

## “FITTING IN?” SCOTTISH PRIMARY TEACHERS’ EXPECTATIONS OF SCHOOL ENTRANTS

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### ABSTRACT

Although attendance is not compulsory, in Scotland today, a substantial majority of three and four year old children experience some form of pre-school provision prior to school entry. Given such high rates of participation the impact of pre-school experiences on children’s readiness for primary school has become an important issue for those involved in the early stages of compulsory schooling. This paper considers the differences in education, beliefs and practices of the adults, particularly teachers, involved in providing for children’s learning in Scottish pre-schools and primary schools. It reports the expectations primary 1 teachers have of children as they start school, and what use they subsequently make of the information transferred from pre-school settings to plan for further learning in a study conducted within one Scottish Local Authority area. The paper then examines factors that may impact on the practices of the primary teachers involved in children’s successful transition from the pre-school sector to the primary sector.

### INTRODUCTION

The government’s drive to improve educational outcomes (Scottish Executive, 2000a) has entailed a series of major developments in the provision of education. In the area of early education, increased provision and developments in childcare and education have also been a response to increasing demand for provision to meet the changing nature of family units and the needs of parents. The government’s commitment (Scottish Office, 1998) to extending accessible services for young children and their families, has been achieved through an increased number of places in the public sector, and additionally, the development of access to private and independent provision through ‘Childcare Partnership’ arrangements (Scottish Office, 1998; Scottish Executive, 2000b). Affordability, flexibility and quality are important factors for parents when choosing childcare (SCVO, 1998) although parents are increasingly aware of the “educational” benefits for children of attending pre-school (Stephen and Brown, 1999).

The publication of the “Curriculum Framework for Children 3–5” (SCCC, 1999) provided a framework for planned learning experiences within all pre-5 settings in Scotland and gave a ‘structured rationale’ for the education of young children. This document is based on a child-centred, developmentally appropriate approach with play as the medium for learning. Performance indicators in “The Child at the Centre” (SEED, 2000) provide further guidance on the quality of pre-five education. Implementation of the “Curriculum Framework for Children 3–5” (SCCC, 1999) and quality of provision are monitored by HMIE inspections and the Scottish Commission for the Regulation of Care (Scottish Executive, 2001) across all sectors – public, private and voluntary.

In Scotland there is considerable diversity in the Childcare/Education settings that children may attend and the language which is used to describe the range of provision for young children expresses some of this confusion – nursery education, nursery units, family centres, child-care centres. This reflects the different aspects emphasised in each of these sectors – childcare and early education. The range of skills and professional qualifications of the adults employed across early childhood services in Scotland (SEED, 2003) varies considerably. A substantial number of those

employed in childcare services for young children have no formal qualifications (SEED, 2003, *op cit*), and a wide range of ‘para-professional’ qualifications are available which focus on working with children, safety and professional relationships. At a ‘professional’ level, meanwhile, the pre-school teacher will have completed a degree in primary education or a Postgraduate Certificate in Primary Education.

#### IMPACT OF PRE-SCHOOL EXPERIENCES

The evidence from research suggests that for children, early positive school experiences may establish a more positive academic trajectory for their future school careers (e.g. Entwistle and Alexander, 1988; Shorrocks, *et al.*, 1993; Schagan and Sainsbury, 1996). The Rumbold Report (DES, 1990) and High Scope Perry Pre-School Study (Schweinhart, *et al.*, 1997) highlight the benefits for children who have been in receipt of quality pre-school experiences and a number of studies have established that child-care quality has modest, long-lasting, positive effects on children’s cognitive and social functioning (e.g. Broberg, Wessels, Lamb and Hwang, 1997; Vandell, Henderson and Wilson, 1988, Peisner-Feinberg, *et al.*, 2001). The research (Osborn and Millbank, 1987; Sylva and Wiltshire, 1994; Schagen and Sainsbury, 1996) suggests positive effects of pre-school experiences that may cause a change in the perceptions and attitudes of children, parents and teachers. Anning and Edwards (1999) claim that fostering positive “dispositions to learn” are an important feature of successful early education. While most studies have found positive influences of child-care quality on children’s outcomes, a few have found little effect (e.g. Chin-Quee and Scarr, 1994; Deater-Declard, Pinkerton and Scarr, 1996; Belsky, 2001). Interpretation of the evidence, therefore, does not conclusively suggest that early childhood education gives children an advantage when they encounter formal education; they do demonstrate that it can make a difference (Sylva and Wiltshire, 1994).

