

A Study of Transition from Primary to Post-primary School for Pupils with Special Educational Needs

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and Nigel Vahey





An Chomhairle Náisiúnta um Oideachas Speisialta
National Council for Special Education

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Foreword

The NCSE is pleased to publish this research report on the experiences of young students with special educational needs (SEN), and their parents, of the move from primary to post primary school.

This is an important transition for all students. Post primary schools tend to be bigger than primary schools, and students face more teachers, more formal and subject focused learning and a more regulated environment. The changes encountered are common to all students. However there are also specific implications for students with SEN, including changes in the organisation of SEN resources and supports, and the need for coordination across schools and other services to ensure a continuum of support to address individual special needs.

This report is particularly welcome as it provides important insights into how students, and their parents, experience this transition, and lessons from their experiences highlight what works well and what might be improved.

The NCSE believes that transition planning is particularly important for pupils with SEN moving from one level of education to the next, whether from early education to primary, primary to post primary or post school to training, work or college. The need for such planning is supported by the stories of parents and students in this research.

Drawing on this research and other work on the topic, the NCSE intends to develop evidence based guidance on transition planning in relation to children and young people with special educational needs over the next year. In addition, this research report will be of great interest to teachers, parents, students and policy makers.

Teresa Griffin,
Chief Executive Officer

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Key Words

Transition experiences; special educational needs (SEN)

Abstract

The existing evidence base on the primary to post-primary transition has been described as incomplete and few studies have explored transitions for pupils with special educational needs. This study investigated the experiences of 32 pupils with SEN making the transition in Ireland, using focus groups and qualitative analyses of themes. The study also employed the same methodology to investigate the experiences of the pupils' parents (N=31).

List of Acronyms

Acronym	Referent
ADHD	Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder
ASD	Autistic spectrum disorder
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
DES	Department of Education and Skills ¹
DEScience	Department of Education and Science
EDBP	Emotional disturbance and/or behavioural problems
EPSEN	Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (2004)
GAM	General Allocation Model
HSE	Health Services Executive
IEP	Individual education plan
JCP	Junior Certificate Programme
LCP	Leaving Certificate Programme
MGLD	Mild general learning disabilities
ModGLD	Moderate general learning disabilities
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum Assessment
NCSE	National Council for Special Education
NEPS	National Educational Psychological Service
RT	Resource teacher
SEN	Special educational needs
SENO	Special Educational Needs Organiser
SERC	Special Education Review Committee (1993)
SES	Socio-economic status
SESS	Special Educational Support Services
SLD	Specific learning disabilities
SNA	Special Needs Assistant
SSLD	Specific speech and language disorder

¹ The government department formerly known as the Department of Education and Science (denoted here as DEScience) was renamed in 2010 as the Department of Education and Skills (denoted here as DES).



Executive Summary

Introduction

A substantive body of international and national research evidence indicates that the transition from primary to post-primary school is an educational milestone in the lives of all children (Hargreaves *et al* 1996; Measor & Woods, 1984; Sirsch, 2003). Overall, evidence has highlighted the commonality of a mix of pre-transition concerns and excitement about academic and social issues, as well as the new school environment. Nonetheless for the majority of pupils, pre-transition worries do not fully materialise and dissipate quickly on entry to the new school (Evangelou *et al* 2008; Graham & Hill, 2003; West *et al* 2008). Some sub-groups, however, take longer to settle and do experience difficulties (Smyth *et al* 2004), and different types of pupil needs may mean that stressors and other factors have differential effects on the individuals in question (Maras & Aveling, 2006).

International and national evidence also indicates that parents play a potentially important role in their children's transitions, as well as having their own concerns (*eg* bullying, safety, homework and friends).

