

Managing Early Years Inclusive Transition Practices



STRANMILLIS UNIVERSITY COLLEGE
A College of Queen's University Belfast



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Report to the SCoTENs Standing Committee 2014

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Chapter 1

Introduction

This small-scale study seeks to explore the transitions of young children with special education needs in the North and the South of Ireland from home/pre-school to primary school. Because these jurisdictions are referred to in the Standing Conference on Teacher Education North and South (SCoTENS), funding documentation as the North (Northern Ireland) and the South (Republic of Ireland), these terms are employed throughout this report. The study is underpinned by articles 2:2, 23, 28 and 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) and by the United Nation's global strategy of 'Education for All' (Farrell and Ainscow, 2002), which both recognise the right of a child with special needs and/or a disability to inclusive education. The bio-ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005) offers the theoretical lens. This holistic approach is pertinent as it explains children's transition to school in terms of an ecological challenge in their early life, which in turn involves changes to identity, roles and relationships and focuses on the social competencies that children need, including 'self-reliance, problem-solving and coping with stress' (Kienig, 2013: 22).

The UNCRC (1989), ratified in the UK in 1991 and Ireland in 1992, represented a seismic shift in the educational experiences of children with special needs (SEN). The right of all children to inclusive education, including those with a disability, was reinforced with the publication of several significant international declarations, including: the World Declaration for Education for All (United Nations, 1990), the UNESCO Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs (1994), the Dakar Framework for Action (2000) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2008). A recent policy document for the Department of Education in the UK succinctly captured the essence of this rights based approach, as described in the following excerpt:

'All children with special educational needs who do not have statements must be educated in a mainstream school. There is also a presumption that a child with a statement of special educational needs will be educated in a mainstream school unless it is incompatible with the wishes of the parent, or the provision of efficient

education for other children at the school' (Article 6.19, p. 99, Department of Education, 2010).

Discussed in more detail in Chapter 3, SEN is a multifaceted term influenced by the cultural and political systems in which it is applied (Dyson & Millward, 2000); therefore definitions tend to be remain highly contested (Powell, 2003). For Wilson (2010) the debate is compounded by a lack of distinction between the meaning of the phrase (the semantic value of 'special' and 'needs') and the criteria of application (what is a special need?). To add clarity, the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1996 introduced a Code of Practice (the Code) for SEN that provided a framework within which all schools in the North were expected to devise strategies for meeting the pupils' SEN. The Code defines a 'SEN' as 'a learning difficulty which calls for special educational provision to be made.' The Code explains a 'learning difficulty' in terms of a child having significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of children of his or her age *and/or* has a disability which hinders his or her use of educational facilities (Inspected 2001-2002). A more detailed definition is offered in the South in the Education for Persons with SEN Act (EPSEN) 2004, which describes it as:

..a restriction in the capacity of the person to participate in and benefit from education on account of an enduring physical, sensory, mental health or learning disability or any other condition which results in a person learning differently from a person without that condition...

(EPSEN, 2004, p. 3).

Reflecting international trends, the number of children with a SEN in mainstream education in Ireland has significantly increased in the last twenty five years. In contrast to countries such as Italy, which operate a single fully inclusive system, both the North and South of Ireland continue to operate a parallel system. This may involve specialist schooling for pupils with profound and complex SEN, attendance at a mainstream school, partial or full attendance at special classes in mainstream schools, or attendance at a unit attached to a mainstream school. From a comparison of international inclusive practices, the OECD (2010) reported that, consistent with other European countries, the number of pupils in Ireland with a SEN attending mainstream schools

had risen from 60% in 2008 to 78% in 2010. Although no comparable figures were reported for the North of Ireland, detailed statistics reported in the Northern Ireland School Census (Department of Education (DE, 2014) indicate that the number of children with a SEN attending preschool settings in Northern Ireland increased from 1,382 in 2006/2007 to 2,205 in 2013/2014.

By contrast, during the same period, the number of children with a statement of educational need (see glossary for an explanation) remained surprisingly low at 15 in 2006/2007, even though this number rose to 39 in 2013/2014. As seen in Appendix 6 of this report, the number of primary school pupils reported as having a statement continued to increase within and across the same period. A review of the statistics suggests that older pupils are significantly more likely to have a statement than younger pupils; particularly younger children in their first year of schooling (see Appendix 6, Tables 1 & 2 Number of children with statements and special educational needs in Northern Ireland from 2006-2014).

Yet national and international evidence shows that early identification of SEN in primary school is one of the most important prerequisites for good adjustment to school (Anders et al. 2011; RAND Europe, 2013). Early identification is also argued to help narrow the attainment gap between pupils with and without a SEN (Davie, 1996; Anders et a. 2011). Without adequate support and early identification, children with SENs are at risk of experiencing poor adjustment to school or even school failure. Moreover, children with SENs are less likely to have friends or to be accepted by their typically developing peers (RAND Europe, 2013). Consequently, a good transition to school is essential to help children with SEN develop independence and good relationships within a supportive and aspirational context (DE, 2010).

On this premise, this study seeks to compare the transition policies and practices employed by mainstream schools for young children with special needs in the North and South of Ireland. Specifically, it aims to:

- document the policies (at government, local authority and school level) that direct and influence the transition process;
- explore the differing practices and strategies employed by schools to support the transition process in both jurisdictions;

- establish how teachers interpret these policies at classroom level;
- identify the factors that support or impede successful transitions;
- identify the importance of parental involvement in the transition process and the role of other agencies.

Therefore, a mixed method (qualitative and quantitative) multi-stage approach was employed, in order to identify the nature and effectiveness of the practices employed by schools to support the transition of young children with special needs from preschool to primary school in both the South and North.

Stage 1 involved a desk top review of government policies and educational practices in both jurisdictions to determine the official policy on:

- the inclusion of young children in mainstream education in both jurisdictions;
- the management of education transitions;
- the involvement of children, parents and multi-agency support agencies in the transition process.

Stage 2 focused on the development, piloting and distribution of a questionnaire survey. Purposive sampling identified a sample matched by school size, area and socio-economic status of 150 schools in the Dublin area, and 150 between the greater Belfast area and the Western Education and Library Board in the North.

Stage 3 involved two focus group discussions in the South and eight one-to-one interviews (via telephone and in person) in the North with year 1/junior infant teachers and special education needs coordinators, key learning support, and/or resource teachers.

The next chapter details key findings from the study, while the main body of the report includes a literature review with a discussion of Early Years transitions, a review of current legislation and practice in the North and South of Ireland, the methodology employed in the study and a report of the findings.

Contents

Chapter	Page Number
<i>Chapter 1</i>	
Introduction	3-6
<i>Content page</i>	7
<i>Glossary of terms</i>	8-11
<i>Chapter 2</i>	
Early Years Transitions	12-15
<i>Chapter 3</i>	
<i>Implementing policy & legislation</i>	16-24
<i>Chapter 4</i>	
<i>Research Methods</i>	25-27
<i>Chapter 5</i>	
Results	28-45
<i>Chapter 6</i>	
Conclusion & Key messages	46-48
Schematic model of the hallmarks of good practice	49
References	50-58
	59-67
Appendix 1: Example of letter to schools	
Appendix 2: Example of Questionnaire Survey	
Appendix 3: Example of Interview Schedule	
Appendix 4: Example of poster for the South	
Appendix 5: Example of poster for the North	
Appendix 6: Number of children with statements and special educational needs in Northern Ireland from 2006-2014.	

Glossary of terms

Aistear

(the Irish word for journey) is the *Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*, developed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) in 2009.

Early childhood

Is defined as the period before compulsory schooling; in Ireland the early childhood period extends from birth to six years

Inclusive Education

‘...the process of increasing participation and decreasing exclusion from the culture, curriculum and community of mainstream schools’ (Booth, 2000, p.9).

Individualized Education Plan: IEP

EPSEN (2004)

Section 3 of the EPSEN Act refers to entitlements to assessments and individual education plans (IEPs) and the involvement of parents of pupils with SEN in this process, although provisions in relation to entitlements to assessments and IEPS have not yet formally commenced. When commenced the Act will provide that:

A parent may request a formal assessment and must be allowed to participate in this, as appropriate.

If a school prompts an assessment, the principal must consult parents in advance and must receive written consent for the assessment.

Parents must also receive a copy of the report. Where an individual education plan is to be constructed, parents must be advised of this, should be involved in this process, and must be provided with a copy.

Parents may also request a review of this plan.

Parents may appeal any decision made on behalf of their child.

An assessment includes an evaluation of the nature and extent of a child’s disability, and a statement of the support needed for maximum educational attainment. Currently this process of diagnosis and referral to the appropriate services is usually conducted by an educational psychologist provided by Government through the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS). Other agencies, however, including local health boards, voluntary and religious disability groups and private businesses are sometimes employed instead of NEPS, because of long waiting lists (Stevens & O’Moore, 2009).

1.1.1 Individual Education Plans (IEPs)

Once an assessment of SEN has been conducted, under the EPSEN Act (2004) an IEP should be formulated, although this is not yet mandatory. The Act sets out a future statutory framework for the preparation and implementation of IEPs, and although they are not yet a legal requirement, NCSE guidelines provide practical advice and exemplars on their construction (2006). In short, an IEP aims to document the learning goals to be achieved by a pupil over a set period of time, and to identify teaching strategies and supports to facilitate these (NCSE). Ideally, an IEP should be developed through a collaborative approach that involves schools, parents and relevant personnel. When conducted in an appropriate context, IEPs may facilitate successful educational planning because they outline the pupil's current and future positions within the education system. For example, IEPs may be particularly significant in the transition from primary to post-primary school because they facilitate a continuum of support. A key part of NCSE work in this area has been to support the development of good

Stage 1: Prereferral, Prescreening, General Education Intervention

Stage 2: Referral and Screening Stage/Process

Stage 3: Evaluation Planning and Evaluation

Stage 4: Eligibility Determination

Stage 5: IEP Development

Stage 6: IEP Is Implemented

Stage 7: The Child's Progress Is Reported

Stage 8: IEP Is Reviewed in a Periodic or Annual Review Meeting

Stage 9: Reevaluation

In the North, the IEP is currently under review. It is anticipated the process will be simplified

Pedagogy

Can be conceived of as a holistic, interactive process where one individual contributes to the learning and development in another.

Special Educational Need (SEN)

The Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1996 defines a Special Educational Need (SEN) as:

a 'SEN' as 'a learning difficulty which calls for special educational provision to be made.' The Code explains a 'learning difficulty' in terms of a child having significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of children of his or her

age *and/or* has a disability which hinders his or her use of educational facilities (Inspected 2001-2002).

The Education for Persons with SEN Act (EPSEN) 2004 in the Republic of Ireland defines a SEN as,

‘a restriction in the capacity of the person to participate in and benefit from education on account of an enduring physical, sensory, mental health or learning disability or any other condition which results in a person learning differently from a person without that condition...’ (EPSEN, 2004, p. 3).

