, 2007). In this study, one junior infant teacher expressed her satisfaction with a particular parent who approached her and said: “‘What can I do with my child at home?’ ... By giving her small little pointers, she [the mother] has made such a difference in her child’s education ... It’s absolutely fantastic ... Just by talking ... about simple things, different social settings ... working on numbers, counting.’

The research findings resonate with the views expressed by Siraj-Blatchford (2010, pp. 466-67), that ‘families do have the capacity to support their children in different ways when they have the will, the means and an understanding of the need to do so’.

### ‘Ready teacher’

A key feature of the school environment is the teacher. Teacher quality plays an important role in the delivery of quality curriculum and student achievement in the early years (Early *et al.*, 2006). According to Shore (cited in UNICEF, 2012), ‘ready schools’ should promote a social learning environment where the relationship between teachers and children is critical for the development of social, ethical, emotional, intellectual and physical competencies.

In this study, 22 parents expressed a view on what they considered to be important in relation to a junior infant teacher’s disposition. They considered the ‘role of the primary school teacher [to be] very important’ [parent]. One parent described a ‘very bad experience ... I had two starting and they hated it. The teacher was so strict ... we had a very rough start ... she expected them to sit there, she wasn’t very understanding ... she would have been better off with older children ... A teacher has to have some understanding of the little ones’ [parent]. Another parent described ‘a very enthusiastic teacher [who] is expecting a bit too much of the infants. [She] gives loads of homework and is expecting a lot, like reading and knowing all the letters. They are only four or five. They can’t know all that’ [parent].

Twelve parents identified a number of characteristics essential to the role of a junior infant teacher. These included ‘patience’ [parent]; ‘sensitivity and responsiveness to the child and adopting a lenient approach’; [parent]; ‘creating a nurturing and safe environment and promoting children’s happiness’; [parent]; and ‘treating the child with respect and nurturing the child’s individuality’ [parent]. Critically, one parent concluded that teachers should be ‘educated enough to know how to deal with kids.’

While specific aspects of the teacher-child relationship may vary across cultures, the literature suggests that responsive, mutually respectful and reflective teaching is always a central element for enhancing children’s learning outcomes (CECDE, 2006; UNICEF, 2012), with strong emotional support from teachers linked to enhanced engagement and academic performance (Curby *et al.*, 2009). Parents’ views from this study reflect an awareness of the importance of these factors in their children’s early learning.

## 4.11 Role of the community in supporting school readiness

According to the Stronger Smarter Institute (2010, p. 4) *‘there can be no school readiness without community readiness’*. Thus, school readiness is an outcome of the resources (including knowledge and skills), attitudes (including priorities) and relationships within a community (Dockett *et al*, 2010). Community involvement requires the establishment of networks and connections, evidenced by policies, procedures and actions, that extend and support all adults’ and children’s engagement with the wider community (CECDE, 2006). As such, the notion of a ‘ready community’ in terms of supporting school readiness was underpinned by the availability of a number of supports and services related to early intervention and supports for children, as well as educational and recreational facilities.

### Early intervention supports and services for children

The need for community involvement and connections can be seen in terms of early intervention. According to Shonkoff and Meisels (2000), early childhood intervention consists of multidisciplinary services provided to children from birth to five years of age to promote child health and well-being, enhance emerging competencies, minimise developmental delays, remediate existing or emerging disabilities, prevent functional deterioration, and promote adaptive parenting and overall family functioning. These goals are accomplished by providing individualised developmental, educational and therapeutic services for children in conjunction with mutually planned support for their families.

The findings from this study indicate that children with special educational needs and/or additional needs received varied levels of support from different professionals, including public health nurses, speech and language therapists, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, special education needs organisers, key workers, SNAs and early intervention educators. It was felt that support from these professionals was necessary in both mainstream pre-schools and special pre-schools before entering school. An early years manager reported that *‘if a child has a problem, it’s better to get it diagnosed before they go to school ... so that it can be worked on.’* Another early years manager referred to working with children who may have a speech and language delay: *‘If they need to work on their “cs” or “ls”, we put pictures on the wall and do as much as we can with them.’* Children attending special pre-schools also rely on the support of a multidisciplinary team: *‘Speech and language therapists, occupational therapists, physiotherapists ... early intervention educators come to the school regularly and meet with parents ... It’s great. You are getting feedback from all angles’* [early years educator].

Once a child with special educational or additional needs is enrolled in primary school, it was reported that, in order to avail of additional resources, they required *‘a psychological report’* [junior infant teacher]. The recent reduction in teaching time for children with special educational needs, in addition to the reductions in SNA numbers (due to financial constraints caused by the recent economic downturn), was reported as impacting negatively on provision in the primary school. A junior infant teacher observed:

*‘The qualification for resource hours is just very difficult ... but I would be for more early intervention. If there is a difficulty, we need to sort it now.’*

A school primary school principal, commenting on children attending special schools, said:

*‘At this age – with the under-sixes ... the OTs [occupational therapists] and speech and language therapists would come in and offer in-class support. But there is never enough support to go around.’*

A multidisciplinary team of professionals not only provide children with the support they need to progress in school, they can also afford early years educators and teachers the support and advice *they* need in caring for and educating children with special educational needs: *‘It’s the support as a teacher ... sometimes you try and try so many strategies and it doesn’t solve the problem. So, to have that support there has really helped me, which has really helped the children’* [early years educator].

## Educational and recreational facilities

Kagan and Rigby (2003) emphasise that ready communities also provide safe, supportive and nurturing environments for children and their families. Therefore, as well as highlighting the need for early intervention services, participants were asked to identify three educational and recreational facilities within the community which were significant to supporting school readiness. These facilities included libraries, mother and toddler groups, and sports facilities.

A junior infant teacher considered that ‘early literacy’ and the ‘love of books’ were particularly important in terms of school readiness. Similarly, an early years educator noted that libraries are ‘really important ... to encourage reading and a love for reading’. In addition to having access to books in the library, another early years educator reported that children also had the opportunity to participate in ‘music workshops’ and various other activities taking place in the library, such as adults coming ‘to read stories ... and do art with the children’.

Mother and toddler groups were seen as promoting ‘social skills [and] language’ [junior infant teacher], as well as being places ‘where children learn to play and share together when they are very young’ [early years educator]. Parents also identified benefits for their children in attending mother and toddler groups: ‘I would have taken her to mother and toddler in the same place before she went to the *naíónra* ... There were no issues with going because she was acquainted with the whole environment’ [parent]. Similarly, teachers felt that their jobs were ‘made a lot easier’ when children had ‘a wider experience at community level’ [principal, primary school]. Mother and toddler groups were also described as being advantageous for parents: ‘It’s good for parents to talk to other parents, to swap stories’ [junior infant teacher].

Sports facilities were also acknowledged in the context of the role of sport in contributing to children’s development. An early years manager considered that ‘if children go to sports activities outside school, it helps with their social skills’. According to one parent, sports introduce children to ‘a wider cohort of kids they might be mixing with’. Another parent noted the value of sports for children because ‘it’s about teamwork and working together and it’s fun’. A junior infant teacher in an urban school believed ‘sports keep them healthy’ and aid in ‘the development of the child’s personality’.

## 4.12 Professional development

As discussed in the literature review in Chapter 2, a central difference between ISCED Level 0 (pre-primary) and ISCED Level 1 (primary school) is evident in the diverse approaches to professional qualifications required for both sectors in Ireland. All primary teachers require an Honours Bachelor of Education degree in order to be allowed to teach, whereas in the FPSY, early years staff must have a minimum FETAC Level 5 qualification with incentives to access Level 6 training.

It is apparent that a junior infant teacher in one particular school was aware of the differences in qualifications between the sectors as she discussed a teacher’s capacity to implement a curriculum (*Aistear*) versus the capacity of an early childhood educator to do the same:

‘I know that when [children] come to Junior school ... it’s [to] a qualified teacher and we know the curriculum ... I think pre-schools are really important and you can see that ... I mean it’s really evident ... the teachers in the pre-schools would need to be adequately qualified ... to teach [*Aistear*].’ [junior infant teacher]

O’Kane (2007, p. 13) notes that ‘a curriculum is only as effective as the practitioners implementing it’. In order to implement a curriculum in a way that will provide a richness of activities and interactions that support and extend children’s learning, teachers and educators must have an understanding of the theories of learning and development, which underpin the curriculum (*ibid*). Although steps have been taken to redress the lack of professional qualifications within the ECCE sector in Ireland, it has been typified by qualified, semi-qualified

and unqualified staff, who may or may not have specialist qualifications in working with young children (OECD, 2001 and 2006; Moloney and Pope, 2011). In relation to the implementation of the FPSY, for example, of the 4,162 ECCE services contracted to deliver the scheme in 2011, 85.4% met the basic capitation criteria and 14.6% met the higher capitation criteria, which are directly linked to higher levels of training. It is not surprising, therefore, that the need for training within the early years sector was highlighted by both a principal and a junior infant teacher in relation to two specific areas: introducing academic work to children in pre-school and implementing *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009).

The junior infant teacher was particularly critical of how children were taught to write in FPSY programmes, and highlighted the impact for her work when children ‘do a lot of handwriting in a lot of places and I have to break a lot of habits from these play schools.’ It is evident that when children are not taught how to write correctly from the beginning, it results in challenges for both the child and the teacher:

‘[Children] are coming in and writing from the bottom up. We always start our letters from the top, but they are doing it [from the] bottom ... I want them to do it the way we are going to do it because it makes for such fluidity in their writing.’ [junior infant teacher]

A primary school principal referred to the issue of children’s pencil grip. He described how children sometimes ‘come in with a variety of techniques on how to write and hold their pencil’ and teachers have to try ‘and unteach what was done already’. One junior infant teacher felt that it might be better if early years educators ‘never touched handwriting’ and, in fact, she stated that they should be ‘trained in the right way to teach handwriting, [such as] making stuff with play dough, seeing form and shape in it, talking with others, taking turns and all those things that are very important when you are teaching large groups of people’ [junior infant teacher].

In relation to the *Aistear* curriculum framework, two junior infant teachers mentioned the need for early years educators to undertake training in its implementation. While one teacher described *Aistear* as being ‘very suitable and typical and successful for infant teachers’, she expressed concern that ‘nurseries are putting it in place without any kind of training or any kind of ... I suppose supervision is the wrong word – maybe monitoring or evaluation’ [junior infant teacher]. Similarly, another junior infant teacher stated ‘the people working in the pre-schools need to be trained adequately. That would be my feeling. I don’t know what training they get at the moment in the pre-school.’

While the Department of Education and Skills published a *Workforce Development Plan* in 2010, there has been limited investment in implementing it across the early years sector. In 2014, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) committed €2.5 million to support a National Quality Early Years Support Service, Better Start, which is a mentoring service to progress the implementation of *Siolta* and *Aistear* within the early years sector. Initially, the focus of Better Start mentors is on settings providing services for children under three years of age rather than on those settings operating as part of the FPSY scheme (DCYA, 2014c).

## 4.13 Summary

In this chapter, early years educators, teachers and parents have provided many insights into their concepts of school readiness. School readiness was primarily associated with a maturationist and environmental approach. The participants valued children’s social and emotional maturity in relation to school readiness, while at the same time expecting children to demonstrate a range of classroom behaviours such as the ability to sit down, follow instructions and recognise letters and numbers.

Most parents and teachers specified five years as the minimum school starting age, whereas early years educators preferred the slightly later age of five and a half years. Most participants were not in favour of the European starting age of six years. All participants recognised that the age at which children start school depended on the individual child, but few referred to gender as an issue. Parental concerns about their children starting school related to large class sizes, children's social and emotional maturity, and the danger of bullying in the school playground. Teacher dispositions and school culture were also identified as concerns by parents.


Significant differences emerged with regard to the implementation of *Aistear* in early years settings and primary schools, with more early years settings engaged in implementing the framework. A distinction was drawn between play and learning by many participants in both sectors, and many educators in early years settings reported teaching phonics and letters, and numbers recognition, in a formal way. Conversely, primary school teachers expected early years staff to develop children's social skills, self-help skills and language skills.

All participants valued the free pre-school year, with reported high levels of attendance and a reduction of the financial burden on parents. Little formal communication was reported between early years settings and primary schools, but participants stressed the importance of contact between the sectors, especially with regard to children with special educational needs. All participants highlighted the importance of a well-supported transition process from early years settings to primary school.









## 5. The voice of the child – qualitative findings

Vision of the National Children's Strategy: 'An Ireland where children are respected as young citizens with a valued contribution to make and a voice of their own; where all children are cherished and supported by family and the wider society; where they enjoy a fulfilling childhood and realise their potential' (Department of Health and Children, 2000, p. 4)



In direct response to Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Goal 1 of the National Children's Strategy, published in 2000 by the Department of Health and Children, made it a priority that '*children will 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*'. This priority recognises the value of the child's voice in terms of understanding children's experiences of the variety of structures and processes that influence their world. It is important, therefore, that children's opinions and concerns are taken into consideration in decisions about the development and strategic management of early years services. The rich democratic discourse, embedded in the report of the Early Years Advisory Group, *Right from the Start* (DCYA, 2013), is reflected in the many early childhood education policy developments, such as:

- *Intercultural Guidelines in the Primary School: Enabling children to respect, to promote equality and to challenge unfair discrimination* (NCCA, 2004);
- *Síolta: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* (CECDE, 2006);
- *National Childcare Strategy, 2006-2010: The Diversity and Equality Guidelines for Childcare Providers* (OMC, 2006b);
- *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009).

This concept of capturing the child's voice firmly locates children as part of the decision-making processes that directly impact their lives and shape their childhood experience. It was therefore essential to include the voice of the child in the present research exploring the concept of school readiness.

As discussed in Chapter 3, Whitehead's (2010) overview of the value of narratives and how these can assist in the interpretation of qualitative data provided a lens through which the child's voice regarding school readiness was analysed. The findings are presented in a composite manner, presenting individual children's responses together thematically, rather than isolating individual participants. The narratives are presented under the following headings: 'Big School'; Activities in 'Big School'; Making friends; and Formation of the child's perception of 'Big School'.

## 5.1 'Big School'

As evident in the literature, young children experience radical changes in their physical environment when they move from one setting to another. The child conferences conducted as part of this study revealed some of the anxieties faced by the young child when thinking about the prospect of attending what they called 'Big School'. The following narratives, many of which come from children who had visited their new school before starting in September, provide insights into children's perceptions of this new environment. The use of 'fantasy' in some of the narratives captures the enormity of the change from the child's perspective. For example:

'[The school is] big ... bigger than any school in the world ... bigger than a giant [and the children would need] help finding their way around by the teacher ... and we saw some hot wheels and transformers and cool things.'

There was a sense that 'Big School' was perceived by children as being physically 'big'. One child captured the scale and the difficulty of representing it and noted, in relation to the drawing below, 'I want to make it bigger'.



In some instances, the enormity of the new space proved to be quite daunting, as illustrated by the following exchange where the child spoke of children being 'scared'. Acknowledging the 'bigness' of the world from the child's perspective is an important consideration for both parents and educators alike when preparing children for starting school.

*Child:* 'This is the big school. They have a mountain and they are all scared.'

*Researcher:* 'Who was scared?'

*Child:* 'My Mom 'cos she said, "No, you have to go in there 'cos there's no monsters"'.

*Researcher:* 'And did you think there were monsters in there?'

*Child:* 'Yeah.'

The children were also acutely aware of the activity around and about the school, such as the buses and cars dropping children off and collecting them. In the following account, children recall the number of buses collecting and dropping off children ('two buses ... now there are three buses'):

*Child:* 'This is the bus and there is a tree outside the school.'

*Child:* 'There are cars there.'

*Researcher:* 'Why is that?'

*Child:* 'To pick them up.'

*Researcher:* 'Oh, to pick them up from school?'

*Child:* 'That's the bus.'

*Researcher:* 'The bus outside the school? Oh, I see.'

*Child:* 'Two buses.'

*Researcher:* 'And who comes on the buses?'

*Child:* 'No one. Now there are three buses.'



Children's drawings and narratives also captured the potential of the outdoor space and the rules associated with outdoor play, including the ringing of the school bell to indicate that it was time to return indoors.

*Researcher:* 'So does anybody know what you are going to be doing when you go to Big School?'

*Child:* 'Or maybe playing in the garden.'



*Child:* 'That's the bell.'

*Researcher:* 'Oh, what's the bell for?'

*Child:* 'The teacher.'

*Researcher:* 'Why does the teacher ring the bell?'

*Child:* 'Because it's inside time.'

*Researcher:* 'Oh, so people have to go inside when she rings the bell?'

*Child:* 'Yeah. Only little girls are allowed at the convent.'



Some of the narratives focused on getting into and out of the school, and provide an insight into the perceived differences between the two environments. As the following narrative suggests, children attached different meaning to different doors, and perhaps spaces, within the school. There were doors 'where the cars go in', a door 'where the little people [children] go in' and then there were locked doors and open doors within the environment.

*Researcher:* 'These are the doorways where the cars go in?'

*Child:* 'And that's the door where the little people go in.'

*Child:* 'The door is locked.'

*Researcher:* 'Is the door locked in Big School?'

*Child:* 'Yeah.'

*Researcher:* 'Why is it locked?'

*Child:* 'One door is locked and one is open.'



As well as children articulating a concept of a vast space, they were also aware that there would be lots of people in 'Big School', as demonstrated in the following exchange where the child indicated that there were 'a really lot of children'. Also in the transcript below, another child said they would draw 'loads of children' if drawing themselves in school.

*Researcher:* 'Is it [Big School] different to this school?'

*Child:* 'Yeah, it's bigger.'

*Researcher:* 'It's bigger and are there other children there?'

*Child:* 'Yeah, a really lot of children. My brother is there.'

Not only is 'Big School' busy in terms of people ('two classes'), children also spoke about there being lots more materials/resources. In the example below, the child refers to sheets of paper:

*Child:* 'There is about a lot of toys in Big School because it is a very big school ... Because there is two, two, two classes.'

*Researcher:* 'And if you were to draw yourself in a classroom, what would you draw?'

*Child:* 'Loads of children.'

*Researcher:* 'And what else do you remember?'

*Child:* 'Loads of sheets.'

## Activities in 'Big School'

With regard to activities in 'Big School', the children's narratives revealed the playful nature of activities within school, with a distinct focus on art, literacy, numeracy, information and communications technology and homework. In addition, the narratives relating to the activities in 'Big School' provide a unique insight into children's perceptions on the types of learning (dispositions, values and attitudes, skills, knowledge and understanding) that

are important from a child's perspective in their early years (NCCA, 2009). They underpin the critical importance of play (with dolls and toys), experiential learning (with play dough and hand-painting) and books for young children. It is equally apparent that children see themselves as being active within their learning in school, and in contrast to the findings in Chapter 4, they do not at any stage mention the need to sit while engaging in the various school activities. Instead, children referred to activities where they could '*explore and work with the objects around them*' (NCCA, 2009, p. 10).

### The child's voice relating to play and art in 'Big School'

*Child 1: 'I am going to read books and colour and I am going to do picture puzzle and play dough and I am going to play skipping rope and I am going to play dolls and doll's house.'*

*Child 2: 'I am going to colour and play with play dough and I am going to play with painting and do my homework.'*

*Child 3: 'I am going to play and colour.'*

*Child 4: 'I am going to play with the toys.'*

*Child 5: 'All you do is play and colour.'*

*Child 6: 'Something to do with painting.'*

*Child 7: 'Painting on the wall and play dough.'*

*Child 8: 'Hand-painting, but that's really messy.'*

There was a perceived similarity between the activities that take place in the pre-school and in the primary school. Circle time was captured in some of the children's drawings as something they would be doing in primary school, with one child noting that '*Circle time is big*'.



Children's perception of the formal aspects of learning that take place in 'Big School' was captured in how children depicted the layout of the new classroom, as seen in the two drawings below.



## The child's voice relating to literacy and numeracy in 'Big School'

Corroborating the findings in relation to the focus on academic activities in pre-school presented in Chapter 4, children were excited about continuing some activities, such as the alphabet, counting and shapes in 'Big School'. In the following exchange, the child refers to 'writing and lessons' and also the fact that there will be music in 'Big School' with his mum bringing 'a whistle' for him:

*Child:* 'My A B Cs ... I don't know what comes after D ... Can you tell me what comes after F? ... A B C D E F G G comes after C ... A B C D E F G H H H ... What comes after J? ... Is that W or M ... W M. Do you have any rubber?'

*Researcher:* 'Will we go back and ask James what are you looking forward to about school?'

*Child:* 'Am doing writing and lessons, and my mum's going to bring me a whistle.'

Similar excitement was evident in the children's comments relating to numeracy, as demonstrated in the following extract where they talk about 'numbers and dancing and drums'. Children's propensity and disposition for learning is evident in the discourse.

*Child:* 'Letters and numbers ... 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 ...'

*Child:* 'Numbers and dancing and drums.'

*Child:* 'These are all the shapes I love.'



## The child's voice relating to information and communications technology in 'Big School'

The availability and prospect of using the computer in 'Big School' generated great excitement among children, who described a range of activities they would be able to do on the computers there. These included playing games, looking up stuff, doing homework and writing.

*Child:* 'Play games on it ... printing out important stuff for ... learning what to do in space ... maybe look up if there is any stuff about aliens ... lots of things.'

*Child:* 'For my homework, I was doing manga high.'

It is apparent from the following extract that some children were already familiar with using computers. In some cases, therefore, using and working with the computers in school would add to children's existing information and communications technology skills.

*Child:* 'I love playing on the computers and doing handstands ... Watch this.'

*Child:* 'Play on the computers. But you can't use any buttons. You have to use the mouse.'

*Child:* 'And even I can go on the computers ... Yeah, even I was there with a uniform on someday and I was going on the puter to do loads of my writing homework and send it on my mum's phone.'

## The child's voice relating to homework in 'Big School'

The concept and nature of homework was also detailed in some narratives, with one child associating it with writing and another describing how her granny was so surprised she was doing homework rather than watching television, following a visit to 'Big School', that she 'actually lied down on the floor and falled down'.



*Child:* 'Am homework.'

*Researcher:* 'And what do you think homework is about?'

*Child:* 'Ah, writing.'

As outlined above, one child elaborated enthusiastically:

'It's going to be fantastic. I will be doing puzzles and last time when I was at Big School I had my uniform on and I did loads of homework and my granny said ... "Why are you not watching TV?" and I said "Maaaag, I'm doing my homework for Miss [name of teacher]" and ... she actually lied down on the floor and falled down.'

These references to homework were also consonant with some references by parents in the interview data concerning the need for children to be able to do homework once they started primary school.

### The child's voice relating to the role of the teacher in 'Big School'

*Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* highlights the critical role of the adult in helping children to reach their full potential, to build on their abilities, interests and experiences (NCCA, 2009, p. 10). The child conference data show that children had particular views on what the teacher did in 'Big School' and said that he or she would sit in the office and read stories to them. They also spoke about teachers having a caring role, where they would 'mind' the children. Children's perspectives in this regard are similar to the parental views highlighted in the findings (see *Chapter 4*) – that teacher disposition is important in the infant classes in primary school.

