



# Insight 3

## **Moving On to Primary 1: An Exploratory Study of the Experience of Transition from Pre-School to Primary**

# Moving On to Primary 1: An Exploratory Study of the Experience of Transition from Pre-School to Primary

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## Introduction

This study explored the experience of a group of 27 children during their first year in primary school. Our exploration focused on:

- the perspectives of the children, their teachers and parents on the first year at primary school;
- changes in the out-of-home care arrangements made for children who had previously had both education and care needs met through varying forms of all-day provision.

During the preceding year the children and their parents had taken part in our earlier study exploring the conditions necessary for satisfactory all-day provision.<sup>1</sup> We were keen to learn about the children's transition to school and this longitudinal study allowed us to build on our data about the children's behaviour in pre-school and the nature of the provision they had experienced. The data on primary school experiences were collected during the school year 2000-2001.

## Background

It is important to recognise the opportunistic and situated nature of this study. We make no claims about representativeness for this opportunity sample and we acknowledge that the nature of its pre-school provision differed from the more typical pattern of five half-day sessions each week. The children in this study had received all-day provision in a local authority (LA) nursery school or private nursery or through some combination of LA nursery school or class, private nursery, childminder or nanny. However, 20 of the children in our sample did attend an LA setting for five half-day sessions each week (as part of their 'all-day package') and the other seven children attended private sector settings that were in partnership with their local authority. The strength of our approach lies in the opportunities that it affords to develop 'thick' descriptions and attention to context. But simple generalisations and causal statements are not possible from such data. Here we describe findings from our sample, offer illustrations, suggest implications and invite the reader to consider these from the perspective of their own particular context.

Of the 31 4-year olds in our study of all-day pre-school provision, 29 were transferring to primary school in Scotland. The parents of these children were invited to participate in this study and 27 families agreed to take part. It is the experience of their children that is examined here. Although the children had attended private and local authority provision during their pre-school years, all had moved to public sector schools.

## Methods

There were two phases of data collection. Phase 1 was designed to focus on the arrangements for transition made towards the end of the pre-school year and the child's experience during the first weeks of school. As it was not possible to confirm the funding for the study until the children had been at school for several months, Phase 1 had to be

<sup>1</sup> This work is reported in Interchange 68: *All Day Provision for 3- and 4-Year Olds* ([www.scotland.gov.uk/library3/education/in68-00.asp](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/library3/education/in68-00.asp)). The full report (Stephen C, Brown S, Cope P and Waterhouse S (2001) *All-Day Provision for 3- and 4-Year Olds*, Stirling, University of Stirling) is available from C Stephen, University of Stirling.

carried out retrospectively. The second phase of data collection was carried out as planned towards the end of the children's first year in school. In addition to talking to teachers about the children from our sample that were in their class, we took the opportunity to ask about the expectations that they had for all children during their first year of school.

The experiences of children were investigated through audio-recorded conversations with the participants and some observations of their behaviour in school. Interviews with teachers were carried out face-to-face but those with parents were conducted by telephone.

What can be done to increase teachers' confidence in the information passed to them from pre-school settings? Can local Childcare Partnerships and primary schools facilitate dialogue between practitioners? How can we ensure records are passed on from each setting a child attends?

Transition records often focus on what a child can do. How much do they tell others about a child's characteristic behaviour?

Parents and teachers may have different views on a child's initial reactions to school. Are there adequate opportunities for teachers and parents to share their perceptions of and anxieties about the way a child is settling in at school?

## Transition to School: Transition Arrangements, Settling In and Making Progress

For all the children in the sample, contact with their primary school began during the summer term before they transferred. Children and their parents were offered visits to the primary school and there was some transfer of written records. However, transition arrangements typically paid more attention to informing parents and children about the new environment they were entering than to learning about children's pre-school experiences. Teachers lacked confidence in the information passed on from pre-school practitioners and made only limited use of the material available. Nevertheless, there were examples that indicated the value of paying attention to the information in pre-school records. For instance, reading a boy's pre-school record alerted his teacher to pre-reading skills that were masked by his immature behaviour and helped her to start him at 'about the right place'. Some teachers had information about a child from one provider but not the other setting that had been part of the child's all-day provision. This meant that, in some cases, a child's teacher was unaware that he or she behaved differently when playroom circumstances varied.

Most children in the sample made a smooth transfer to school and for many it was a positive and pleasurable experience. However, some children did experience difficulties (mostly temporary, but some more enduring). There was no clear relationship between the nature of children's pre-school experience and the ease with which they transferred to school. Being able to separate easily from parents while at pre-school did not necessarily mean that a child entered school without difficulty.