Special educational provision

6.19 If a child has learning difficulties, they are entitled to receive special educational provision.

All children with special educational needs who do not have statements must be educated in a mainstream school. There is also a presumption that a child with a statement of special educational needs will be educated in a mainstream school unless it is incompatible with the wishes of the parent, or the provision of efficient education for other children at the school.

Children with disabilities are entitled not to be discriminated against in the provision of education and associated services, and not to be refused admission to, or excluded from, a school for reasons relating to their disability; see Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001, which amends the Education Act 1996. There is a right of appeal for parents to the First-tier Tribunal if they dispute specified decisions made by local authorities relating to their special educational needs or the contents of their statement. Disability discrimination claims may also be made to the Tribunal by the parents of children with disabilities. Where the disability discrimination claim is related to admission or exclusion, and is in relation to admission or exclusion, the claim is made to a local panel. (Article 6.19, p. 99, Department of Education, 2010).

Statements of Special Needs (statements, statemented)

A statement is a legal document setting out the special educational help which a child must receive by law. They are reviewed every year. The Statement includes a full description of the child's strengths and weaknesses and any test scores. In Northern Ireland it follows a 5 stage process, this is currently under review and it is anticipated the process will be refined, shortened and speeded (DE, 2012b).

The Provision identifies how much support should be given by and by whom, including the qualification of the teacher etc.

Síolta

(the Irish word for seeds) is *The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education*, which was developed by the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) in 2006.

Transition

Transition a term with myriad meanings but for the purposes of the present study denotes a child's passage or movement from a preschool setting or home into statutory primary education.

Chapter 2

Early Years Transitions

Transitions is a term with myriad definitions, but for the purposes of the present study it denotes a child's passage or movement from a preschool setting or home into statutory primary education. Despite a burgeoning literature on almost every facet of the transition process, considerably less attention is paid to the transition of young children with SEN to mainstream primary school. As a result, this chapter draws on a general rather specific literature base.

The start to school for almost any child is 'a highly valued and celebratory event' (Ramey and Ramey, 1998, p.292-295). It represents a major shift in a child's social context as they enter an 'educational Kasbah full of a rich variety of materials, activities, staff and fellow pupils,' a move into the unknown that fills children with 'fear, hope, anticipation, anxiety and excitement' (Jackson and Warin, 2000, p. 381). The transition to school marks a significant period of change and adjustment during which the child is transformed and new capacities and abilities emerge such as literacy skills, social competence and independence. The transition period can also prove to be confusing and difficult as children move from a smaller setting staffed by larger numbers of adults to larger schools with fewer staff, less adult attention and new rules and protocols.

Given the immensity of challenges involved in the transition to school, it is unsurprising that even the most competent child will experience a significant dip in confidence during the first weeks and months of schooling (Fabian & Dunlop, 2007). Although most children adapt well, for others the start to school can be so difficult that 'each day brings too many challenges of the wrong sort' (Broström 2000, p.3). This latter group tends to include very young children, children from disadvantaged families and children with additional needs, who are at particular risk of social and academic maladjustment (McInnes, 2002; Broström, 2000). Carefully managed, Page (2002) argues, discontinuity can be a positive experience which allows the child to build their resilience to change. Poorly managed, it can have long term consequences for some children. Support for this claim comes from an extensive review of international research on the transition process by Dockett and Perry (2007). They concluded that children who experience academic and

social difficulties in the early school years are likely to continue having problems throughout their school careers, and indeed throughout their adult life.

To identify and minimise the risk factors that might impede a successful transition to school, schools throughout the developed world have devised strategies aimed at drawing closer links between the child's preschool and primary education in the last twenty years. In Iceland, for example, the preschool class might visit the primary school or the primary school might extend an invitation to the preschool class to participate in primary school events (Einarsdottir, Perry, & Dockett, 2008). In Ireland, to facilitate children's transition to school, preschool teachers focus on developing children's independence, their understanding of school rules and turn taking, and introduce them to some basic academic skills (O'Kane & Hayes, 2006, 2013).

In a similar manner, Sweden offers a pre-school class for children aged between six and seven, which promotes active and experiential learning and is intended to act as a bridge into formal schooling (Newman, 2001). Meanwhile, a study in Australia found that children who had access to a high number of transition activities had a better start to school, since these activities helped them familiarise the children and their parents with the school environment, (Margetts, 1999). Other practices employed by schools include staggered start dates, shorter school days in the initial phase and circle time to ensure children have an opportunity to meet and learn a little about their peers (Fabian, 2002). While these measures may prove effective for the majority of children, more than twenty years ago Lombardi (1992, p.2) was arguing that 'the key to effective services for young children is less through bridging the gap between different types of programmes, and more through ensuring continuity in certain key elements that characterise all good early childhood programmes'.

Towards the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, Lombardi's philosophy was shaping pedagogy in all regions of the United Kingdom (UK) including Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Guernsey, Jersey, and the Isle of Man. The publication of 'Every Child Matters: Change for Children' (DfES, 2004) established the standards for learning, development and care for children, from birth to five. The introduction of a longitudinal pilot entitled the 'Early Years Enriched Curriculum' (2000/2009) in areas of deprivation was the first major initiative undertaken in the North of Ireland to address inequalities and to ease the transition of four to five

year olds from preschool into formal primary education (for a review, see McGuinness, Trew & Walsh, 2009). An important innovation is the fact that Northern Ireland has the youngest statutory school starting age in Europe. Issues within the participating schools were acute, with many children starting school with poor language skills and a poor understanding of routine. In the intervening years since the start of the pilot, both nationally and internationally, there was a general movement to align the preschool curriculum with the primary curriculum (e.g. The Foundation Stage in Wales, 3-7 year olds; the Early Years Foundation Stage in England, 0-5 year olds; The Foundation Stage in the Northern Ireland Curriculum, 4-6 year olds). Since the introduction of the Enriched Curriculum, all four nations of the UK have continued to review and shape their Primary Curriculum to compliment and extend the Early Years Curriculum.

Through the new play-based curriculum entitled ‘The Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage’ (DE, 2012a), the UK government has sought to offer continuity of learning between the preschool and primary curriculum. This approach was extended by the government in Scotland, which prepared schools during the academic year of 2008-9 for the delivery of a curriculum for all children and young people starting in 2010-11. ‘Curriculum for excellence’ aims to minimise discontinuity in curricular practices and offer all children aged from 3 to 18 a seamless educational experience through the delivery of one curriculum based on four capacities: successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors. The programme will continue until 2016, when new qualifications will be implemented.

Similar policy initiatives inform Early Years practice in Ireland. Margetts and Kienig (2013), identify ‘Síolta: National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education’ (2006) and ‘Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework’ (2009) as the policy documents most closely associated with the transition to primary school in Ireland. Aistear (the Irish word for ‘journey’) was modelled on the New Zealand Curriculum of Te Whariki (Churchill Dower, Sandbrook and Fort 2013) and developed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA, 2009). It was introduced to address the educational needs of all children from birth to six years of age. This age-span was purposively selected to include children in their first two years of primary school, as at least half of the Ireland’s four year olds and most five year olds are in primary school, even though having a compulsory school starting age of 6 (O’Connor

and Angus 2012). The Framework has both implicit and explicit links with the PSC (1999) (for a review, see NCCA 2009). With its focus on children from birth to six years, Aistear can support continuity and progression in children's learning. Although it does not specifically address the transition process, a vignette is included in the Building Partnerships section of the document, (Learning experience 13: Transitions, p. 20) to provoke practitioner thinking about the transition process for a child with special needs.

Reflection: How can I improve how I work with parents of children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) to involve them more in their children's learning and development? (Learning experience 13: Transitions, p. 20)

In contrast, transitions are addressed in Standard 13 of Síolta. This document highlights the importance of certain practices such as: good communication between settings, the collection and sharing of information before a child starts school, and a review and update of transition policies, which should translate into everyday practice. It is relevant to notice that, however, the document does not address the transition of children with special needs.

Given the considerable progress made in both the North and South of Ireland to enhance the child's Early Years experience and develop continuity of learning, and the wealth of research undertaken to explore almost every facet of the transition process, it is disappointing to note the paucity and dearth of literature addressing the transition of children with special needs to primary school. On this premise, this study seeks to make a contribution to the body of knowledge described in this chapter by exploring school transitions practices in Ireland.

Chapter 3

Implementing Policy & Practice

This chapter focuses on the development of policy and provision for young children with SEN in the North and South of Ireland.

Historically

The inclusion of children with special needs in mainstream education is relatively new. Although special schools began to emerge in the 15th Century and continued throughout the twentieth century, they were mainly for individuals with sensory impairments (Kisanji, 1999). The education provided in these trade schools was practical rather than academic and children with more severe forms of SEN were generally excluded (Wilson, 2003). It was typically assumed that the inclusion of children with a SEN would ‘disrupt’ the education of other pupils (Nutbrown & Clough, 2006, p. 29). So widespread was this belief that in 1893 the Massachusetts Supreme Court reinforced it by upholding the exclusion of a ‘mentally retarded’ child from the public school system (*Watson v. City of Cambridge, Mass. 1893*). In 1919 the Wisconsin Supreme Court extended the exclusion of disabled students to a child suffering from a particular type of paralysis (*State ex rel Beattie v. Bd. of Educ., 1919*).

Paralleling the growth of compulsory education for all children, in the twentieth century the number of special school significantly increased. The Education Act 1944 established children's right to education based on their age, aptitude and ability. Eleven categories of ‘*handicap*’ were described, including *educationally subnormal*, *delicate* and *blind*. At that time, the general philosophy was that the child should fit the school rather than the school fit the child. Calls for reform led to the establishment of the Warnock committee in 1974 and the publication of the seminal Warnock report in 1978.

For more than two decades, educational reforms introduced to enact the recommendations of the Warnock report continued to shape and inform the educational experiences of children in mainstream schools. Several of the key initiatives that changed the

educational landscape for children with a SEN in the North and South of Ireland are discussed in the following section.

Legislation

A cursory review of legislative policy concerning inclusive education in the North and South of Ireland reveals parallels between the jurisdictions, with comparable policies enacted in both during a roughly similar time frame.

Reflecting provision in England and Wales, the publication of the Warnock Report (1978) marked a watershed in the education of children with special needs in the UK and Northern Ireland. The report called for the removal of derogatory terms such as *retarded* in favour of the broader term *special needs*. According to Warnock, the needs of the majority of children with a SEN could be met in mainstream schools. She estimated that the needs of a smaller population of approximately 2% would be catered for in special schools. The Education Act of 1981 and 1993 were introduced to enact the recommendations of the Warnock Report. Rather than segregate children with SEN into special schools, local authorities were now tasked with identifying the child's individual learning needs and with supporting the school in making the necessary alterations to meet their needs (O'Connor, Hansson & Keating, 2012). By 1986, responsibility for children with SEN had moved from the Department of Health and Social Services to Education (The Northern Ireland Education and Libraries Order, 1986).