*Child:* 'That is the teacher.'

*Researcher:* 'That's the teacher, okay. What's the teacher doing?'

*Child:* 'Sitting down.'

*Researcher:* 'Sitting down. Okay. Where is she?'

*Child:* 'She's in the office.'

*Researcher:* 'In the office. What does she do in the office?'

*Child:* 'Just sit down.'

*Researcher:* 'Just sit down?'

*Child:* 'To do her work.'



In the following extract, children discuss their perceptions of the teacher's role in activities:

*Child:* 'And she read us a story about the Three Billy Goats Gruff.'

*Researcher:* 'Who told you about that?'

*Child:* 'Miss [name of teacher].'

*Researcher:* 'And who is she?'

*Child:* 'She's a teacher.'

As mentioned, other children revealed the sense of security the teacher provides in the caring role:

*Researcher:* 'Your teacher, is it?'

*Child:* 'Yeah.'

*Researcher:* 'Where is she?'

*Child 1:* 'She is at the front door minding all the kids. But it's raining and it's too wet. She doesn't want to go outside.'

*Child 2:* 'Miss ... Miss ... Miss, there was a fire at the class. I saw it and the fireman put it all out and the police got the baddie because the baddie was climbing over the classroom and arrested him.'

## 5.2 Friendships

Analysis of the child conference data revealed the importance of friendship for children, and their excitement at the prospect of attending school with their peers. In the following narrative, the child tells the researcher that ‘you have to make friends in Big School’.

*Researcher:* ‘Do you know what is going to happen in Big School?’

*Child:* ‘I am going to play with my friends.’

*Researcher:* ‘You are going to play with your friends? Lovely.’

*Child:* ‘You have to make friends, you know.’

*Researcher:* ‘Are any friends from here going to your big school?’

*Child:* ‘Yes. Actually no. Well, [child’s name] is.’



Although the narratives revealed some uncertainty (‘I don’t know what friends we are going to make in Big School’), the prospect of making new friends was viewed in positive terms.

### A child’s first experience of ‘Big School’

The children’s senses played a key role in terms of their first experience of ‘Big School’. Their accounts refer to experiencing sunshine (‘It was nice on a sunny day at the school’), noting that ‘there was a big storm’ and hearing the fire alarm go off. These sensorial experiences amplified children’s perceptions of ‘Big School’:

*Researcher:* ‘There is a fire in the school?’

*Child:* ‘The fire alarm went off.’

*Researcher:* ‘The alarm went off. Did you hear the alarm in the school before?’

*Child:* ‘Just once.’

*Researcher:* ‘Were you there when the alarm went off?’

*Child:* ‘Yeah.’



Each child had a different and unique initial experience during visits to the primary school, and this impacted on how they subsequently described the world of ‘Big School’. Although children learn and explore through their senses, their reports of their initial experiences of ‘Big School’ indicate the importance of planning and preparing for transition experiences (Hirst *et al*, 2011).

### Formation of the child’s perception of ‘Big School’

One of the most interesting features of the collective children’s voices relates to the manner in which the child’s perception of ‘Big School’ is formed. The data indicate that while the children’s perceptions are derived from many sources, they reported that it was primarily their parents who talked to them about ‘Big School’. While narratives identified parents as the people who talked to children in relation to ‘Big School’, they rarely provided detail in relation to further understandings the children may have taken from the conversations.



**Narrative 1**

*Researcher:* 'Did anybody tell you about going to Big School?'

*Child:* 'Yeah, my mummy.'

*Researcher:* 'And what did she say about Big School?'

*Child:* 'Nothing.'

**Narrative 2**

*Child:* 'My mum and my daddy knows.'

**Narrative 3**

*Researcher:* 'What does Mummy say?'

*Child:* 'Emmm, nothing.'

*Researcher:* 'Nothing? Does she tell you about Big School?'

*Child:* 'I don't remember.'

*Researcher:* 'Who talks to you about your big school?'

*Child:* 'My daddy.'

*Researcher:* 'Your daddy does. And what does Daddy tell you about Big School?'

*Child:* 'Lots.'

The children's drawings indicated the great value that children place on the supportive role that parents, in particular mothers and in some cases grandparents, play in accompanying them to school.



Other narratives indicated that children's perceptions of the parent-child conversation centred on the notion that it was going to be an exciting experience. However, in some cases, the data suggest that this excitement may have been identified by the parents during the conversation with the child about school.

**Narrative 1**

*Researcher:* 'Who talks to you about going to Big School?'

*Child:* 'Mum.'

*Researcher:* 'What does she say about Big School?'

*Child:* 'She says "I am so excited."'

**Narrative 2**

*Researcher:* 'Who talks to you about going to Big School?'

*Child:* 'My mum.'

*Researcher:* 'And what does she say about Big School?'

*Child:* 'She says, "Mary, are you so excited to go to Big School?" and I say "Yes, Mum".'



In another instance, when asked what her mother tells her about 'Big School', the child replies, 'Are you very excited about going?'

In keeping with the maturationist-environmental view of school readiness (Dockett and Perry, 2002), as presented in Chapter 4, some narratives indicated that the child's perception of the parent-child conversation focused on how they should behave in 'Big School'. These behaviours related to being 'very good' and 'to listen what the teacher is saying'.

#### **Narrative 4**

*Researcher:* 'What did your mum and dad tell you about Big School?'

*Child:* 'To be good at school.'

*Researcher:* 'To be good at school, OK.'

*Child:* 'Be very, very good.'

#### **Narrative 5**

*Researcher:* 'Who talks to you about Big School?'

*Child:* 'My mum and dad.'

*Researcher:* 'And what do your mum and dad tell you about Big School?'

*Child:* 'My mum says to be good.'

#### **Narrative 6**

*Researcher:* 'What do your mum and dad tell you about Big School?'

*Child:* 'Toys.'

*Researcher:* 'Toys. Anything else? What do your mum and dad tell you about Big School?'

*Child:* 'They tell me to listen to what the teacher is saying.'

Other narratives highlighted that parent-child conversations relieved some of the children's anxieties about school. As the following exchanges show, children were reassured that 'school is lovely', that 'mum collects us after break' and there is 'a clock on the wall. It says the time'.

#### **Narrative 7**

*Child:* 'Emmm, my daddy.'

*Researcher:* 'Your daddy. What does daddy say?'

*Child:* 'He says Big School is lovely.'

#### **Narrative 8**

*Child:* 'My mum knows.'

*Researcher:* 'Your mum knows?'

*Child:* 'Yeah.'

*Researcher:* 'And did she tell you anything about it?'

*Child:* 'Uh, yeah.'

*Researcher:* 'Like what?'

*Child:* 'We go home after Mum collects us after break.'

*Researcher:* 'Very good. You go home after she collects you after the break. And what else did she tell you?'

*Child:* 'A clock is on the wall. It says what time.'

Although it was clear that the children viewed their parents as the people who tell them about 'Big School', it was the experiences of other children, such as friends, siblings and cousins, that played a more prominent role in the formation of children's perception of what it might be like in 'Big School'. In the first instance, the children seemed to place great value on their new school in terms of the 'significant others' who are currently attending that school:

*Researcher:* 'Will you tell me who is in your picture, Sara?'

*Child:* 'That is Meg. That is Matthew.'

*Researcher:* 'Is Matthew going to the same school as you?'

*Child:* 'Yes.'

Some narratives indicated that children paid equal attention to their friends' 'new school' as well as their own. This is interesting in terms of children's early perception of 'ownership' of the school, a quality that could be harnessed in terms of enhancing children's participation in their new school once they arrive there. The children see the school as a children's space:

*Child 2:* 'And I am going to my sister's school.'

*Child 1:* 'And she is going to the same school as me.'

*Researcher:* 'You are going to your sisters' school. So Ellen and Cathy are going to the same school?'

*Child 3:* 'And I am going to Jake's school.'

*Researcher:* 'You're going to Jake's school?'

*Child 4:* 'And I am going to the school in ...'

*Researcher:* 'Very good. And what about you, Aiden? Are you going to Big School?'

*Child 5:* 'I am going to my Auntie Cecilia's school and then Teresa's school. I am going to two schools.'

*Researcher:* 'Oh, right.'

*Child 5:* 'One when I am four and one when I am six.'

*Child 1:* 'My cousin and my mum brought me to my cousin's school.'

The importance of 'significant others' was reiterated in the narratives about the children's drawings:

*Child 1:* 'I'm going to draw Natasha in Big School.'

*Researcher:* 'Natasha in Big School – that would be great. What about you, Lara? What do you think you might draw?'

*Child 2:* 'I'm going to draw Tanya.'

*Researcher:* 'What about you? What are you going to draw for us?'

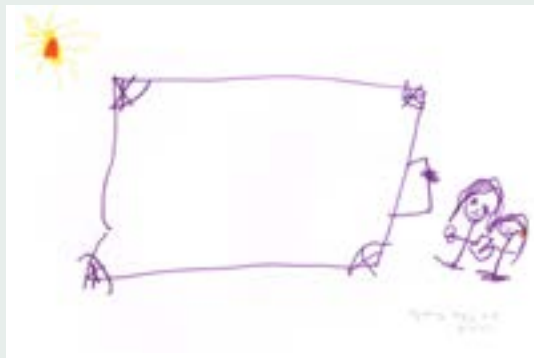
*Child 3:* 'My brother.'

*Researcher:* 'Your brother in Big School?'

*Child 1:* 'I'm going to draw Natasha's school.'

*Researcher:* 'You're going to draw Natasha's school?'

*Child 1:* 'Yeah.'



Siblings also provided an insight into the activities that take place in 'Big School'. As evident from the following narratives, siblings had told children about opportunities to play football and to draw:

#### **Narrative 9**

*Child 1:* 'My brother ...'

*Researcher:* 'Your brother? What does he say?'

*Child 1:* 'I don't know.'

*Researcher:* 'Does he like Big school?'

*Child 1:* 'Yeah.'

*Researcher:* 'What does he do there?'

*Child 1:* 'Football.'

### Narrative 10

*Child 1:* 'Catherine ...'

*Researcher:* 'Is that your sister? Yeah? And what does she say about Big School?'

*Child 1:* 'Emmm ...'

*Researcher:* 'Does she like it? Yeah? And what kind of things does she do in Big School?'

*Child 1:* 'Drawing.'

Many of the narratives offer an insight into how siblings' experiences influenced the children's perception of the differences between the pre-school and the primary school, and highlighted a distinct variation between the two in terms of play and work. Critically, Child 1 below believed that there would only be 'a tiny bit of playtime' in school. As with parental commentary in Chapter 4, children also referred to the inevitability of having to go school: 'Everybody has to to to Big School'.

*Researcher:* 'What do you know about Big School?'

*Child 1:* 'Well, I only know what my Peter [child's brother] told me about Big School ... they only get a tiny bit of playtime.'

*Researcher:* 'Oh, you only get a tiny bit of playtime? Who told you that?'

*Child 1:* 'My Peter.'

*Researcher:* 'Your Peter? Is that your brother? Yeah, and you only get a tiny bit of play. What do you think about that? Are you happy or sad about that?'

*Child 2:* 'Well, everybody has to go to Big School.'

The following narrative provides insights into children's perspectives on the balance between play and work in school. Children seemed to agree that there would be more work, and Child 3 expressed the view that there would be 'boring work' to do, which Child 4 felt related to 'maths'.

*Child 1:* 'More work.'

*Researcher:* 'More work? What kind of work will you be doing?'

*Child 2:* 'There's going to be more work.'

*Researcher:* 'More work?'

*Child 3:* 'Boring work.'

*Researcher:* 'Boring work? Oh, no. What kind of work do you think?'

*Child 4:* 'Maths.'

*Researcher:* 'Maths?'

*Child 1:* 'I think I will make more work.'



Discussions with siblings introduced the children to the topic of homework. Based on these discussions with their siblings, children associated homework with doing numbers:

### Narrative 11

*Researcher:* 'Your sister ... what did she say about Big School?'

*Child:* 'Ah, I am doing homework there.'

*Researcher:* 'She told you you'd be doing homework there. And did she tell you anything else?'

*Child:* 'No.'

**Narrative 12**

*Child:* 'I am going to play with the toys.'

*Researcher:* 'You are going to play with toys. And what else are you going to do?'

*Child:* 'My homework.'

*Researcher:* 'That sounds interesting. What is homework?'

*Child:* 'You do your numbers.'

*Researcher:* 'You do your numbers, very interesting. And what do you do for your homework besides numbers?'

*Child:* 'You do lots of homework there.'

*Researcher:* 'What do they tell you about Big School – your mummy, your brothers – when they are telling you about Big School?'

*Child:* 'That I have to do homework.'

### 5.3 Summary

Data gathered in the child conferences provide an interesting insight into children's impressions of 'Big School', while also enabling the reader to catch a glimpse of children's learning dispositions as they begin formal education. Children clearly indicate their desire to learn through play and their need to explore and experiment within the learning environment. The importance that they attach to relationships with adults and other children is equally evident within the research data. The insights presented in this chapter provide important considerations for parents and educators alike, and highlight the potential contribution of effective transitions and curriculum continuity to children's early years experiences.

Clark (2005), in her study on children's involvement in the design of early childhood spaces, noted that children notice close-up things and faraway places that go relatively unnoticed to the adult eye. The children's narratives demonstrate the impact of the physical environment, ranging from the busy traffic and the start of the school day to the school bell to locked doors to 'no access' areas to the perception of the space in terms of children and equipment. In addition, these narratives clearly point to the value and the power of other/older children's voices to the soon-to-start-school child.

It is recommended that this finding should be harnessed by both the pre-primary and primary sectors in the strategies they develop to assist a child's preparation for starting school. This is especially important in instances where there is no older sibling or 'significant other' child to share their experiences with the soon-to-start-school child. Strategies in the pre-school could be adjusted to encompass the important role that other children and parents play in assisting children at pre-primary level with their understanding of 'Big School'.





## 6. Quantitative findings from the online survey

This chapter presents quantitative data from the online survey, which was designed to explore concepts of school readiness among a representative sample of staff in early years settings and primary schools (see *Appendix 4 for full details of survey*). Due to space constraints, some data have been omitted, but full details are available from the authors.

## 6.1 Perspectives on school readiness of early years respondents

### Categorisation of early years settings

Of the 132 early years settings that responded to the online survey, 67.4% (n=89) defined their setting as 'private' and 32.6% (n=43) defined it as 'community' (see *Table 8*).

**Table 8: Categorisation of early years settings**

	n	%
Private	89	67.4
Community	43	32.6
Total	132	100

Note: Data were not provided by 16 early years settings.

### Characteristics by different types of early years settings

Most early years settings categorised their setting as play based (21.2%), closely followed by Montessori (19%), pre-school (16.2%) and *naíonra* (15.3%) (see *Table 9*). About 10.1% categorised their setting as crèche and 10.2% noted that their setting combines more than one identified type. A relatively small percentage (5.8%) defined their setting as HighScope. No Steiner pre-school participated in the research.

**Table 9: Baseline characteristics by different types of early years settings**

Demographic	n	%
Play based	29	21.2
Pre-school	24	16.2
Crèche	15	10.1
Montessori	26	19.0
HighScope	8	5.8
Steiner	–	–
<i>Naíonra</i>	21	15.3
Mix of different types (pre-school, crèche, Montessori, etc)	14	10.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>137</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Note: Data were not provided by 11 early years settings.

### Did approach to school readiness change since the introduction of free pre-school year?

Among the sample, 41.2% (n=54) of early years educators noted that their approach to school readiness had changed since the introduction of the free pre-school year; by contrast, 58.8% (n=77) of those suggested that their approach had not changed (see *Table 10*).



**Table 10: Did approach to school readiness change since the introduction of the free pre-school year?**

	n	%
Yes	54	41.2
No	77	58.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>131</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Note: Data were not provided by 17 early years settings.

### Rationale for changing approach to school readiness since the introduction of the free pre-school year

Of the 54 early years educators who indicated that their approach to school readiness had changed since the introduction of the free pre-school year, 37% indicated that their approach had changed by becoming more curriculum based, while 20.3% indicated that their approach had changed due to children attending five days a week (see Table 11). Smaller percentages indicated that their approach had changed due to children being in the same age group, and a very small percentage indicated that their approach had changed due to training and qualifications (3.7%). Sixteen participants did not provide information as to how their approach had changed.

**Table 11: Rationale for changing approach to school readiness since the introduction of the free pre-school year**

	n	%
Approach is more curriculum based	20	37.0
Approach changed, as all children are in the same age group	3	5.5
Children attend five days/week	11	20.3
Increased professional confidence due to Government funding	2	3.7
Training and qualifications	2	3.7

Note: Data were not provided by 16 early years settings.

### Why approach to school readiness of some early educators did not change

When the 77 early years educators who indicated that their approach to school readiness had not changed as a result of the free pre-school year were asked why their approach did not change, the majority (75.3%, n=58) said that their approach was already sufficiently focused on preparing children for school (see Table 12). Approximately 9% of this group indicated that due to having confidence in their existing skills and experience, they did not feel that a change in approach was necessary. Twelve participants did not provide a reason.

**Table 12: Why approach to school readiness did not change**

	n	%
Approach already focused on preparing children for school	58	75.3
Educators confident with their skills and experience	7	9.1

Note: Data were not provided by 12 early years settings.

## Strategies used by early years educators to prepare children for starting school

When asked what type of strategies early years settings used when preparing children for starting school, 94.2% (n=114) reported that they talk to children about starting school (see Table 13). They also said that they engage children in activities related to starting school (75.4%) and that they have books that relate to starting school available for children (72.1%), together with a booklet on children starting school available for parents (56.6%). Almost 43% of early years settings reported visiting a primary school; 39.3% meet with parents; 35.2% meet with principals or junior infant teachers in school; and 34.4% invite junior infant teachers or principals to pre-school. Almost 39.3% of respondents said that they meet past pre-schoolers after they have started school.

**Table 13: Strategies used by early years educators to prepare children for starting school**

	n	%
Talking to children	114	94.2
Activities related to starting school	92	75.4
Books related to starting school	88	72.1
Visits to primary school	52	42.6
Meeting past pre-schoolers	48	39.3
Invite junior infant teacher/principal to pre-school	42	34.4
Meeting junior infant teacher/principal in school	43	35.2
Parent booklet on children starting school	69	56.6
Parent meeting	48	39.3

## What early years educators tell children about starting school

Early years educators responding to the online survey said they tell children that school is fun (81.1%) and that they will make new friends in school (91%) (see Table 14). They also tell children that there will be lots of children in their new class (77%); that they will be learning lots of different things (88.5%), and that they will have only one teacher in their new class (32.8%). Around 45% of respondents noted that they tell children they will learn how to read and write, and that they will have to listen to their new teacher (59%). Relatively smaller percentages (30.3%) tell children that they will be getting homework and that they will have to sit down at a table and do work. Only 11.5% indicated that they tell children they will not be playing as much in school as they do in pre-school.

**Table 14: What early years educators tell children about starting school**

	n	%
Make new friends	111	91.0
Learn lots of different things	108	88.5
School is fun	99	81.1
Lots of children in your class	94	77.0
Have to wear a uniform	85	69.7
Have to listen to your new teacher	72	59.0
Learn how to read and write	55	45.1
Only one teacher	40	32.8
Getting homework	37	30.3
Sit down at the table and do work	37	30.3
Not as much play	14	11.5

Note: Data were not provided by 26 early years settings.

## 6.2 Perspectives on school readiness of primary school respondents

### Descriptive characteristics of primary school group

Among the primary school respondents who completed the online survey, 55% defined their school as Rural Mainstream Co-ed, followed by 17.4% as Urban Mainstream Co-ed (see Table 15). 11% identified their school as Urban DEIS and 9.2% as Rural DEIS. Smaller percentages of participants identified their school as Urban Single-sex (6.4%) and as Rural Gaeltacht (0.9%).

**Table 15: Descriptive characteristics of primary school group**

	n	%
Urban DEIS	12	11.0
Rural DEIS	10	9.2
Rural Gaeltacht	1	0.9
Urban Mainstream Co-ed	19	17.4
Rural Mainstream Co-ed	60	55.0
Urban Single-sex	7	6.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>109</b>	<b>100</b>

Note: Data were not provided by five primary schools.

### Junior infant classes (single or multi-grade)

Among the primary school respondents who answered this question, 52.5% noted that the junior infant classes in their school were single grade (i.e. one class only, e.g. junior infant only), whereas 47.5% indicated that their classes were multi-grade (i.e. two or more classes, e.g. junior and senior infant classes together) (see Table 16).

**Table 16: Percentage of junior infant classes by single or multi-grade type**

	n	%
Single	52	52.5
Multi-grade	47	47.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>99</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Note: Data were not provided by 15 primary schools.

### Specified school starting age in primary schools

Some schools (44.4%) have a specified school starting age policy in place, whereas others (55.6%) have no specified starting age for prospective junior infant children (see Table 17).

**Table 17: Specified school starting age in primary schools**

	n	%
Yes	44	44.4
No	55	55.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>99</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Note: Data were not provided by three primary schools.

## Schools with specified starting age

Among the 44 primary schools which said they had a specified school starting age policy in place, almost 66% (n=27) recommended age four to four and a half years for their junior infant classes, compared with 34% (n=14) which recommended a starting age of five to five and a half years (see Table 18). Three primary schools did not indicate the specified school starting age.

**Table 18: Age specified for starting school**

	n	%
4-4½ years	27	65.9
5-5½ years	14	34.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Note: Data were not provided by three primary schools.

## Strategies to assist children in starting school

Different strategies are employed in primary schools to assist children in starting school (see Table 19). The majority of respondents (94.5%) to the online survey reported that they provide parents with information in the form of booklets, leaflets or information packs, and that they also facilitate a parent information meeting (85.7%). Almost 74% facilitate an open day in their school and 82.4% indicated that they invite pre-school children to visit the school for a day(s) (this does not indicate that children are invited to school directly from pre-schools). A number of respondents indicated that they organise sports or activity days at the school for pre-school children (22%), whereas a smaller number engage children in after-school activities related to starting school (7.7%). Only 16.5% of respondents reported sharing books or materials related to starting school with early years educators, and 15.4% organised a visit to local pre-school(s) for junior infant teachers. Twenty-three participants did not indicate the types of strategies available in their school.

**Table 19: Strategies to assist children in starting school**

	n	%
Providing parents with information booklet/leaflet/pack	86	94.5
Facilitating a parent information meeting	78	85.7
Inviting pre-school children to visit the school for a day(s)	75	82.4
Facilitating an open day	67	73.6
Organising a sports/activity day at the school for pre-school children	20	22.0
Sharing books/materials with early years educators related to starting school	15	16.5
Organising a visit to local pre-school(s) for junior infant teacher(s)	14	15.4
Engaging children in after-school activities related to starting school	7	7.7

Note: Data were not provided by 23 primary schools.

