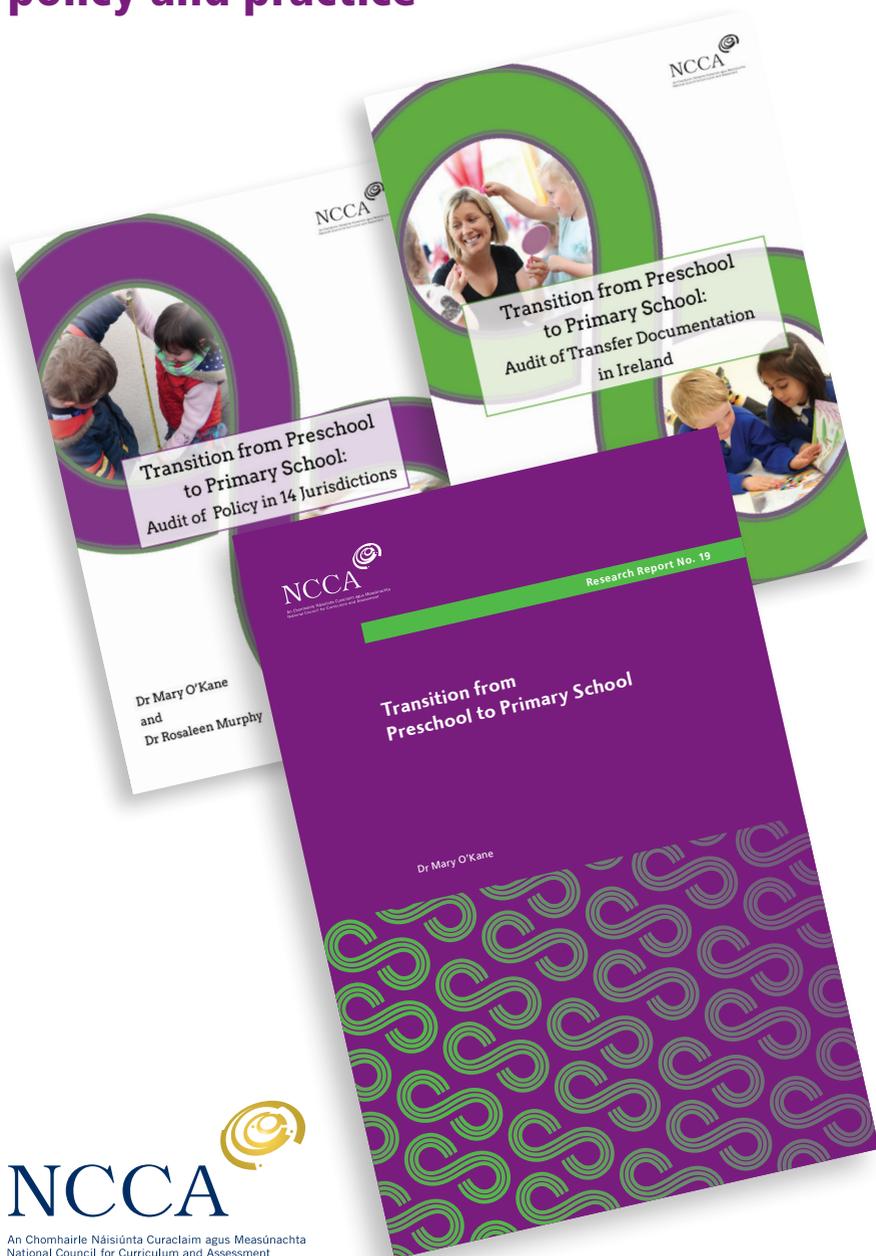


Transition from preschool to primary school: Learning from research, policy and practice





An Chomhairle Náisiúnta Curaclaim agus Measúnachta
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Preface

The transition from preschool to primary school is recognised nationally and internationally as a very important time in children's lives. This transition is a priority area of work in the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment's Strategic Plan, 2015-2018. A coordinated information-sharing process between the preschool and primary school is an important way of supporting children making this transition. As part of *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020* (Department of Education and Skills, 2011), the NCCA was assigned responsibility for developing reporting templates and to make these available online to

Improve arrangements for the transfer of information about the progress and achievement of students between all schools and state-funded ECCE settings by requiring all settings and schools to provide written reports in standard format to schools and settings to which students transfer (reports to be provided following admission of student to the new school/setting).