The Education Reform Act of 1988 had a more direct impact upon individuals. It established, amongst other things, a National Curriculum for England, Wales and Northern Ireland (1989) which offered parents the choice of schooling, mainstream or special school, for their child and gave children with SENs access to the same curriculum as their typically developing peers. Rights further reinforced by the introduction of a wide range of policies at national and international level including the Education (NI) Order (1996) and Special Educational Need and the Disability Order (SENDO) 2005, the Disability Discrimination Order 2006, the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (2009), the Equality Act (NI) (2010) and the green paper on Special Education and Disability (2012). As can be seen in Table 1, legislation continues to change to meet international demands for equality of opportunity driven, in large part, by the UNCRC which upholds the rights of all children with a

disability to receive an education which encourages the fullest possible social integration and individual development. It also recognises the European Unions role in the protection of the rights of the child in Articles 21 and 24 and offers a legal base to combat discrimination in Article 19.

Table 1. Policy & legislation in the North and South of Ireland.

North	South
The Northern Ireland Education and Libraries Order (1986)	National Disability Authority Act (1999)
Disabled Persons (NI) Act (1989)	Education for a Changing World: Green Paper on Education (1992)
UN Convention on the Rights of The Child (UNCRC) (1991)	UN Convention on the Rights of The Child (UNCRC) (1992)
Removing Barriers to Achievement (1994)	
Disability Discrimination Act (DDA)(1995)	The Report of the Special Education Review Committee (SERC) (1993).
Children (NI) Order (1995)	
The Education (NI) Order (1996)	Charting our Education Future: White Paper on Education (1995)
The Green Paper, Excellence for All Children. Meeting Special Educational Needs (DfEE, 1997)	A Strategy for Equality: Report of the Commission on the Status of People with Disabilities (1996).
Northern Ireland Act (1998)	Education Act (1998)
Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs (COP, DENI, 1998)	National Disability Authority Act (1999)
Equality Act (NI) (2000)	Ready to Learn: White Paper on Early Childhood Education (1999)
Special Educational Need and the Disability Order (SENDO) 2005	New Deal A Plan for Educational Opportunity (Dec. 1999)
Disability Discrimination Order 2006	Equal Status Act 2000
UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD)(2009)	Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (EPSEN Act) (2004)
Equality Act (NI) (2010)	Disability Act (2005)
The green paper on Special Education and Disability (2012)	Disability Act (NDA, 2011)
Education, Health and Care Plan (in process, 2014)	Delivery for Students with Special Educational Needs: A better and more equitable way. An NSE Working Group report (2014)

International policies including the seminal Salamanca Statement on Special Needs Education UNESCO (1994), the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN) (1990), the Council of Europe (CE) Political Declaration (2003) and Action Plan (2006) and the UN International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) have similarly influenced the development of inclusive educational practices in the South of Ireland (Winter & O’Rawe, 2010). At national level, inclusive education in the South was largely informed by the philosophy of the Special Education Review Committee (SERC) (Government of Ireland, 1993, p. 22), which

favours ‘as much integration as is appropriate and feasible with as little segregation as is necessary’ (Travers et al., 2010, p. 1) and by the introduction of the Education Act (1998), the Education (Welfare) Act (2000), the Equal Status Act (2000-2004) and the Disability Act (2005). The *SERC Report* (1993) incorporated a broad spectrum of difficulties and disabilities within the remit of special needs and advocated the full and appropriate inclusion of these pupils in mainstream educational settings. Specifically, it recommended a continuum of educational support to facilitate:

- full-time placement in mainstream classrooms;
- part- or full-time placement in special classes or special schools;
- full-time placement in residential special schools;
- part-time placement in special centres or schools.

The Education Act (1998) was more broadly directed towards education, it also referred to provision for pupils with SEN. Specifically, the Act affirmed the constitutional rights of these individuals to access inclusive education and established the supports needed to fulfil this objective. These included systems of resource teachers (RTs), and full- and part-time Special Needs Assistants for all pupils with SEN in mainstream education. In addition, the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) was established by the Department of Education and Science (DEScience) to provide relevant educational psychology services (Barnes-Holmes et al., 2013, p.7-8). These policies culminated in the development of the EPSEN Act (2004) which is credited with changing the educational landscape for pupils with SEN (Griffin & Shefflin, 2007).

Critics have argued that the EPSEN Act (2004) is systems rather than child-centred and a soft option seriously weakened by the inclusion of the proviso ‘*wherever possible*’ (O’Connor et al., 2012; Winter & O’Rawe, 2010, p. 11). Although concern was raised with the broad description of the allocation of resources in EPSEN, the introduction of the National Council for Special Education and expansion of Psychology services is thought to offer increased special needs support (O’Connor et al.2012). Policy in the North has also been subject to criticism; on the grounds that it is overly bureaucratic with procedures designed by professionals for professionals (Kearns & Shevlin, 2006). The former point is acknowledged in the Ministerial response to the review of SEN in Northern Ireland (DE, 2012b). The Minister for Education notes

that, ‘one of the fundamental aims of the review is to reduce bureaucracy so that teachers are better able to focus on teaching and learning (p.6).’

Inclusive education

Provision for children with SENs has also been the subject of continued criticism at the level of theory, policy and practice in education. Terzi (2010), for example, questions the need to identify children as different and queries the methods of assessment employed to segregate children by ability for the purposes of education. Similar concerns have been raised by Norwich (1993, 1996, 2010) with regards to the wording (SEN) used to describe children’s differences and by Barton (2003), who argues that SEN is a derogatory term based on a deficit model. Confusion is also thought to surround the concept of needs and to undermine the ideal of inclusion (Warnock, 2005). Warnock (2005), the original author of the Warnock report (1978), explains how this has led to a situation where children with very different needs are classified as though they were the same (Warnock, 2005). Moreover, Warnock describes the practice of including all children together under ‘one roof,’ as the most ‘disastrous legacy’ of inclusive education. She argues that inclusive practices, such as special classes and units, can be extremely divisive and exclude children from a shared learning experience (p. 19 & 32).

To an extent, support for the views expressed by Warnock comes from the definition of an inclusive school included in the Salamanca Framework for Action:

‘The fundamental principle of the inclusive school is that all children should learn together, wherever possible, regardless of any difficulties or differences they may have. Inclusive schools must recognise and respond to the diverse needs of their students, accommodating both different styles and rates of learning and ensuring quality education to all through appropriate curricula, organizational arrangements, teaching strategies, resource use and partnerships with their communities. There should be a continuum of support and services to match the continuum of special needs encountered in every school’. (Salamanca Framework for Action, 1994).

A more succinct definition of inclusion was offered by the OECD (2011), which described an inclusive school system as *one which does not segregate pupils by ability but distributes its most experienced teachers evenly throughout the school*. According to Florin (2013), the inclusion discourse is confounded by the differing interpretations each country brings to the term inclusion, the assessment of inclusion and to methods of data collection with regards to school inclusion. To facilitate comparison, Florin argues in favour of a common language with an agreed definition of inclusion and with clearly articulated categories of disability. Richler (2013), however, takes issue with the direction of the debate and contends that discussions of inclusive education automatically imply differences. From a rights based perspective, she argues the discussion must shift from the *what* and the *why* discourse to consider *how* inclusion can be achieved (Richler, 2013, p.7).

Statistical patterns of inclusion

As the legislation included in Table 1 attests, both the North and South of Ireland have progressed their inclusive education agenda to facilitate the high proportion of children (6% respectively) born each year with a disability in each jurisdiction and the number of children with a SEN identified in later childhood. In the North, between 2006 and 2014, statistics show a small but steady increment in the number of children with SEN attending a pre-school setting from 1656 to 2554. A similar trend is reported in the numbers entering the Foundation Stage in mainstream schools. No difference is, however, reported in the percentage of children starting school with a statement of education, which remains disproportionately low at 4%. The pattern is reversed in the South, where the number of 4 and 5 year old children with SEN entering mainstream national schools fell from 1318 in 2007 to 619 in 2013. The reason for this drop in numbers from 2007 to 2013 is attributed by the DES to a change in statistical calculations, as indicated below.

'The withdrawal of the Resource Teacher for Travellers in 2011 resulted in a change in the way pupils who were members of the Travelling community are accounted in the annual Census of Primary Schools. This has led to a once-off discontinuity in the count of pupils in mainstream classes in mainstream schools, and that of pupils with special needs in mainstream schools' (DES Census of Primary Schools, 2011)

Conversely, there was a small but notable increase in the number of children entering special national schools during the same period from 362 in 2007 to 581 in 2013. As data for the South does not reflect the severity of the child's SEN, it is not clear whether this differential is made on the grounds of 'appropriate to their needs,' parental preference or to other reasons (Government of Ireland, 1999: 29).

As indicated in the introduction, the statistical pattern reported for schools in the North suggests that older children are significantly more likely to have a statement of educational need than younger children (see Appendix 6). It seems likely that this trend is mirrored in the South for several reasons. First, children develop at different rates and an SEN may not manifest until a child has begun their statutory education. For example, although known predictors of dyslexia include heritability and language delay (McBride-Chang et al., 2011), these factors are not sufficient to identify a child who is likely to experience reading difficulties. Second, parents may not disclose their concerns about their child's progress for fear that they might be labelled (Barnett, Clements, Kaplan-Estrin & Fialka, 2003; Jones, 2003). Third, adults interpret special needs quite differently (Sammons et al. 2003), Fourth, the statementing can be long and overly bureaucratic (Warnock, 2010; DE, 2012b).

Processes

There is considerable variation in the policy documents published on school transitions within and between jurisdictions. To support the introduction of the curriculum for excellence, Scotland (Learning & Teaching, 2010), recently reviewed its transition policy. To ensure continuity in the child's early learning experiences, it recommends the transfer of information from preschool to school in an agreed learning vehicle such as *a learning story, e-profile or personal profile* (p. 9). Primary 1 teachers are advised to continue to record the child's development in four capacities with the focus on literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing across the first term at school. It is also proposed that schools appoint a dedicated transitions co-ordinator in every preschool and primary school to ensure the process is effectively managed. The document does not, however, offer advice about children with SEN.

The Special Educational Needs Code of Practice (DfES2001) clearly detailed the responsibility of schools to promote consistency of approach to meet the needs of children with SEN. By 2006, however, a House of Commons report on special needs noted serious

failures within the statementing process including: a lack of joined up services linking health and education, parents lack confidence in the system and too many children being turned away from mainstream when that provision could adequately meet their educational needs. The forthcoming review of SEN in NI seeks to address these issues (DE, 2012b). It is proposed that the new regulations will reduce the time frame for a statement from 26 to 20 weeks and refine the five stage process replacing it with a 2 level structure. Under the new system a child can only reach level 2 if the child's school cannot provide for their SEN. The education board will then have a duty to assess the needs of the child and make provision for them and put in place a Coordinated Support Plan (CSP).

The school will also have a duty to write a Personal Learning Plan (*PLP which was called an Individual Education Plan IEP*) for the children they identify with special needs which will set out what the child's needs are and what extra help the child needs and what help the provision they make will produce for the child. It seems likely that the role of the special needs coordinator in the school will be extended to include some basic psychological testing to support their decision. They will also have to determine the level and nature of support provided to assist the child. This information will be included in a written profile for transfer to the child's primary school.