## How primary educators organise play in the classroom

When asked how they organise play in their classrooms, 74.5% of respondents indicated that play is organised for children so that they are able to choose their own play activity as well as follow the 'Assign and Rotate' system in the classroom. Almost 23% noted that play is organised in the 'Assign and Rotate' system, and only 3.4% noted that they organised play where children choose what to play (see Table 20).

**Table 20: How primary educators organise play in the classroom**

	n	%
Children choose what to play	3	3.4
An 'Assign and Rotate' system	20	22.5
Play organised in both ways	66	74.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>89</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Note: Data were not provided by 25 primary schools.

## 6.3 Comparison of perspectives on school readiness among educators in early years settings and in primary schools

### Early years setting and primary school sample

Table 21 shows the breakdown of the total sample between early years setting and primary school respondents to the online survey. Out of the participating settings (N=262), 43.5% (n=114) were primary schools and 56.5% (n=148) were early years settings.

**Table 21: Early years setting and primary school sample**

	n	%
Early years setting	148	56.5
Primary school	114	43.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>262</b>	<b>100.0</b>

### Perspectives among early years and primary school educators on school starting age

Among the respondents, 61.6% of primary school educators preferred a school starting age of between four and a half years and five years; the comparable figure for early years educators was 38.4% (see Table 22). Just over 50% of early years educators preferred a higher school starting age of between five and a half and six years; the comparable figure for primary school educators was 34.3%. Relatively small proportions of respondents preferred that children start school at four to four and a half years (i.e. 1.6% of early years educators and 4% of primary school educators). Almost 10% of early years respondents preferred children starting school at an older age (i.e. between five and a half and six years). This age category was not favoured by any primary school educators.

**Table 22: Perspectives among early years educators and primary school educators on school starting age**

	Early years educators		Primary school educators	
	n	%	n	%
4-4½ years	2	1.6	4	4.0
Between 4½ years and 5 years	48	38.4	61	61.6
5-5½ years	63	50.4	34	34.3
Between 5½ years and 6 years	12	9.6	–	–
<b>Total</b>	<b>125</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>99</b>	<b>100.0</b>

There was a significant association between type of setting and preferred school starting age, ( $X^2(3) = 19.7, p < .001$ ). Standardised residuals indicated that this difference was driven by the fact that no primary school respondents favoured a school starting age of five and a half years or higher, whereas 9.6% of early years respondents were in favour of it.

### Educators' perspectives on European school starting age (six years)

When asked about their perspectives on the European school starting age of six years, almost 50% of primary school educators reported that they felt that it is 'too late'; the comparable figure for early years educators was just 21% (see Table 23). Early years educators (44.4%) indicated that the European school starting age of six years is 'about right'; the comparable figure for primary school educators was just 16.2%. Both early years educators (33.1%) and primary school educators (33.3%) almost equally indicated that it 'depends on the child'.

**Table 23: Educators' perspectives on European school starting age (six years)**

	Early years educators		Primary school educators	
	n	%	n	%
Too late	26	21.0	49	49.5
About right	55	44.4	16	16.2
Depends on the child	41	33.1	33	33.3
Not sure	2	1.6	1	1.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>124</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>99</b>	<b>100.0</b>

There was a significant association between type of setting and perceptions of a school starting age of six years ( $X^2(1) = 11.9, p < .01$ ). Standardised residuals indicated that this difference was driven by differences in opinion between early years and primary school groups in terms of whether a starting age of six years was 'too late' or 'about right'. Primary schools were significantly more likely to regard a starting age of six years as 'too late' (49.5%), when this is compared with the figure for the early years group (21%). In a similar vein, the early years group (44.4%) were significantly more likely to regard a starting age of six years as 'about right' than were the primary school group (16.2%).

### Formal written policy on school readiness

Among the sample, only 9.2% of primary schools and 8% of early years settings indicated that they have a formal written policy on school readiness (see Table 24). The great majority of early years settings (92%) and primary schools (90.8%) reported that they have no formal written policy on the subject.

**Table 24: Formal written policy on school readiness**

	Early years settings		Primary schools	
	n	%	n	%
Yes	10	8.0	9	9.2
No	115	92.0	89	90.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>125</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>98</b>	<b>100.0</b>

## Perspectives on whether pre-school prepares children for school

Both groups of respondents were essentially in agreement on the question of whether pre-school prepares children for primary school, with 100% of early years educators in agreement and 99% of primary school educators in agreement (see Table 25).

**Table 25: Perspectives on whether pre-school prepares children for school**

	Early years educators		Primary school educators	
	n	%	n	%
Yes	127	100.0	98	99.0
No	–	–	1	1.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>127</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>99</b>	<b>100.0</b>

## Educators' perspectives on gender difference in relation to school readiness

Educators from early years settings and primary schools were asked whether there were any gender differences in terms of certain indicators of school readiness. Their responses are outlined in Figure 11.

On each school readiness indicator, both the early years and primary school respondents tended to report that girls are more ready to start school than boys, or that there is no difference between boys and girls in terms of school readiness. Only a minority of participants (less than 7% on each indicator) in both the early years and primary school groups felt that boys were better than girls on any of the school readiness indicators. Specifically, the majority of both early years respondents (55.4%) and primary school respondents (68.9%) regarded girls as better than boys in terms of emotional readiness for school. The findings were similar for 'independence', 'maturity' and 'organisational skills'. As follows:

- 'independence' (early years respondents 55.1% and primary school respondents 64.4%);
- 'maturity' (early years respondents 66.4% and primary school respondents 64.4%);
- 'organisational skills' (early years respondents 64.2% and primary school respondents 79.1%).

The differences between the boys group and the girls group, and in turn between the boys group and the 'no difference' group, were significant on each indicator (at the 0.001 level). To summarise, on each indicator of school readiness, participants were significantly more likely to rate girls as better than boys in terms of school readiness, or to judge that there was no difference between the sexes in terms of school readiness.

There were no significant differences between early years educators and primary school educators in terms of their perspectives on the presence or lack of gender differences in relation to school readiness, thus indicating a relatively unified perspective between the two participant groups in terms of their perspectives on gender and school readiness.



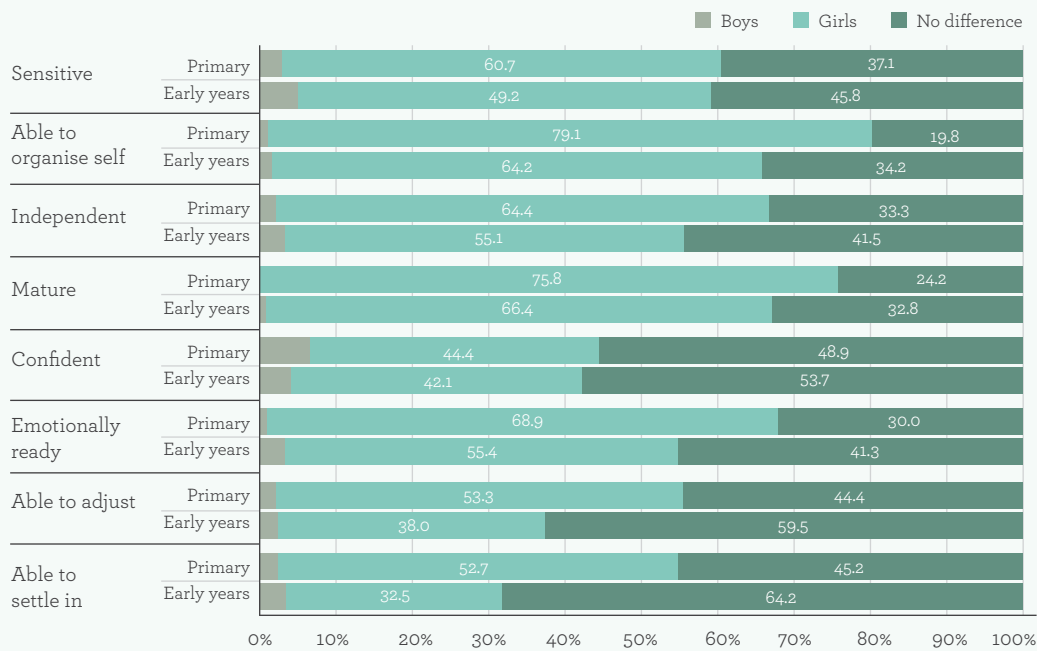


Figure 11: Perspectives on gender differences in relation to school readiness (%)

## Educators' perspectives on whether the free pre-school year impacts on school readiness

Among the educators, 63.9% of primary school educators and 83.2% of early years educators reported that the introduction of the free pre-school year (FPSY) did have an impact on school readiness. The comparable figure for primary school educators who believed it had no impact was 16.5%; by contrast, 8.4% of early years educators believed that it had no impact (see Figure 12). 19.6% of primary school educators reported that they were not sure whether the introduction of the FPSY impacted on school readiness. These differences in opinion were significant ( $X^2(2) = 11.2, p < .01$ ).

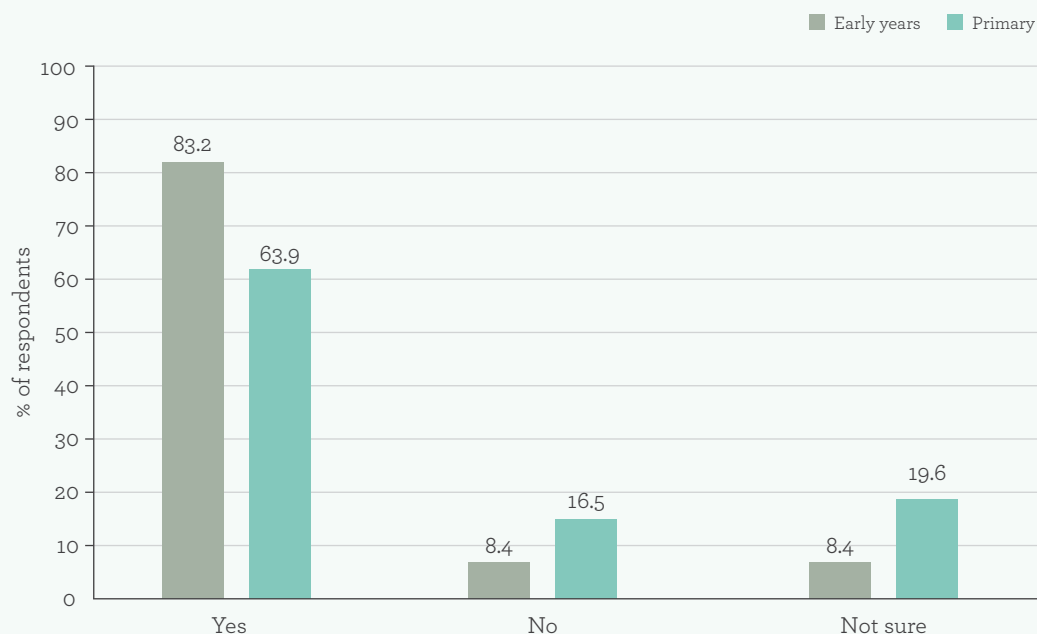


Figure 12: Educators' perspectives on whether the FPSY impacts on school readiness (%)

## Educators' perspectives on the benefit of a second free pre-school year

The majority of early years educators (85.5%) stated that children would benefit from a second free pre-school year (FPSY); the comparable figure for primary school educators was just 51% (see Table 26). Almost 19% of primary school educators reported that children would not benefit from a second FPSY, whereas only 7.6% of early years educators held this view. Almost 30.2% of primary school educators responded that they were not sure whether children would benefit from a second FPSY; the comparable figure for early years educators was just 6.9%. These differences in opinion between the primary school educators group and the early years educators group were significant ( $X^2(2) = 32.8, p < .001$ ).

**Table 26: Educators' perspectives on whether second a free pre-school year would deliver any benefits**

	Early years educators		Primary school educators	
	n	%	n	%
Yes	112	85.5	49	51.0
No	10	7.6	18	18.8
Not sure	9	6.9	29	30.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>122</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>100.0</b>

## Communication between early years settings and local primary schools in relation to children starting school

Among the respondents, 66.9% of early years educators and 63.3% of primary school educators indicated that there is communication between early years settings and primary schools in relation to children starting school (see Table 27). Almost equal numbers of early years educators (33.1%) and primary school educators (36.7%) reported that there is no communication in relation to children starting school.

**Table 27: Communication between early years settings and local primary schools in relation to children starting school**

	Early years settings		Primary schools	
	n	%	n	%
Yes	81	66.9	57	63.3
No	40	33.1	33	36.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>121</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>90</b>	<b>100.0</b>

## Type of communication between early years settings and primary schools

Table 28 details the type of communication taking place between early years settings and primary schools in relation to children starting school. Among the 81 early years and 57 primary school respondents who indicated that there is communication in relation to children starting school, almost 78.6% of early years settings and 82.8% of primary schools indicated that they exchange informal information about children starting school. Only 28.6% of early years settings and 22.4% of primary schools noted that they exchange written information. Communication between early years settings and schools on the best approach to starting school took place between 33.3% of early years settings and 25.9% of primary schools.

Only 25% of early years settings and 34.5% of primary schools noted that primary school teachers communicate with pre-schools after children start in primary school, and 10.3% of primary schools reported that they build on work completed in pre-school. A small number of early years settings (9.5%) and primary schools (10.3%) exchanged information on the implementation of *Aistear* and *Síolta*. Almost 37% of early years settings and over 41% of primary schools reported that the type of communication engaged in depends on the child.

**Table 28: Type of communication between early years and primary**

	Early years		Primary	
	Yes		Yes	
	n	%	n	%
Exchange of informal information	66	78.6	48	82.8
Exchange of written information	24	28.6	13	22.4
Communication related to best approach to starting school	28	33.3	15	25.9
Primary schools share their views and expectations	16	19.0	10	17.2
Primary school teachers communicate with pre-schools after children started in primary school	21	25.0	20	34.5
Exchanging information on implementation of <i>Aistear</i> and <i>Síolta</i>	8	9.5	6	10.3
Junior infant teacher follows on work completed by pre-school	8	9.5	6	10.3
Depends on the child	31	36.9	24	41.4

## Communication with parents in relation to children starting school

Among the sample, 97.5% of early years educators and 92.3% of primary school educators indicated that they communicate with parents in relation to children starting primary school (see Table 29). Only 2.5% of early years educators and 7.7% of primary school educators reported that they do not communicate with parents.

**Table 29: Educators communicating with parents in relation to children starting school**

	Early years educators		Primary school educators	
	n	%	n	%
Yes	119	97.5	84	92.3
No	3	2.5	7	7.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>122</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>91</b>	<b>100.0</b>

There is a significant association between type of setting and whether or not educators indicated that they discussed whether a child was ready to start school ( $X^2(1) = 4.7, p < .05$ ). Early years educators (97.5%) were significantly more likely to discuss this with parents than were primary school teachers (92.3%).

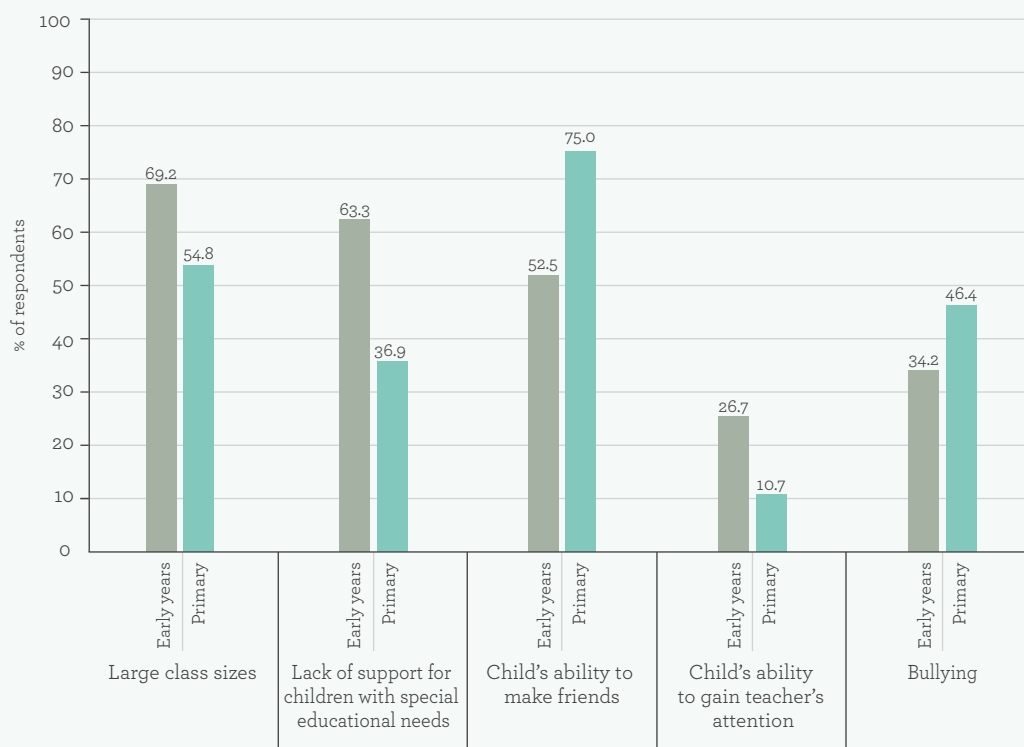
## Educators' perspectives on the type of parental concerns in relation to children starting school

According to early years educators, parents were mostly concerned about large class sizes in primary schools (69.2%), followed by the lack of support for children with special educational needs (63.3%) and children's ability to make friends (52.5%) (see Figure 13). Primary school educators indicated that parents are mostly concerned about their children's ability to make friends (75%), followed by concerns about large class sizes (54.8%) and bullying (46.4%).

There was a significant association between the type of setting and all of the concerns that educators reported parents had about their child starting school. However, the one concern where there was no difference in findings between the different settings was on the issue of bullying. Early years educators (69.2%) were significantly more likely to report that parents were concerned about large class size; the comparable figure for primary school teachers was (54.8%) ( $X^2 (1) = 4.4, p < .05$ ). Early years educators (63.3%) were also significantly more likely to report that parents were concerned about lack of support for children with special needs; the comparable figure for primary school teachers was 36.9% ( $X^2 (1) = 4.4, p < .05$ ). Finally, early years educators (26.7%) were significantly more likely to report that parents were concerned about their child's ability to gain the teacher's attention; the comparable figure for primary school teachers was (10.7%) ( $X^2 (1) = 7.8, p < .01$ ).

By contrast, primary school educators (75.0%) were significantly more likely to report that parents were concerned about their child's ability to make friends; the comparable figure for early years educators was (52.5%) ( $X^2 (1) = 10.5, p < .01$ ).

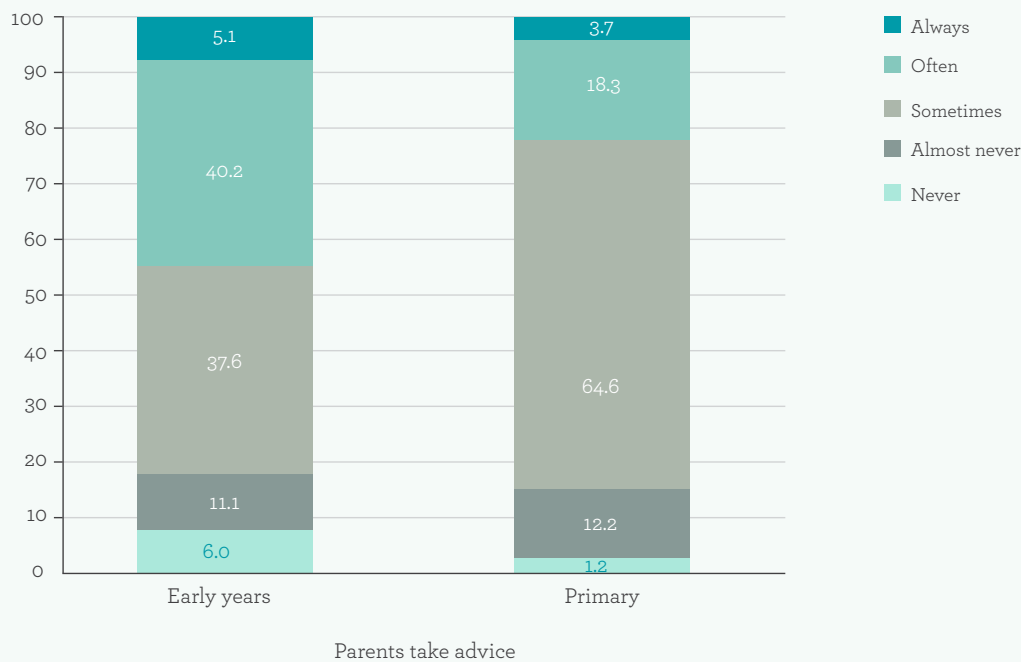
Bullying was also a concern for parents, although ranked much lower on the list, as reported by early years educators (34.2%) and primary school educators (46.4%).



**Figure 13: Type of parental concerns reported by educators (%)**

### Parents taking advice from early years educators and primary school educators in relation to their children being ready for school

Early years educators and primary school educators were asked whether parents take advice from them in relation to their children starting school. The educators' responses are shown in Figure 14. As can be seen, small proportions of both groups (early years educators 5.1% and primary school educators 3.7%) reported that parents 'always' took their advice.



**Figure 14: Frequency of parents taking advice from early years educators and primary school educators in relation to their children being ready for school (%)**

There was a significant association between type of setting and whether or not educators felt parents took their advice on children's school readiness ( $X^2(4) = 17.6, p < .01$ ). Early years educators (40.2%) were significantly more likely to report that parents took their advice 'often'; (the comparable figure for the primary school group was 18.3%). Early years educators were significantly less likely (37.6%) than primary school teachers (64.6%) to report that parents took their advice 'sometimes'.

## Educators' perspectives on parents' rationale for sending children to school

Figure 15 outlines the possible reasons parents may use when determining whether their child should start school; in addition, it presents the perspectives of early years educators and primary school educators on how frequently parents use such reasons.

Among the respondents, 80.3% of early years educators and 65.9% of primary school educators indicated that parents send their children to primary school for financial reasons. The second most frequent reason, as reported by 77% of early years settings and 83.5% of primary schools, was that parents simply believe their child is ready for school. Other reasons – such as advice from relatives (early years settings 51.6%; primary schools 50.5%); work obligations (early years settings 59%; primary schools 73.6%); previous experiences with older siblings (early years settings 54.1%; primary schools 75.8%) – were indicated by both groups as having an impact on the parents' decision to send their children to school. Smaller numbers of respondents in both groups indicated that parents send their children to school as a result of pressure from the media (early years settings 4.1%; primary schools 6.6%) or due to a need to secure a place for their children in junior infant classes (early years settings 21.3%; primary schools 14.3%). Some respondents noted that parents believed their child was ready at four years of age (early years settings 45.1%; primary schools 40.7%) or five years of age (early years settings 27%; primary schools 22%).