Relative to the large body of research on pupils in general, the transition experiences of pupils with SEN have received less attention at both international and national levels. Although the pre-transition concerns and post-transition experiences of this group appear to be broadly similar to pupils in general (Evangelou *et al* 2008, Forgan & Vaughn, 2000; Lovitt *et al* 2009), accessing support is a largely unique theme that has emerged from available evidence (Maras & Aveling, 2006). Indeed, only one published study (Maunsell *et al* 2007) has investigated the transition experience of pupils with SEN in Ireland. The findings did overlap strongly with available international evidence, however.

This study aims to investigate the transition experiences of pupils with SEN and their parents in Ireland. The specific research purposes were to:

- locate the transitions of pupils with SEN in Ireland in an appropriate academic and policy context
- explore the experiences of these pupils and their parents at pre- and post-transition in a variety of educational settings
- identify and analyse factors that contribute to, or hinder, their positive transition experiences.

Methodology

In total, the research programme comprised several elements in addition to what is currently reported. These included psychometric testing with pupils, and quantitative surveys with parents and school personnel. Limitations associated with the quantitative elements of the research meant their potential was not realised, however, and the

psychometric testing was of limited value to the study's aims. Hence, a decision was made, with the NCSE, to include only the qualitative elements of the methodology and related findings in this report.

A sample of 32 pupils with SEN, spanning the diversity of categories, was drawn from 30 schools (22 mainstream and eight special schools) at a range of locations. Separate pre-transition focus groups (and interviews, when requested²) were conducted late in sixth class with the pupils ($N=32$ for focus groups) and their parents ($N=28$ for focus groups and $N=3$ for interviews) to explore their experiences of transition planning. Separate post-transition focus groups (and interviews, if requested) were again conducted with the same children ($N=26$ for focus groups and $N=1$ for interview) and their parents ($N=26$ for focus groups and $N=3$ for interviews) early in first year to assess their experiences of transition.

Main Findings

Four themes emerged from the pupils' pre-transition focus groups. *'Things I will miss'* reflected their perceived loss of the care and familiarity of primary school teachers, as well as the solidarity and stability of peers. *'Fitting in and keeping up'* articulated concerns about accessing social information regarding peers, older pupils, school rules and curricula, and being understood by teachers. *'Laying the groundwork: getting to know new people'* described the complexities of the new academic and social world. *'Experiencing and talking about transition'* reflected a mix of impressions that comprised positive information about the new school, but daunting advice about not letting the school down through under-performing or behaving badly.

Three themes emerged from the pupils' post-transition focus groups and interview.

- *'Settling in'* reflected the complex negotiations of early days and the perplexities of dealing with different teachers.
- *'Asking questions, provoking questions'* highlighted barriers and facilitators to receiving information.
- *'It's not as bad as you think it's going to be'* described new 'practical' subjects and the gaining of autonomy.

Four themes emerged from the parents' pre-transition focus groups and interviews.

- *'Losing ground'* characterised loss of the community support at primary schools and a fear that hard-won gains may be undermined.
- *'Information is critical: "I'm not asking for the moon, but a bit more information'* described frustration and anger at lack of communication from schools about their children's support and a sense of disenfranchisement from the transition process.
- *'I'd like help but I don't want to make trouble for my child'* articulated hesitancy to petition schools for help and concerns that their children were perceived as a burden to the schools.

² The main reason for this request was respondents feeling uncomfortable discussing relevant issues in a group setting.

- *'Challenge and support'* represented the consensus that the children's social integration was critical and that school staff had a key role to play here. Parents also believed academic confidence would give their children more choices about how to live their lives independently.

Three themes emerged from parents' post-transition focus groups and interviews.

- *'Social support is key to settling in'* reiterated the view that social integration was the bedrock of transition.
- *'Communication problems'* articulated frustrations at the lack of information and support at post-primary schools.
- *'Prevention is better than cure'* reflected beliefs that effective early supports resulted from good transition planning.

The qualitative data are based on a small sample of pupils and parents, hence the authors acknowledge that the findings cannot be generalised to the wider population.