The transition to primary school is an important step for young children. Kagan (1999) describes starting school as a “big deal”, and international research on children starting school points to a range of often unexpected changes and challenges that children face at this time (Margetts, 2000). A range of factors will influence smooth transition to school (Brostrom, 2000; Brooker, 2002; Peters, 2003), and there is a growing body of evidence illustrating the importance of providing continuity in children’s learning experience. The Rumbold Committee (DES, 1990) emphasised that,

Continuity and progression are interlinked concepts relating to the nature and quality of children’s experiences over time. (DES, 1990:13)

Research by Wood and Bennett (1999) found that a complex range of tensions and contradictions exist for educators between theory, policy and practice. These differences impact on the nature and context of the learning experiences that children are offered within the more formal programmes of curriculum study in the primary school. Changes also occur for children in that they are now closely monitored and measured in their ability to meet standards of attainment. Keating, *et al.*, (2002:201) found that for some teachers pressures of accountability towards raising standards and target setting continue to be “placing unreasonable demands upon reception teachers” and that little account was taken of the different needs of young children.

How children negotiate these changes and adjust to the new contexts, people and experiences of primary school, can have long-term effects (Pianta and Kraft-Sayre, 1999). Bailey (1999) also suggests that at this time children make important decisions about “themselves as learners”, a point developed by Brostrom (2002), who claims that children need to feel “suitable in school, that is, to have a feeling of well being and belonging” (Brostrom, 2002:52). Given that 83% of three year olds and 99% of four year old children in Scotland ([www.scotland.gov.uk/stats/bulletins](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/stats/bulletins)) experience some form of pre-school provision (Scottish Executive, 2003)

the recorded information about children's interests, experiences, achievements and progress in the pre-school should be shared with the primary school. This would enable children to continue to make effective progress in learning and maximise the benefits of their pre-school experiences.

#### FOCUS OF THE STUDY

One of the most significant challenges for those involved in children's transition from their pre-school setting and induction into the primary school, is to ensure that there is a shared understanding of information as it is transferred from one sector to the other. Primary teachers have a "responsibility" to use this information to ensure continuity in children's learning (SCCC, 1999). However, research (Dunlop, 1998; SEED, 1999a; Wilkinson, *et al.*, 2001) has found a wide variation in practice in pre-school settings of maintaining records on children's progress and in sharing these records with primary schools.

This study set out to illustrate the different educational beliefs and practices of the adults involved in the education of young children in Scotland. It investigated the expectations P1 teachers in one Scottish local authority have of children, and the use they make of children's prior learning, as children transfer from the child centred informal learning situation of the pre-school to the managed learning environment of the primary school.

#### THE PRE-SCHOOL PRACTITIONER: TRAINING, BELIEFS AND PRACTICE

##### *Training*

At present, the skills and professional qualifications of the adults employed across early childhood services in Scotland (SEED, 2003) varies considerably. A substantial number of those employed in childcare services for young children have no formal qualifications but have considerable practical experience in caring for young children (SEED, 2003, *op cit*). A wide range of 'para-professional' qualifications are available (see website at [www.Scotland.gov.uk/stats/bulletins](http://www.Scotland.gov.uk/stats/bulletins)) which focus on working with children, safety and professional relationships. Meanwhile at a 'professional' level, staff will have graduate and postgraduate qualifications in professions such as teaching and social work. Teachers working in nursery education settings will have completed a primary education qualification and many will have experience of working in both primary and nursery education.