Parents will have a right of complaint under the new system which begins at school level, if a parent remains dissatisfied with a decision then they must approach the board of governors. The next step involves the parent contacting the Dispute Avoidance and Resolution Service (DARS) if agreement is not reached at the end of this stage then the parents can appeal to the special educational needs and disability Tribunal.

Perusal of the information on school transitions provided by each of the five Education & Library Boards in the North revealed considerable variation. On the one hand the Belfast Education & Library Board includes a Transition pack for parents and practitioners to support the transition process at all levels of a child's education. On the other, two boards focus on the transition of pupils from primary to post primary school and a further two fail to include any information on the subject.

From a recent review of the transition process in the South, O'Kane and Hayes (2013) concluded that there was a need for continuity across sectors but that Ireland does not have a national policy on transitions. The authors devised and piloted the *Child Snapshot [a tool for the*

transfer of information on the child from preschool to primary school] which was well received by schools. Noting that fiscal constraints may impact the development of this tool, the authors recommend that it be rolled out across schools to enhance communication between schools and to support pupil transfer from preschool to primary school.

In summary: the development of policy to shape inclusive education continues in both jurisdictions. Informed by demands for equality of access to education, the UNCRC and Salamanca Statement on special needs Education (1994) continues to influence national policy and practice. Increasing numbers of pupils with a SEN in the North and South are in mainstream schools. Evidence suggests that older pupils are significantly more likely to have a statement of educational need than younger children. Yet it is widely acknowledged that early intervention is the key to achievement and social and emotional adjustment (Warnock, 2010; DE, 2006, 2012).

In summary, special education is a relatively new concept. Informed by international calls for equality of opportunity and national policy which identifies the benefits of mainstream education, the last twenty-five years have witnessed a significant shift away from segregated education to a more inclusive approach in both jurisdictions. There is no singly agreed definition of the terms inclusion and special needs which is accepted by all. As Richler (2013) notes, continued discussion about the interpretation of these terms fails to progress the equality agenda. Considered within the Bio-ecological model, it becomes clear that that forces operating within the child's macrosystem have a significant impact on their educational experiences. Similarly influences within the child's microsystem including their interactions with the school, their teacher and their peers can significantly affect the child's self-image, enjoyment of school and later academic success. There remains, however, some variation in the practices operated within and between jurisdictions. To gain greater insight into school practices, the present study aims to explore the transition process employed by schools in the North and South to support young children with SEN as they start their formal education.

Chapter 4

Methods Section

To identify the nature and effectiveness of the practices employed by schools to support the transition of young children with special needs from preschool to primary school in both the Republic of Ireland (South) and Northern Ireland (North), a mixed method (qualitative and quantitative) multi-stage approach was employed. This chapter reports the methods and procedures employed at stage 1, 2 and 3 of the project.

Stage 1: This stage involved a desk top review of government policies and educational practices in both jurisdictions to determine the official policy on:

- the inclusion of young children in mainstream education in both jurisdictions;
- the management of education transitions;
- the involvement of children, parents and multi-agency support agencies in the transition process.

Stage 2: Informed by the literature review, a survey was designed to examine transition practices at school and classroom level (a copy of the questionnaire survey is included in Appendix 2). The questionnaire was piloted with PGCE Early Years students and Masters in Education students completing their degree at Stranmillis University College. Teachers with specialist knowledge of special needs and teaching practice in the South also reviewed the survey. Comments from these groups were employed to inform the final version of the questionnaire survey.

Questions focused on the following key areas:

- the school transition policy;
- the management of the transition process for children with special needs at school level;
- the management of the transition process at classroom level;
- the activities and strategies employed to support the child's transition to mainstream school;
- factors that impede a child's successful transition;
- the involvement of children, parents and multi-agency support groups in the transition process.

Ethics

In accordance with the ethical guidelines published by the British Educational Research Association (2011), every effort was made to ensure the ethical rigour of the project. Names and identifiers have been removed prior to analysis and the procedures involved at every stage of the project subject to the scrutiny of the Stranmillis University College Research & Ethics Committee.

Survey Distribution

Originally it was proposed to survey schools in the North Eastern Education and Library Board, Dublin and Cork. An exploratory study of schools in each region by area (rural, semi-rural, urban) and size (small, medium, large) suggested this was not an appropriate match. Further examination of schools in both jurisdictions indicated that the demographic profile of schools in the greater Belfast (BELB) area and the Western Education and Library Board (WELB) were aligned with schools in the greater Dublin area. The final selection was made using information available from the Department of Education & Skills 2011/2012 list of Dublin schools (n=434) and from the BELB (n=110) and WELB (n=179) school lists. A purposive sampling approach was undertaken to ensure schools in the North and the South were matched according to school size, location and social demographics (socially advantaged/socially disadvantaged areas). The initial survey was posted to a large number of schools (n=150) in North and in the greater Dublin area (n=150). Each school received a pack containing a cover letter (see Appendix 1), a survey for the special needs coordinator (SENCO)/ key learning support (KLS) teacher to complete, a survey for the primary 1/junior infant teacher and a flyer indicating that on completion and return of the survey the school was eligible for entry to a draw. The prize was £50 for the winner in North and 60 euro in the South (see Appendix 4 and 5).

Response rate: According to O’Kane (2007), the best time of year to administer a survey examining school transition practices is between April and May when teachers are preparing for their new school intake. Based on this recommendation the initial survey was posted in early May of 2013. The response to this mailing was poor and yielded some 90 surveys. To increase the response rate follow-up measures were undertaken. The survey was distributed to 100 schools in each jurisdiction in June 2013. Again the response was disappointing. A third distribution of the

survey was frustrated by the fact that, between June and September schools in the North are closed for the summer holidays. To improve the response rate, contact was made with the following groups of stakeholders involved in the delivery of special needs training in Stranmillis University College (n=50) and Maynooth (n=50) in the last week of August 2013 and teachers attending a professional development conference in Dublin in June 2013.

In total, 128 (28%) surveys were returned. Three incomplete surveys were eliminated prior to analysis. Of the 125 surveys subject to inferential and descriptive analysis, 52% (n=65) were from the North and 48% (n=60) from the South.

Stage 3: To gain a deeper insight into the processes involved in school transitions an opportunity sample of schools (n=6) in each region were approached with a view to engaging year 1/junior infant teachers and special education needs coordinators/ key learning support/ resource teachers (KLS) in small group interviews. Two focus group discussions were conducted in the South with eight interviewees. In the North, telephone interviews were conducted with four SENCOs and four primary one teachers in rural and urban schools. Questions were semi-structured to encourage a sharing of ideas (see Appendix 3). Each discussion lasted between 35 and 70 minutes and was recorded and transcribed for analysis using the thematic approach. According to Howitt and Cramer (2008), thematic analysis is one of the most common approaches employed in qualitative data analysis. Time efficient, thematic analysis has the potential to yield a deep understanding of key findings.

Findings from both the qualitative and quantitative dimensions of the study are reported in the Results Chapter.

CHAPTER 5

RESULTS & Findings

This chapter reports the results of the questionnaire survey and practitioner interviews. Findings were subject to descriptive and, where appropriate, inferential analysis using Pearson's Chi-Square Test of Association, T-test and Analysis of Variance. The results are reported at both aggregate and regional levels, in order to highlight similarities and differences in the responses received.

Questionnaire survey

Despite the repeated efforts undertaken by the team (outlined in the Methodology Chapter) to increase the response rate, it remained disappointingly low. In total, 128 (28%) questionnaires were completed and returned for analysis. Acknowledging there is no ideal standard for an acceptable response (Cummins et al., 2001), three incomplete surveys were excluded prior to analysis. The remaining 125 were subject to quantitative analysis using a range of statistical methods, which will be described in the sections below. Of the 125 surveys subject to analysis, 52% (n=65) were from Northern Ireland (NI) and 48% (n=60) from the Republic of Ireland (RoI).

Respondent profile

Age Profile

An examination of the age profile of the respondent groups using a Pearson Chi-square test of association showed a modest but significant difference ($\chi^2 = 9.291$, $df=125$, $p < 0.05$) between respondents of the North and South of Ireland. More specifically, the pattern depicted in Table 1 suggests that the respondents in the North tended to be older than their Southern counterparts.

Table 1: Respondent age profile by jurisdiction (in frequency values)

Age Profile	29-	30-39	40-49	50+
North	5	17	25	18
South	14	21	14	11
Total	19	38	39	29

Gender, position in school and special needs training

Eight respondents (6%) were male (5 from North and 3 from the South), and an almost equal number in the North and South female. There were 117 (94%) female participants in total with 60 (51%) from the North and 57 (49%) from the South. The majority of responses were from class teachers (44%, n=55), with equal numbers from school principals (28%, n=35) and SENCOs/Learning Support teachers (28%, n=35). T-test results showed no significant trends in position by region. Given the age profile reported in Table 1, it was unsurprising to note that teachers in the North have been teaching for a greater number of years and in their current post longer than their Southern counterparts. These differences were statistically significant ($t_{(123)}=2.078$, $p<0.05$ and $t_{(122)}=2.488$, $p<0.05$ respectively), as illustrated by Table 2 below:

Table 2. Post currently held within the school (% and frequency values)

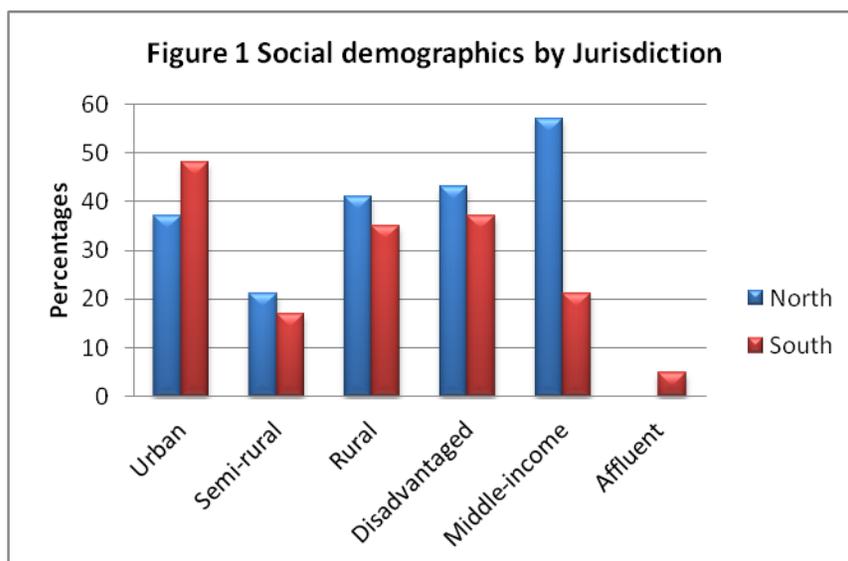
Region	Total Respondents	Principals	Class Teachers	Special Needs Coordinator/ Learning Support Teacher	Years Teaching	Years in Current setting
North	65 (52%)	31% (n=20)	40% (n=26)	29% (n=19)	2-38 (mean 19)	1-38 (mean 13)
South	60 (48%)	25% (n=15)	48% (n=29)	27% (n=16)	1-35 (mean 11)	1-34 (mean 9)

When asked about specific training in the area of SEN, 80% (n=52) in the North and 69% (n=41) in the South indicated they had some form of training. Annotated comments to this section of the survey indicated that a range of courses were undertaken, from a master's degree in special needs through to continuing professional development courses in SEN. A number of respondents both in the North (20%, n=13) and South (32%, n=19) said that they have no training in this field. Qualifications and training courses attended by respondents by both participant groups include:

- MSc in Special Needs;
- Diploma in Special Needs;
- Dyslexia awareness training;
- Dyspraxia awareness training;
- Autism awareness training;
- Attention deficit disorder awareness training;
- continuing professional development courses.