Parents tended to ascribe problems with settling to difficulties that arose with separating from parents or a dislike of the school experience. Teachers on the other hand were more likely to ascribe problems to a lack of confidence or maturity on the part of the child or to problems with the child's behaviour.

By the end of their first year in school all of the children were considered by their teachers to be settled in school and most were making satisfactory academic progress.<sup>2</sup> For most, any initial difficulties such as separating from parents or lacking confidence over school work had proved temporary. The behaviour of three children was considered problematic throughout P1 but three others were thought to be overcoming their earlier difficulties with school discipline and structure and presenting fewer problems in class. The experience of one child illustrates this gradual transition:

He found the transition from nursery quite difficult and he has come on really well [with] constant positive discipline measures. . . . His self-esteem had plummeted, he was misbehaving, his dad was cross with him, I was cross with him so we have worked really hard. (teacher)

<sup>2</sup> However, it should be noted that the attainment level considered 'good' or 'average' varied from school to school (particularly in reading).

Teachers generally ascribed problems that remained at the end of P1 to specific aspects of children's behaviour (considered characteristic of the individual) or to progress with learning, rather than the move from one educational environment to another.

The difficulties with academic progress encountered by a few children (four in particular) were identified both by their parents and their teachers. Reflecting on their own progress was difficult for the children. The majority responded readily that they were getting on 'fine' or 'good' but could not expand on this general comment. However, three children did express some qualifications about their own progress and rather more offered specific comments on the mistakes made by others. There was no evidence that this group of children's *all-day* experience of pre-school education and care settings had given them any advantage (in terms of progress with learning) over children who had only attended pre-school settings for half-day sessions.

An analysis of the way in which teachers described the sample children suggested that they thought about them in four categories.

<p><b>Ideal pupils</b></p> <p>These children were well equipped to be effective learners, motivated and grasping quickly the social and 'structural' requirements of the classroom. They:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• listened to and followed instructions;</li> <li>• were well adjusted to school and keen to learn;</li> <li>• concentrated well and worked through the tasks set;</li> <li>• knew what was expected of them and when.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Ready for school and able to adjust</b></p> <p>These children met the expectations that teachers had of them, they were socially and emotionally ready for school. They were described as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• competent;</li> <li>• alert;</li> <li>• keen to please;</li> <li>• willing to contribute in class;</li> <li>• aware of what to do;</li> <li>• happy;</li> <li>• sociable.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Taking time to adapt to the classroom</b></p> <p>These children needed time to adapt to new expectations and new relationships with adults. They were characterised as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• immature;</li> <li>• lacking in confidence;</li> <li>• quiet or withdrawn;</li> <li>• in need of adult attention.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Having difficulty in the classroom</b></p> <p>These children were thought to have more enduring difficulties because of the way in which they behaved or reacted to classroom routines. They:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• did not listen or pay attention;</li> <li>• demanded attention;</li> <li>• were disobedient;</li> <li>• did not take turns;</li> <li>• had behaviour problems (e.g. pushing or fighting);</li> <li>• preferred to make their own choices.</li> </ul>

## After School and Holiday Care

In addition to their transfer to school all of the children experienced some change in the arrangements made for out-of-school care. Parents who had used a wraparound service during their child's pre-school year made the most extensive use of after school clubs and the holiday provision they offered. Other families (typically where the mother worked part-time) moved to care in an after school club for part of the week. It was important for these families that part week, flexible arrangements could be made with the after school club. Although after school clubs were a crucial part of families' childcare arrangements, most preferred to minimise their use of the holiday provision that the clubs offered and combined time there with care by friends and family.

Are these categories, or similar ones, familiar? How can the demands of the classroom be adjusted to accommodate those 'taking time to adjust' or 'having difficulty'? What kinds of experiences promote the development of personal characteristics that make adjusting to school easier?

How can staff in after school clubs and those who manage the service ensure that they are meeting the needs of parents? How can they find out about the likes and dislikes of children and demonstrate their responsiveness?

What can be done to help working parents cope during the period of 'half-day attendance'? Can 'after school provision' be offered to children from the beginning of P1?

Some parents were able to change their working hours so that they could care for their children themselves after school while others relied on grandparents. Only three children were cared for by childminders and the mothers of two of these children would have preferred to use an after school club if one had been available.