The Department of Education and Skills, and the Department of Children and Youth Affairs are to make the transfer of this information a requirement.

In preparation for this work, the NCCA have commissioned the following:

- A review of literature nationally and internationally titled *Transition from Preschool to Primary School: Research Report 19* (O'Kane, 2016).
- An audit of policies relating to the transition from preschool to primary school in 13 jurisdictions and Ireland. The audit, *Transition from Preschool to Primary School: Audit of Policy in 14 Jurisdictions* (O'Kane and Murphy, 2016a), looks at data transfer and the transition process.

Executive Summaries

Transition from preschool to primary school: Learning from research, policy and practice

- An audit of transfer documentation developed in Ireland to support the transition from preschool to primary school. This audit, *Transition from Preschool to Primary School: Audit of Transfer Documentation in Ireland* (O’Kane and Murphy, 2016b), focuses on ten transfer documents that have been developed in a collaborative way and compares and analyses these.

The executive summaries of the three commissioned papers are presented in this document. The full papers are also available at <http://www.ncca.ie>

The authors are to be commended on these insightful papers which deepen and enrich our understanding of this important transition in children’s lives. The research will be of benefit to many areas of the NCCA’s work, not only on transitions but also on the work of developing a new Primary Curriculum Framework. I also want to acknowledge the work of the NCCA staff who commissioned the papers, liaised with the authors, and prepared the reports for publication.



Brigid McManus

Chairperson, NCCA

Contents

Transition from preschool to primary school: Research Report8

National policies that focus on the transition to primary school	9
Templates, tools and practices used for the transfer of information	10
Key skills, knowledge and dispositions that support children during this transition	11
The role of play, curriculum, and pedagogy in the transitions process	11
Roles, responsibilities and relationships	12
Conclusion	13

Transition from preschool to primary school: Audit of policy in 14 jurisdictions.16

Availability of state-funded preschool	17
Location of state-funded preschool	17
Preschool starting age	18
Primary school starting age	18
Nationally agreed templates for transfer of information	19
Data protection concerns in relation to transfer of information	19
On-going documentation and assessment	20
Conclusion	21

Transition from preschool to primary school: Audit of transfer documentation developed in Ireland24

Aspects of children's learning and development recorded in the documents	26
Aistear's visibility in the documentation?	26

6

Executive Summaries

Transition from preschool to primary school: Learning from research, policy and practice

Parental and child involvement	27
When and how information transfers	27
Conclusion	28

RESEARCH REPORT NO. 19

Transition from preschool to primary school



Executive Summaries

Transition from preschool to primary school: Learning from research, policy and practice

As part of *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020* (Department of Education and Skills, 2011), the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) was assigned responsibility for developing reporting templates to support children moving from state-funded preschools to primary school. In beginning this work, the NCCA commissioned a review of research on the transition between these two educational settings. This review focused on the following key questions:

- What does research tell us about the importance of **national policies** to support children's transition from preschool to primary school?
- What does research tell us about the importance of **tools, resources and practices** used in the transfer of information from preschool to primary school?
- What does research identify as the **key dispositions, skills, knowledge** and other aspects of learning and development that are most critical in terms of supporting children at this transition point?
- What does research say about the role of **curriculum, pedagogy and play** in supporting children's transition to primary school?
- What can we learn from research about **relationships, roles and responsibilities** during the transition period?

The main findings of the review confirm that a positive experience during this important transition is a predictor of children's future success in terms of social, emotional and educational outcomes. Furthermore, the review notes that in addition to the transfer of relevant information, the roles of all stakeholders in the process must be considered in order to support children making the transition from preschool to primary school settings. From the child through to parents and family, preschool practitioners and primary school teachers, the emphasis currently is on supporting the stakeholders to communicate and collaborate. Other key points are summarised below under thematic headings.