There is a significant association between type of setting and some of the reasons that educators reported parents used to rationalise their child starting school. Early years educators (80.3%) were significantly more likely to cite that parents started their children in school for financial reasons; the comparable figure for primary school teachers was 65.9% ( $X^2(1) = 5.6, p < .05$ ).

Primary school teachers (73.6%) were significantly more likely to state that parents started their children in school due to work obligations; the comparable figure for early years educators was 59.0% ( $X^2(1) = 4.9, p < .05$ ). Primary school teachers were also significantly more likely (75.8%) to state that parents started their children in school based on their experience with their children's older siblings; the comparable figure for early years educators was 54.1% ( $X^2(1) = 10.6, p < .01$ ).

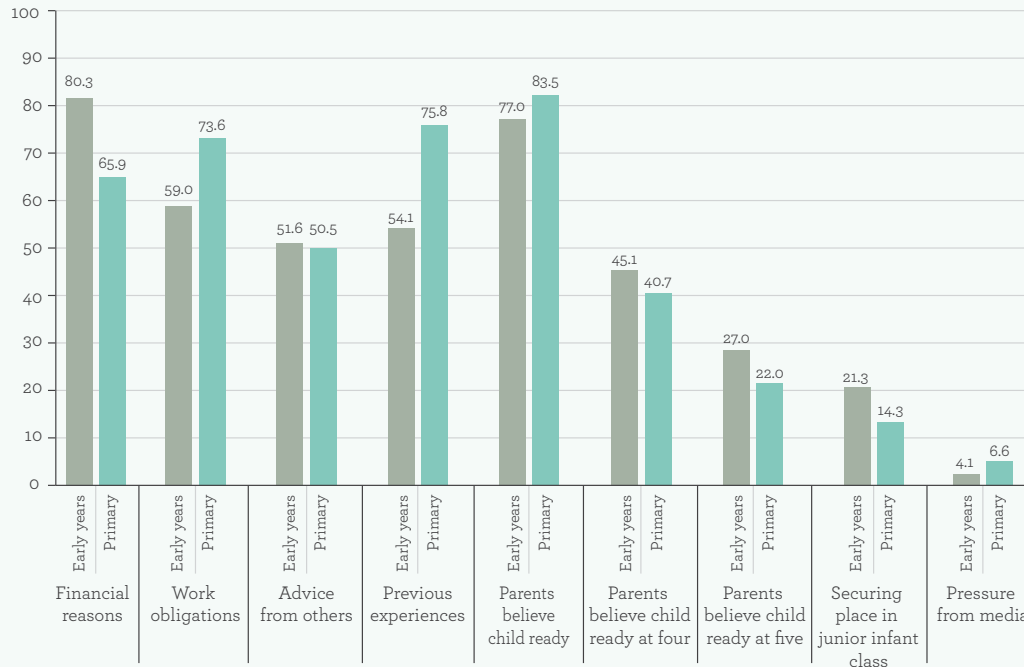


Figure 15: Educators' perspectives on parents' rationale for sending children to school (%)

### Educators' familiarity with *Aistear*

In early years settings, 89.2% of staff were either 'moderately familiar' (35%) or 'extremely familiar' (54.2%) with *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (see Figure 16). The figure for primary school staff was 47.8% (26.7% and 21.1%, respectively). In addition, 6.7% of early years managers and 26.7% of primary school principals were 'somewhat familiar' with *Aistear*. Just over 4% of early years staff and 25.5% of primary school staff were either 'slightly familiar' or 'not at all familiar' with the framework.

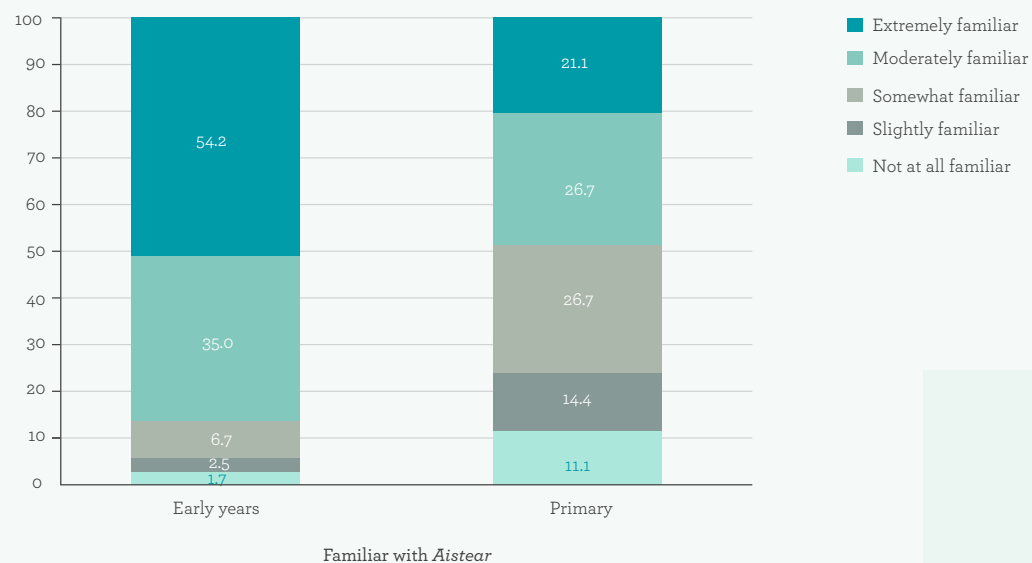
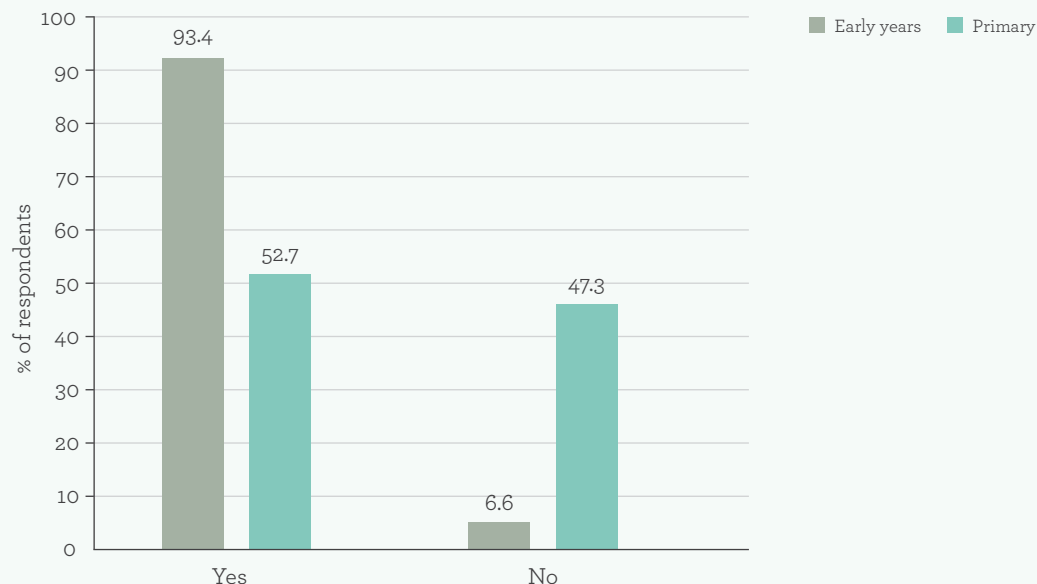


Figure 16: Educators' familiarity with *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (%)

There was a significant association between type of setting and reported level of familiarity with *Aistear* ( $X^2 (4) = 46.4, p < .001$ ). The significant differences were driven by every category with the exception of the ‘moderately familiar’ category, where there were similar percentages in both the early years (35.0%) and primary school (26.7%) groups. The overall picture created is one where early years educators are significantly more familiar with *Aistear*, with 54.2% of early years practitioners reporting that they are ‘extremely familiar’ with the curriculum framework, significantly more than the 21.1% of primary school teachers who report that they are ‘extremely familiar’. Moreover, primary school teachers are significantly more likely to be ‘not at all familiar’ or ‘slightly familiar’ or ‘somewhat familiar’ with the framework (11.1%, 6.2% and 26.7%, respectively) compared with their early years counterparts (1.7%, 1.4% and 6.7%, respectively).

### Educators implementing *Aistear*

In the early years group, 93.4% of educators indicated that they are implementing *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*; the comparable figure for primary school educators was 52.7% (see Figure 17). This difference in implementation between early years settings and primary settings was highly significant ( $X^2 (1) = 46.9, p < .001$ ).



**Figure 17: Early years settings and primary schools that are implementing *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (%)**

### Aspects of *Aistear* implemented by early years settings and primary schools

Among the sample of those who actually reported implementing *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*, 86.0% of early years educators and 41.7% of primary school educators said they were implementing *Aistear* in a way that focused on building partnerships between parents and practitioners/teachers (see Figure 19). This difference was significant ( $X^2 (1) = 33.1, p < .001$ ), with early years educators being significantly more likely to implement *Aistear* through building partnerships between parents and practitioners.

With regard to promoting learning and development through interactions, a very high percentage (88.6% of early years settings and 83.3% of primary schools) said they used this approach. An even higher proportion said they promoted learning and development through play (97.4% of early years settings and 97.9% of primary schools). A higher percentage of early years settings, compared with primary schools, said they supported learning and development through assessment (79.8% of early years settings and 62.5% of primary schools). This difference between the survey respondents groups was significant ( $X^2 (1) = 5.4, p < .05$ ).

There were no other significant differences between early years and primary school settings in terms of how they reported implementing *Aistear*. It should be noted, however, that far fewer numbers of the primary school group respondents reported implementing any of the aspects of the *Aistear* framework; moreover, the differences between groups are significant when the mean for each group is considered.



**Figure 18: Aspects of *Aistear* implemented by educators in early years settings and primary schools (%)**

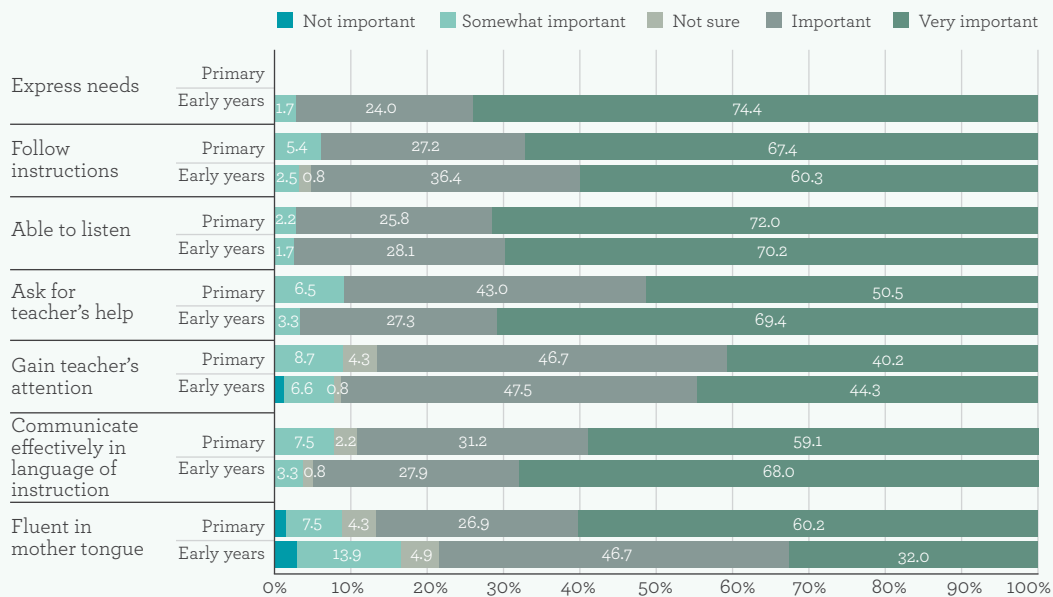
### Educators' rating of the level of importance of children's communication skills for school readiness

Respondents to the online survey were asked to rate the importance of various child development indicators for school readiness (e.g. the children's communication skills, social skills, self-help skills, disposition and academic skills).

With regard to children's communication skills, 27.9% of early years settings and 31.2% of primary schools felt that it is 'important' or 'very important' (early years 68%; primary schools 59.1%) that children could communicate effectively in the language of instruction (i.e. English or Irish) (see Figure 19). Being fluent in their mother tongue (i.e. the language they spoke at home) was also viewed as 'very important' by 60.2% of primary school staff; the comparable figure for the early years staff group was 32%. This was found to be a significant difference between the educators in the two groups, with primary school teachers being significantly more likely ( $X^2(4) = 17.4, p < .01$ ) than early years educators to believe that fluency in the mother tongue was 'very important' for determining a child's school readiness. Only 1.1% of primary school staff and 2.5% of early years staff indicated that fluency in the child's mother tongue was 'not important' in relation to school readiness.

In addition, the majority of early years educators (74.4%) and primary school educators (69.2%) noted that it is 'very important' for children to be able to express their needs, as well as be able to follow instructions (early years educators 60.3%; primary school educators 67.4%); to be able to listen (early years educators 70.2%; primary school educators 72%), and to ask for the teacher's help (early years educators 69.4% and primary school educators 50.5%).



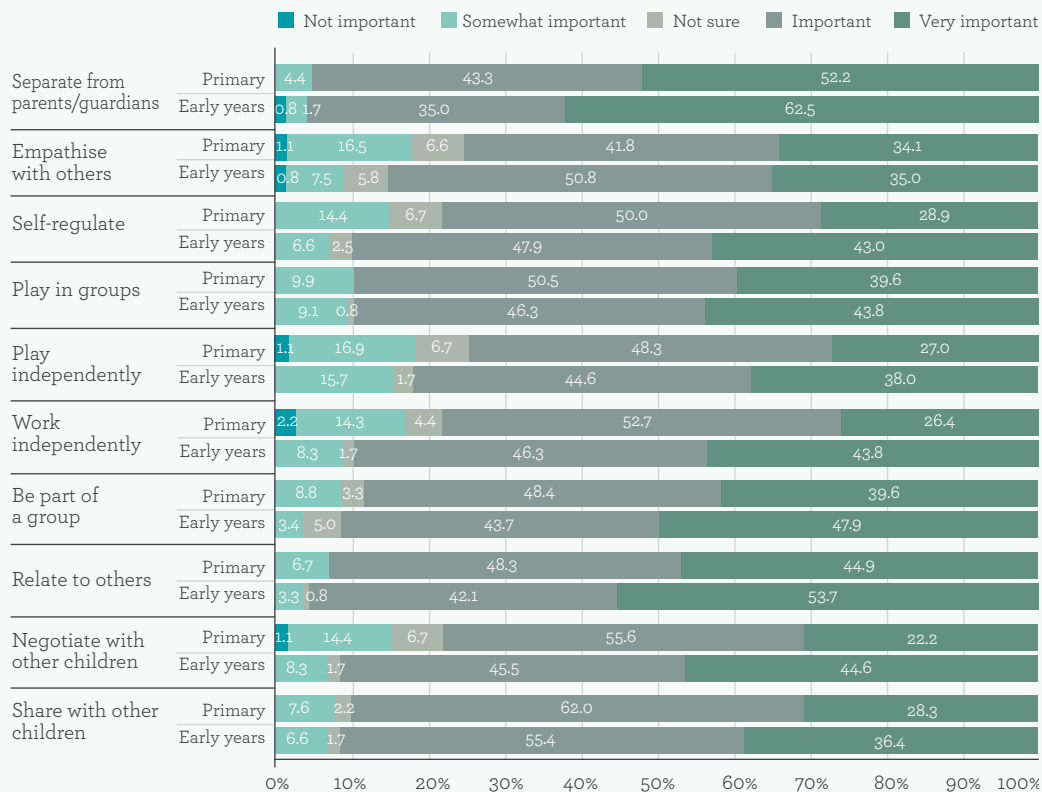


**Figure 19: Educators' rating of the level of importance of children's communication skills for school readiness (%)**

### Educators' rating of the level of importance of children's social skills for school readiness

Among the respondents, 46.3% of the early years settings group and 52.75% of the primary school group viewed the ability to work independently as 'important' for school readiness (see Figure 20). Similar numbers of early years educators (47.9%) and primary school educators (50%) regarded children's ability to self-regulate as 'important' and 43% of early years survey respondents and 28.9% of primary school respondents viewed it as 'very important'. In addition, 62.5% of early years educators and 52.5% of primary school educators indicated that it is 'very important' for children to be able to separate from their parents/guardians. The ability to share (early years settings 55.4%; primary schools 62%), negotiate (early years settings 45.5%; primary schools 55.6%) and empathise with other children (early years settings 50.8%; primary schools 41.8%) was also viewed as 'important'. Relating to others was indicated as 'very important' by 53.7% of the early years educators and as 'important' by 48.3% of the primary school educators. Being part of the group was viewed as 'very important' by early years educators (47.9%) and as 'important' by 48.4% of primary school educators. Having the skills to play independently (early years settings 44.6%; primary schools 48.3%) or in groups (early years settings 46.3%; primary schools 50.5%) was viewed as 'important' by both groups of educators.

Early years educators (44.6%) were significantly more likely ( $X^2(4) = 15.1, p < .01$ ) to believe that it was 'very important' for children to be able to negotiate with other children; the comparable figure for primary school teachers was 22.4%.



**Figure 20: Educators' rating of the level of importance of children's social skills for school readiness (%)**

### Educators' rating of the level of importance of children's self-help skills with regard to school readiness

The majority of early years educators (71.7%) and primary school educators (75.4%) indicated that it is 'very important' for children to be able to wash their hands, as is the ability for children to use the toilet (early years educators 81.3%; primary school educators 82.6%) and the ability for children to open their lunch box or school bag (early years educators 43%; primary school educators 52%) (see Figure 21). In addition, being able to sit at the table was rated as 'very important' by 52.9% of primary school educators and 46.7% of early years educators. The ability to tidy away materials was seen as 'important' by both groups (early years educators 53.3%; primary school educators 44%).

There were some differences between the ratings given to other self-help skills, such as children's ability to put on their shoes and coat. Early years educators rated this skill higher than did primary school educators, with 51.2% of the early years educators group rating it as 'important' and 38.8% as 'very important'; the comparable figures were 47.3% and 30.1%, respectively, in the primary school educators group (see Figure 21). The 'somewhat important' ratings in both groups were also different, with 22.6% of primary school teachers significantly more likely ( $X^2(4) = 10.2, p < .05$ ) to think that it was 'somewhat important' for school readiness that children were able to put on their shoes and coat; the comparable figure for early years educators was 8.3%.

This was also true in the case of children's ability to hang up their coats. Similar numbers in both educators groups rated this skill as 'important' (early years 48.8%; primary schools 47.3%), with 11.4% of early years settings and 22.6% of primary schools rating it as 'somewhat important' and 38.2% of early years settings and 26.9% of primary schools rating it as 'very important'.

Another significant difference between the groups of educators related to the children's ability to hold a pencil or crayon. Primary school teachers (22.6%) were significantly more likely ( $X^2(3) = 11.9, p < .01$ ) to think that this ability was 'somewhat important' for a child's school readiness; the comparable figure for early years educators was 9%.

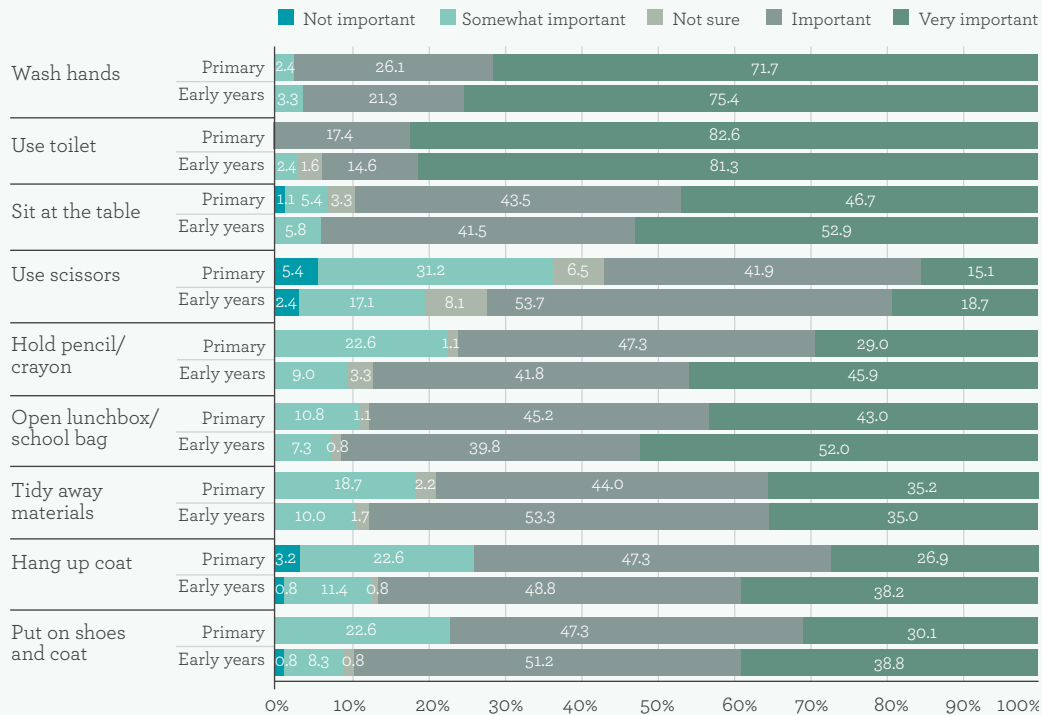


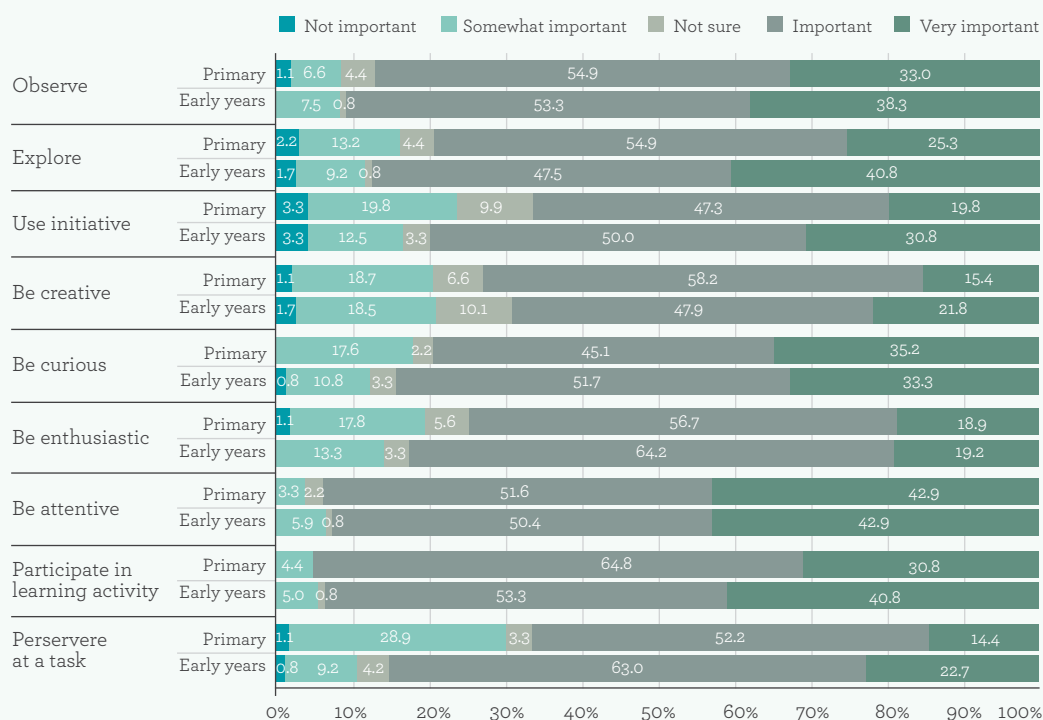
Figure 21: Educators' rating of the level of importance of children's self-help skills for school readiness (%)

## Educators' rating of the level of importance of children's dispositions for school readiness

On the subject of children's dispositions for school readiness, it was considered 'important' by both groups of educators that the children were **enthusiastic** (early years educators 64.2%; primary school educators 56.7%); were **creative** (early years educators 47.9%; primary school educators 58.2%); were **curious** (early years educators 51.7%; primary school educators 45.1%); and were **attentive** (early years educators 50.4%; primary school educators 51.6%) (see Figure 22). Also noted as 'important' were the ability to **observe** (early years educators 53.3%; primary school educators 54.9%); to **explore** (early years educators 47.5%; primary school educators 54.9%); to **persevere at a task** (early years educators 63%; primary school educators 52.2%).