Location and catchment area of schools

Nearly equal numbers of responses were received from practitioners working in urban (42%, n=53) and rural areas (38%, n=48), with under 20% (n=24) located in semi-urban areas. Whereas slightly more than a half (58%, n=73) reported their location as being in a middle-class catchment area, a substantial number are located in disadvantaged areas (39%, n=49), with few situated in areas of affluence (2%, n=3). Figure 1 reveals a similar profile for schools in both Northern and Southern jurisdictions. This was confirmed by a Chi-square test of association, which showed no significant differences in the location and catchment areas of schools reported by respondents in the North and South ($p>0.05$ in both cases).



In this sample, school size ranged from 7 to 790, with a mean of 205, while larger pupil numbers were reported for schools located in the North (range 25-750, mean 224) than in the South (range 7-465, mean 187).

Transition Policy Documents

Government policy documents

The majority of respondents in the South (77%, n=46) and North (68%, n=44) said that they were unaware of a government policy on the transition of children with special needs from preschool to school. Of the 32% (n=21) in the North who said ‘Yes’ to this question, only a few (9%, n=4) named a policy document. Interestingly, each identified a different policy document including the

Northern Ireland Equality Special Needs Act (n=1), SENDO (n=1) the Early Years 0-6 Strategy (n=1) and the Education and Library Board transition policies (n=1). Worthy of mention, neither the Northern Ireland Equality Special Needs Act (2011) nor SENDO make reference to the transition stage, whereas the Early Years 0-6 Strategy (2010) offers detail on the young child's transition to school. The Belfast Education and Library Board is the only government body to hold a repository of resource materials for parents and practitioners on the transition process.

Mirroring the pattern of responses provided by teachers in the North, only 9% (n=5) of teachers in the South who said that they were aware of this government policy (23%, n=14) were able to provide a name. Four identified the EPSEN Act (2004) and another named the 'Special Educational Needs Act DES (2003)' which is most likely the EPSEN Act. While this document highlights the need for provision to be made available, in order to support the transition of children with special needs from preschool to primary school, this point is encapsulated within a single paragraph (Government of Ireland, 2004).

External policy documents

In parallel with their lack of knowledge of government policies, almost two thirds of the practitioners in both jurisdictions (North=63%, n=41) and (South=68%, n=40) were unaware of any transitions guidelines produced by other agencies. The 28% (n=18) in the North and 30% (n=18) in the South who indicated they were aware of other agencies' documentation named a variety of agencies and charities. Respondents from the North identified the local education and library board (n=8), the Autism Society (n=3), health boards (n=3) and multi-disciplinary teams (n=2). Respondents in the South named Aistear (n=4), HSE (n=4), the Fiesta programme (n=1), Cork City Partnership Happy Talk (n=1), SESS (n=1), the Down Syndrome Association (n=1) and the Dublin Dockland's Project (n=1) as sources of transition guidelines.

School policy documents

Developing the theme of policy documents, this section asked respondents to indicate if their school has a SEN policy, in the form of an Early Years transition document, and/or a transition document for children with SEN, and if the school has a member of staff with responsibility for transitions. Results presented in Table 4 show that the majority of schools do have a specific SEN policy (91%, n=59 in the North and 85%, n=51 in the South). According to the respondents, half

(55%) of the schools in the North and 40% of schools in the South have an Early Years transition policy. Fewer schools in the North (38%), and slightly more in the South (49%), have a specific policy for the transition of children with SEN. Conversely, a higher percentage of schools in the North (52%) than in the South (38%) task a specific member of staff with transition-related responsibilities.

Pearson Chi-square results showed a significant difference for SEN ($X^2= 5.028$, $df1$, $p< 0.03$) and Early Years transition documentation ($X^2=4.505$, $df1$, $p<.0.04$). This suggests that schools in the North are more likely to have these policy documents than schools in South.

Table 4. School policy documents

Policy Document	North %	South %
	YES	YES
SEN	91	85
Early Years transition	55	40
Transitions for Children with SEN	38	49
Staff responsible for transitions	52	38

School Practice

Question 14 sought views on school policies and practices, and comprised eight subsections with responses given on a 5 point oppositional scale (1= never; 5 = always). Given that no significant difference was noted in the responses given to ‘never’ and ‘almost never’ categories and ‘almost always’ and ‘always’, for reporting purposes, the five point scale was collapsed into a three point scale (never, sometimes, always). Results in Table 5 show differences by jurisdiction in the transition practices typically used by schools. For example, a significantly higher percentage of schools in the North reported receiving each child’s preschool records (88%) and other relevant information from preschool services (71%), in addition to visiting the child’s preschool (61%) and communicating with preschool staff (84%), in comparison with schools in the South (36%, 48%, 26% and 32% respectively). Conversely, a higher proportion of practitioners in the South reported contacting the child’s parents by phone (71%) than in the North (35%). As seen in Table 5, whilst it is rare for practitioners in either jurisdiction to visit the child’s home, the vast majority always meets the parents at school and a large proportion have contact with outside agencies.

The last two columns of the table indicate that significant differences were calculated for five of the eight subsections. The non-statistically significant items included: contacting parents by phone, home visits and meeting parents at school.

Table 5. Transition policies and practices employed by schools (in percentages)

Transition Practices	Never %		Sometimes %		Always %		Ch-Square Value	SIG value
Question	North/South		North/South		North/South		X²	P Value
<i>Receive the child's records from preschool</i>	---	30	11	29	88	36	40.289	.0001
<i>Receive other relevant information from the pres service</i>	2	29	23	19	71	48	20.390	.0001
<i>Visit the child's previous setting</i>	10	51	27	19	61	26	33.931	.0001
<i>Communicate with staff of child's pre-school setting</i>	3	19	11	45	84	32	33.839	.0001
<i>Phone the child's parents</i>	23	6	37	19	35	71	7.261	.123
<i>Visit to the child's home</i>	89	81	3	13	4	3	2.758	.599
<i>Meet with parents at school</i>	6	6	---	---	93	91	1.159	.763
<i>Have contact with outside agencies</i>	2	5	37	29	60	62	17.987	.001

NB: Where respondents failed to answer a question, percentages do not total 100%

Transition practices

To gain further insight into the practices employed by schools to support the transition of children with SEN, four open ended questions were included in this aspect of the survey. Though generally well answered, a number of respondents (n=36, 29%) elected to leave some aspects of the survey blank or responded 'yes,' 'all' or 'no' without expansion. With the exception of 'further training', respondents in the North were more likely to offer an annotated response to these questions than their counterparts in the South. The responses given by the 84% (n=105) who replied to question 15 were aggregated and outlined below.

Q. 15 *'briefly outline any other activities the school undertakes to involve the family, pre-service or outside agencies in the transition process.'*

Frequently mentioned responses included:

- parent meets the teacher (43%, n=45);
- induction day, parent and child visits the school (38%, n=40);
- welcome pack of information about the school (24%, n=25);
- joint activities with preschool setting, with parents invited (14%, n=15);
- phased start to school (11%, n=12).

Baseline assessment was mentioned by a small number of teachers in the North (6%, n=6), with a few teachers in the North (3%, n=3) and South (5%, n=5) indicating that, prior to their start to school, they observed children in their preschool setting to gain insight into their needs.

Other strategies mentioned by one or two respondents included home visits, home-community liaison, invitations to sports day and school activities, multiagency meetings, and parent workshops on introducing children to high frequency words.

A significant difference was observed in the number of responses given by jurisdiction to question 16, which sought information on the ‘transition practices to support children with a SEN who have not attended a pre-school setting.’ Although a significantly higher proportion of respondents in the North answered this question ($\chi^2=14.767$, $df=1$, $p<0.001$), half of that group (50%, n=32) pointed out that they have ‘*never taught a child without a preschool experience*’. This may be attributed to the fact that the Pre-School Education Expansion Programme introduced in the North in 1997/1998 offered all preschool children the opportunity to enjoy a free preschool year before their start to school. Statistics indicate that, within two years, the number of children attending preschool had risen from 45% to 99% (Sutherland, 2006). Consequently, it would be rare for a practitioner in the North with less than 16 years teaching experience to encounter a child with no preschool attendance. In contrast, the free preschool year was introduced into the South in 2009/2010, under the Early Childhood Care and Education scheme. Although Early Childcare Ireland (2012) estimated the uptake of free preschool places had increased to almost 100% within a two year period, many rural families have limited preschool access (see McGettigan & Gray, 2012). Given the pattern of provision and later school starting age in the South, it seems probable that a higher percentage of practitioners in that jurisdiction will work with children who have no preschool experience than their Northern counterparts.

In terms of their practice, practitioners in the North said they would contact agencies

working with the child and arrange meetings with parents and service providers. In contrast, Southern practitioners focused on the family as a primary source of information. They also noted that parents are encouraged to meet the teacher at open days, to submit any details about the child's special circumstances and, in a few instances (5%, n=5), may have a tour of the school to familiarise the child with the layout of the classroom, school and play areas. Similarly, parent teacher communication was considered by focus group participants in the South to be a crucial factor to successful transition for children with SEN. Liaising with parents was thought to be an important step to establish if the child had been assessed and to source any supporting documentation and advice.

[T]he first thing you'd have to do is ascertain if the child has had any sort of assessment, if they'd been referred to OTs or Ed Psyches or GPs, or whatever, if they have any documentation that's going to help you, or advice from other professionals that may help you in the classroom; how the parents deal with the problem at home or how they cater for the child (Linda, South)

A small number of teachers (9%, n=5) in the North with experience of children with long term illnesses indicated that they use a transition picture book to familiarise the child with the teachers, classroom assistants, the classroom and classroom resources prior to their start to school. Medical training for staff was also mentioned (5%, n=3), to familiarise staff with the child's medical condition. This last point was discussed at length by an interviewee (North) who said:

'It's a coincidence that we're talking about this today. I have a child with severe epilepsy starting in September. She's had numerous hospital stays and has been quite poorly. Really she's the only child we've had that didn't attend preschool. We've already made an approach to the board to sort out [epilepsy] training. The teacher and classroom assistant will both attend but we would like another teacher to ensure we have a good knowledge of what to do. So that's a main strategy here. Mum and child have both been in to meet the teachers and we invited them to sports day and we always have a wee fun day near the end of term. We have a film in the hall and the children get popcorn and drinks. So they came to that. But we're open to any suggestions from the family.'