##### *Beliefs*

The background and training of the adults employed in the various types of pre-school settings results in differences in practitioners' emphasis on education and care. Moss and Penn (1996) found that very different philosophies and value systems underpin the different services provided for young children in the UK. Their study showed that, for teachers in nursery education, the main aim was to promote children's learning and mastery of "basic skills", however these are defined, whereas day nursery staff viewed their role as caring for children and supporting parents.

The care of young children is an important aspect of the nature of early childhood education. Caregivers have traditionally been mothers but with the increase of working mothers, 'other' adults are closely involved in providing what Ruddick (1980, 1989) calls 'attentive love'. Noddings (1993) made the distinction between natural, unconditional caring found in the family situation and professional caring in its relation to teaching. In the context of children in day-care settings, Leawitt (1994) described positive, supportive interaction between the child and the pre-school practitioner as 'responsive caregiving'. Responsive caregiving involves the adult providing not only for the physical well-being of the child but also more personal, emotional elements of empathy, mutual understanding and appreciation.

Differences in attitudes and beliefs may impact on the focus for desirable practices and actions of the practitioners within the pre-school setting. Mooney and Munton (1999) suggest that in different forms of pre-school provision staff have different perceptions of values, outcomes for children and the curriculum. Dahlberg, *et al.* (1999) claim that pre-school settings are interested in planning for children's future – the schoolchildren and adults they will become rather than with the individual child and their current childhood experience. On the other hand, within the Scottish context, Stephen, *et al.* (2001) found that pre-school practitioners across all sectors viewed the pre-school experience as a distinct educational stage and not a preparatory step towards school.

### *Practices*

Within the pre-school the adults interact responsively with children's own interests to develop knowledge and understanding. In this model children are encouraged to make choices about what is relevant to them, to take risks, to play, negotiate and regulate their behaviour with others, thus "helping them develop firm foundations on which later learning can be based." (David, 1996:99)

Using guidelines officially identified in the 'Curriculum Framework 3-5' (SCCC, 1999) each pre-school setting is expected to develop its own plan for educational provision to meet the particular learning and developmental needs of the children within that setting. Aspirations for good practice in assessing and planning for children's learning expect nursery staff to record children's progress using the developmental "features of learning" (SCCC, 1999).

In a child-led model where adults treat children as active learners, teachers see themselves as facilitators rather than directors, supporting children's intellectual, social and physical experiences. Nursery teachers' beliefs about children's learning advocate "learning through play", "discovery", "freedom to choose" and "autonomy" underpinned by a belief (Bruner, 1996; Laevers, 2000) that children learn best when they choose to pursue activities which interest, involve and motivate them. Consequently, in pre-5 settings the adults organise children's learning to extend experiences and present new challenges that develop the children's interests (SCCC, 1999:44). Children are encouraged to learn through self-directed, self-motivated activities, rather than the product of teaching or direct instruction (Anning and Edwards, 1999). In this model of learning it is the child's accomplishments that are important, and the focus is on the process rather than the product of learning.

## THE PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHER: TRAINING, BELIEFS AND PRACTICE

### *Training*

Since 1984 all teachers in Scottish primary schools have undertaken a pattern of teacher education that has involved a four-year honours degree course in education or a one-year professional education course, post initial degree. The perspectives about the professional preparation, "competencies" and achieving professional "benchmarks" considered to be appropriate are influenced by policy, components of learning and personal perceptions of what is seen to be 'good practice' (Shaughnessy, 1998; Entwistle and Walker, 2000). A range of professional and academic bodies, which include the Scottish Executive Education Department, the General Teaching Council for Scotland and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, have prepared guidelines for "The Standard for Initial Teacher Education in Scotland". Their stated aim is to provide for Scottish schools teachers who "can function as an effective facilitator of pupil's learning" (QAA, 2002), who are prepared to continue to develop their professional understandings and who will engage with families and the wider community.

### *Beliefs*

Research has, however, shown that ITE students themselves bring to their course beliefs about teaching and being a teacher. Zeichner and Tabachnick (1981) proposed that personal experience of being a pupil in the classroom shape the beliefs about teaching of many potential teachers. Fernstermacher and Soltis (1986) suggest that these beliefs become a major force in the classroom and influence their approach to teaching. Kennedy (1997) claimed that potential teachers have strong beliefs about the role of education and a belief “that they already have what it takes to be a good teacher.” (Kennedy, 1997:14). These are views which have been confirmed in the Scottish context by HMIE (HMIE, 2002:12).