There were differing emphases between the two groups of educators on the importance of children's ability to participate in learning activities: 40.8% of early years educators and 30.4% of primary school educators viewed it as 'very important', whereas 53.3% of early years educators and 64.1% of primary schools viewed it as 'important'.

Primary school teachers (28.9%) were significantly more likely ( $X^2(1) = 46.9, p < .001$ ) to believe that it was 'somewhat important' that children were able to persevere at a task; the comparable figure for early years educators was (9.2%).



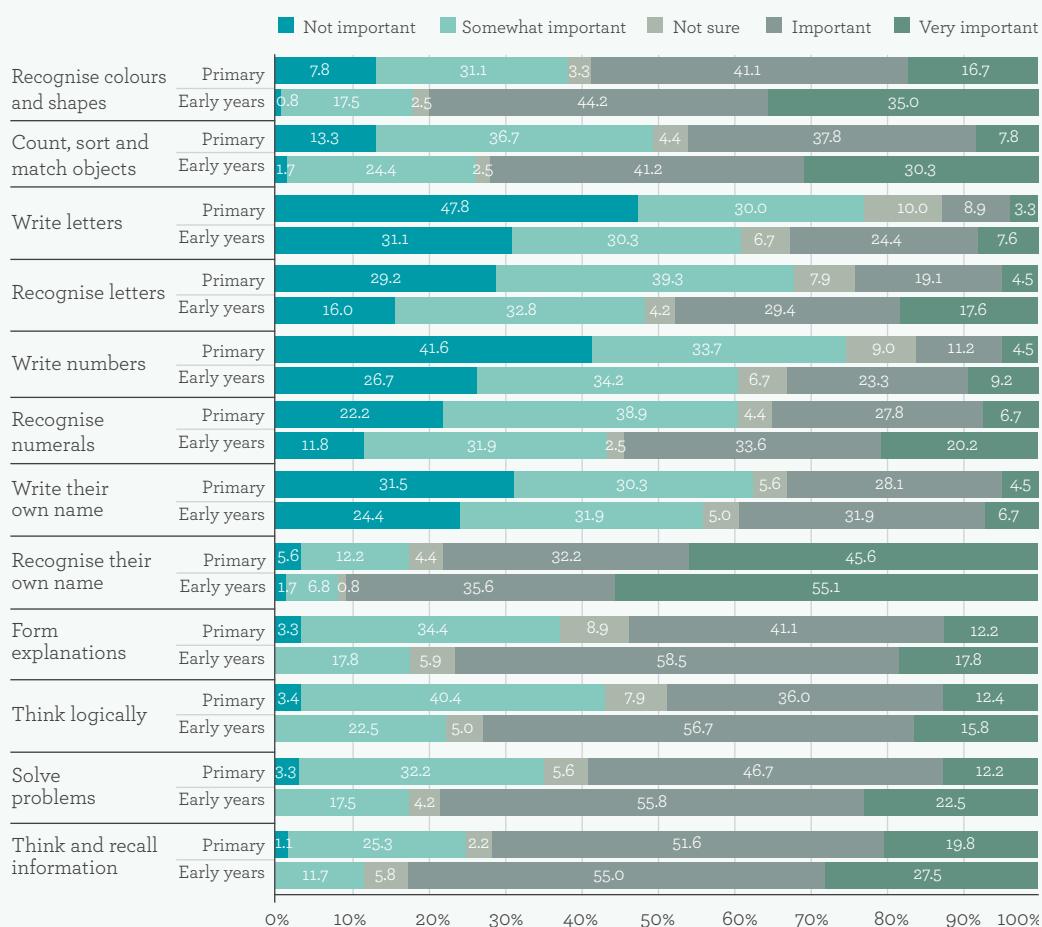
**Figure 22: Educators' rating of the level of importance of children's dispositions for school readiness (%)**

### Educators' rating of the level of importance of children's academic skills for school readiness

Among the respondents, 55% of early years educators and 51.6% of primary school educators viewed the ability to **think and recall information** as 'important' (see Figure 23). The ability to **think logically** was viewed as important by 56.7% of early years educators; the comparable figure was 40.4% for primary school educators, who believed it was 'somewhat important'. Both groups noted that it was 'important' for children to **be able to solve problems** (early years educators 55.8%; primary school educators 46.7%) and **be able to form explanations** (early years educators 58.5%; primary school educators 41.4%).

Early years educators (20.2%) were significantly more likely ( $X^2(4) = 11.8, p < .05$ ) to believe that it was 'very important' for children to **be able to recognise numbers**; the comparable figure for primary school teachers was 6.7%. Similarly, early years educators (17.6%) were significantly more likely ( $X^2(4) = 15.4, p < .01$ ) to believe that it was 'very important' for children to **be able to recognise letters**; the comparable figure for primary school teachers was 4.5%. Early years educators (24.4%) were significantly more likely ( $X^2(4) = 12.9, p < .05$ ) to believe that it was 'important' for children to **be able to write letters**; the comparable figure for primary school teachers was 8.9%. Early years educators (30.3%) were significantly more likely ( $X^2(4) = 26.3, p < .001$ ) to believe that it was 'very important' for children to **be able to count, sort and match objects**; the comparable figure for primary school teachers was 7.8%.

By contrast, primary school teachers (13.3%) were significantly more likely to believe that it was 'not important' for children to **be able to count, sort and match objects**; the comparable figure for early years educators was 1.7%.



**Figure 23: Educators' rating of the level of importance of children's academic skills for school readiness (%)**

## Educators' perspectives on curriculum continuity

Respondents to the online survey were asked their opinion on curriculum continuity between pre-school and infant classes in primary schools. Curriculum continuity was defined as similar activities, programme structure and content. Among the sample, 83.2% of early years educator respondents and 60% of primary school educator respondents agreed that there should be curriculum continuity between early years settings and primary schools (see Table 30). Just under 2% of the early years educators group and 11.1% of primary school educators disagreed, whereas 15.1% of the early years educators group and 28.9% of the primary school educators were unsure.

**Table 30: Educators' perspectives on curriculum continuity**

	Early years educators		Primary school educators	
	n	%	n	%
Yes	99	83.2	54	60.0
No	2	1.7	10	11.1
Unsure	18	15.1	26	28.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>119</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>90</b>	<b>100.0</b>

There was a significant association between type of setting and whether or not respondents believed in curriculum continuity between early years and primary curricula ( $X^2(1) = 16.3$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This was driven by the fact that 11.1% of primary school educators did not support curriculum continuity, whereas only 1.7% of early years educators believed this to be the case.

## Children with special educational needs attending early years settings and primary schools

Respondents were asked whether children with special educational needs attended their early years setting or primary school. 75.2% of early years settings indicated that children with special educational needs did attend their setting; the comparable figure for primary schools was 89% (see Table 31).

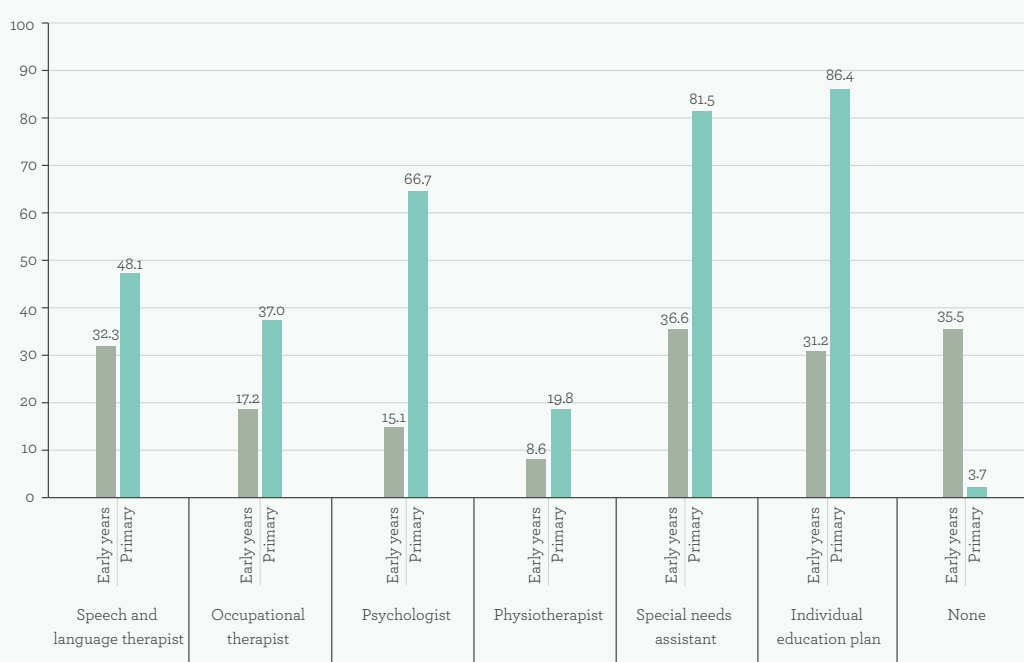
**Table 31: Children with special educational needs attending early years settings and primary schools**

	Early years settings		Primary schools	
	n	%	n	%
Yes	91	75.2	81	89.0
No	30	24.8	10	11.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>121</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>91</b>	<b>100.0</b>

## Support and strategies provided for children with special educational needs in early years settings and primary schools

Figure 24 details the type of support and strategies available in early years settings and primary schools for children with special educational needs. Among the sample, 86.4% of primary schools, compared with 31.2% of early years settings, indicated that they used an Individualised Education Plan (IEP) designed for children with special educational needs. Primary schools (81.5%) also indicated that they had special needs assistants for these children; the comparable figure for early years settings was 36.6%. Most of the requisite supports and strategies were provided in primary schools (for example, psychologist 66.7%; speech and language therapist 48.1%; occupational therapist 19.8%; physiotherapist 19.8%). The comparable figures for early years settings were (psychologist 15.1%; speech and language therapist 32.3%; occupational therapist 17.2%; physiotherapist 8.6%). Almost 36% of early years setting respondents indicated that there were no supports and services provided for children with special educational needs; the comparable figure for primary school respondents was 3.7%.

There were significant differences between early years settings and primary school settings in terms of the supports and strategies available for children with special educational needs in those educators' settings. For example, primary schools were significantly more likely to use the support of both an occupational therapist (37%) and a speech and language therapist (48.1%) than were early years settings (17.2% for occupational therapist and 32.3% for speech and language therapist). Primary schools (66.7%) also reported having significantly greater access to a psychologist for children with special needs than did early years settings (15.1%). Primary schools also had more access to physiotherapy (19.8%) and special needs assistants for children with special needs (81.5%) than did early years settings (8.6% for physiotherapist and 36.6% for special needs assistants). Primary schools (86.4%) tended to use Individual Education Plans significantly more than did early years settings (31.2%).



**Figure 24: Support and strategies provided for children with special educational needs in early years settings and primary schools (%)**

### Strategies in place for children from different cultural backgrounds

Among the sample, 55.4% of early years settings and 61.5% of primary schools indicated that there were no strategies in place in their particular setting/school to assist children from different cultural backgrounds when they were starting school (see Table 32).

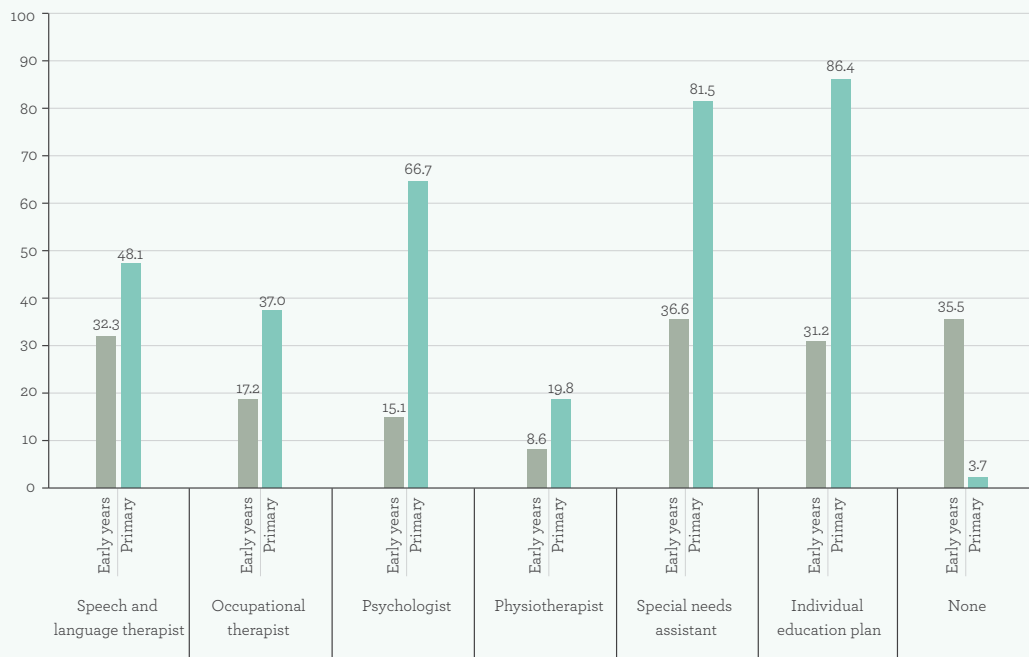
**Table 32: Strategies in place for children from different cultural backgrounds**

	Early years setting		Primary school	
	n	%	n	%
Yes	54	44.6	35	38.5
No	67	55.4	56	61.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>121</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>91</b>	<b>100.0</b>

### Type of strategies in place for supporting children from different cultural backgrounds

Among the 54 early years respondents and 35 primary school respondents who reported that they had strategies in place in their particular setting for supporting children from different cultural backgrounds (see above), almost 94.4% of early years settings and 88.6% of primary schools indicated that they had had discussions with parents about their child starting school (see Figure 25). Both early years settings (74.1%) and primary schools (74.3%) noted that they created awareness of school culture and also provided language support for children from different cultural backgrounds (early years settings 61.1%; primary schools 80%). Most of the early years settings that had strategies in place (72.2%) had organised staff training on diversity and equality; by contrast, only 20% of primary schools had strategies in place to support children from different cultural backgrounds. A small number of early years settings (22.2%) and primary schools (20%) provided a booklet about starting school, which was translated into different languages.

There was a significant difference between settings in terms of the use of staff training on diversity and equality as a strategy for supporting children from diverse backgrounds. The early years group (72.2%) was significantly more likely to report having received this training than was the primary school group (20%). For all the other strategies aimed at supporting children from culturally diverse backgrounds, there were no significant differences between early years and primary school respondents.



**Figure 25: Strategies in place for supporting children from different cultural backgrounds (%)**

## Educators' perspectives on importance of play in the free pre-school year

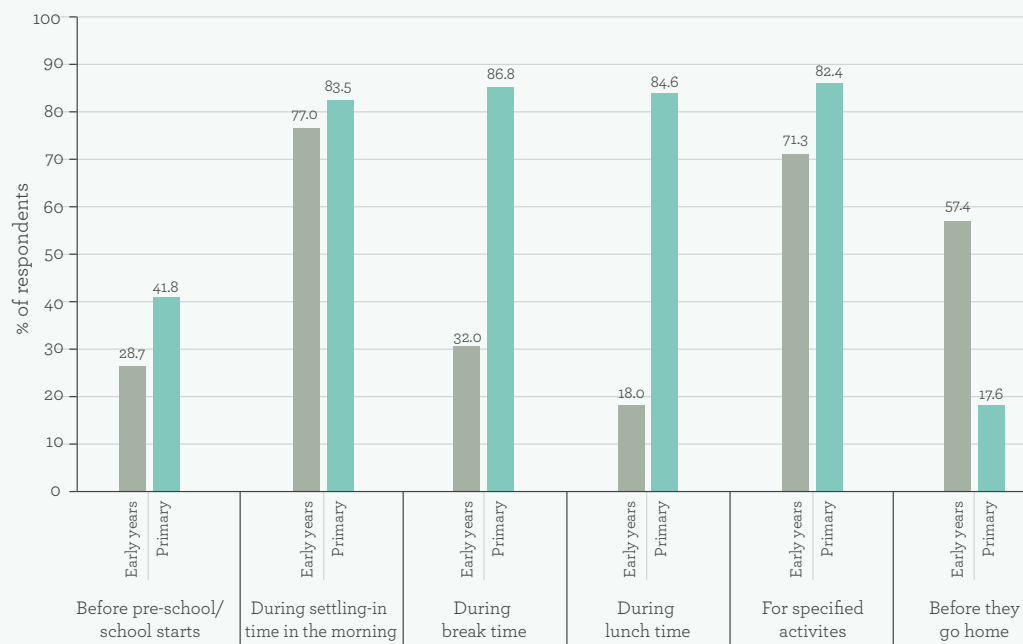
The majority of early years educators (80%) and primary school educators (73.3%) reported that they believed play was 'very important' or 'important' (early years educators 18.3%; primary school educators 23.3%) during the free pre-school year.

## When children play in early years settings and primary schools

Figure 26 details the times when children play in early years settings and in primary schools. Most primary school respondents indicated that children play during break time (86.8%), during lunch time (84.6%), during settling-in time in the morning (83.5%) or for specific activities (82.4%). By contrast, children in early years settings play mostly during the settling-in period in the morning (77%) and for specific activities (71.3%). According to early years respondents, children also tend to play before they go home (57.4%).

There were significant differences between early years setting respondents and primary school setting respondents in terms of the time they devoted to allowing children to engage in play in their respective educator settings. Primary school teachers were significantly more likely to indicate that play happened in the time before school officially started (i.e. pre-9am) (41.8%) or during a break period (86.8%); the corresponding figures for early years settings were 28.7% and 32%, respectively, ( $X^2(1) = 3.9, p < .05$  and  $X^2(1) = 63.4, p < .001$ ). Early years respondents were significantly more likely to indicate that play happened in the time before children went home (57.4%) than were primary schools (17.6%), ( $X^2(1) = 34.3, p < .001$ ).



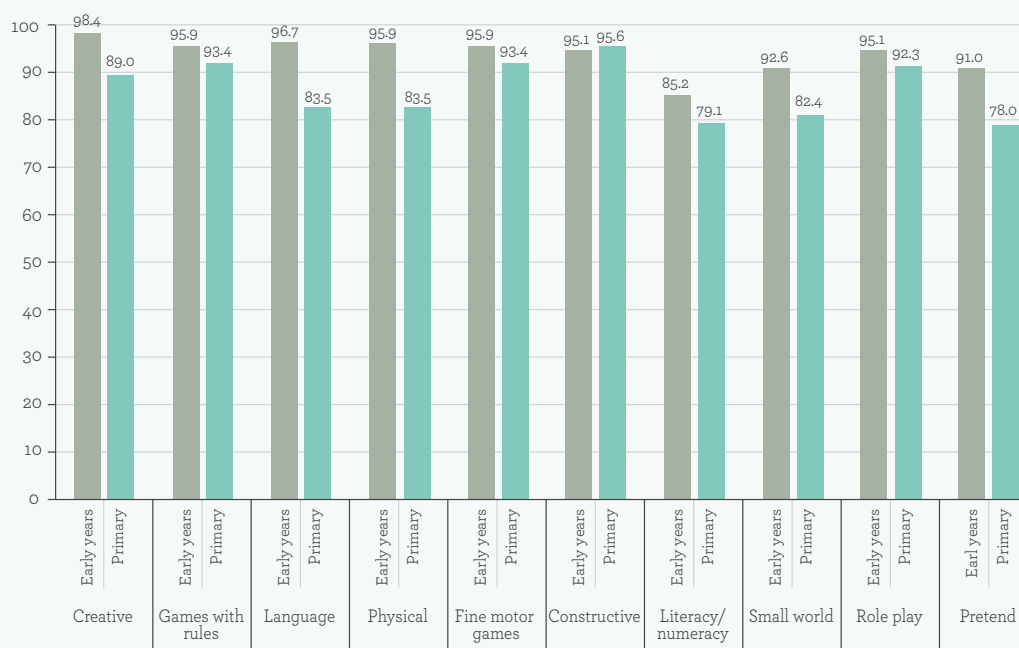


**Figure 26: When children play in early years settings and primary schools (%)**

## Type of play available to children in early years settings and primary school settings

Figure 27 shows the many different types of play available to children in the survey respondents' early years settings and primary school settings. Among the most available types of play in both settings were games with rules (early years 95.9%; primary schools 93.4%), fine motor games (early years 95.9%; primary schools 93.4%), constructive play (early years 95.1%; primary schools 95.6%) and role play (early years 95.1%; primary schools 92.3%). Language games happened less frequently in primary school settings (83.5%); the comparable figure in early years settings was 96.7%. Interestingly, literacy and numeracy games were among the least frequent in both early years settings (85.2%) and primary school settings (79.1%). All other types of play – such as creative play (early years settings 98.4%; primary school settings 89%), physical play (early years settings 95.9%; primary school settings 83.5%) and pretend play (early years settings 91%; primary school settings 78%) – were more frequently available in the early years settings than in the primary school settings.