Issues Raised by the Research

Several issues arise from the current findings:

- The children's and parents' data highlighted discontinuities in their perceptions of primary versus post-primary teachers.
- Pupils were aware they had received support for their SEN at primary school and generally perceived this to have been of benefit. Strong fears were expressed by pupils and parents of not having assistance at post-primary school.
- Pupils and parents were acutely aware of the children's SEN in the context of teachers and peers.
- Parents and pupils perceived the integration of social and academic issues, but valued social inclusion over academic success.
- Parents' dialogue reflected anger, frustration and lack of power or advocacy for their children.
- The importance of having a significant other (in this context, this refers to one specific individual who is involved in the transition process, who will provide support, and with whom issues regarding transition can be discussed) was reflected in numerous ways in both the children's and parents' data.

Conclusions

The themes derived from the focus groups and interviews conducted with the children reflected issues that were consistent with international and national transition research generally. While issues pertaining more directly to their SEN did affect the children, these were revealed to a much greater extent and with more depth of emotion during the discussions held with the children's parents.

Introduction

A large body of international evidence exists on the transition from primary to post-primary school (eg Eccles *et al* 1993; Gutman & Midgeley, 2000; Hargreaves & Galton, 2002) along with a growing number of studies on transition in the Irish context (eg Darmody, 2008; Smyth *et al* 2004; Naughton, 1998). Almost universally, evidence suggests that although the pre-transition experience represents a significant period of anxiety and anticipation, most worries either do not materialise or dissipate quickly for most pupils (Evangelou *et al* 2008; Graham & Hill, 2002). Certain sub-groups take longer to settle in and experience more difficulties (Smyth *et al* 2004), however.

International and national evidence also indicates that parents play a potentially important role in their children's transitions, as well as having their own concerns (eg bullying, safety, homework and friends).

Relative to the large body of research on pupils in general, the transition experiences of pupils with SEN has received less research attention at both international and national levels. Although the pre-transition concerns and post-transition experiences of this group appear similar to pupils in general (Evangelou *et al* 2008; Forgan & Vaughn, 2000; Lovitt *et al* 2009), accessing support is a largely unique theme that has emerged from available evidence (Maras & Aveling, 2006). Only one published study (Maunsell *et al* 2007) has investigated the transition experience of pupils with SEN in Ireland and these findings overlap strongly with available international evidence.

In the context of limited empirical evidence and a rapidly changing educational climate, the NCSE offered a tender to conduct research on the transition experiences of pupils with SEN in Ireland. This was an explicit attempt to obtain evidence that would help to identify the necessary practices and policies for ensuring a smooth transition and continued provision of appropriate support for pupils with SEN in Ireland. This study is the outcome of securing funding for that tender.

The purposes of the research can be summarised as follows:

- locate the transitions of pupils with SEN in Ireland in an appropriate academic and policy context
- explore the experiences of a sample of these pupils and their parents at pre- and post-transition in a variety of educational settings
- identify and analyse factors that contribute to, or hinder, positive transition experiences for them.

Use of qualitative methods is part of a strong methodological shift in the last two decades towards including the pupil voice in educational research and decision-making. This study has the pupil experience at its centre and is bolstered by a broader understanding of parents' experiences.

Section 1 reviews the large body of international and national research on the transition from primary to post-primary school for pupils in general, as well as briefly summarising the relevant policy context. This section also reviews the smaller body of research on the transitions of pupils with SEN. Section 2 details the research design. Section 3 describes

the findings on the pupils' experiences, while Section 4 deals with the experiences of parents. Section 5 draws the data together and discusses the implications.

1 Review of Policy, Legislative and Literature Contexts

Section 1 has two main aims: to provide an overview of the policy and legislative contexts for the education of pupils with SEN in Ireland; and to review existing international and national evidence on transitions of all pupils, and of pupils with SEN.