National policies that focus on the transition to primary school

There is little evidence to show that the transition from preschool to primary school is recognised at national policy level in the jurisdictions included in the review. However, the review concludes

- developments in Australia and New Zealand lead the way in work on transitions.
- the case for greater levels of communication and co-ordination between the various stakeholders continues to be argued for, internationally and nationally.
- although there is a vast amount of research arguing the need to communicate and transfer information between preschools and primary schools, there is less formal guidance on exactly what should be transferred, and on how or when this should happen
- both internationally and nationally, local transition-to-school policies and an array of transfer documents exist and are used at a local level in an uncoordinated way, with little or no evidence of joined-up transition strategies.

Executive Summaries

Transition from preschool to primary school: Learning from research, policy and practice

Templates, tools and practices used for the transfer of information

Regarding templates and tools used to transfer information between preschools and primary schools, documentation may differ in style and format. However, some aspects are generally agreed upon.

- Documentation needs to be user-friendly for both sectors, and written in clear and concise language.
- Documentation should be positive in approach and focus on the achievements of the child rather than work from a deficit model.
- Areas where children need extra support should be identified and shared.
- It is important to involve parents in the transfer of information and in compiling it.
- The voice of the child should be included in a meaningful way.
- A greater level of understanding than is currently available about how primary schools use information transferred by preschools is needed.

Key skills, knowledge and dispositions that support children during the transition to primary school

In terms of the key dispositions, skills and knowledge that best support children as they make the transition to primary school, a good degree of consistency was identified. The focus is on social and emotional skills, communication and language skills, positive learning dispositions like independence and curiosity, and self-help skills, with less focus being placed on academic skills.

- The concept of 'readiness' that dominated transitions research in the past has been replaced with a broader interactionist approach that considers readiness as a bi-directional concept focusing both on the child, family, community on the one hand and on the characteristics of the school on the other.
- The current perspective is that it is the interaction between these various influences that makes the most significant impact on the child's transition to the primary school.
- Children need to be 'school-ready' in the broadest sense and 'ready schools' are equally important.
- Children experiencing social and economic disadvantage, children with English as an additional language (EAL) and children with special educational needs (SEN) require particular supports at the time of transition to primary school.

The role of play, curriculum, and pedagogy in the transitions process

While research reviewed highlights the importance of greater alignment between curriculum and practice across preschools and primary schools, there continues to be a discontinuity at the time, particularly, in terms of pedagogical practice.

- The research argues the case for interactive, play-based learning for younger children in both preschools and the early years of primary school.
- Tensions between play-based and more formal approaches have the potential to impact negatively on children's transition experiences.
- *Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* (CECDE, 2006) and *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Learning* (NCCA, 2009) support quality experiences and learning throughout early childhood

Executive Summaries

Transition from preschool to primary school: Learning from research, policy and practice

in Ireland, including infant classes in primary schools. Each of these frameworks has important implications for policy development on the transition from preschools to primary schools. However, a clear national implementation plan to help practitioners and teachers to use them to extend and enhance children's experiences has yet to be put in place.

- Could *Aistear* be the curriculum framework for the first year, or two years, in primary school? In New Zealand, the Advisory Group on Early Learning (2015) recommended the establishment of reception/transition classes for 5-year-olds using *Te Whāriki* (which is similar to *Aistear*) rather than the New Zealand Curriculum to plan, assess and evaluate in the first year of school with an implementation timeframe beginning in 2016 (Recommendation 14). Could/should Ireland do the same with *Aistear* as we look towards the development of a new primary curriculum framework?

Roles, responsibilities and relationships

Supporting transitions is a shared responsibility. The need for families, preschools and primary schools to work together to support children making the transition from preschool to primary school is emphasised in research.

- Cross-sectoral co-operation should result in the development of stronger relationships between the two educational settings, not only smoothing educational transitions for children, but also contributing to improved long-term outcomes for them.
- However, it appears that collaboration and communication are still not happening in any systematic or comprehensive manner.
- It is noted that issues of professional identity in the wider Early Childhood Care and Education sector in Ireland may be contributing to a lack of cross-sectoral communication and collaboration.

- Joint continuing professional development (CPD) experiences for professionals from the two educational sectors could enable greater alignment in pedagogical strategies.
- Parents play an important role in their children's transition to primary school and should be seen as collaborators in a process where respectful dialogue is all-important.