Early years educators (95.9%) were significantly more likely to favour language-based play with the children; the comparable figure for their primary school counterparts was 83.5% ( $X^2(1) = 11.2, p < .01$ ). Early years educators (95.9%) were also significantly more likely to report that children engaged in physical play; the comparable figure for primary school educators was 83.5% ( $X^2(1) = 9.4, p < .01$ ). Small-world play was significantly more common in the early years group (92.6%) than in the primary schools group (82.4%) ( $X^2(1) = 5.2, p < .05$ ). This was also the case for pretend play, with a significantly larger proportion of those in the early years group (91%) indicating that children engaged in pretend play; the comparable figure for the primary schools group was 78% ( $X^2(1) = 7.1, p < .01$ ).



**Figure 27: Type of play available to children in early years settings and primary school settings (%)**

## Educators' perspectives on the importance of community services for school readiness

Figure 28 shows that there were no significant differences between early years respondents and primary school respondents in terms of their perceptions of the importance of community services for school readiness. Among the sample, 31.9% of early years educators and 41.6% of primary school educators stated that parent and toddler groups were 'important'; 33.6% of early years educators and 16.9% of primary school educators stated that they were 'somewhat important'; 11.5% of early years educators and 15.7% of primary school educators stated that they were unsure of their importance.

With regard to the importance of public libraries, 42.9% of early years educators and 51.1% of primary school educators stated that they were 'important'; almost 19% of early years educators and 12.5% of primary school educators stated that they were 'somewhat important', whereas less than 10% of both groups (8.9% of early years educators and 9.1% of primary school educators) were not sure. A higher number of primary school respondents stated that sports clubs were 'important' (45.3% of primary school educators and 33.6% of early years educators); by contrast, 10% of early years educators and 8.1% of primary school educators stated that sports clubs were 'not important' and 15.5% of early years educators and 11.6% of primary school educators stated that they were unsure.

Family support services were regarded as 'important' (early years educators 45.7%; primary school educators 40.7%) or 'very important' (early years educators 35.3%; primary school educators 34.9%), with a small number (early years educators 9.5%; primary school educators 10.5%) deeming them 'somewhat important'. Language support services were viewed as being 'important' (early years educators 51.8%; primary school educators 42%) or 'very important' (early years educators 39.5%; primary school educators 43.2%).

Almost all respondents viewed speech and language services as 'important' for school readiness (early years educators 32.5%; primary school educators 47.1%) or 'very important' (early years educators 62.3%; primary school educators 46%). Occupational therapy was viewed as 'important' by 36.8% of the early years educators group and 47.7% of the primary school educators group. Psychologists were viewed as 'very important' by 44.2% of early years educators and 37.9% of primary school educators or 'important' (early years educators 32.7%; primary school educators 43.7%).

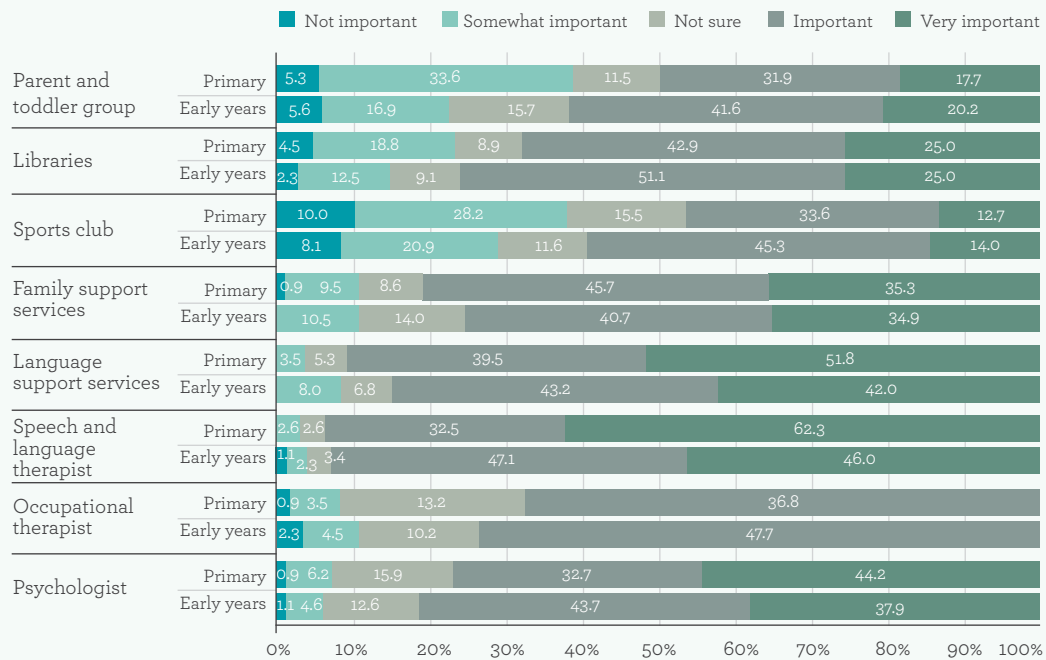


Figure 28: Educators' perspectives on the importance of community services for school readiness (%)

## 6.4 Summary

This chapter has presented findings on the concept of school readiness from the quantitative phase of the research project. The findings are presented in three sections: the first section reports the perceptions of early years educators; the second section presents the perceptions of primary school educators; the third section provides a comparison between the two groups.



## 7. Discussion

This research project set out to study the concept of school readiness among parents of children enrolled in the free pre-school year (FPSY); among primary school principals and junior infant teachers; managers of early years settings; educators working directly with children enrolled in the FPSY. It also sought to examine perspectives on school starting age, and to determine the motivation for choice of school-entry age among parents in Ireland. During Phase 1 of the study, the views of children availing of the FPSY in relation to starting school were also elicited. This chapter discusses the key findings from both the qualitative and quantitative empirical work in the two phases of the study. These findings are considered below with reference to the literature review and the experience of the Research Team.

## 7.1 School starting age

Comparison of early years respondents and primary school respondents' opinions on the optimal school starting age indicated a difference in opinion, with significant differences between the groups in some cases. 61.5% of primary school respondents expressed a preference for a school starting age of between four and a half and five years, with 34.3% indicating five to five and a half years as optimal. Only 4% of primary school respondents expressed a preference for a school starting age of four to four and a half years. None of the primary school respondents suggested a school starting age of five and a half years, as is common in other European countries. Overall, primary school respondents were satisfied with the current school starting age, and indicated a preference to maintain the status quo.

By contrast, early years respondents were less likely to favour the current situation, with 50% favouring a school starting age of five to five and a half. They were less likely than their primary school counterparts to favour four and a half to five years, with almost 10% of early years respondents favouring the five and a half to six years age category. Over 44% of early years respondents indicated that the European school starting age of six years was about right; however, this was not mirrored in the primary school group, where only 16.2% stated that six years was about right. 33% of both groups stated that it depended on the child.

With regard to parents' perspectives, 24 of the 30 parents surveyed identified five years as the minimum school starting age, with the majority indicating that children aged four years, but as close to five years as possible, were also at an acceptable school starting age. In the qualitative phase of the research, the concept of 'birthdate effect' emerged as an issue related to compulsory school starting age, and further confirmed a strong maturationist view of school readiness (Crawford *et al*, 2007; Sykes *et al*, 2009).

The rationale provided by all research participants for what they considered the most appropriate school starting age reflects the maturationist-environmental concept of school readiness (Meisels, 1999; Dockett and Perry, 2002). While a child's readiness was primarily linked with chronological age by all participants, chronological age was also associated with behaviours children exhibited at that particular age, such as being able to hold a pencil, being ready for the alphabet, counting, putting on a coat and sitting down. The primary school sector and parents were more inclined to be satisfied with the current situation, preferring children to start between four and five years of age. By contrast, the early years group were open to change, and tended to indicate a preference for children to start school later, i.e. up and including six years of age.

It is possible that each participant group's views on the optimal school starting age were influenced by contextual factors specific to each group. It was clear from the qualitative analysis that the views of primary school principals and junior infant teachers in relation to the optimal school starting age were influenced by custom and practice in relation to the minimum school starting age in Ireland of four years, which it was reported was referred to in all school enrolment policies. It was stated that factors related to school readiness were not

detailed in enrolment policies. A change to the current status quo would have considerable implications for primary school teachers, not least of which would be the need for a revised curriculum and associated teacher upskilling.

Early years educators were not averse to a later school starting age for a number of reasons, as the qualitative data show. They believe that, under the current system, children are starting school too young, that the present school system does not meet the needs of young children, and that they would benefit from an additional year of play and informal learning. Early years respondents' identification of a later optimal school starting age may be related to the possibility of extending children's access to the curriculum experiences implemented at pre-primary level; it may also perhaps be related to the creation of career paths and increased employment opportunities in the sector.

A number of external factors impacting on school starting age also emerged during the qualitative phase of the research. These included teacher retention in primary schools, the prohibitive cost of childcare for parents, personal experiential influences, the perceived impact of an earlier or later school starting age on children's trajectory through primary, secondary and third-level education. These findings were also mirrored in the quantitative phase of the research. A significant association was evident between the respondents in early years settings and primary schools in relation to the factors they perceived as impacting on parents' decision to send their children to school. However, in a minority of cases, some differences were evident between both groups of respondents. For example:

- 80% of early years respondents and 66% of primary school respondents stated that parents sent their children to school for financial reasons.
- 52% of early years respondents and 51% of primary school respondents identified advice from relatives as impacting on their decision to send children to school.
- 59% of early years respondents and 74% of primary school respondents stated that work obligations were the reason parents decided to send their children to school.
- 54% of early years respondents and 76% of primary school respondents identified parents' previous experiences with older siblings as affecting their decision to send children to school.
- Very few interview participants in either the early years or primary school groups stated that parents send their children to school as a result of pressure from the media.
- 21% of early years respondents and 14% of primary school respondents reported that parents sent their children to school at a particular age because they needed to secure a place for their children in junior infant classes.
- 77% of early years respondents and 84% of primary school respondents stated that parents believed their child was ready for school when they made the final decision to send the child to school.
- 45% of early years respondents and 41% of primary school respondents stated that parents believed their child was ready for school at the age of four years.
- 27% of early years respondents and 22% of primary school respondents stated that parents believed their child was ready for school at the age of five years.

The research findings indicate a tendency to inextricably link maturity and school readiness with age, which means that, to a certain extent, children are always a product of their age, and school readiness becomes indivisible from age. The main determinants emerging from this research study of when children in Ireland start school are a child's age; contextual factors related to the pre-school and primary sectors; parents' particular circumstances; and a number of identified external factors (e.g. financial, work obligations, older siblings) rather than developmental, educational or child-led criteria. It should also be noted that the issue of school starting age is a contested area in the literature (Black *et al.*, 2011) and that much of the research refers to the European school starting age of six years.

## 7.2 Understanding of school readiness

A primary objective of this study was to examine concepts of school readiness from the perspective of primary school principals, junior infant teachers, managers of early years settings and early years educators, as well as parents. Across both quantitative and qualitative datasets, it is apparent that school readiness is a complex concept with multiple meanings and connotations. Dockett and Perry (2002) have delineated four views of school readiness: the maturationist, environmental, social constructivist and interactionist views. In this study, school readiness was clearly located along a maturationist-environmental continuum, where readiness is associated with biological maturity as well as external evidence of the acquisition of specific skills and knowledge, such as the ability to count, recite the alphabet and behave in polite and socially appropriate ways (May and Kundert, 1997; Meisels, 1999).

In Ireland, children start formal schooling as young as four or five years of age. The school readiness expectations associated with a maturationist-environmental continuum, therefore, are the antithesis of how children learn at this young age. While early years educators acknowledged the need to develop ‘the whole child’, they focused on developing concentration skills, helping children to become accustomed to rules and routines, developing social skills and independence. Parents and junior infant teachers also identified these factors as important for children as they begin school. However, teachers did not identify academic skills to the same extent as did the early years educators. In fact, there is some support for the view that primary school teachers consider academic preparation at pre-school as problematic.

As noted in the literature review (*see Chapter 2*) – and as indicated in the study’s findings – while there is some measure of agreement among primary school teachers, early years educators and parents about concepts of school readiness, there are also considerable differences with regard to indicators of school readiness. The cultural and social context of school readiness is important, and it is advantageous that several studies were conducted in Ireland in relatively recent years and thus provide a context for the current findings. The following section on school readiness indicators draws primarily on these recent Irish studies.

## 7.3 School readiness indicators

A number of school readiness indicators have emerged from this study; these indicators relate to classroom behaviour, dispositions, self-help skills, social and emotional skills, language and pre-academic skills. Each is discussed in detail below.

### Social and emotional skills

The importance of social and emotional skills (including children’s ability to share with other children, to negotiate with other children, and to relate with others) is evident in the literature, with teachers in the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) Preprimary Project (Hayes *et al.* 1997) rating social skills with peers highly, in fact putting these skills in first place. Moreover, teachers in the Children’s Profile on School Entry, part of the evaluation of the ‘Preparing for Life’ Early Childhood Intervention Programme (UCD Geary Institute, 2012a and 2012b), viewed emotional maturity as the most important domain.

In this study, children’s ability to share with other children was rated more highly (in terms of being ‘very important’) by early years respondents than by primary school respondents. Early years respondents also attached greater importance to children’s ability to negotiate with other children and to relate with others. However, both early years and primary school groups regarded the ability to relate with others as ‘important’ or ‘very important’ overall.

More early years respondents viewed children's ability to separate from their parents or guardians as 'very important' than did primary school respondents. However, the qualitative findings indicate that all research participants (parents, school teachers, principals, managers of early years settings and educators) rated social and emotional skills very highly, and indicated that the ability to separate from parents or guardians was a significant aspect of school readiness. Emotional maturity was considered important to enable children to settle in and begin to feel comfortable in a new environment. In keeping with the maturationist-environmental school readiness continuum (*discussed in Chapter 4*), parents gave equal weight to social and emotional skills and to pre-academic skills.

As with previous findings, some of the differences in ranking may be explained by the relatively flexible approach to interactions in the early years when compared with the more structured context of primary schools, with their curriculum demands, larger adult-child ratios and space constraints.

## Dispositions

*Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009) clearly states that dispositions, as well as attitudes and values, skills, knowledge and understanding, should be fostered in children. In this study, although children's dispositions to empathise, to persevere at a task, and to be enthusiastic, were viewed as moderately important by both sectors, more early years respondents gave higher ratings to children's ability to persevere at a task than did primary school respondents. These differences may be related to the differing contexts of early years settings and primary classrooms – as highlighted above – with more freedom and therefore more need to persevere independently in early years settings. Differences may also be related to primary teachers' perception of their role in supporting scaffolding and differentiating children's learning and teaching in the event of children being unable to complete allocated tasks. Conversely, given the large class sizes in primary school classrooms, it is interesting that teachers did not prioritise a child's ability to work independently. Early years educators tended to rate dispositions such as children's ability to be enthusiastic or to be curious more highly than did primary school educators. This may indicate that educators in the early years sector are increasingly aware of *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*, which places considerable emphasis on exploration and hands-on experiences. It may also indicate that primary school teachers perceive it to be their responsibility to cultivate children's enthusiasm and curiosity – as opposed to perceiving that these dispositions are a priority for children as they start school. There were some differences between early years respondents and primary school respondents with respect to children's ability to be creative. It is noteworthy that approximately 19% of both early years respondents and primary school respondents regarded creativity as 'somewhat important'.

Overall, there is a trend among early years educators to value dispositions as proposed in *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009) and *Síolta* (CECDE, 2006) more highly than they are valued by primary school teachers. In recent years, the discourse in early childhood education and training has focused on dispositions. Early years educators may therefore have a heightened awareness of the importance of fostering positive dispositions in young children.

While these dispositions are not confined to early years settings, they are perhaps more visible in the relatively free interactions within these contexts. However, the above figures raise questions about the dispositions and skills that are being valued in both early years and primary school education – and perhaps in education in general – with respect to school readiness. What affordances for fostering positive dispositions are available in both contexts? Early years educators rated such skills as using initiative, perseverance and ability to explore more highly than did their primary school counterparts. These valuable transferrable skills are core to the *Primary School Curriculum* (NCCA, 1999) as well as to the *Aistear* and *Síolta* frameworks.



## Language

A considerable body of research (Neuman and Dickinson 2002) reflects the importance of oral language for cognitive development and the benefit of education in the early years for language development (UCD Geary Institute, 2012a). This mirrors the importance of understanding and speaking the language of instruction, as explored in two recent studies in Ireland. The IEA Preprimary Project (Hayes *et al*, 1997) found significant differences in language ability between children attending non-designated disadvantaged schools and children attending designated disadvantaged schools and early years settings. Interestingly, age was not found to be a significant factor, but a mother's educational level and the number of occupants in the home were found to be significant factors. The 'Preparing for Life' evaluation (UCD Geary Institute, 2012a) also found that the number of siblings had a significant effect on children's language ability.

Further afield, Hart and Risely (1995) found that there were significant differences in the amount of language heard by children in different socio-economic contexts in the USA, and concluded that the most important variable to evaluate in childcare settings was the amount of talk between children and adults. The EPPE study in the UK (Sylva *et al*, 2010) revealed that there was a high correlation between '*sustained adult-child verbal interaction*' and high cognitive outcomes. Also revealing was that these types of conversation were very rare. Dickinson and Tabors (2001), again in the USA, highlighted the importance of developing children's language as a valuable goal in itself and as a precursor to later literacy development. They also talk about the value of extended discourse, particularly around books, to prepare children for some of the skills required for literacy. Parents also have a large part to play in helping their children develop their language and communication skills (French, 2013), and several parent participants in this study spoke about enjoying books with their children and about bringing their children to the local library.

In this study, with respect to the issue of children's ability to speak fluently in their mother tongue, more than twice the percentage of primary school respondents, compared with early years educators, believed that such ability was 'very important'. A teacher in one primary school recognised language as key, and stated that children should have a reasonable level of language in terms of '*good speech and good language*'. She had found a huge deficit in language among some children who were not necessarily financially disadvantaged, but rather were disadvantaged from a language and literacy perspective. A teacher in another school said that language and communication skills were very important, so that children could understand her and what she was teaching, or could understand what was happening in the classroom on a daily basis. The high regard by primary school teachers for the importance of a child's mother tongue is noteworthy, but the lack of priority given to this understanding among early years educators is a matter of concern, given its importance for both monolingual and bilingual children.

Respondents in this study placed great importance on children's ability to communicate effectively in the language of instruction (i.e. English or Irish), with 68% of early years respondents and 59% of primary school respondents indicating that it was 'very important', and almost 28% and over 31% respectively stating that they considered it was 'important'. However, issues regarding children's ability to succeed in education when their mother tongue is not used as a language of instruction are complex. In Ireland, there are two main types of education through a language other than mother tongue. The first is 'immersion education' in the Irish language for children whose mother tongue is not Irish; this is popular with the 144 Gaelscoileanna catering for 8,890 children in Ireland who live outside Gaeltacht areas. Children in this system succeed in education to a very high degree (Shiel *et al*, 2010). Children with a language other than English attend mainstream schools and are taught through English, another form of 'immersion education'; these children receive limited support from language support staff. Research by Baker (2011) and Spolsky and Hult (2010) highlights the importance of high ability in the home language for cognition and emotional development

for children in second language settings. Research in the USA by Thomas and Collier (cited in Walter, 2010) shows that children whose mother tongue is a language other than English perform poorly in education experienced through the English language only. Clearly, there are many complex factors behind these outcomes, but language of instruction is an important issue meriting further investigation.

Primary school teachers who participated in continuing professional development (CPD) programmes provided by Integrate Ireland Language and Training (IILT) will have learned about the importance of a child's home language, but it is not known if the participants in this study availed of this training. IILT was established to meet the language and training needs of children and adults from diverse cultural and educational backgrounds (NCCA, 2014). Prior to its closure in 2008, IILT published a range of documents and provided CPD programmes to assist primary and post-primary staff in supporting the children's diverse language needs. Few early years programmes, either at degree level or further education level, address children's language backgrounds in depth (McTaggart, 2013). However, very few participants in this study believed fluency in the mother tongue was 'not important' (1% of early years respondents and 3% of primary school respondents).

## Self-help skills

In relation to self-help skills, such as the ability to tidy up and open a lunch box, some differences were evident between the ratings given by both the early years and primary school groups. 35% of respondents in both groups rated children's ability to tidy up equipment and materials as 'very important', with 53% of early years respondents and 44% of primary school respondents rating it as 'important'. This finding also points to diverse approaches in both contexts where activities tend to be teacher-directed (Moloney, 2011; McGettigan and Gray, 2012) within the primary classroom, whereas in an early years setting children can choose materials but are required to put them back in the right place.

In total, 52% of early years respondents rated the ability to open a lunch box and a school bag as 'very important' for children starting school; the comparable figure for primary school respondents was 43%. The discrepancy could be explained by early years educators' experience of opening lunch boxes for children a year younger than primary school children, coupled with the fact that the adult-child ratios are less favourable in primary school, and therefore less help from adults would be available. All research participants rated children's ability to manage hygiene and toileting as highly important in relation to school readiness.

Significant differences were found with regard to children's ability to put on their shoes, with primary school respondents rating these skills lower than did early years respondents. Both groups of respondents were well matched in terms of the importance given to children's ability to hang up their coat.

Overall, most survey respondents ranked self-help skills in broadly similar ways, with somewhat higher rankings given to these skills by early years respondents. These findings are consonant with the qualitative findings from the study, where both early years participants and primary school participants recognised the importance of self-help skills for children in school. Although parents also recognised the importance of these skills, they did not rate them as highly as they did social and emotional skills.

## Classroom behaviour

A number of attributes have been grouped together under the heading 'classroom behaviour', including children's ability to express their needs, to gain the teacher's attention, to ask for the teacher's help, to listen, to be attentive, to follow instructions, to work independently, to self-regulate and to participate in learning activities. The majority of respondents from both the early years and primary school sectors rated children's ability to express their needs highly.

Surprisingly, 69% of early years respondents rated children's ability to ask for the teacher's help higher than did primary school respondents, where only 50% of respondents rated this ability. A majority of both groups viewed children's ability to listen as 'very important'. 27% of early years respondents stated that parents were concerned that, when starting school, their children would have the ability to gain the teacher's attention. Both early years respondents and primary school respondents attached exactly the same levels of importance to children's ability to be attentive. There were notable differences between the early years respondents and the primary school respondents with respect to the importance of children's ability to work independently, with a greater number of early years educators valuing this attribute more highly than did their primary school counterparts.

Similar numbers of early years respondents and primary school respondents regarded children's ability to self-regulate as 'important', but there were differences among those at the upper and lower ends of the scale. More than 7% of early years respondents and 14% of primary school respondents regarded this skill as 'somewhat important', whereas 25% of early years respondents and 12% of primary school respondents viewed it as 'very important'. There were noticeable differences between respondents in almost all ratings with respect to the importance of children's ability to use their initiative, again with a higher value being placed on this attribute by early years respondents.