1.1 Policy and Legislative Contexts for the Education of Pupils with SEN in Ireland

The last 20 years have witnessed significant changes in educational provision for pupils with SEN in Ireland and four key legislative or policy developments have defined this change: the Special Education Review Committee Report (SERC, 1993); the Education Act (1998); the EPSEN Act (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.

Traditionally, most pupils with SEN were educated in special schools or special classes within mainstream schools (SERC, 1993). However inclusion predominantly advocates as much mainstream education as possible and appropriate. The inclusion of pupils with SEN in mainstream primary and post-primary schools operates through mainstream classes with resource teacher hours and special needs assistant (SNA) supports or through special classes. The latter commonly include pupils whose SEN may also be catered for in special schools. Although special schools are designated at primary level, they may also offer post-primary education and indeed most have pupils between the ages of four and 18 years. As a result, classes in special schools contain a broader range of pupils with SEN, including multiple disabilities, than normally found in mainstream education, and special schools operate lower student-teacher ratios.

While 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 SNAs 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.

The EPSEN Act of 2004 similarly emphasises inclusive education and defines a pupil with SEN as anyone under 18 who has 'an enduring physical, sensory, mental health

or learning disability, or any other condition which restricts the child's capacity to participate in and benefit from education' (Section 1).

Although the Act was to be implemented within five years, fiscal constraints restricted these efforts. Nevertheless, several aspects have already been implemented. These include: promoting inclusive education for pupils with SEN; the establishment of the National Council for Special Education (NCSE); the transfer of resource allocation responsibilities from the DEScience to the NCSE; and the appointment of special educational needs organisers (SENOs). The NCSE also has remits under EPSSEN in policy and research. For example, Section 20 stipulates that a key function of the NCSE is to conduct and commission appropriate research. The NCSE also consults voluntary bodies which promote the interests of, and/or provide services to, persons with disabilities. Their knowledge and expertise can then be used by the NCSE in developing policy and providing services.

As already stated, the NCSE was established under the EPSSEN Act. It allocates two main types of additional supports to schools for pupils with SEN: additional resource teaching hours and special needs assistants (SNAs). Schools can apply for additional resource teaching hours for individual pupils with diagnosed, low incidence SEN and the level of additional teaching hours is determined by the type of need involved. Schools can also apply to the NCSE for SNAs to support pupils with demonstrated care needs arising from a disability, again the level of support provided depends on the care need involved. Applications for SNA support must be based on:

- appropriate professional recommendation
- evidence of the pupil's specific needs and
- a signed professional certificate on these needs

(DEScience, 2002).

Under the current system, as additional supports are allocated to schools, and not to pupils, resource teaching hours and SNA support do not transfer when a pupil moves from primary to post-primary school. The post-primary school must make new applications for each intake of pupils.

At primary level, pupils with high incidence SEN (ie borderline mild general learning disability, mild general learning disability and specific learning disability) are supported under the DES General Allocation Model (GAM) – in other words through the school's general allocation of resources. Hence, provision of this support does not require individual assessment or application (see Circular O2/05). A flexible deployment of these resources is provided for under Circular O2/05 to encourage inclusive provision, and to preclude exclusive and non-inclusive reliance on the use of resource teacher hours for individual tuition.

Until recently, there was no GAM at post-primary level. Applications had to be submitted to the NCSE for pupils with high incidence needs who had been supported under GAM at primary level. This meant that pupils who had support without formal assessment/diagnosis at primary school were then required to undergo individual assessment so that schools could apply to the NCSE for support on transition to post-

primary school. This was revised in Circular 0010/2012 which introduced a GAM for post-primary pupils with high incidence SEN. In short, the circular pointed out that post-primary schools would be allocated resource hours for the forthcoming academic year through an initial allocation in January, based on a calculation from the previous year's allocation. This removes the need for individual assessment/diagnosis for pupils with these high incidence needs on transfer to post-primary school.

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 practice and a uniform approach to the preparation and implementation of IEPs.