Parents were generally confident about the quality of provision offered by after school and holiday clubs, but the children were more likely to point to both positive and negative features of provision. Teachers had little or no knowledge of children's after school experience.

Coping with the period of 'half-day attendance' when children began primary school was very difficult for working parents. During that period parents wanted after school clubs to be available when P1 classes end (typically at lunch time). Further childcare difficulties arose in some locations after the period of 'half-day attendance' had ended because the after school club did not admit children until their second term in P1.

## Adapting to the Classroom Environment

### *Developing New Relationships with Adults*

Almost all parents thought that their child had developed a positive relationship with his/her teacher, but teachers were less sanguine about these relationships. The comments of parents, teachers and children focused on the personalised nature of the relationship. Teachers described aspects of children's behaviour as endearing and matching their expectations. Some of the children demonstrated an implicit understanding of teachers' expectations. For example, one girl suggested that children were expected to 'listen and do what you are told' while another talked of being rewarded for both manners and good work. Four children from the sample were described by their class teacher as initially being more dependent than most on the support of the teacher. In these circumstances teachers considered that the presence of more than one adult in the classroom had been vital.

What range of relationships with adults do children experience in pre-school settings? Does the mix of adults that children meet in P1 allow them to develop the kind of supportive relationships that some need or prefer?

Although many of the children in the sample had begun to experience more formal relationships with adults during their time in a nursery class, this was not the case for all children in the sample or the preferred type of relationship for all. For instance, one child missed the cuddles offered in pre-school and another (who had attended a small private nursery) noticed the lack of personal attention from her P1 teacher. A comment from a teacher illustrates more generally the shift in the nature of the adult-child relationship experienced on transition to school:

To have an idea I suppose of sort of authority figures, how they respond to adults, it maybe is a different environment from nursery. They might have been to a nursery that has a different kind of teacher relationship. . . . Some of them did find that difficult – getting used to the fact that it was listening to one person (they are probably used to having several adults at the nursery) and the fact that the teacher can't always be there to pay attention to them when they have 20 other children to look after. (teacher)

'Getting into trouble' was seldom mentioned by children but had caused an emotional reaction in a few children. Teachers too expressed concern when they had not been able to establish a positive relationship with a child, although there was a presumption that child-teacher relationships would be good unless some aspect of a child's behaviour disrupted this. They referred to children being cheeky, challenging rules or showing displeasure about rules or routines as hindering the establishment of positive relationships.

### *Developing New Relationships with Other Children*

Going to school was viewed as an opportunity to make new social relationships by almost all parents in this study and the quality of their child's social experience was an important factor in parents' judgements about the success of the move to school. Most children were thought by their teachers to be able to form good relationships with others in the class but a minority were considered to have some difficulty getting on well with others. Teachers valued aspects of children's characteristic behaviour that made it easy for them to 'belong to the class', e.g. children who mixed well, found it easy to make friends or were sociable. The children too saw the classroom as a social environment. They were aware of the behaviour and personalities of others, named friends, were glad when they had others to play with and reported being sad or cross when they had no-one to play with.

### *Learning Classroom Routines and Rules*

The recorded conversations with children suggested that they had easily become familiar with class routines and had accepted them, for the most part, as the way in which things should be done. Indeed, for some the change to new ways of doing things and belonging to a new social group ('being a school boy or girl') offered both excitement and enhanced status.

In contrast to pre-school settings primary schools introduced the children to an explicit set of rules, sanctions and rewards. Most children were able to recite a list of class rules (either the 'Golden Rules' and/or a list of specific prohibitions) although knowing the rules did not necessarily mean obeying them. Regardless of teachers' attempts at engaging children in discussions about appropriate behaviour, these children saw rules as established by teachers and head teachers and as non-negotiable.

The majority of teachers thought that the children in this study were aware that being placed in a group for reading or maths reflected some evaluation and ranking (a change from the child-centred focus of pre-school practice). However, parents were less sure that children were aware of the judgements being made. The children were able to explain about being grouped for particular activities, especially reading. They recognised that it was the teacher who made decisions about the allocation to groups and that group membership could change. Some children suggested that they were placed in groups to prevent misbehaviour (e.g. chatting or copying) while others gave organisational reasons (e.g. having enough books). However 11 children referred (accurately) to the evaluative judgements made by their teachers (e.g. that one group was better at sums than others, that another group was the 'highest' for reading).