Question 18 sought views on the importance of developing school transition strategies for young children with a SEN. The majority (North n=63, 97%; South n=53, 89%) described it as very important/important. However, a few respondents in the South described it as not very/not at all important (7% n=4). No statistical difference was noted in the responses to this question ($X^2=6.668$, df3 $p>0.05$).

Hallmarks of an effective transition for young children with SEN were consistent across groups, with practitioners in the North (51%, n=31) and in the South (55%, n=27) identifying communication with parents, preschool and external agencies as prerequisites to good practice. In addition, the second most popular indicator for practitioners in the North (21%, n=12) and South (16%, n=8) was familiarity with the setting prior to the child's start to school. This point was extended by a few (n=2) practitioners in the North and one in the South, who mentioned that school picture books are sent to the child's home prior to their start to school. The aim of these social stories or resource books, which include pictures of the school, classroom, school principal, teachers and classroom assistants, is to get the child acquainted with their new setting. Another hallmark noted by practitioners in both the North (11%, n=6) and the South (10%, n=5) was that the child should feel happy, comfortable and confident in their start to school. No mention was made, however, as to how this might be achieved. Similarities were also noted in the point raised by respondents in the North (10%, n=5) and South (7%, n=4), who reported that it was essential to have the right resources in place prior to the child's start to school. Other factors mentioned by respondents in the North included: having a diagnosis and assessment results to meet the child's specific needs (10%, n=5), and ensuring a child feels safe (3%, n=2). A few practitioners in the South pointed out that hallmarks of good practice include responding to the individual needs of the child (3%, n=2), having agreed policies in place (3%, n=2) and offering school visits ahead of the child's start to school (3%, n=2).

Factors that affect the transition process

Question 20 comprised eleven practices that might impact on the transition process. Respondents were invited to rate them using a five point oppositional scale (Very important – Not at All Important). In the final section of this question, respondents were invited to include any factors used by their school to enhance the transition process. Respondents were subsequently asked to identify the factors which they believed were of greatest importance. Since no significant

difference was found in the percentage of responses that indicated ‘very important’ and ‘important’, or ‘not very important’ and ‘not at all important’, these categories were collapsed into a three point scale for reporting purposes. The results presented in Table 6 show considerable overlap in the responses given by practitioners in the North and South. The majority of respondents in both the North and South identified each of the factors listed as very important to the transition process. When asked to identify ‘other factors’ that they thought might be of greatest importance, few completed this section (n=7, 6%).

Table 6. Factors affecting the transition process (% , frequencies in brackets).

Transition Practices	Very important		Somewhat important		Not at all important	
	North	South	North	South	North	South
<i>Developing child specific strategies</i>	98(62)	93(55)	1(2)	7(4)	---	---
<i>Evaluating the child's progress</i>	98(62)	100	1(2)	---	---	---
<i>Exchanging information with family</i>	98(62)	100	1(2)	---	---	---
<i>Exchanging information with pre-school</i>	98 (62)	94 (56)	1(2)	3(2)	---	2(1)
<i>Receiving relevant training</i>	97(61)	95(56)	2(1)	5(3)	---	---
<i>Developing a specific school policy</i>	70 (44)	83 (49)	27 (17)	12 (7)	3 (2)	5 (3)
<i>Receiving classroom support</i>	97 (56)	96 (56)	3 (2)	2 (1)	---	2 (1)
<i>Support from outside agencies</i>	95 (61)	96 (56)	---	3 (2)	3(2)	---
<i>Curriculum continuity</i>	95 (62)	85 (51)	3 (2)	13 (7)	1(1)	2 (1)
<i>Access to relevant resources</i>	98 (63)	96 (56)	2 (1)	3 (2)	---	---

**Slight variations in figures are due to response differences to each item*

Supporting the transition process

Question 22 asked respondents to indicate their satisfaction/dissatisfaction with the support available to them during the transition phase. The results indicate that the majority of respondents in the North (80%, n=52) and just over half in the South (57%, n=46) were either satisfied or very

satisfied with their school’s internal collaboration. They were unsatisfied or very unsatisfied with specific teacher training (North=37%, n=24 and South 38%, n=26), resources provided (North 38%, n=25 and South 38% n=25) followed by guidance from outside agencies (North 40%, n=24 and 38%, n=23). Half of the respondents in each jurisdiction were either satisfied or very satisfied with the level of classroom support provided. Only one practitioner from the South added a comment to the ‘other category’ to indicate that ‘more training in special needs is required’. Further analysis revealed no significant differences in the transition practices reported.

Adaptations to the classroom environment to support children with special needs are common practice in schools in the North (85%, n=55) and in the South (77%, n=46). Nevertheless, a small percentage in the North (14%, n=14) and in the South (13%, n=8) said they have not made adjustments to the classroom. A larger number of respondents from the North (81%, n=53) than the South (75%, n=45) annotated this section of the survey to explain the adaptations made to accommodate children with SEN. Although ordering differences can be noted in the list of adaptations reported by region, there are also some overlaps. For example, practitioners in both the North and South reported using visual timetables, soft seating areas, quiet corners/areas and behaviour management strategies. Whereas reorganising the classroom to create space was frequently mentioned by practitioners in the South, none of the respondents from the North included this point in their adaptations.

Table 7. Classroom adaptations

South		North	
Rearrange the furniture	42% (n=19)	Visual timetable	28% (n=15)
Visual timetable	18% (n=18)	Quiet corner	24% (n=13)
Soft seating area	15% (n=7)	Behaviour management	9% (n=5)
Quiet area	13% (n=6)	Visual aid adjustments	9% (n=5)
Sloped Boards	6% (n=3)	Soft seating	6% (n=3)
Behaviour management	4% (n=2)	Helmets & headphones	4% (n=2)
Support for hearing impaired	4% (n=2)	Reward charts	4% (n=2)

Rearranging furniture to create space for the child with SEN was the most common adaptation made by practitioners in the South, with visual timetables second and soft seating areas third. Visual time tables, quiet corners and behaviour management strategies are the three most

common adjustments reported by practitioners in the North. Practitioners in both regions also reported using a range of resources such as sloped boards for children with a visual impairment, helmets and headphones for children with autism, reward systems and support for children with a hearing impairment. Findings from the Southern focus groups support these claims and participants consider a clutter free physical environment which children can easily navigate to be a vital factor regarding differentiation. The practical use of a home school journal using digital photos to indicate activities in which the child had participated both at home and in school was reported by one participant to be extremely useful.

Resource materials

The final section of the survey contained three open-ended questions. The first sought information about the appropriateness of the resources and materials available to support the young child with a SEN. Of the 52% (n=31) Southern practitioners who responded to this question, 45% (n=14) described them as ‘very adequate/good’, 39% (n=12) termed it ‘adequate’ and 16% (n=5) said it was ‘inadequate.’ One practitioner noted that resource materials were ‘particularly difficult for rural school to access.’ Respondents in the North described their resources as ‘adequate’ (65%, n=28) and ‘very adequate’ (15%, n=10) with a few describing them as ‘inadequate’ (2%, n=5).

Barriers to successful transitions

This section of the questionnaire attracted considerable attention with practitioners identifying a wide range of barriers that frustrate the transitions process for pupils with SEN. Of concern to practitioners in both jurisdictions are lack of time (18%, n=14; 12% n=8), classroom support (18%, n=14; 12%, n=8), training (12%, n=9; 18%, n=12), poor communication with parents and external agencies (10%, n=8, 14%, n=9), lack of classroom resources (9%, n=7; 15%, n=10) and inadequate support from external agencies (9%, n=7; 12%, n=8); presented figures are for the North and South respectively.



Lack of training

Annotated comments to this section suggest that a number of teachers in the North have concerns with their ability to manage a diverse range of disorders in one class. A teacher in the

North noted that *'a number of children, and that number increases every year, should be in a specialist school. We have no training or knowledge of their needs and it takes time to figure it out. If we had information ahead of the child's start to school we would be more able to support them through the transition.'* This last sentiment was shared by practitioners in both jurisdictions. This view was expanded by a teacher in the South who wrote, *'we have very large classes anything up to and over 30 children. A child with SEN can get lost in the crowd. We need as much information as possible before they come to us.'* Large class size was mentioned by a number of respondents in the South, whereas the number of referrals available to schools was of concern to teachers in the North.

Several teachers talked about having *'maybe one, maybe two referrals each year.'* This requires them to select the children for referral and in schools with large numbers of children with additional needs can prove difficult. Comments in the text book describe the experiences of a school Principal in Northern Ireland. Practitioners in the North and South reported delays with the assessment process *'referrals can take a long time; anything up to 18 months is not at all uncommon, but sadly some children wait years'*. (North)

Another pointed out that, *'a child can be with a teacher for almost a year before the child has an assessment. In between, they are meant to settle down and learn, when some are unable to grasp simple concepts.'* (South)

A few respondents in the North noted that parents sometimes fail to disclose information about their child's disorder seeing their start to school as a *'new opportunity.'* Rather than offer a blank slate and new beginning, failure to report concerns was said to *'creates problems. If we had all the information, we could organise the class ahead of the child's start, not after they are with us for some time.'* Similar concerns are echoed in the focus groups conducted in the South. Participants reported that some parents may not inform the school if their child has a SEN or may even be unaware of their child's difficulty. In this regard the issue of parental denial emerges. Two participants noted their experience of two children whose parents did not reveal the diagnosis of their child despite the fact that they had also been allocated maximum resource

The truth is choices must be made when resources are limited. We are a small school with one referral per year. In some years the number of children with a potential SEN has been overwhelming. When it comes to making a choice, we refer older children to ensure support is in place for their transfer to secondary school. Not at all fair to the younger children but until there is a better system in place, we have no choice

hours together with the support of a SNA. *'Sometimes parents can be a hindrance to communication failing to tell the truth'*. Parental adaptation to a diagnosis of SEN is of course unique and variable. While some parents may deny a problem exists, others may find it catastrophist. Another group may fluctuate between these extremes (Barnett et al., 2003). Although their reaction may be different, these parents share a common need for support as they adjust to their child's SEN (Jones, 2002). This issue is of particular concern given that early identification of SEN in primary school is considered one of the most important prerequisites for good adjustment to school. It is also argued to help narrow the attainment gap between children with and without a SEN (Davie, 1996; Anders et al. 2011).

Communication

The final section of the survey invited practitioners to add any further comments they might wish to make about the transition process for children with a SEN. Though few took this opportunity, the response from practitioners in the North (17%, n=11) was lower than for the South (40%, n=24). Additional comments from a very small number of practitioners in the South focused on the need for lower pupil number, additional classroom support in the form of a special needs assistant and improved communication.