1.1.2 Pupils with SEN in transition in Ireland

Irish policy directives provide several key sources delineating best practice in, or advice pertaining to, the transition process for pupils with SEN (ie NCSE *Guidelines on the Individual Education Plan Process*, 2006; DEScience *Guidelines for the Inclusion of Pupils with SEN in Post-primary Schools*, 2007a; the Task Force for Discipline in Schools, 2005b; the Special Educational Support Services (SESS) guidelines for transition for pupils with SEN, 2010; and the NEPS *Behavioural, Emotional and Social Difficulties: A Continuum of Support: Guidelines for Teachers*, 2011).

Although the *Task Force Guidelines for Discipline in Schools* (2005b) were not specifically designed to focus on pupils with SEN, they may apply to this group (of course it is important to emphasise that behavioural difficulties are not synonymous with pupils with SEN). Overall, the guidelines highlight the need for transition programmes to be formalised and structured in the service of creating a genuine sense of partnership between home and school by minimising apprehensions and facilitating pupils' academic and social development. In particular, the report emphasised the importance of early contact among involved parties, and this is in line with a general emphasis on careful and systematic transition planning.

The DEScience guidelines (2007a) allocate a critical role to the home environment and highlight the centrality of parents in supporting pupils during transition. Specifically, they recommend that schools provide parents with all relevant and appropriate information affecting their children. In turn, parents can often provide useful information from other agencies on their children's specific needs (this should also be included in IEPs). This partnership approach also facilitates cases in which special arrangements need to be made with parents about homework and in which teachers need ongoing information on pupil progress or difficulties. Along with a partnership and inclusion-driven approach, the DEScience guidelines also highlight the importance of pupil input, especially in the development, implementation and review of IEPs, in the service of acknowledging the pupil's role and enhancing motivation for learning.

The NCSE guidelines on IEPs (2006) offer specific transition advice regarding pupils with SEN and strongly emphasise the appropriate transfer of information. This information should generally incorporate:

- test results
- assessment results
- medical reports
- psychiatric reports
- IEPs.

In particular, the guidelines highlight the need to protect pupils' statutory rights and to obtain parental agreement.

The Special Education Support Service (SESS) provides in-service training for primary and post-primary schools on transition for pupils with SEN. These are delivered through teacher education centres throughout the country. The SESS recommends that transition

planning should begin early in sixth class and its guidelines outline several measures to assist pupils in this regard. Guidelines are also available on:

- continuation of resources
- implications of data protection legislation for the transfer of pupil information
- development of admission policies which reflect current legislation.

There is also information for post-primary teachers to enable them to become familiar with the primary school curriculum.

More recently, NEPS (2011) produced a set of teacher guidelines to facilitate the inclusion of pupils with behavioural, emotional and social difficulties. Although not specifically directed at transition issues, they nonetheless support teachers in the design and delivery of classroom- and individual-level behavioural interventions. These may be beneficial in facilitating transition to a new school, especially around classroom integration, for pupils susceptible to challenges in this regard.

1.2 The Literature Context for the Current Research

At the broadest level, this study attempts to contribute to the incomplete body of empirical evidence on transition. More specifically, it seeks to explore the experiences of pupils with SEN making the transition in the Irish school system and thus to add to the much smaller bodies of research in the latter two areas.

The current literature review synthesises information and findings from a range of published sources in which the transition of pupils, including those with SEN, to post-primary education, at international and national levels, had been investigated and/or discussed. The initial systematic sourcing of material comprised two main strands. First, there was a search of electronic databases for empirical research. Second, there was collation, electronically and by hand, of articles, reports and reviews, which contained relevant expert opinion, unpublished data or policy/legislative material. The databases searched were: PsychInfo, the Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC) and the ISI Web of Knowledge, all selected as offering wide coverage of the relevant literature. The search terms used were 'transition' and 'transfer'. All hits were then screened, by abstracts, for relevance to the type and level of school transition in question. The combined searches resulted in 284 documents for full screening. 'Handsearching' involved material referenced by papers sourced electronically and included, for example, postgraduate theses and government or commissioned reports. All documents were then subject to the mapping of findings by keywords, as well as descriptions of main points, results and/or conclusions. Finally, the main themes were synthesised and discussed in light of the emergent findings from each strand. Throughout the review process, team members consulted each other regularly on the main points and findings from the selected material.