Conclusion

Despite its critical importance this educational transition is not recognised at national policy level in the jurisdictions reviewed. Instead, supports happen informally and at local level as children make the transition to primary school. However, Australia and New Zealand are leading the way in the area of transition. The transition from preschool to primary school is very important for children and the literature notes that the transfer of information using templates or portfolios is a key part of this complex process. As well as supporting continuity in the child's learning and development it can also facilitate supportive relationships and dialogue between preschools and primary schools. Additional important factors mentioned are partnership with families, and increased alignment of curriculum and pedagogy between the sectors. There is a general consensus that a successful transition for children must be considered in the context of relationships between the various stakeholders. A key message from the research is the changing understanding of what being 'school-ready' really means and the need for primary schools too to become 'ready' for the children transferring from preschool. The research reviewed extends our understanding of some of the issues surrounding this transition internationally and nationally, and gives insight into the multiple factors which influence it. This Research Report along with *Transition from Preschool to Primary School: Audit of Policy in 14 Jurisdictions* (O'Kane and Murphy, 2016a) and *Transition from Preschool to Primary School: Audit of Transfer Documentation in Ireland* (O'Kane

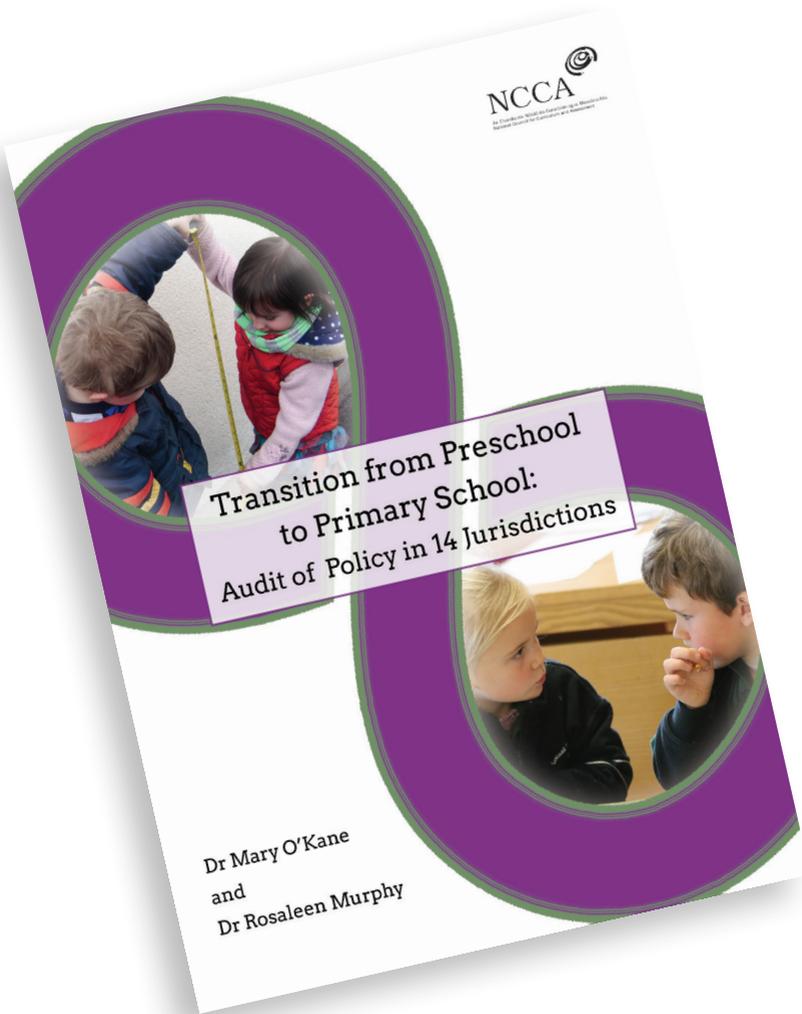
Executive Summaries

Transition from preschool to primary school: Learning from research, policy and practice

and Murphy, 2016b) provide a strong foundation on which the NCCA can build when developing reporting templates for transferring information on children's learning and development as they make the important transition from preschool to primary school in Ireland. It also provides valuable information for the NCCA as work begins on developing a new primary curriculum framework.