'We need more communication between preschool and school. They have had a child for a year and they pass them to us without a word about their disorder or the resources we need to buy in. It could be the following June before we figure out what's wrong and try to sort out an assessment. It's the child who suffers.' (South)

'Class numbers are increasing, more children have special needs and it's impossible for a teacher to offer a child the support they need. We need more classroom support but government cutbacks make that impossible.' (South)

The experience of some participants in the Southern focus groups was in stark contrast to the findings of the survey open question. The experience of a *class* teacher working in an ASD unit differed greatly from that of her colleagues because the preschool class was located within the ASD unit. This enabled close communication between preschool and primary teachers and thus

greater continuity in terms of the teachers' knowledge and experience of the child, as well as greater access to the assessments and reports conducted in preschool and at transition by staff and by external agencies. This teacher also described a very positive experience of transition when a child from the ASD unit transitioned to her junior infant class *'I was able to go down and talk to the teachers and they were able to pass on resources and say you know, this is what he's used to. It was really, really useful.'* Arguably, this is the kind of information sharing and collaborative planning which supports positive adjustment and school preparedness (Kagan & Neuman, 1998) and which is likely to be of particular importance for young children with ASD. However, this level of communication only occurred within the school campus and there was no mechanism for liaison with preschools regarding transition and little formal or informal contact with preschool teachers. This reflects the finding of O'Kane and Hayes (2008) that only 23% of preschool teachers reported any form of communication with primary teachers regarding transition although 74% would welcome such communication.

The need for *better communication* with parents and external agencies was also of concern to respondents in the North. For example,

'..parents need to give us the information necessary to support their child. Denial doesn't make the situation better. Outside agencies must empower parents so that they feel they can talk about their child with authority.' (North)

Others mentioned the need for

'...greater cohesion between service providers,' 'speech and language, physio etc. should all work together to create a package that best suits the child's needs and we can operate as a delivery point.' (North)

Additional comments made towards the end of the interview discussions are included below:

'Better communication with preschools would help. If we could observe the child to find out how physically able they are and then note any cognitive delays we could offer that child a tailor made programme of support.' (South)

'It's impossible to get a psych [educational psychologist] evaluation. We have one referral per year but might have as many as five children who need an evaluation. Nothing is done until we have the paper work in place.' (North)

'We need the government to take the lead and produce a detailed transition policy. At the minute schools do what they think is right and that differs from school to school.' (South)

'A faster more joined up referral system is essential.' (North)

Summary

Findings presented in this chapter suggest that:

- *Respondent profile:* A typical respondent is a female class teacher between 30-50 years of age with some special needs training gleaned during their teacher training.
- *Location and catchment area of schools:* Most schools encompassed in survey were located mostly in middle class or disadvantaged areas in the North and South. There was a nearly equal number of schools in urban and rural areas of both jurisdictions, with larger schools from the North participating in the survey. A significant difference was observed in the number of pupils with ESL between Northern and Southern schools, as the former has more ESL speakers than the latter.
- *Government and external agencies policy documents:* Most respondents in both the North and South were unaware of government policy on the transition of children with SEN from preschool to school, and a very small percentage in both jurisdictions was able to name a policy document. In addition, external policy documents were unknown to two thirds of respondents in both the North and South.
- *School policy documents:* Northern schools are more likely to have SEN and Early Years transition policy documents, as well as a specific policy for transition of children with SEN, in comparison with their Southern counterparts, as indicated by significant Pearson Chi-square results.
- *School practice:* Schools in the North are more likely to receive a child's preschool records and other relevant information before their start to school. They are also more likely to visit the child's preschool and communicate with pre-school staff than schools in the South. In both jurisdictions, however, the majority of teachers meet with parents in the school environment and keep in contact with outside agencies.
- *Transition practices:* As regards activities involving the family, most respondents in both jurisdictions mentioned that they organise meetings with parents and induction days in

which parents and child visit the school. Differences were, however, observed in transition practices for children with SEN without preschool experience between North and South. As a consequence of specific regional policies, fewer teachers in the North reported receiving a child without any preschool experience than in the South. In terms of their actual practices, respondents in the North reported contacting agencies working with the child and arranging meetings with parents and service providers, while practitioners in the South mentioned focusing on the family as a primary source of information. In general, Northern and Southern respondents find these transitional strategies important for young children with a SEN in their school.

- *Hallmarks of good practice* include communicating with parents, preschool and external agencies, and ensuring the child's familiarity and wellbeing within setting.
- With the exception of developing a specific school policy, all factors listed in survey were identified by Northern and Southern respondents as highly impacting in the transition process.
- *Transition process support*: Respondents in both North and South reported being generally satisfied with their school internal collaboration and classroom support, but demonstrated some dissatisfaction with regard to specific teacher training, access to resources and guidance from outside agencies. Practitioners in both jurisdictions also reported adaptations to classroom environment as an important factor in transition support, such as implementing visual timetables, soft seating areas, quiet corners and behaviour management strategies.
- *Resource materials*: Southern respondents were more positive about the appropriateness of the resources and materials available to them than their Northern counterparts.
- *Barriers to successful transitions*: Respondents in the North and South seemed to agree that the most impacting barriers to successful transitions are: (1) lack of time, classroom support/resources and training, (2) poor communication with parents and external agencies, (3) inadequate support from external agencies. In addition, teachers in both North and South have concerns with their ability to manage a diverse range of disorders in one class. Regional differences appeared with regard to comments about class size, which was more frequent in the South, and number of referrals available to school, which was

mentioned more often by Northern respondents. Practitioners in the North also revealed that parents sometimes fail to disclose info about their children's disorders.

- *Additional comments:* A few respondents in both jurisdictions reported a need for the improvement of communication between school, parents and external agencies. Practitioners in the South also focused on the necessity of additional classroom support, by means of a special needs assistant and the establishment of fewer pupils per class.

Conclusions & Key Messages

Key findings from the study are detailed below.

- The prevalence of children born with a known disability in both jurisdictions remains high (6%) but static.
- In contrast, there has been a large increase in the number of children identified with a learning disability attending mainstream schools in both regions (Conway and Sloane, 2005; INTO, 2004; DE, 2013).
- 19% of the total number of children in mainstream education in NI has a SEN.
- An examination of the literature reveals that in the last decade, in both jurisdictions, a significant number of policy initiatives and curriculum documents have been implemented to offer children a seamless Early Years education.
- A review of legislation in both jurisdictions suggests that both governments are keen to enhance the educational experience of children with a SEN.
- Proposed amendments to the statementing are under review in the North
- Policy reviews continue in both jurisdictions to develop more effective inclusive practice.
- There remains a dearth of research on the transitions of young children with SEN to mainstream school.

Findings from the survey indicate that:

- *Government and external agencies policy documents:* Most survey respondents in both the North and South were unaware of government policy on the transition of children with SEN from preschool to school, and a very small percentage in both jurisdictions was able to name a policy document which specifically addressed this issue. In addition, external policy documents were unknown to two thirds of respondents in both the North and South.
- *School policy documents:* Northern schools are more likely to have SEN and Early Years transition policy documents, as well as a specific policy for transition of children with

SEN, in comparison with their Southern counterparts, as indicated by significant Pearson Chi-square results.

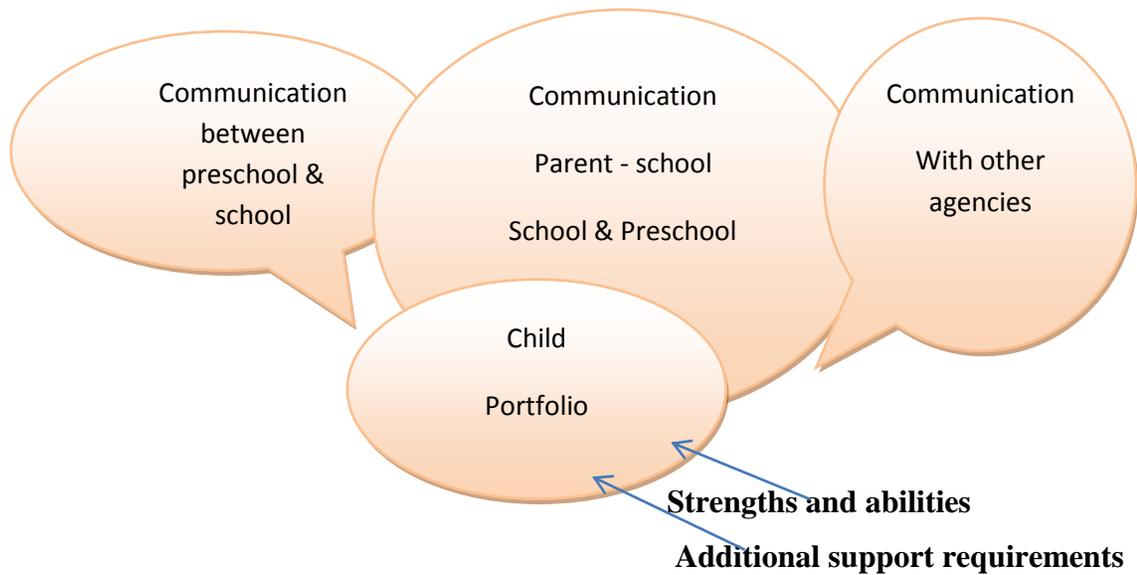
- *School practice:* Schools in the North are more likely to receive a child's preschool records and other relevant information before their start to school. They are also more likely to visit the child's preschool and communicate with pre-school staff than schools in the South. In both jurisdictions, however, the majority of teachers meet with parents in the school environment and keep in contact with outside agencies.
- *Transition practices:* As regards activities involving the family, most respondents in both jurisdictions mentioned that they organise meetings with parents and induction days in which parents and child visit the school. Differences were, however, observed in transition practices for children with SEN without preschool experience between North and South. As a consequence of specific regional policies, fewer teachers in the North reported receiving a child without any preschool experience than in the South. In terms of their actual practices, respondents in the North reported contacting agencies working with the child and arranging meetings with parents and service providers, while practitioners in the South mentioned focusing on the family as a primary source of information. In general, Northern and Southern respondents find these transitional strategies important for young children with a SEN in their school.
- *Hallmarks of good practice* include communicating with parents, preschool and external agencies, and ensuring the child's familiarity and wellbeing within setting.
- With the exception of developing a specific school policy, all factors listed in survey were identified by Northern and Southern respondents as highly impacting in the transition process.
- *Transition process support:* Respondents in both North and South reported being generally satisfied with their school internal collaboration and classroom support, but demonstrated some dissatisfaction with regard to specific teacher training, access to resources and guidance from outside agencies. Practitioners in both jurisdictions also reported adaptations to classroom environment as an important factor in transition support, such as implementing visual timetables, soft seating areas, quiet corners and behaviour management strategies.