Overall, there was general agreement among respondent groups on the importance of children's ability to express their needs, to gain the teacher's attention, to ask for the teacher's help, to listen, and to be attentive. More divergent views emerged on children's ability to work independently, to self-regulate, to use their initiative and to participate in learning activities. The rationale for these diverse opinions is evident in the qualitative findings, which indicate that many primary school participants believed that children need to be able to adapt to classroom routines and structures. As noted by one principal in an urban, non-designated disadvantaged school, children should be ready to follow group rules, as opposed to being centred on their own interests; by contrast, another principal in an urban Gaelscoil believed that children should be able to understand basic rules. As discussed previously, research in the Irish context shows that different pedagogical approaches are evident in both sectors. There is considerable structure in place in infant classes in primary schools; these are more teacher-directed than early years settings, where there is more scope for independent activity (Moloney, 2011; McGettigan and Gray, 2012).

## Pre-academic skills

Pre-academic skills included, but were not confined to, children's ability to hold a pencil or crayon and to recognise and write numbers and letters. There was a very noticeable trend in how early years respondents and primary school respondents rated children's pre-academic skills, with the early years respondents consistently ranking these skills higher. This trend also held true in the case of holding a pencil or crayon, with 46% of early years respondents and 29% of primary school respondents rating it as 'very important'. Less importance was attached to children's ability to use a scissors, with only 15% of primary school respondents and 19% of early years respondents rating it as 'very important'.

With regard to literacy skills, 55% of early years respondents, as opposed to 45% of primary school respondents, considered children's ability to recognise their own name as 'very important'; by contrast, similar numbers (early years settings 36%; primary schools 33%) viewed it as 'important'. Similar levels of importance were accorded to children's ability to write their own name, with most respondents ranking it at the middle or lower end of the scale. Only 7% of early years respondents and 4% of primary school respondents ranked it as 'very important'.

There were significant differences in the scale of rankings for children's ability to recognise numbers, with early years respondents giving it a significantly higher importance than primary school respondents. More than 20% of early years respondents and 7% of primary school respondents viewed it as 'very important', whereas 34% of early years respondents and 28% of primary school respondents rated it as 'important'. Respondents attached less importance to children's ability to write numbers, but, overall, early years respondents attached significantly more importance to this than did primary school respondents. More than 9% of early years respondents and 4% of primary school respondents stated that it was 'very important', whereas more than 23% of early years respondents and 11% of primary school respondents stated that it was 'important'.

Early years educators also attached significantly greater importance to children's ability to recognise letters than did primary school respondents, with 18% of early years respondents viewing this ability as 'very important'; the comparable figure for primary school respondents was just 4%. There were also differences among early years respondents and primary school respondents with respect to children's ability to recognise letters. Almost 30% of early years respondents stated that it was 'important', whereas almost 19% of primary school respondents rated it as such. More than 47% of early years respondents rated this skill as 'important' or 'very important', whereas 24% of primary school staff rated it as such.

Interestingly, views on the importance of children's ability to write letters were more convergent. Only 7% of early years respondents rated it as 'very important' and even fewer primary school respondents (3%) believed it was so. In fact, more than 47% of primary school respondents and more than 31% of early years respondents believed it was 'not important'.

30% of early years respondents and only 8% of primary school respondents believed it was 'very important' for children to count, sort and match objects. At the other end of the scale, 2% of early years respondents and 13% of primary school respondents believed it was 'not important'.

All respondents rated children's ability to recognise colours and shapes highly. More than 44% of early years respondents and 40% of primary school respondents believed it was 'important', whereas 35% of early years respondents and 17% of primary school respondents rated it as 'very important'.

As outlined earlier in this report, parents also viewed children's pre-academic abilities as highly important. Overall, 21 of the 30 parents interviewed spoke about the importance of children knowing letters and numbers, and being able to hold a pencil and write. These skills were considered just as important as social and emotional skills by both parents and early years respondents. Several early years educators mentioned using phonics schemes designed for primary schools, and one pre-school used a primary school maths scheme. It was considered that these schemes would introduce the children to the type of work they would be doing in primary school. Children in one pre-school had homework every evening and an early years educator in another pre-school used flashcards, alphabet songs and join-the-dots activities in order to prepare children for primary school.

However, there is evidence that primary school teachers do not agree with this pre-school policy. One Gaelscoil principal said that they did not expect anything academic from children starting primary school, and that teachers actually prefer it that way. Similarly, a mainstream teacher said that pre-school should be about teaching children about nature and should not be about sounding out the letters in words such as 'bat'. Another teacher referred to encountering difficulties with early years educators teaching the Letterland phonics scheme (Wendon *et al*, 2003). Two teachers in rural schools valued the learning that occurs through play, and stressed that pre-school should be informal.

In summary, in keeping with other studies (Moloney 2011; McGettigan and Gray, 2012), the trend was for early years educators to focus on pre-academic skills. Thirty participants from all settings, including principals, teachers and early years staff, mentioned the need for children to have a basic knowledge of numbers and letters; to recognise symbols or numbers; recognise the start of their own name; be able to hold a pencil, and know colours.

The relatively low priority attached to the achievement of 'academic' skills among teachers in this study mirrors other research on teachers' perspectives carried out in the Irish context (Hayes *et al.*, 1997; Moloney, 2011; McGettigan and Gray, 2012). However, teachers in designated disadvantaged pre-schools in the IEA Preprimary Project ranked pre-academic skills highly (third in order of importance), whereas teachers in more advantaged schools did not rank pre-academic skills as highly. Snow (2007) contends that there is an increasing emphasis by teachers in the USA on pre-academic skills, especially in the case of teachers of children from low-income or minority groups. It is notable that the findings in the present research show that early years educators regard pre-academic skills as being highly relevant to school readiness. They are therefore contributing to the 'schoolification' (PACEY, 2013) of pre-school and in some instances they operate as a 'scaled-down version of school' (Moloney, 2011). This practice may stem from a misunderstanding of the necessary foundation skills for literacy and numeracy, as well as a lack of understanding regarding the primacy of oral language skills for children. In addition, such practice may be further compounded by a misunderstanding of the aims and goals of the national literacy and numeracy strategy (DES, 2011). Early years educators may also be responding to parental pressure to give children a 'head start' in literacy and numeracy before starting school, again continuing a trend among parents in schools in areas of designated disadvantage in the IEA Preprimary Project (Hayes *et al.*, 1997).

## 7.4 Free pre-school year

In Ireland, there is a wide variety of early years setting types, which reflects the origins or philosophy of each individual service. In this study, of the total sample of early years settings (n=137) that responded, one-third were community based and two-thirds were private settings. When asked to describe their service by type, one-fifth (n=29) of respondents described their service as play based and one-fifth (n=26) indicated Montessori based. 16% (n=24) of settings described their service as a pre-school, whereas the remainder of settings (n=58) identified their service as either a *naíonra* (15%), mix of different types (10%), a crèche (10%) or a HighScope setting (6%).

As the FPSY is a universal scheme designed to give children access to a free pre-school year in the year before they start primary school, it is open to all setting types, irrespective of whether they are community based or private. However, in order to be eligible to receive a contract, applicants must have a minimum of eight eligible children attending and 'a service that does not have this level of participation has no entitlement to be funded under the programme' (DCYA, 2013). Figures available from DCYA indicate that in 2011, a total of 4,162 ECCE services were under contract to deliver the FPSY to 65,592 children, which represents 97% of all eligible children.

When introduced in 2010, the FPSY was explicitly identified as an initiative to prepare children for school. One of the aims of this study was to explore whether the introduction of the FPSY had impacted on approaches to school readiness among early years educators. 58.7% of respondents to the online survey across all types of pre-schools indicated that the FPSY had had no impact on their approach to school readiness. Indeed, 75.3% of respondents (n=77) who indicated that their approach to school readiness had not changed further indicated that they were already sufficiently focused on preparing children for school. Similarly, qualitative findings indicate that practice in early years settings has remained largely unchanged, but that the FPSY scheme has resulted in an increase in administrative work. However, in the qualitative phase of the research, the FPSY was identified as resulting in more children attending *naíonraí* and impacting positively on children's fluency in the Irish language.

Of those who reported having changed their approach, the majority referred to changes made at curriculum level. However, as the qualitative findings indicate, changes at curriculum level often resulted in early years educators feeling under pressure to get everything done before children started school. In fact, one early years educator suggested that because the FPSY is considered to be 'an educational grant', it was important to undertake education-type activities, which may necessitate a reduction in other areas such as 'crafting or baking'. This finding in relation to the perception of the FPSY is a matter of concern, and may impact negatively on children's access to important learning experiences in favour of more narrowly defined academic activities.

Of those respondents (n=20) who indicated that their practice had become more curriculum based, a minority (n=2) linked this to the increase in training available at local level, with a further two respondents identifying an increase in professional confidence as a factor in their changed approach to practice. This finding may be associated with the new qualification requirement for providing the FPSY; it may also be associated with enhanced capitation funding for higher levels of qualification.

The most significant finding in relation to the FPSY is the noticeable increase in the number of children attending pre-schools, which respondents regarded as a welcome development. In one case, the early years educator in a community crèche stated that 40 children were availing of the scheme, whereas prior to the introduction of the FPSY only 20 children would have attended the pre-school prior to starting primary school. In addition, the qualitative findings suggest that the FPSY has helped to alleviate the 'financial' burden for parents that is associated with sending a child to pre-school. This finding is corroborated by respondents in the quantitative data, where 80% of early years respondents and 66% of primary school respondents indicated that parents send children to school for financial reasons.

When asked whether or not the FPSY had had an impact on children's school readiness, 82% of early years educators and 63% of primary school teachers agreed that it had. Interviews with early years educators suggest that due to the increasing numbers of children accessing the FPSY, more children are being prepared for school. Pre-school was seen by participants as giving children a good start on the education journey, allowing them to become more independent and enhancing their social skills, so that their first days at primary school are not too daunting or experienced by children as too sudden a change. The fact that the FPSY is universal was seen as being particularly valuable to children who might not ordinarily attend a pre-school in advance of entry to the primary school system. Junior infant teachers supported these observations, noting that children who had attended pre-school were generally better able to settle into school. Although the majority of respondents perceived benefits to attending the FPSY, almost one-fifth of primary school teachers believed that pre-school had no discernible impact on children's adjustment to school. By contrast, all early years settings and 99% of primary schools indicated that pre-school prepares children for school, with opinions on how this happens located within both the maturationist and environmental views. Therefore, even though early years educators perceive their role as preparing 'the whole child', they tended to focus on academic skills as well as helping children become accustomed to routine and developing independence. Montessori settings in particular identified their programme as a teaching programme directed towards 'preparing children for school'. When asked through the online survey to identify the type of pre-school that best prepares children for primary school, the three most commonly selected types of pre-school by early years respondents were pre-school, play based and Montessori.

These findings suggest that while respondents associate pre-school with preparing children for school, there appears to be an element of ambiguity about the FPSY. This may be attributable to the minimal impact of the FPSY on practice within settings. It is clear from this study that early years educators are doing what they always did by way of preparing children for school and, therefore, there is no discernible difference from a teacher's perspective.



Drawing on international research evidence indicating that duration as well as quality of pre-school has an impact on child outcomes (Sylva *et al*, 2004), there has been some debate about the possibility of introducing a second free pre-school year in Ireland. This study sought the opinion of respondents on the benefits of this proposal. 85.5% of early years educators reported that a second year would be beneficial, whereas just over 51% of primary school teachers believed this to be the case. However, almost one-third of primary school teachers were unsure whether or not children would derive any benefit from a second year. Similar uncertainty emerged from the qualitative data, with early years educators expressing the view that a second FPSY would necessitate curricular changes at both ECCE and primary school level. Without such changes, a second FPSY could be, in the words of one early years manager, 'a waste of time'. Respondents were therefore cautious about introducing it without considering the implications for children and children's readiness for school.

Early years educators also expressed some concerns about the age bands for the current FPSY, noting that if a child is in the younger age band (i.e. three years and two months), they may not be ready for school on completion of the FPSY and would benefit from a second year.

## 7.5 Communication

Making the move to 'Big School' (which is what children called primary school) was recognised by all participants as a major event in the life of a young child. Children's responses and drawings also confirm that this is a significant event in the child's life (see Chapter 5). Research has found that the transition is less stressful for children where there has been communication between the pre-school and school settings, where children and parents know what to expect, and where there is continuity across settings (Dockett *et al*, 2010; Fabian and Dunlop, 2007; UNICEF, 2012). Participants in this study recognised the value of well-supported and well-thought-through transitions for children, and noted the effect that successful transitions can have on children's enjoyment of their first experience of primary school.

To investigate the process further, the study explored how parents and educators from the early years and primary school sectors communicated with each other and with children about the move from pre-school to primary school. The majority of respondents to the online survey indicated that they had no formal written policy on school readiness, but that there was informal communication between settings in respect of children starting school. However, despite this, the findings from the interviews suggest that communication can be very varied, with many of the early years educators reporting that there was limited or no communication with primary schools; others reported that their efforts to communicate with primary schools had been unsuccessful. While the majority of communication was informal, almost one-third of early years respondents and one-fifth of primary school respondents reported exchange of written information.

When asked to identify the strategies that help prepare children for going into junior infant class, the majority of early years participants indicated that they introduced children to the idea of school in a variety of ways in the months leading up to transition. The most common themes explored by early years educators with children included making new friends, the bigger classes in primary school, the curriculum, and school being fun. Three-quarters of early years settings reported providing activities and books related to starting school, and more than half of early years settings provided parents with booklets on preparing children for school. Margetts (2002) suggests that providing children with the opportunity to experience the school setting in advance of transition has a positive impact on adjustment to school. In this study, just over 40% of parents indicated that they had visited the local primary school.

While the early years settings engaged directly with children on the topic of starting school, strategies employed by primary schools focused more on communicating with parents directly and facilitating access to the school for children. Almost all primary school teachers reported that schools provided a booklet for parents and facilitated parent meetings, with the majority of these teachers inviting pre-school children to visit their school and facilitating open days.

Approximately one-fifth of primary schools organised a sports day at the school for pre-school children. Parents reported finding open days particularly valuable because they provided a context for talking about the primary school to their child. The duration of open days varied from school to school, with some reported to be scheduled for one hour and others scheduled for a whole morning.

Although the majority of both early years educators and primary school teachers reported discussing with parents whether or not a child was ready for school, this study found a significant difference between the groups, with the early years educators more likely to discuss a child's readiness for school. This finding is not unexpected, since research has shown that parents are anxious to talk about their own child, and their transition, while the child is still in the pre-school setting. Almost all early years respondents (98%) and primary school respondents (94%) who participated in the quantitative phase of this research reported that they were communicating with parents in relation to children starting school. However, in the qualitative phase of the research, all participants considered parents to be the key decision-makers in relation to when their child should start school, and they expressed a reluctance to advise parents in this regard. This is corroborated by the quantitative data, where small proportions of early years settings and primary schools reported that parents 'always' took their advice in relation to children's school readiness. Significantly, only 38% of early years educators, compared with 65% of primary school teachers, reported that parents took their advice.

Communication with parents is highlighted as having a central role in children's education, especially in the transition between home and school, and such communication is consistently advocated both in the context of pre-school and primary school curricula (NCCA, 1999 and 2006). The research findings suggest that there is scope to strengthen the communication on school readiness issues between pre-schools and primary schools, between pre-schools and parents, and between primary schools and parents.

## 7.6 Adult-child ratios in junior infant classes

When asked what parents are mostly concerned about when their children are starting school, 69% of early years educators noted that parents are mostly concerned about large class sizes in primary schools. Interview data indicate that a majority of primary school participants regard junior infant class sizes as excessive. Early years participants also demonstrated an awareness of the larger adult-child ratios in infant classes, and reported discussing the bigger numbers with children in the context of preparing them for school. Although the Department of Education and Skills (DES, 2013) advises that school authorities should, where possible, use their autonomy under the staffing schedule to implement smaller class sizes for junior infant classes, the general average teacher-pupil ratio in primary schools in Ireland is 1:28. While the literature indicates that reducing class size alone will not automatically impact positively on children's outcomes, smaller class sizes are likely to be most beneficial for children in elementary school, for children who are economically or educationally disadvantaged, for gifted children, and for children with special educational needs (Ellis, 1994; Biddle and Berliner, 2002; Graue *et al*, 2007). The literature acknowledges that in addition to reducing class size, attention must be directed to teacher quality, pedagogical practice and school culture (Graue *et al*, 2007).

## 7.7 Curriculum in the early years

Pedagogical continuity is consolidated through frameworks that bridge informal and formal education settings (Fabian and Dunlop, 2007). *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009) is designed to support continuity in children's learning experiences and consolidate the curricular links between ISCED Level 0 (pre-primary) and ISCED Level 1 (primary school). *Síolta: The National Quality Framework* (CECDE, 2006) comprises a quality framework for the education and care of children from birth to six years of age.



According to the findings from the online survey in this study, only a small number of early years settings and primary schools exchanged information on the implementation of *Aistear* and *Síolta*, leaving 90% of both sectors that did not exchange information on this topic. This is noteworthy, since both *Aistear* and *Síolta* are set out in overlapping age ranges, and both frameworks apply to early years and primary school settings. Both frameworks are designed and structured to allow for the exchange of information on implementation.

Early years educators and managers were more likely to report familiarity with *Aistear* than were primary school principals and junior infant teachers, with almost twice as many early years respondents than primary school respondents indicating high or moderate levels of familiarity with the framework. Similarly, more than 93% of early years respondents (compared with 53% of primary school respondents) indicated that they were implementing *Aistear* in their setting. Only 7% of early years settings said they were not implementing *Aistear* (compared with 47% of primary school participants). Similar findings emerged from the qualitative phase of the study, where eight out of nine early years educators and seven out of nine early years managers stated that *Aistear* was being implemented in their settings. Three out of six junior infant teachers who responded to this question, as well as three out of seven primary school principals who responded, stated that *Aistear* was being implemented in their schools.

The significant discrepancy in the implementation of *Aistear* in both qualitative and quantitative findings may be partly explained by the fact that primary schools are using the *Primary School Curriculum* (NCCA, 1999) and may not see the need for a curriculum framework, which in theory is similar in some respects to the one they are familiar with. In the qualitative phase of the study, several teachers identified class size and restricted classroom space as barriers to implementing *Aistear* and one teacher referred to the competing demands in other areas of the primary curriculum. One teacher made such a comment, stating that *Aistear* and *Síolta* were similar to the principles of the *Primary School Curriculum*. On the other hand, early years educators did not have a national curriculum framework until *Aistear* was launched in 2009. Because *Aistear* is a framework, it allows early years educators to use their autonomy and to incorporate any existing curriculum, such as Montessori or HighScope, as they wish.

Curriculum continuity refers to similar activities, programme structure and content between pre-school and infant classes. More than 83% of early years respondents and 60% of primary school staff agreed that there should be curriculum continuity between early years settings and primary schools; by contrast, 2% of early years respondents and 11% of primary staff disagreed with this view. These highly significant differences between the participant groups are all the more surprising when the findings related to implementing the pedagogical approaches of *Aistear* are considered. In the context of the online survey, respondents were asked to select the pedagogical approaches outlined in *Aistear* that they were implementing in practice. More than 86% of early years respondents and 42% of primary school respondents who implemented *Aistear* said they were basing their pedagogical approach on building partnerships between parents and practitioners/teachers. This reflects a highly significant difference between the early years sector and the primary school sector. Over 89% of early years respondents and 83% of primary school respondents indicated that they promoted learning and development through interactions. 97% of early years respondents and 98% of primary school respondents said they were promoting learning through play. Interestingly, a significantly higher percentage of early years respondents (80%), compared with primary school respondents (63%), stated that they supported learning and development through assessment. This discrepancy may be due to the emphasis in recent *Aistear* training on formative assessment, which interview participants may have linked directly to this question.

The *Primary School Curriculum* stresses the importance of continuity in the child's life between home and school, and primary school principals are encouraged to ensure that procedures for consultation with parents are put in place (NCCA, 1999). Communication between all parties involved with the child is recommended in *Síolta* (CECDE, 2006). The importance

of communication between all parties involved in a child's life is embedded in the White Paper *Ready to Learn* (DES, 1999) and more recently in the design of the *Aistear* and *Síolta* frameworks (CECDE, 2006; NCCA, 2009). The majority of participants (91% of early years respondents and 90% of primary school participants) reported that the primary school did not continue with work from the pre-primary sector. Limited training in the implementation of *Aistear* in the primary school sector was provided up to the end of 2012 in a number of education centres, through short workshops and summer courses for almost 6,000 primary school staff. Since 2009, support has been provided for a number of early years projects and organisations to engage with *Síolta* (DES, 2013); in addition, DCYA committed €2.5 million to introduce a new mentoring service in 2014, in order to progress the implementation of *Síolta* and *Aistear* in the early years sector. It is not known if the survey respondents had received *Aistear* training.

## 7.8 Play

The majority of respondents in this study believed that play was 'very important' during the FPSY; however, early years respondents tended to rate it highly slightly more often than did primary school respondents. Children in both primary schools and early years settings were reported as having access to a wide range of play opportunities. These included play related to creativity, games with rules, language play, physical play, fine motor games, construction play, literacy/numeracy, small-world and pretend play.

Certain types of play were significantly more common in early years settings than in primary settings; the more common types included language-based play, pretend play, physical play and small-world play. This could be related to the fact that the primary school respondents also reported fewer opportunities for play during the day and were significantly more likely to report that play occurred at times when teachers were not engaged with the class, such as before the official start of school and during a break. This theory is supported by the fact that a small number ( $n=47$ ) of the overall primary school sample ( $n=114$ ) reported using the 'learning through play' aspect of the *Aistear* curriculum framework; the comparable figure for early school educators was 111.

When all the data are taken into consideration, a picture emerges which illustrates that while play is valued by both primary school educators and early years educators, primary teachers have less time for play; moreover, certain play-type activities take place significantly less often in primary settings than in early years settings. The qualitative findings support this finding and offer some explanation as to why this might be the case. One primary school participant spoke about play being something that helped children to be ready to learn once they were in school, but she regarded the time for play as having been their years before school, when they attended an early years setting. The reason cited for this was the rigidity of the school classroom, where she believed that children had to sit and pay attention, rather than enjoy the luxury of play previously afforded to them in pre-school. It reinforces a view of play as being diametrically opposed to active academic learning, which was also echoed by some parents. This view demonstrates either a lack of understanding of the importance of play among the participants cited or a difficulty with applying a mutually understood definition of play across different groups of survey respondents.

Either way, play tends to be more prevalent in early years settings, and takes place significantly more often and across a wider range of activities than in primary school settings. Research findings nationally suggest that while the *Primary School Curriculum* emphasises the importance of play, the reality is that children are often required to sit for long periods of time in infant classrooms and have relatively little time devoted to play. (Murphy, 2004; Moloney, 2011; McGettigan and Gray, 2012). This is a cause for concern given the acknowledgement of the recognised value of playful learning over instructional learning for children (Whitehead, 2013).