Whatever beliefs about teaching they held at the start of their initial professional programme, teachers in primary schools will have been influenced by the content of the initial teacher education course they have followed and the experiences they have had within their practical professional placements. Within ITE programmes students study “operational competence” and “academic competence” (Barnett, 1994) with a strong emphasis on children as learners and becoming ‘a reflective practitioner’. However, as Cope and Stephen (2002) highlight, different professional contexts develop different cultures and potential teachers entering the teaching profession will seek to embrace the culture of schools as they find them.

### *Practices*

Teachers in Scottish primary schools are responsible for delivering the full range of subject areas prescribed in the government’s “Curriculum Guidelines 5–14” (SOEID, 1991–1993; LTS, 2000) within the “time entitlement” for effective teaching and learning (LTS, 2000) for each child in their class. Both Local Authorities and HMIE maintain public accountability for the quality of teaching and learning in all Scottish primary schools through regular inspections. Local Authorities may require schools to implement particular policies on curriculum provision. In addition, individual schools will have their “topic grid” and schemes of work. Class teachers consequently have the professional responsibility to plan for all children in their class using these sources with their plans being formally monitored by school management teams.

Government initiatives intended to raise standards of achievement particularly in literacy and numeracy (SOEID, 1997; SEED, 1999a; 2000a), combined with other developments, such as setting targets, reductions in class sizes and the introduction of classroom assistants, have tended to focus on the early stages of children’s school experience. Children’s progress is monitored and formally recorded (National Tests, Class Tests, Diagnostic Tests). These external pressures on teachers, and particularly early years teachers, allow little flexibility in planning for the individual interests of children or for extending experiences beyond the pre-set curriculum.

The accountability pressures of curriculum provision and time allocation command a view of teachers providing the learning within the primary classroom in a “teacher-centred approach”. Despite these external pressures, teachers’ beliefs, attitudes and educational philosophy continue to influence their instructional approach and the classroom climate (Esquivel, 1995; Baer, 1997). Teachers create learning environments according to their personal judgements of children’s needs. In attempting to create a ‘learning environment’ in its broadest sense, teachers produce intrinsic learning in the form of displays of work which are visually stimulating, and formal structured learning in the lessons they plan which involve pupils in learning experiences based on their judgements of children’s needs and abilities.

The delivery and resourcing of the learning activities to stimulate and retain interest are part of the professional skill of the individual teacher (McPake, *et al.*, 1999). In contrast to the learning situations in pre-school, the pedagogy of primary schools tends to be based on class and group learning, with each classroom having

its own distinctive process for bringing about learning in that setting. However, Lambert and McCombs (1998) advocate that in order to nurture children to become independent and life long learners who possess a creative and innovative approach to learning, individual differences and unique learning styles should be recognised. Cooper and McIntyre (1996) suggest that there should be an emphasis on the pupils feeling safe to take risks and developing their interdependence and independence of one another and developing their sense of self worth. McPake, *et al.* (1999, *op cit*) made a similar and related point, advocating that approaches to teaching in which children are given the opportunity to interact with their peers, discover their strengths and weaknesses, and ascertain strategies that match their needs and learning styles should be considered (Cropley, 1997; Tan, 2001).

#### THE STUDY: SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

This study aimed to gain an understanding of the practices of Primary 1 teachers involved in the transition process, and it addressed two questions:

- What expectations did teachers have of children as they started school?
- Did the information the primary teachers received from the pre-school assist and inform their planning for children's learning in P1?

The approach selected for this investigation was a qualitative one and the methodology involved a semi-structured interview. All interviews were analysed by response.