- *Resource materials:* Southern respondents were more positive about the appropriateness of the resources and materials available to them than their Northern counterparts.
- *Barriers to successful transitions:* Respondents in the North and South seemed to agree that the most impacting barriers to successful transitions are: (1) lack of time, classroom support/resources and training, (2) poor communication with parents and external agencies, (3) inadequate support from external agencies. In addition, teachers in both North and South have concerns with their ability to manage a diverse range of disorders in one class. Regional differences appeared with regard to comments about class size, which was more frequent in the South, and number of referrals available to school, which was mentioned more often by Northern respondents. Practitioners in the North also revealed that parents sometimes fail to disclose information about their children's disorders.
- *Additional comments:* While considerable progress has been made in the development of practices that reduce discontinuity and seek to offer young children a seamless transition between preschool and primary school, all schools should have a transitions policy and a policy for children with special needs.

Recommendations

- Greater communication is warranted between the preschool and school sector with documented evidence on the child's abilities and skills gathered over time and transitioning with the child to facilitate the process. This profile can provide evidence on the child's ability to meet the aims of a play-based curriculum, identify areas of concern and highlight the child's additional support needs.
- Government policy initiatives appear largely unknown to teachers. Consequently there is a tension between policy and practice. Government must ensure that all teachers, particularly those working with children with SEN, are fully informed about policy developments that affect the child's educational experience.
- Further research involving a larger cohort to offer a broader perspective on practices in the North and South of Ireland.
- Research which gives voice to the child with a SEN would offer considerable insight into the young child's experience of school transitions in the North and South of Ireland.

Schematic model of the hallmarks of good practice



Smooth transitions are supported by consultation and communication between settings (home, early childhood service, school and specialist staff), sharing information and establishing welcoming environments for the child and family (Fabian and Dunlop, 2002, cited in Síolta Standard 13, p. 4).

The role of communication and consultation in supporting the transition process identified by practitioners in this small-scale study are clearly articulated in Síolta and by the DE (2012), but are yet to be fully implemented at school level. Other hallmarks of good practice include: communication informed by the development of school policies to ensure the child enjoys a seamless and positive transition to school, underpinned by:



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Appendices

Appendix 1. Example of Letter to schools

17 May 2013

Dear Principal,

Starting school represents the first major transition point in a young child's life. As academics working with student teachers at Stranmillis University College, Belfast and St Patrick's College, Drumcondra, we hope to gain insight into the strategies employed by primary schools to aid children's transition to primary school, particularly young children with a diagnosed or suspected special educational need.

To gather as wide a perspective on this topic as possible we enclose a questionnaire survey which should take no longer than 10 minutes to complete, with a SAE envelope for return by Monday 10th June 2013.

In recognition of the importance of the research, we are offering all participating schools the opportunity to enter a prize draw. The successful winners [one in the Republic of Ireland and one in the North of Ireland] will each receive a cheque for €60/£50 respectively which may be used to support the purchase of classroom resources. The draw will take place on Monday 10th June with the names of the winning schools published on the Stranmillis University College and St Patrick's College websites. Please note, all names and identifiers will be removed prior to analysis and reporting and are required only for entry into the draw.

If you have any questions regarding any aspect of the research then please don't hesitate to contact either of the principal investigators Dr Colette Gray (NI) at c.gray@stran.ac.uk or Dr Anita Prunty (ROI) at Anita.Prunty@spd.dcu.ie.

Yours Sincerely,

Dr Colette Gray & Dr Anita Prunty, Dr Anna Logan, Dr Geraldine Hayes
Principal Investigators.



2. Example of Questionnaire Survey

Transition Practices in the Early Years

This study seeks to compare the transition policies and practices employed by mainstream schools for young children particularly young children with special educational needs (SEN). We appreciate your participation as it will help highlight important aspects of provision particularly for young children with a SEN. Names included for the draw will be removed prior to analysis, with responses treated in strictest confidence.

The term SEN denotes a broad spectrum of additional needs, defined in the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004 as, “a restriction in the capacity of the person to participate in and benefit from education on account of an enduring physical, sensory, mental health or learning disability or any other condition which results in a person learning differently from a person without that condition... ” Transitions is understood as children’s passage or movement from preschool setting or home into formal education.

Background Details

1. Age: 29 or under 30-39 40-49 50 or over
2. Gender: Male Female
3. How long have you been teaching? _____
4. How long have you worked in your current setting? _____
5. Please indicate the position you currently hold: _____
6. Please state briefly any specific education or training you have received in the area of SEN?

7. The area my school is located in is mainly: Urban Semi-urban Rural
8. The area my school is located in is mainly: Disadvantaged Middle-income Affluent
9. Please include numbers in the table below:

	Your School	Your Class (or caseload)
A. Number of pupils:		
B. Number of pupils with a SEN		
C. Pupils with a suspected SEN in diagnostic process		
D. Number of pupils with English as additional language:		
E. Number of special needs assistants		
F. Number of classroom assistants		

Your School’s SEN and Transition Policies

10. Are you aware of any government policy relating to the transition to school of children with a SEN? Yes No

If yes, please specify _____

11. Are you aware of guidelines produced by any other agency relating to the transition to school of children with a SEN? (e.g. health service, charity, an early childhood organization, education board)

Yes No

If yes, please specify _____

12. Does your school have specific policies in place in relation to:

A. SEN?

Yes No

If yes, please specify _____

B. Early years' transitions?

Yes No

If yes, please specify _____

C. Transitions for Children with SEN specifically?

Yes No

If yes, please specify _____

13. Does your school have a member of staff responsible for transitions? Yes No

If Yes, please specify _____

Your views and practices

14. Please read each of the following statements and select the response that most closely reflects policies and practices at your school.

	Never	Almost never	Sometimes	Almost always	Always
A. Receive the child's records from preschool					
B. Receive other relevant information from the preschool service					
C. Visit the child's previous settings					
D. Communicate with staff of child's pre-school setting					
E. Phone the child's parents					
F. Visit to the child's home					
G. Meet with parents at school					
H. Have contact with outside agencies (e.g. Health service, Education board)					

15. Briefly outline any other activities you undertake to involve the family, pre-school service or outside agencies in the transition process

16. What transition practices do you employ for children with a SEN who have not attended pre-school?

17. Are there any aspects of supporting SEN children during the transition process in which you would welcome further training?

18. How important do you believe the development of effective transitions strategies for young children with a SEN is for your school?
 Very important Important Not very important Not at all important

19. Briefly state what you believe are the hallmarks of an effective transition strategy for young children with SEN

20. Please rate how important you believe each of the following factors is in terms of the transition of children with SEN from pre-school to a school setting.

	Very Important	Important	Somewhat Important	Not Very Important	Not at all Important
A. Developing child-specific strategies					
B. Evaluating the child's progress					
C. Exchanging information with family					
D. Exchanging information with pre-school					
E. Receiving relevant training					
F. Developing a specific school policy					
G. Receiving classroom support (from classroom assistants, special needs assistants)					
H. Support from outside agencies (eg. HSE, Early years organisations, ELB's)					
I. Curriculum continuity from Early Years to school					
J. Access to relevant resources (e.g occupational therapy)					
k. Other factor. Please specify _____					

21. Which of the factors listed in the table above do you believe to be most important?

22. How satisfied are you with the support you receive in relation to the transition of young children from Early Years' settings to formal schooling in terms of the following?

	Very satisfied	Satisfied	Undecided	Unsatisfied	Very Unsatisfied
A. Guidance from outside bodies (eg. Health service, Early years organisations, Education board)					
B. Internal collaboration with colleagues					
C. Classroom support					
D. Resources provided					
E. Specific teacher training					
G. Other form of support. Please specify: _____					

23. Have you adapted your classroom environment for young children with a SEN? Yes No
If yes, in what way?

24. How appropriate are the resources and materials to which you have access?

25. What do you think are the main barriers to effective practice that exist in this area?

Please include in the box provided any further comments you wish to make in relation to how best to support children with a SEN through the transition process from the Early Years' setting to formal education.

Thank you for completing and returning this short survey

Appendix 3. Example of Interview Schedule

Transition Practices in the Early Years

This study seeks to compare the transition policies and practices employed by mainstream schools for young children with special educational needs (SEN). The term SEN denotes a broad spectrum of additional needs, defined in the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004 as, “a restriction in the capacity of the person to participate in and benefit from education on account of an enduring physical, sensory, mental health or learning disability or any other condition which results in a person learning differently from a person without that condition...” Transitions is understood as children’s passage or movement from preschool setting or home into formal education.

Ask Participants to introduce themselves and briefly state their role in the school

1. What do you believe are the hallmarks of good practice in terms of aiding the transition of pupils with a special educational need?
2. Could you explain your school policies in this area?
3. In terms of your current practice, could you explain your approach to:
 - A. Evaluating the child’s progress
 - B. Communicating with parents
 - C. Obtaining information from the preschool setting
 - D. Engaging with outside agencies (e.g HSE, Early years organisations, etc)
4. Could you give examples of how you have adapted your classroom practice to aid a pupils transition? strategies you have used?
5. Are there any areas of your current practice or current practice at your school you would like to improve on?
6. How appropriate is the level of support you receive?
 - Documentation and guidance
 - Classroom resources
 - Support from fellow teachers
 - Classroom assistance
7. What do you believe is the main barrier to effective practice in this area?
8. Would you like to make any additional comments?

Thank you for your participation

Appendix 4
Win €60

Appendix 4 **for your school.**



Return with the questionnaire on 'Early Years Transition practices for children with Special Educational Needs' to be entered into a prize draw to win €60 towards classroom resources.

To enter, complete the details overleaf.

Win £50

for your school.



**Return with the questionnaire on 'Early Years Transition practices for children with Special Educational Needs' to be entered into a prize draw to win £50 towards classroom resources.
To enter, complete the details overleaf.**

Appendix 6 – Number of children with statements and special educational needs in Northern Ireland from 2006-2014.

Table 1: Number of stated children in pre-school and primary school stages in Northern Ireland 2006-2014, Northern Ireland School Census (DE, 2014)

	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14
Nursery school	48	50	50	62	64	71	67	72
Pre-school	15	21	18	16	8	17	61	39
Nursery class	#	30	#	#	#	#	#	#
Reception	*	5	*	*	*	*	*	*
Foundation Stage (P1-2)	704	642	648	688	717	756	797	879
KS1 (P3-4)	1236	1213	1162	1134	1142	1144	1127	1267
KS2 (P5-7)	2449	2655	2692	2673	2579	2498	2477	2535
Total	4493	4616	4065	4624	4580	4558	4599	4875

Table 2: Number of SEN children in pre-school and primary school stages in Northern Ireland 2006-2014, Northern Ireland School Census (DE, 2014a).

	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14
Nursery school	1001	950	962	1093	1199	1180	1380	1375
Pre-school	381	483	473	501	559	613	758	830
Nursery class	265	195	212	236	253	242	#	333
Reception	9	9	8	6	7	7	*	16
Foundation Stage (P1-2)	4112	3933	4077	4306	4393	4558	4724	5298
KS1 (P3-4)	9279	8930	9295	9563	9757	9965	9819	10153
KS2 (P5-7)	13780	14055	14197	14796	14960	14964	14728	14657
Total	28827	28555	29224	30501	31128	31529	31656	32662