## 7.9 Children with special educational needs

Findings from the quantitative phase of the research indicate that children with special educational needs attended 75% of the early years settings and 89% of the primary schools that took part in the survey. It was evident from an analysis of data in the qualitative phase of the research that participants believed that children with special educational needs were entitled to an appropriate education, indicating evidence of a shift away from a 'caring perspective' of disability to an 'entitlement' frame of reference (Jordan, 2008). The benefit of early intervention for children with special educational needs was affirmed by participants in the qualitative phase, and the Montessori approach in particular was acknowledged by one participant in terms of its appropriateness for children with special educational needs. A concern to adopt an individualised approach to meeting the needs of children with special educational needs was a feature of pedagogical practice in both early years settings and primary schools. The manager of a special pre-school noted that it responded to children with special educational needs on a 'case-by-case' basis through undertaking training in response to the particular needs of each child.

A more positive approach to school readiness was reported in relation to children with special educational needs, with some elements of an interactionist view of school readiness evident (Meisels, 1996). However, both the environmental and maturationist views were also evident in participants' responses.

Findings from the online survey suggest that primary schools tended to have significantly more supports and strategies in place than did early years settings. These supports and strategies included services such as occupational therapy, speech and language therapy, physiotherapy and support from special needs assistants; other services included psychological services and the use of individualised education plans. The role of the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) and the Special Educational Needs Organiser (SENO) was positively affirmed by primary schools in the qualitative phase of the research. However, the recent 25% reduction in teaching time for children with special educational needs, coupled with reductions in special needs assistant numbers, were reported by one junior infant teacher as impacting negatively on the provision of education in primary schools. Early years respondents were significantly more likely than primary school respondents to report that parents were concerned about the lack of support for children with special educational needs. When asked what parents were most concerned about when their children were starting school, 63% of early years respondents indicated that parents were most concerned about provision for children with special educational needs. This may be attributed to the different resourcing mechanisms that apply to both sectors, and parents' lack of familiarity with the resourcing of additional support for children with special educational needs in primary schools.

## 7.10 Children from different cultural backgrounds

Lack of support as well as strategies for children from different cultural backgrounds were also evident in this study, with more than half of the early years respondents and primary school respondents indicating that they did not have such strategies in place. Among respondents who indicated that they had some type of strategy in place for children from different cultural backgrounds, the use of training in equality and diversity significantly differed among the two groups. When compared with primary school respondents, early years setting respondents tended to have higher percentages of personnel with this type of training.

The findings indicate that the early years respondents have, in many cases, completed some type of training in diversity and equality, which potentially made them more aware of providing materials (such as books and toys) that represent different cultures. However, based on the study's qualitative findings, it is evident that children are still being treated as 'the same' or 'like us', thus indicating a lack of awareness and understanding of cultural diversity. According to the *Diversity and Equality Guidelines for Childcare Providers* (OMC, 2006b), treating children as 'the same' does not mean treating them equally. Equality and diversity is about valuing and acknowledging differences, creating opportunities for children to be able to participate equally to achieve their own potential (CECDE, 2006; NCCA, 2009; Dolan, 2014).

## 7.11 School readiness and the role of the community

The literature identifies school readiness as an outcome of the resources (including knowledge and skills), attitudes (including priorities) and relationships within a community (Dockett *et al*, 2010). The concept of a 'ready community' in terms of supporting school readiness was underpinned by the availability of a number of supports and services related to early intervention and supports for children with special educational needs, and the availability of educational and recreational facilities in the community.

Children with special educational needs received support from a number of professionals, including public health nurses, speech and language therapists, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, special education needs organisers, key workers, special needs assistants and early intervention educators. However, as outlined above, early years respondents to the online survey were significantly more likely than primary school respondents to report that parents were concerned about the lack of support for children with special educational needs. Positive practice in relation to collaboration between mainstream schools and outside agencies was reported in relation to children with special educational needs by two schools. Libraries, mother and toddler groups, and sports facilities were also referred to as educational and recreational facilities within the community which contributed to supporting children's school readiness.

## 7.12 Summary

The concept of school readiness – as it is understood by parents of children availing of the free pre-school year, and also by school principals, junior infant teachers, early years managers and educators – emerges as a multi-faceted and complex phenomenon, which is influenced by a range of historical, political, educational and sociological factors. Concepts of school readiness articulated by participants in this study – and identified school readiness indicators – are located within a maturationist-environmental continuum associated with biological maturity, as well as external evidence of the child having acquired specific skills and knowledge. Participants' perspectives on school starting age and parents' motivation for choice of school-entry age are influenced by particular contextual factors related to the pre-school sector and the primary sector, to parents' motivation with respect to their individual circumstances, and to a number of identified external factors, as opposed to developmental, educational or child-led criteria.

The FPSY was affirmed as contributing to an increase in children availing of pre-school provision, including the number of children attending *naíonraí*, which was reported as impacting positively on children's fluency in Irish. However, early years educators indicated that pedagogical practice in early years settings has remained largely unchanged. Findings suggest that although the research participants demonstrate an awareness of the key role of communication in enhancing children's early years experiences, there is scope to strengthen the communication on school readiness issues between pre-schools and primary schools, between pre-schools and parents, and between primary schools and parents. The current adult-child ratios in junior infant classes emerged as a potential negative impact on children's curriculum experiences and engagement. With regard to the concept of curriculum, there was an obvious dissonance between the early years groups and the primary school groups, and this can only be reduced by providing clarification on the role of play in early years settings and in junior infant classes.

A positive approach to school readiness was reported in relation to children with special educational needs, with evidence of some elements of an interactionist view of school readiness apparent apropos the value of relationships and interactions. However, a need to reiterate the importance of valuing and acknowledging differences, and creating opportunities for children to participate equally in accommodating cultural diversity in the context of school readiness, emerged as a key research finding. The interview participants also highlighted the potential role of the community in supporting school readiness through providing additional supports and interventions as well as educational and recreational facilities. Based on the research findings and discussion in this chapter, Chapter 8 details the conclusions and recommendations as well as the implications for research policy and practice.



## 8. Conclusions and recommendations



The aim of this research study was to explore concepts of school readiness as they are understood by early years educators and managers, primary school principals, junior infant teachers and parents in Ireland. The research also examined participants' perspectives on school starting age and the motivation for choice of school-entry age among parents in Ireland. The views of children availing of the free pre-school year scheme in relation to starting school were also elicited. The project maintained the focus on concepts of school readiness as set out by the Irish Research Council's tender document, while at the same time bearing in mind that other areas with regard to school readiness also merit investigation.

An extensive review of the national and international literature was carried out on concepts of school readiness, and the study was situated within an ecological framework that examined how school readiness is understood and how it relates to societal culture, history and values. A range of valuable findings emerged from the research, and these findings have the potential to inform policy, practice, training and research in the future. The implications of the research findings are identified in this chapter, and recommendations are made with reference to policy, practice, training and research. These implications are discussed below with reference to the main findings regarding participants' concepts of school readiness; school starting age; the free pre-school year; curriculum continuity; indicators of school readiness; language; children with special educational needs; cultural diversity; and parental motivation and concerns.

## 8.1 Participants' concepts of school readiness

As evidenced by the study findings, the concept of school readiness is complex and multi-faceted, and comprises three dimensions: 'ready children', 'ready schools' and 'ready families'. Dockett and Perry (2002) delineate four theoretical views of school readiness: the maturationist, environmental, social constructivist and interactionist views. The predominant view to emerge from this study locates the concept of school readiness within a maturationist-environmental continuum within which it is the child's responsibility to demonstrate school readiness. Along this continuum, readiness is simultaneously associated with biological maturity (May and Kundert, 1997), where children are expected to behave in certain ways and are also expected to adhere to structure and routine while simultaneously demonstrating evidence of certain skills and knowledge directly related to school (Meisels, 1999). All early years participants, primary school participants and parents regarded social and emotional maturing as being critically important to school readiness. However, views differed among the groups with respect to the importance of children's dispositions, self-help skills, language development, classroom behaviour and pre-academic skills. As this study indicates, other factors were rated highly. Such factors included the ability to listen and concentrate; being able to count; recite the alphabet; know letters, shapes and colours; behave in a polite and socially appropriate manner. In terms of emphasis, this finding differs from contemporary understandings of the concept of school readiness, which emphasise the complexity of factors contributing to a child's adjustment to school, and which are encapsulated in the interactionist approach.

### Recommendations

- › All policy guidelines and training for early years educators and primary school teachers should support awareness of the interactionist approach to school readiness and refocus early childhood educators' and teachers' current concepts of school readiness in line with this approach.
- › The interactionist approach emphasises the importance of the adult-child relationship, and the role of the child's environment and those within it in promoting learning and development.

## 8.2 School starting age

The rationale provided by all research participants for what they considered the most appropriate school starting age reflects the predominant maturationist-environmental concept of school readiness (Meisels, 1999; Dockett and Perry, 2002) that emerged from this study. While all participants primarily linked age with school readiness, chronological age was also associated with behaviours children exhibited at that particular age, such as being able to hold a pencil, being ready for the alphabet, counting, putting on a coat, and sitting down. A difference of opinion was evident between early years respondents and primary school respondents on the issue of the optimal school starting age. The majority of primary school respondents (61.6%) expressed a preference for a school starting age of between four and a half and five years, with 34% indicating five to five and a half years as optimal. Overall, primary school respondents were satisfied with the current school starting age; by contrast, early years respondents were less likely to favour the current starting age. Just over 50% of early years respondents indicated that a school starting age of five to five and a half years was about right, with 38.4% preferring a school starting age of between four and a half and five years; by contrast, the majority of parents identified five years as the minimum school starting age. It was reported that factors related to school readiness were not detailed in enrolment policies in pre-schools or in primary schools.

Parents' motivation for choice of school-entry age was variously linked to a number of external factors, including teacher retention in primary schools, the financial cost of childcare for parents, personal experiential influences, and the perceived impact of an earlier or later school starting age on children's trajectory through primary, secondary and third-level education. While finance is undoubtedly an important factor, a combination of factors are, in fact, what lead to parents' decision to send their child to school.

The study findings indicate that the historical origins of school starting age combined with custom and practice – rather than the statutory school starting age of six years and developmental, educational or child-led criteria – continue to be the main determinants of when children in Ireland are first enrolled in primary schools (Department of Education, 1965; Rogers and Ross, 2007). The link between school starting age and ascertaining a child's readiness for school emerges as a tenuous one.

This report was commissioned to investigate concepts of school readiness among parents and educators in Ireland. The Research Team maintained the focus of the study on these concepts, but concur with the view expressed by one reviewer – that it would be worthwhile conducting research into the long-term effects of early or late school starting age, and the type of pre-school experiences that children encounter. Such further research would be particularly important given the views expressed on school starting age during this study.

### Recommendations

- The findings from this study provide clear evidence that the issue of school starting age should be revisited. The Department of Education and Skills and the Department of Children and Youth Affairs should jointly initiate a national discussion on school starting age and school readiness.
- School starting age in Ireland should be considered with reference to developmental and child-led criteria.
- The Department of Children and Youth Affairs and the Department of Education and Skills should promote dialogue between parents, early years settings and primary schools in relation to curriculum and pedagogy.



### 8.3 Free pre-school year

Although the free pre-school year (FPSY) is a highly visible fiscal policy that provides parents with financial support to help defray childcare costs, it also represents Government commitment to universal early childhood education and care provision. Given the dual purpose of the FPSY, some areas of the scheme would merit further amplification.

The positive impact of Government policy and practice, as expressed in a range of policy documents and legislation, provides a framework within which a rich early childhood experience can be provided for children through high-quality early education. Recent policy initiatives and legislation demonstrate a commitment to enhancing quality in the early years sector. However, the findings from this research study suggest that further clarification is needed with regard to the purpose of the FPSY and the desired curricular and pedagogical approach in order to enhance the quality of early childhood education and care within participating settings.

#### Recommendations

- › The pedagogic aims of the free pre-school year should be made explicit in the eligibility criteria for participating services and on the Department of Children and Youth Affairs website.
- › The pedagogic value of the free pre-school year programme for children should be evaluated.

### 8.4 Curriculum continuity

Pedagogical continuity is consolidated through frameworks that bridge informal and formal education settings (Fabian and Dunlop, 2007). *Aistear* is designed to support continuity in children's learning experiences, as well as consolidate the curricular links between pre-primary (ISCED Level 0) and primary school (ISCED Level 1) for the child (NCCA, 2009). Early years educators and managers were more likely to report familiarity with *Aistear* than were primary school principals and junior infant teachers, with almost twice as many early years respondents as primary school respondents indicating high or moderate levels of familiarity with the framework. Only a small number of early years settings and primary schools reported exchanging information on the implementation of *Aistear*. The success of *Aistear* is dependent on its implementation in both the pre-primary and primary sectors. This requires that each sector fully understands the shared principles, objectives and pedagogy of *Aistear* across all settings.

#### Recommendations

- › The continuity inherent in *Aistear* should be used as a unifying mechanism on pedagogical content and practice across pre-school and junior infant classes in primary school.
- › *Aistear* should be a key feature of initial education programmes for junior infant teachers and early years educators.
- › Continuing professional development, focusing on the implementation of *Aistear* in the context of an integrated curriculum, should be available for all junior infant teachers and early years educators.
- › The Department of Children and Youth Affairs and the Department of Education and Skills should initiate a national framework for transition processes between early years settings and primary schools.

## 8.5 Features of school readiness

Early years educators and managers in this study genuinely believe that they are working in the best interests of children as they seek to address what they perceive as deficiencies in primary schools, such as large class sizes and high pupil-teacher ratios. Accordingly, early years participants believe that the more academic preparation children have before school, the better they will cope with school. Early years educators and managers may also feel under pressure from parents, many of whom indicated that they value academic preparation for children in pre-school. While primary school principals and junior infant teachers did not identify the need for academic preparation for children to the same extent as did early years participants and parents (in fact, some early years participants and parents suggested that it might even be problematic), a number of teachers who participated in this study clearly perceived the benefits of academic preparation for children during their time in pre-school.

The findings from this study seem to indicate that some pre-school and primary school environments tend to be characterised by rigid structure, routine and an emphasis on academic skills. In the absence of guidance on developing school readiness, early years educators replicate the perceived structure and routine of the primary school classroom. Rather than attempting to accelerate children's learning by focusing on academic skills, early years educators and junior infant teachers should respond to current evidence on enhancing children's development and learning in the early years by refocusing their pedagogic practice towards enriching learning environments, and instead direct their attention to the quality of interactions, relationships and learning opportunities. In this way, they could enable children's learning styles and dispositions to emerge naturally.

### Recommendations

- › The Department of Education and Skills and the Department of Children and Youth Affairs should develop a series of information leaflets on features of school readiness.
- › Materials that provide advice and strategies on an integrated approach to school readiness should be developed and made available to all settings providing the free pre-school year.

## 8.6 Language

The pre-school years are a very exciting time in child language development – when children have acquired the basics of their native language and are curious and ready to expand their language in line with their experiences. A considerable body of research highlights the importance of developing children's language as a valuable goal in itself and as a precursor to later literacy development. The amount of adult-child talk and the richness and depth of participating in sustained purposeful conversations have been found to be particularly helpful in promoting language and cognitive development. Teachers who participated in the quantitative survey element of this study valued a child's fluency in their mother tongue more highly than did early years educators; in addition, the qualitative analysis captured some of the examples that teachers valued, such as books, nursery rhymes and songs.

Early years educators were significantly more likely than primary school teachers to value pre-academic skills, such as recognising and writing letters and numbers, and being able to count, sort and match objects. This perspective could be linked to views expressed by early years educators in the qualitative analysis – when they spoke about the FPSY being a Government initiative; it could also be linked to their interpretation of the national literacy and numeracy strategy, *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and for Life* (DES, 2011), and to their views on preparing children for school by using commercial phonics schemes. Teachers expressed the view that they did not want children to learn to write in pre-school, as they often had to 'unlearn' skills that they deemed inappropriate. However, there was little communication between the educators in both sectors on this issue.

The opportunities for developing children's oral language, for fostering phonological awareness and for playing with the sounds of language should be promoted in the pre-primary sector. Staff need to understand the process of language development, and to support language and communication development. Various strategies could be used to promote language development during book reading sessions, and children should be encouraged to recount their own personal narratives. The value of speech and language therapy for children with language delay was recognised by both early years educators and primary school teachers, and speech and language services should be closely linked with pre-schools and primary schools in order to deliver the greatest benefit to children. The results of the evaluation of the Child Development Initiative Speech and Language Therapy Service suggest that integration of services such as speech and language therapy within the community and/or educational system meets the needs of the community in a way that traditional clinic-based services do not (Hayes *et al*, 2012). The FPSY was reported by *naíonraí* to have impacted positively on children's acquisition of Irish.

### Recommendation

- › Education and training for early years educators at pre-service and in-service levels should further develop an understanding of child language development and associated support strategies.

## 8.7 Accommodating diversity

The research findings indicate that pedagogical practice in relation to children with special educational needs has shifted from a 'caring perspective' of disability to an 'entitlement' frame of reference. The Constitutional and legislative framework in Ireland is based on this 'entitlement' frame of reference, and children with special educational needs are entitled to access, participate in and benefit from an appropriate education (Government of Ireland, 1998, 2000, 2000-2004, 2004 and 2005). Participants in this study demonstrated a knowledge and understanding of the entitlement of children with special educational needs to access quality early education experiences. A more developed concept of school readiness was evident in relation to children with special educational needs, with some elements of an interactionist view of school readiness evident. However, both the maturationist and environmental views were also evident in the research findings. Positive practice was reported in relation to children with special educational needs – specifically regarding liaising with the local primary school, adopting an individualised approach, and collaborating with parents and early years educators. The benefit of early intervention for children with special educational needs was affirmed by the research participants. The positive practice reported in relation to children with special educational needs was not identifiable with any particular cohort, and applied generally across different settings and schools. Informal communication structures, rather than formal structures, in facilitating children's transition to school were reported by survey respondents.

Very positive attitudes towards children from diverse backgrounds were evident in both the qualitative and quantitative research. However, more than half the early years settings and primary schools indicated that they did not have specific strategies to assist children from diverse backgrounds when they are starting school. The interviews revealed that staff believed children from different cultural backgrounds should be treated the same as all other children.

The study findings show that more primary schools than early years settings provide English language support. In addition, disquiet about new arrangements on language support in primary schools was expressed by some teachers. However, language support should include valorisation of children's mother tongue or home language(s). Some interviewees stated that they encouraged parents to speak English with their children at home. Much of children's language development takes place through their first language, and since close family ties with nuclear and extended family members are often carried on through a language other

than English, it is important that families are encouraged to maintain their home language and culture while acquiring English.

Many more early years educators, compared with primary school teachers, have received diversity and equality training, and this situation should be rectified in the primary sector.

### Recommendations

- › An individualised approach to meeting each child's identified additional needs should be a key feature of pedagogical practice in early years settings and primary schools. This should include collaboration with a range of other relevant professionals.
- › In order to support the transition of children with special educational needs to primary school, formal communication structures between early years settings and primary schools should be developed and rolled out nationally.
- › Diversity and equality training should include the importance of valuing children's mother tongue or home language in early years settings and primary schools.

## 8.8 Parental motivations and concerns

Parents voiced a number of concerns about their child starting school. The most significant concerns related to large class sizes in primary schools, teacher disposition and school culture, bullying, the level of teacher care and supervision in primary schools, and the availability of supports for children with special educational needs and/or health issues.

Class sizes in Ireland are the second highest in Europe, slightly behind those in the UK (INTO, 2013). While the literature indicates that reducing class size alone will not automatically impact positively on children's outcomes, smaller classes are likely to be most beneficial for children in the early years of school, for children who are economically or educationally disadvantaged, for gifted children, and for children with special educational needs (Ellis, 1994; Biddle and Berliner, 2002; Graue *et al*, 2007). Parents who participated in this study were particularly concerned about how large class sizes would impact on their child's ability to adjust to and succeed in the infant classroom setting. Large class sizes were linked to children's social and emotional development. In particular, parents were worried that their child would be overwhelmed in the infant classroom setting; in addition, they voiced a concern that their child would not be nurtured in a large classroom environment.

Parents also expressed concern about the availability of support for children with specific health needs or special educational needs on enrolment in primary schools, with particular concern expressed about recent reductions in child resource hours in primary schools. These concerns were amplified by parental fears that children could be 'lost' in the system. It is apparent from the study findings that primary school principals and junior infant teachers would like to see a reduction in class sizes, with 57.3% of these respondents indicating that the ideal ratio should be one teacher to every 15 pupils at infant level, and an additional 23.6% of these respondents indicating that the ratio should be one teacher to every 20 pupils.

A number of parents stated that teacher disposition and school culture were critical factors affecting their child's ability to settle into and get on in school. It was believed that the role of the junior/senior infant teacher in terms of his or her ability to relate to children and engage with them in an appropriate manner was critical. Some parents recounted personal experiences where they perceived that junior infant teachers had been overly strict with young children and had unrealistic expectations of them, such as requiring them to sit for long periods of time, or expecting too much too soon from the child. While parents expressed the need for infant teachers to foster the child's sense of wonder, curiosity and individuality, they voiced a concern that the infant classroom tended to be formal and inflexible.

A number of parents were anxious about the possibility that their child might be bullied in school, most notably in the school yard. Thus, even though parents were clearly dissatisfied with large class sizes at infant level in primary school, they acknowledged that children were safe within the classroom. Parental fears relating to the school yard centred around their concerns about a lack of appropriate care and supervision, as well as concerns that children in infant classes would be mingling with children from more senior classes. Some parents were particularly worried that younger children would be bullied by older children who might pressurise them into behaving in certain ways, or that older children might provide younger children with age-inappropriate information.

### Recommendations

- › Consideration should be given to the optimum class size in junior infant classes, within the context of available resources.
- › Schools should reassure parents of children who are transitioning to primary school that comprehensive policies and procedures relating to their children's safety and well-being are in place in the school.

## 8.9 Summary

This report is published at a time of great change and development in early childhood education in Ireland. High-quality early childhood education at both pre-primary and primary levels is recognised as a valuable contributor to children's well-being and development, and the transition from early years settings to primary school is a major step in the lives of children and their families. This study identifies current perceptions of school readiness by early years educators, primary school staff and parents in a representative sample, along with qualitative detail and insights into children's ideas about going to 'Big School'. A number of recommendations are made with reference to policy, practice, training and research, which, if implemented, would make a significant contribution to children's educational experience at pre-school and primary school. Many of the recommendations concur with those of the Expert Advisory Group on the Early Years Strategy (DCYA, 2013) with regard to quality and supports, training and professional development in the early years. With political will and Government support, we now have a roadmap of how to support children during this critical period of their development.

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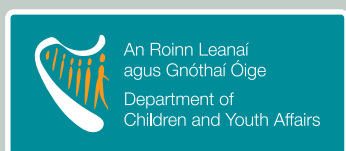
## NOTES



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