The face-to-face interview is recognised as a form of inquiry, which allows for flexibility, sensitivity and "delicacy" (Jayaratne and Stewart, 1995; Kvale, 1996), and the selection of the semi-structured interview was considered to be a particularly appropriate approach for this study. This method allowed for a degree of reflection and introspection on the part of the respondents, and allowed the interviewer to elicit attitudes, perspectives, concerns and goals for transition. A semi-structured interview schedule was prepared with a number of open-ended questions to be asked. These questions could then be followed up within the interview to probe issues, attitudes and concerns more deeply. This discussion would provide insights into the views of the teachers, an opportunity to explore attitudes, and gain perceptions and perspectives of the teacher's practice.

In selecting the participants for this study no particular characteristics were identified as important; rather the focus was on people who were prepared to engage with the topic being investigated. All of the teachers involved volunteered to participate in the study; subsequently responses were provided willingly and enthusiastically. Each of the teachers interviewed was a class teacher currently involved in teaching the new intake of Primary 1 children. This sample represented 50% of the total number of P1 teachers within this local authority, and represented a cross section of primary schools, both with pre-school classes attached and with no pre-school attached. The group also represented a range of experience of intake from all sectors of provision – local authority, private and voluntary. However, it must be acknowledged that as this sample were self-selected this may impact on any attempt to more widely generalise the findings.

The investigation was carried out in two phases shortly after the new intake of children had started in P1. Initially, a focus group discussion (Festervand, 1984–85; Maiampolski, 1989), which was audio-taped and transcribed, investigated a group of six P1 teachers' experiences and practices of communication with pre-five settings. The focus group interview was analysed initially by response to the research questions to clarify themes that were important for the teachers themselves. The insights gained into the attitudes and perspectives of the participants of the focus group interview were then used to inform the interview schedule for the second phase of the research.

The second phase of the study involved six confidential individual interviews also audio-taped and transcribed. In these individual interviews primary 1 teachers from six different primary schools were interviewed and were encouraged to describe how they go about familiarising themselves with their new intake of children. The interviews were carried out across a range of publicly funded primary schools within this local authority area experiencing a cross-section of social and economic backgrounds. All interviews were carried out in locations suitable for the interviewees including school settings.

Content of the transcriptions of all interviews — focus group and individual — was subsequently analysed by response and by teacher. In this analysis patterns of opinion, experience or expectations of the teachers were identified.

#### FINDINGS

In the analysis of the interview transcriptions it was evident from the respondents' replies that the teachers had a range of expectations for children starting school. What appeared to emerge from the evidence was that the priority task was of managing a large group of children who are unfamiliar with the school environment, with each other and with the classroom routine. There was an overwhelming acceptance by all of the teachers interviewed of their professional responsibility to implement the formal curriculum. Teachers (eleven of the twelve interviewed) were also conscious of the need to prepare for the new intake of children, and of their role in making school a welcoming and secure place for the children to be. The participants' views of children's development and how children learn also revealed some dilemmas within their teaching.

##### *Expectations of children*

There was a substantial emphasis by all those interviewed on the importance of children's ability to operate in a classroom and of their adapting socially to the school context. Teachers spoke of needing to know about children who 'mix well; were lively and outgoing'; and 'were a leader'. One teacher spoke very warmly of the kindness of one boy in her class towards others, whereas other teachers were more negative and spoke of needing to know about children who 'don't gel'; who were 'boisterous, loud or introverted'.

All of the teachers interviewed spoke of the skills they expected children to possess as they started school. They wanted to know if children could assume responsibility for their belongings and their actions '...if they can dress themselves... put their shoes on, and their coats'. Teachers wanted to know what physical skills children had, could they sit and attend to an adult, hold a pencil correctly, or be trusted to follow instructions? The strong focus by teachers on skills suggests that they value children who accept responsibility for their actions and can act independently. They particularly wanted to know what language and early number abilities children had. Factors relating to physical attributes particularly health, safety, speech and language ability were mentioned frequently by teachers '...things like difficulties with personal safety, very clumsy, poor articulation, some difficult behaviours'.