TRANSITION FROM PRESCHOOL
TO PRIMARY SCHOOL:

Audit of policy in 14 jurisdictions



Executive Summaries

Transition from preschool to primary school: Learning from research, policy and practice

To support and inform its work on the transition from preschool to primary school the NCCA commissioned an audit of policies relating to this transition in 14 jurisdictions. The jurisdictions identified for investigation were Australia (Queensland and Victoria); Canada (Ontario); England; Finland; France; Netherlands; New Zealand; Northern Ireland; Scotland; Singapore; Sweden; USA (Massachusetts); and Wales. These were chosen either because of their similarity to the Irish system or because of their reputation for excellence in early childhood care and education. For comparison, it was decided to include information on the Irish context. The audit focuses in greater detail on those jurisdictions which have more developed policies and practices on transition—Australia and New Zealand—and summarises the remainder, noting brief points of relevance in each jurisdiction.

The audit was guided by the following questions:

- Is **state-funded preschool provided**? If yes, for **how many years**?
- Does this provision take place **within the preschool or primary school sector**?
- Is there a state recommended **starting age for preschool attendance**? If yes, what is this age?

- What is the **compulsory primary school starting age**?
- Are there **national policies and agreed templates** for the transfer of information from preschool to primary?

Information is summarised and presented in the document in table format with additional, supplementary information provided in order to better understand the context of each jurisdiction. The main findings are outlined briefly below.

Availability of state-funded preschool

- A state-funded preschool year is becoming increasingly common internationally. Of the 14 jurisdictions examined, 12 offer a minimum of a year of state-funded preschool education.
- Canada, England and Scotland offer two years while France and New Zealand offer the option of three years. From September 2016 Ireland offers up to two years of state-funded preschool education.
- The countries that do not provide a free preschool year all subsidise childcare payments for parents in a variety of other ways.

Location of state-funded preschool

- Most jurisdictions offer free preschool places both within the primary school system and in preschool settings (Ireland, England, Finland, Netherlands, Northern Ireland, Scotland, Sweden, Wales).
- Ireland offers places mostly in community and private preschools under the ECCE Scheme DCYA, 2010/2016), except for specially targeted responses in areas of social and economic disadvantage such as the Rutland Street Project and 40 Early Start classes in primary schools. A small number of special preschools for children with special educational needs are also available.

Executive Summaries

Transition from preschool to primary school: Learning from research, policy and practice

- Some jurisdictions offer places within the primary school system only (Australia – Queensland and Victoria; Canada – Ontario; France; Sweden; USA – Massachusetts)
- New Zealand is the only jurisdiction to offer places in preschool settings only.

Preschool starting age

- The age at which preschool is offered varies across the jurisdictions, depending on statutory primary school starting age.
- Most jurisdictions offer a state-funded free preschool place to a child at some point after they turn three (Ireland, England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales) while Finland has the latest preschool start commencing at six years.

Primary school starting age

- With regard to compulsory primary school starting age, the lowest age ranges noted are throughout the UK with Northern Ireland having the lowest compulsory school starting age at four years.
- For the majority of jurisdictions, the compulsory starting age is six years, but many children have started school well in advance of the compulsory school starting age, for example, in Ireland, Australia, England, Netherlands, New Zealand, and Scotland.
- Whether children commence in the formal educational system at a young age (such as four years in Northern Ireland) or at a later age (for example, seven years in Finland) children are making a transition which includes organisational, physical, pedagogical, and functional differences.

Nationally agreed templates for transfer of information

- No jurisdiction has a nationally agreed template for the transfer of information on children’s learning and development.
- However, the New Zealand Preschool Regulations require preschools to have a ‘transition to school’ policy. They also require state-funded services to send basic data on the children attending the service to the Ministry of Education including records of attendance, using the Early Learning Information System (ELI).
- Australia leads the way in the development of transfer documents. The *Victorian Transition Statement* and *Queensland Successful Transitions Initiative* are particularly noteworthy.
- Anecdotal evidence suggests that a lot happens locally in relation to the transfer of information, but without national policy input. Consequently, details of locally devised documentation can be difficult to access.
- Nationwide templates to transfer information on children’s learning and development at key points within the early years of primary school system do exist (for example, in Canada – Ontario, England, France, and Wales). This information is transferred within a system and does not cross sectoral boundaries.