## **Teachers' Expectations About Children and Pre-School Education**

During one of the interviews with teachers we took the opportunity to ask some questions that went beyond the focus on a particular child in the sample. We asked the teachers (20 in total) about characteristics that made transition to school easier for *children in general*. They suggested that children would be able to engage readily in the P1 classroom if they were:

- willing and able to listen;
- motivated and responsive;
- socially confident and willing to co-operate;
- ready for the structure and discipline of the classroom;

Many children enjoy making new friends and working with others. How can we make the classroom experience comfortable for children who prefer to work or play alone?

How might children's explanations for grouping influence the ways in which they think about themselves as learners? Does an awareness of 'ranking' influence their self-esteem?

How can opportunities be arranged for school teachers and pre-school practitioners to discuss their perspectives and develop a shared vision for early years education?

There are discontinuities between the 'culture' of the pre-school playroom and the P1 classroom. What do pre-school practitioners want to share with school teachers about their perspective on the educational experiences they offer to children?

How can school teachers and pre-school practitioners work together to offer children a gradual introduction to the demands of the P1 classroom?

- arriving at school after appropriate pre-school experiences (ideally in a nursery class);
- able to cope with some practical tasks (e.g. dressing for gym).

Teachers' expectations and the experiences of the sample children suggest some discontinuities between the way that teachers view pre-school and the perspectives of practitioners (teachers and nursery nurses) engaged in pre-school education. Teachers' expectations focused on children's readiness or preparedness for effective learning in the primary classroom. While skills acquired in pre-school such as being able to use a pencil, to colour in or use scissors were mentioned as useful by a few teachers, there was no mention of the learning that children might have been expected to have achieved through their experience of the Curriculum Framework for Children 3 to 5 (with the exception of some acknowledgment of what might be considered aspects of emotional, personal and social development).

On the other hand the practitioners responsible for these children in their pre-school settings (LA and private) saw fulfilling the requirements of the Curriculum Framework as necessary for satisfactory provision.<sup>3</sup> Being able to take turns and being willing to listen were mentioned by the children's pre-school practitioners as useful preparation for the circumstances they would meet later in school but they regarded pre-school education as a stage in its own right, not a preparation for school.

Teachers expressed a view that nursery classes offered a better preparation for P1 than other forms of pre-school provision. This preference appeared to arise largely from concerns about behaviour, rather than learning or attainment. Some suggested that attendance at a nursery class resulted in greater familiarity with school routines and resources and in pupils being 'better trained' for school so that they were more likely to behave appropriately in the classroom.

A few teachers referred to a negative legacy from pre-school if children wished to continue to make choices about which resources to engage with or to enjoy the freedom from structure and time constraints that had characterised much of their time in pre-school settings. A preference for or expectation of the freedom to choose activities and pursue these independently was a way of working that did not always fit with the primary school classroom and resulted in some tension between teachers and children in this study.

## Implications for Practice and Continuing Development

- It cannot be assumed that children who have had all-day provision will move to school without settling-in difficulties or longer-term problems with the nature of the classroom experience.
- There is a need to look further at the information passed on when a child moves to school. Can information about children's readiness for the classroom experience or their characteristic behaviour and preferences be passed on to P1 teachers? Can information about a child be transferred from each pre-school setting they experienced so that teachers may learn about their behaviour in different circumstances?
- Considering whether a child's difficulties might arise from expectations and preferences developed during their pre-school provision offers an important alternative perspective to the more typical view that considers difficulties to arise from aspects of children's behaviour and personality. But understanding and

<sup>3</sup> See Stephen et al (2001).

accommodating children with different expectations demands a flexible approach in the primary 1 classroom.

- The expectations of teachers and the experience of children suggest that there are discontinuities in the way in which children are expected to learn and behave when they move from pre-school to primary school. There is a need for practitioners and managers in both sectors to discuss their different educational cultures and consider ways in which school can best build on the experience of learning in pre-school settings and nursery experience can prepare children for the adaptations necessary on transfer.
- Children generally experience a more generous adult:child ratio in pre-school settings than in P1 classrooms. Addressing this discontinuity would allow for alternative ways of managing P1 classes and smooth children's experience of transition.
- The period of 'half day attendance' at the beginning of P1 creates difficulties for childcare. Further consideration is necessary about the optimum length for this period and the help with childcare that can be offered to working parents during this time.
- It is crucial that after school clubs and holiday provision are offered in a way that allows parents to tailor the service they use to their needs. It is necessary to consider the children's positive and negative evaluations of their after school club as well as the club's value for working parents.





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