Teachers were conscious of the value of the school being a friendly and welcoming place for children and families. A substantial majority of the teachers spoke of wanting the children to know them '...to recognise a familiar face' and of their knowing each child's name. Some teachers appeared to make an evaluation of their personal involvement in the transition process, in terms especially of the benefits to the children. The costs involved were often to themselves in terms of time and involvement: 'I was in here most of the summer holidays getting the classroom ready, sorting it out, doing different bits and pieces...'

Only two of the teachers talked about seeking children's views about coming to school and this was done within curricular "Circle Time" activities.

Many of the teachers' expectations related directly to their ability to implement the formal curriculum effectively and within the time scale expected. The information the teachers talked about was gained from their own observations of children in the classroom setting and not from parents or nursery reports.

#### *Expectations of pre-school experience*

Although only one respondent referred directly to the "Curriculum Framework 3–5" (SEED, 1999) two teachers referred to "changes" in pre-school experiences children have. One teacher in the Focus Group interview was quite clear about the "child-centred" approach in the nursery, another teacher interviewed individually referred to her own children's experience in the nursery and spoke of the primary being more "structured in approach". One teacher openly admitted that she did not know what the structure of the nursery curriculum was. There was a lack of awareness of any nursery policy and practice, and a suggestion from five respondents that perhaps the nursery had a responsibility to prepare children for school. In the focus group interview the participants discussed the view that the nursery could perhaps:

'take individual children who were not going to be ready to start at the stage we want them to start at, and work with them in their final year of nursery to try to bring them on to that standard.'

'Preparing for school is actually sitting in a chair, and the concentration span is extended, that's very useful.'

One participant did, however, speak of the nursery being a separate stage and having a different philosophy for children's learning. She recognised that nurseries are more concerned with:

'the whole child, the development of all aspects of their personality and their learning, their confidence and their ability to communicate, that sort of thing. So they're not going to want to bring them up to a certain mark, threshold.'

#### *Use of children's prior learning experiences*

Within the analysis of the focus group interview the impact of implementing the pre-set curriculum was established as a major factor influencing the teacher's planning and actions during the first weeks children were at primary school, "...Now I have a programme for practically every minute of every day...". In the individual interviews teachers were asked to focus and reflect on their own practice of becoming familiar with one particular child during the transition process. Curriculum implementation again emerged as a predominant feature of the teacher's actions. The important issues identified were influenced by the need to fulfil professional responsibilities and little reference was made to the children's learning experiences in the pre-school setting. The impact of school targets and the local authority's pre-set curriculum and teaching plans were reflected in the overwhelming response of all teachers interviewed. "You seem to sort of rush from one thing to another, don't you, because there's so many aspects to cover..." The common factor for all respondents was their experience of the inflexible nature of teaching plans and the specific methodology to be used within the classroom. No teacher referred to the flexibility factor allowed within "The Structure and Balance of the Curriculum" (LTS, 2001). Almost all teachers expressed awareness that children are starting school with different experiences, skills and abilities, but only one teacher spoke of her recognition of different learning styles. There was an implicit acceptance by all respondents that children have to "fit in" to the demands of being at school, although within the focus group interview teachers spoke of concerns about this approach:

"We've got to follow a curriculum for that and it goes against the idea... it's

contradictory to my mind, of child-centeredness... It has to be based around the child's needs."

The information transferred from pre-school does not assist or inform the planning for children's learning in Primary 1 due to the prescriptive nature of the pre-set curriculum "...I mean the script's written for you!" and teachers are unable to adapt teaching and learning to meet the needs of individual children.

#### *Pressures and Tensions*

One significant theme that recurred throughout the interviews was the concern for the well-being of children as the teacher struggles to comply with policy demands. The focus group interview in particular revealed the degree of frustration felt by teachers. Uncertainty was expressed about the children's ability to cope with the programme and of their understanding of the subject areas covered. Teachers talked of not having time to learn about the children as individuals and to get "... better relationships going which they have to do before they can learn anything. They have to be comfortable and feel secure with you." One respondent talked of the general dissatisfaction within her school of the pressure to implement the taught curriculum quickly, however, all teachers interviewed accepted their professional responsibilities that "...you've got to deliver!"