Data protection concerns in relation to transfer of information

- The absence of well-developed national systems for transfer of information from preschools to primary schools might be due to concerns about data protection.
- In Queensland, Australia, privacy legislation requirements are cited as preventing kindergartens from providing documentation directly to schools. Other Australian states such as Victoria overcome this by making parental consent a pre-requisite for the transfer of documentation.

Executive Summaries

Transition from preschool to primary school: Learning from research, policy and practice

- In relation to data privacy in the Irish context, the transfer of information concerning a child moving between recognised schools is allowed without breaching data protection law once it is in the educational interests of the child. For example, the *Education Passport* travels between primary and post-primary schools. It is of some significance that this transfer happens from primary to post-primary schools, and within the period of compulsory education. This may not be the case in the transfer of data from preschool to primary school in relation to children below the compulsory school age of six. Regarding this question of data privacy and the transfer of information from the preschool to the primary school, the Education (Welfare) Act 2000 (Section 28) (Government of Ireland, 2000) and the (Prescribed Bodies) Regulations 2005 (Government of Ireland, 2005) are key pieces of legislation to consider.

On-going documentation and assessment

- Many early childhood curriculum frameworks highlight the importance of on-going assessment in order to provide documentary evidence of progression in children's learning and development.
- Mention is made in many curriculum frameworks of the importance of sharing this information with other professionals including primary schools. However, little evidence was found internationally or nationally to support the transfer of this information to the next educational level.
- The use of portfolios to document and assess children's learning is a feature of preschools in New Zealand. These are used by many primary teachers to learn more about the child's strengths and interests. While they require mutual understanding of this way of documenting learning, portfolios do allow the child's voice to be heard in a meaningful way as they make the transition to primary school.

Conclusion

The findings of this audit suggest that it is widely recognised that the preschool years provide important foundations for children's life-long learning journeys. This is apparent in the number of jurisdictions which provide a state-funded preschool place for children. The age at which children start primary school varies widely and the audit shows that no matter what age the child transfers at, there are still organisational, physical, pedagogical, and functional differences that the child encounters.

There is a dearth of national policies on the transfer of information from preschool to primary school. While a lot of developmental work happens locally, the absence of more explicit national policies can, at times, seem puzzling and in stark contrast to the evidence that points to the positive impact that such data transfer and the cross-sectoral relations it fosters can make in supporting the transition. However, Australia and New Zealand are recognised as leading the way in work on transitions and they provide valuable information from which Ireland can learn.