In Scottish primary schools teachers are often moved from one level of the primary school to another. One teacher interviewed in this study had primary 4 the year before, another explained that most of her teaching experience had been in upper school grades and she had only recently moved into the early stages. This could be an added tension for some teachers in primary 1 classes, who not only have to become familiar with the children starting in their class but also with the curriculum and specific methodologies prescribed within this authority.

#### DISCUSSION

This study set out to investigate expectations primary 1 teachers have of children as they start school, and what use they subsequently make of the information transferred from children's pre-school setting to plan for their further learning. The evidence revealed that a tension exists between the teachers' awareness of the need for children's welfare and their own need for accountability. Results of the study suggest that within this local authority area, the pre-set nature of the curriculum, prescribed methodology and the targets set for achievement within the curriculum are putting pressure on teachers to rapidly begin formal education with their new intake of children. The important transition issues are influenced by the individual teacher's need to fulfil their professional responsibilities in implementing the curriculum. Teachers are anxious to know what social skills and knowledge based abilities children have rather than a child's developmental stage, personal interests and learning styles or their prior learning experiences.

These factors need to be considered when planning for children's successful transition from the pre-school setting to the primary school.

#### *Supportive Learning Environment*

The transition from early pre-school experiences to the formal educational environment of the primary school is one of the major steps that young children will take in their early years (Entwistle and Alexander, 1998). It has been suggested that this transition to school is "...a key life cycle transition both in and outside school." (Pianta, Rimm-Kaufman and Cox, 1999:xvii) and that it "...sets the tone and direction of a child's school career." (Pianta and Kraft-Sayre, 1999:47). This view is supported by Margetts (1997), who claims that when children successfully adjust to the first year of primary schooling are likely to be "more successful in their future progress

than children who have difficulty adjusting to the new situation” (p54).

Peters (2003) suggested that an important factor influencing the success of transition was the social interaction that developed, particularly in relation to families and friends. One of the important influences on learning is familiarity with the environment in which it takes place (Margetts, 2002). If the setting is familiar and ‘safe’ children are more able to use their prior knowledge and skills. Within the primary school setting children meet new challenges intellectually and socially, and very quickly they have to learn to comply with the teacher’s directions as they are expected to understand and perform complex new tasks. They are also now assessed in a comparative manner and this has not only a direct impact on their self-regard, but also on how they are regarded by others (Donaldson, 1978; Entwisle, 1995).

Children’s experiences are integrated into their understandings about themselves, others and the world around them. These experiences become part of their personal biographies as every experience lives on in further experiences (Dewey, 1938:28). Effective transition should be a positive experience for children enabling them to function successfully in their new environment. As young children move from the familiar caring educational environment of the pre-school to the more formal educational environment of the primary school they require time to become familiar with their new environment. Teachers involved in this study were aware of the need to make the school environment friendly, secure and caring for these young children and two teachers especially were making considerable personal efforts to ensure that it was. There is a need for the support of this caring approach to be recognised as an important part of the transition process.

Children need time to become familiar with their new environment, learn to respond to the teacher’s demands and adjust to the social and intellectual requirements of being at school. Consideration could be given to studies (Sylva and Nabuco, 1996; Elkind and Whitehurst, 2001) which caution that earlier exposure to formal academic skills may be associated with higher levels of anxiety, lower self-esteem and less motivation towards learning. While the research evidence (Richardson, 1997; Sharp, 2002) of a linkage between age and successful transition to school is inconclusive, concern has been expressed that pressure to implement literacy and numeracy programmes and to assess children’s ability in these areas, could exert a downward pressure even on pre-schools to begin formal education before children are developmentally ready.

#### *Curricular Pressures*

While this investigation was carried out in one Scottish Local Authority area, throughout Scotland Local Authorities have implemented initiatives to improve standards, particularly in literacy and numeracy (Scottish Executive, 2000a). Individual schools have their own perceptions, priorities and expectations about what is important. Early Years teachers throughout Scotland are experiencing similar accountability pressures and demands to produce evidence of children’s progress. All of the teachers involved in this study spoke of implementing the formal curriculum and their need to meet targets. Consequently, they expected children to possess skills that will enable them quickly to adapt to school life and to the demands of the teacher. Indeed a number suggested that the preschool should be consciously preparing children for school.