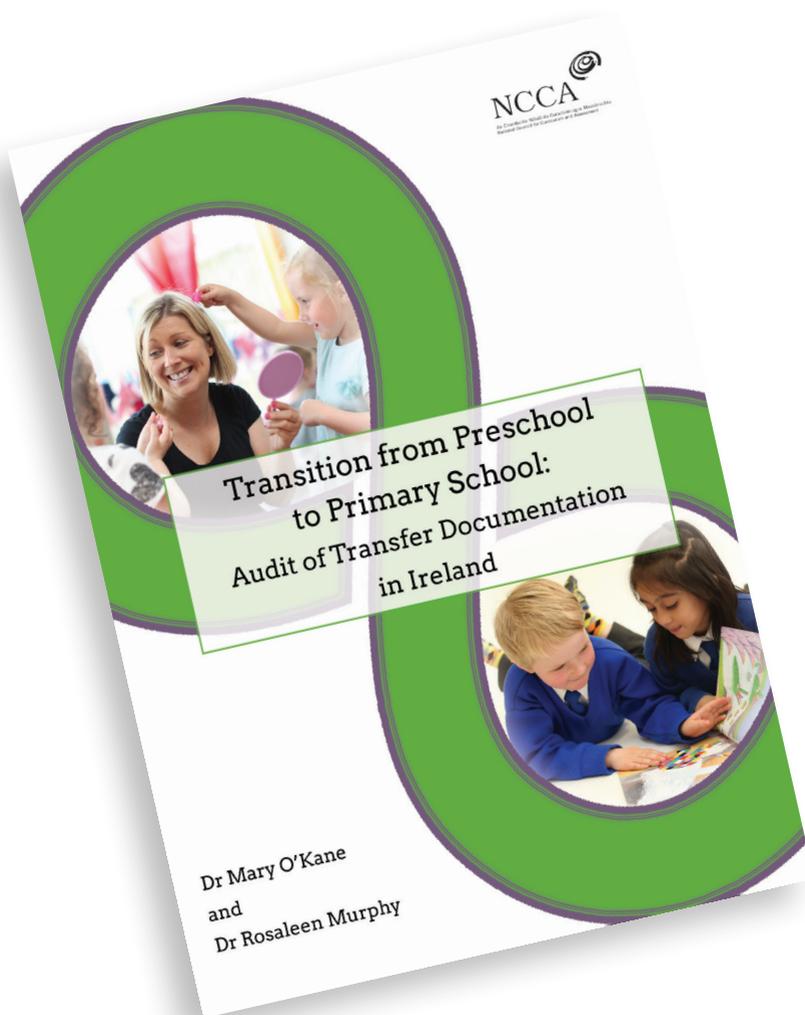
This audit along with *Transition from Preschool to Primary School: Research Report 19* (O'Kane, 2016) and *Transition from Preschool to Primary School: Audit of Transfer Documentation in Ireland* (O'Kane and Murphy, 2016b) provide a strong foundation on which the NCCA can build when developing reporting templates for transferring information on children's learning and development as they make the important transition from preschool to primary school in Ireland. It also provides valuable information for the NCCA as work begins on developing a new primary school curriculum framework.

Executive Summaries

Transition from preschool to primary school: Learning from research, policy and practice

TRANSITION FROM PRESCHOOL
TO PRIMARY SCHOOL:

Audit of transfer documentation
developed in Ireland



Transition from Preschool
to Primary School:
Audit of Transfer Documentation
in Ireland

Dr Mary O'Kane
and
Dr Rosaleen Murphy

Executive Summaries

Transition from preschool to primary school: Learning from research, policy and practice

A lot of work on the transition from preschool to primary school is already happening at a local level in Ireland. To learn from, and build on this the NCCA commissioned an audit of transfer documentation developed in Ireland. The audit focuses on ten transfer templates that have been developed and used in Ireland, and considers these questions:

- What **documentation has been produced and by whom** to transfer information from the preschool to the primary school?
- What **aspects of children's learning and development** are recorded in these? Do they **link to Aistear**?
- To what extent are **children and parents involved** in the process?
- **When** do the documents transfer from the preschool to the primary school?
- Are formal recommendations made as to **how** the templates should be transferred?

The audit has found that in the absence of nationally agreed transition templates or stated policy direction regarding the transition process, a number of stakeholders have taken the initiative and have been involved in developing transition documentation. The audit has identified a range of transfer documents used by individual settings and by private training companies. It also highlighted a number of research and development projects that happened or are happening at local level across the country. Many of these have produced templates and resources to support children in making the transition to primary school. Although a dedication to improve the transfer of

documentation between preschools and primary schools is apparent through many of these local initiatives, it is also clear that the fragmented nature of this development has seen a duplication of effort by stakeholders.

Consequently, although individual settings have developed their own unique transfer documentation, this audit considers ten specific documents. The ten focused on were chosen for consideration as they were developed following consultation and cross-sectoral cooperation. These documents are outlined in Table 1.

TABLE 1: TRANSFER DOCUMENTATION DEVELOPED IN IRELAND

Title:	Developed by:	Year:
Child Snapshot	Centre for Social and Educational Research, Dublin Institute of Technology	2010
All About Me	Sligo County Childcare Committee	2010/2015
An Traein	Forbairt Naionraí Teo	2011
The Personal Education Plan	Dublin North City Children's Services Committee	2011
Happy Talk Transition Flower	Cork City Partnership Ltd (National Early Years Access Initiative/NEYAI)	2012
The Parent Child Hub Transition Form	Dublin South West Inner City National Early Years Access Initiative/NEYAI)	2012
Little Steps to Big School - Preschool to Primary Transfer Document	Louth County Childcare Committee, Dundalk Institute of Technology)	2012
Child Snapshot with Developmental Outcomes	Kilkenny County Childcare Committee	2013
Moving on Transition Statement	Donegal County Childcare Committee	2014
I Can Book	Kildare County Childcare Committee	2014

Executive Summaries

Transition from preschool to primary school: Learning from research, policy and practice

The ten documents were examined under three headings: development process; skill sets covered; and the transfer process. The main findings are outlined under thematic headings.

Aspects of children's learning and development recorded in the documents

- The skill sets focused on in the transfer documents emphasised language and communication skills, social and emotional skills, independence and self-help skills, thinking skills (cognitive development), and fine and gross motor skills with less focus on pre-academic skills.
- Generally speaking, these align closely to the skill sets identified both in international and in Irish research as being important for children's success during the transition to primary school.
- Some of the documents moved beyond these areas and also considered aspects of learning and development such as left/right-handedness, knowledge of the world, creative development.
- Some of the documentation stressed the importance of agreed interpretations of terminology or skill categories across the sectors – that there should be dialogue within and across the sectors to ensure that everyone is clear on what the terms mean.

Aistear's visibility in the documentation

- When some of the first templates were being developed, settings were just beginning to become familiar with *Aistear* and links were not made with the framework.
- However, three of the recently developed templates in the audit have explicit links to *Aistear*. These are the *All About Me* template, the *I Can Book*, and the *Moving On Transition Statement*.

- Building links with *Aistear* in transfer templates is critical as it has the potential to support greater coordination and consistency across the preschool and primary school sectors, particularly when supporting children making the transition from one sector to the next.

Parental and child involvement

- Parents were specifically asked to contribute to four of the ten templates.
- In other cases, although practitioners were primarily responsible for outlining the strengths and capabilities of the child, the templates were completed in collaboration with the parent or, at least, the completed information was discussed with parents.
- Children were asked to contribute to four of the ten templates. This often involved attaching a photograph of themselves or drawing a picture, and including information such as the things they liked best about preschool, or the reasons they were looking forward to primary school.
- The audit questions whether the input of the child in these ways really gives the child the right kind of opportunity to have their voice heard, especially when compared to a tool such as a Child Portfolio which highlights the voice of the child to a greater extent.

When and how information transfers

The audit investigated if and when information transfers from the preschool to the primary school, and whether formal recommendations were made within the transfer documentation as to how the information should be transferred.

Executive Summaries

Transition from preschool to primary school: Learning from research, policy and practice

- Some documentation outlines recommended procedures to be followed prior to and/or during transfer, although it is not clear if these recommendations are being followed. For example, where personal transfer of documents is encouraged little information is available on the extent to which this is actually happening.
- There is little, if any, information available on what happens to these documents/templates once they have reached the primary school.
- In general, the final term of preschool was mentioned as being the most appropriate time to complete and transfer documentation.

Conclusion

The transfer documentation reviewed in this audit provide practical ways of sharing information about children's progress and development as they transfer from preschool to primary school in Ireland. Consequently, they have a number of implications for policy and practice. Their use affords an opportunity to preschools and primary schools to work in partnership with each other and with families to provide relevant information in support of the child's transition. The importance of cross-sectoral dialogue and co-operation along with the transfer of the templates cannot be overstated.

However, although a commitment to improve the transfer of documentation between the preschools and primary schools is apparent through many local initiatives in Ireland, particularly by those in preschool settings, the work to date is somewhat fragmented, leading to a duplication of effort by stakeholders in different parts of the country. Developmental work undertaken by NCCA in this regard will ensure that there is greater consistency in the information that is shared, and when and how this sharing will happen. It will also be important for the NCCA to explore how a template and the information detailed in it will be used in primary schools.

The development of a national template to transfer information on children's learning from the preschool to the primary school is a key part of this complex transition process. This audit along with *Transition from Preschool to Primary School: Research Report 19* (O'Kane, 2016) and *Transition from Preschool to Primary School: Audit of Policy in 14 Jurisdictions* (O'Kane and Murphy, 2016a) provide a strong foundation on which the NCCA can build when developing reporting templates for transferring information on children's learning and development as they make the important transition from preschool to primary school in Ireland.

Executive Summaries

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