Much of the research exploring children’s transition to school has focused on the expectations of teachers (Lewit and Baker, 1995; Powney, Glissou, Hall and Harlen, 1995). Research (Biggs and Edwards, 1992; Buchanan, 1995) suggests that in early years schooling a discrepancy often exists between the teacher’s views of childhood and their developmental expectations of young children (Bennett, *et al.*, 1997) which may influence their professional practices and pedagogy. As teachers face constant demands to fulfil the curriculum, to ‘fit in’ and meet targets set by the school, they

may feel a sense of diminished control and the loss of their own individual autonomy. Teachers are caught in the tension of implementing an enforced routine of daily schedule and of discipline as they manage a large group of young children, yet on the other hand, teachers are aware of the developmental and cognitive changes that occur in children's understanding at this stage.

In Scotland children start school in the August nearest to their fifth birthday. Consequently, there is a wide range of age (4y6m to 5y5m) and stage of development within each P1 class. Early Intervention Initiatives (SEED, 1999c) and "Targets" set by schools are subjecting teachers to change, increased pressure and worries about the appropriateness of the curriculum for young children. Nursery teachers are aware of, and increasingly subject to outside-in pressures to implement the curriculum and are conscious of the requirement to prepare children for more formal education in primary school. Within the pre-school setting activities are provided for children that are school related and prepare children for the curriculum, thereby providing experiences and knowledge, which has been described by Bernstein (1996) as "official" knowledge, because it was regarded as important as a means of entry to the mainstream culture of school. This provision is guided by the 'key aspects of learning' identified within the 'Curriculum Framework 3-5' (SCCC, 1999) which has a clear focus on developmentally appropriate approaches to learning, including Emergent Literacy and Numeracy. The pre-school experience therefore, provides a valuable route along which children can progress at their own pace, with each "feature of learning" identifying clear guidelines for monitoring children's development.

The increased provision of pre-school places has provided a substantial majority of pre-school children with at least part-time nursery education, and thereby the opportunity for the adults involved in that provision to record children's progress. Children entering school are no longer 'working towards Level A', they are continuing to progress through the 'key aspects of learning' (SCCC, 1999:57).

#### CONCLUSION

Recent developments in the provision of pre-school education for three and four year olds in Scotland means that a substantial majority (98%) of the children entering primary school have had some form of pre-school experience. Transition from pre-school to primary needs to be viewed as an important step in children's lives and the support required to make this a secure and positive experience recognised.

The learning experiences provided for children in the pre-school are influenced by the beliefs and practices of early childhood educators which emphasise learning through play, real-life exploration and experience, self-initiated learning and focused adult interaction. There is an increasing body of evidence supporting the important contribution of quality early childhood education and care to children's later school achievement. If their pre-school experiences influence a child's later outcome in school then it is important that the work undertaken in pre-school establishments influences planning, policy and practice at the next stage of education. The tension between providing an appropriate curriculum for children that continues to recognise and develop a positive disposition towards learning and the official focus on accountability and outcomes is evident. While the pre-school curriculum and pedagogy are different from those found in primary school, there continues to be a case for the continuity of programming for children's learning from one sector to the other. There is a need to consider the possibility of decreased formality in the delivery of the curriculum and an increased opportunity for active involvement in learning. This will require that primary teachers are given the professional responsibility of judging children's abilities and developmental level and that they are given the flexibility to introduce the curriculum to children at a pace appropriate for each child as an individual. This will have implications for staff development and training.

Further research could explore pre-school/primary alliances that best create high

quality transition programmes which take account of the necessary caring dimension of early education, recognises the ‘multi-dimensional’ nature of children’s learning, and provides a truly ‘developmentally appropriate’ curriculum which values the child’s previous experiences and allows the primary teacher to build upon these to indeed create continuity and progression.

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