The authors acknowledge fully that no review is entirely robust, and is susceptible to omission and distortion of facts. External factors, such as the idiosyncrasies of electronic search engines, can exacerbate these. The report authors, however, have attempted,

as much as possible, to source all relevant and reliable information and to present this accurately and transparently.

From the large body of evidence reviewed, two types of related comparisons of findings were made between:

- themes observed internationally and those recorded in Irish research
- themes recorded in research with pupils in general and those recorded in the smaller body of evidence on pupils with SEN.

1.2.1 Research literature

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, most transition research focused on outcomes and attributed poor outcomes to developmental and individual level factors, such as socio-economic status (SES, *eg Blyth et al 1983; Gerwitz et al 1994*). The field then witnessed a shift in focus to systemic factors, such as curricular continuity (*eg Rice, 1997*). Most recent research has to some extent renewed its interest in individual factors, however, by exploring transition experiences and listening to the pupil voice (*eg Smyth et al 2006*).

This changing emphasis has had implications for the research methodologies employed, which may in turn, have influenced findings. For instance, qualitative studies of individuals have generally found transition to be a profound personal experience in terms of its ramifications for self-identity and wellbeing (*eg Naughton, 1998; Tobbell, 2003*), whereas quantitative studies across individuals have not (*eg Measor & Woods, 1984; Pratt & George, 2005*).

In summary, although the existing body of research evidence on transition is substantive, it contains a broad array of emphases and methodologies and has focused primarily on pupils in general, with less attention paid to pupil sub-groups. As a result, West *et al* (2008) concluded that systematic comparisons across studies and across pupil sub-groups are hard to conduct, hence the existing evidence base remains incomplete. McGee *et al* (2003), who conducted a comprehensive review in this area, came to the same conclusion.

1.2.2 International research on pupil experiences of transition

A host of studies have examined the pupil experience of transition (*eg Naughton, 1998; O'Brien, 2004; O'Dalaigh & Aherne, 1990*), but findings at one level appear heterogeneous (see Sirsch, 2003). On one side, evidence suggests that pupils have generally positive perceptions and experiences of transition (*eg Berndt & Mekos, 1995*). Other studies, however, report neutral or negative experiences (*eg Cotterell, 1982; Mertin et al 1989*). On balance, this mix of evidence perhaps points to a continuum of transition experiences, which Galton and Hargreaves (2002) summarised as:

... a process which, at its best, research suggests causes slight apprehension, while at its worst provokes deeply felt anxiety (p1).

1.2.2.1 Pre-transition concerns

There is general consensus on some level of pre-transition concern for most pupils and the fact that these peak in June of sixth class (*eg* Galton & Hargreaves, 2002; Measor & Woods, 1984). Agreement is almost universal that these concerns revolve around the formal school system and the informal peer system (Anderson *et al* 2000; Fouracre, 1993; West *et al* 2008). The themes identified in the existing literature are summarised below.

Academic issues

West *et al* (2008) reported that around 5.4 per cent of pupils worried about new subjects and greater work volume (*see also* Delamont & Galton, 1986). These worries were often based on the perception that subjects and timetables would necessarily be more complex (*see also* Cheng & Ziegler, 1986). Around 30.6 per cent of pupils also had concerns about numerous teachers, with specific anxieties about their strictness and discipline (Delamont & Galton, 1986; Galton, 2010).

The school environment

The larger post-primary school created concerns about getting lost for around 13 per cent of pupils (Zeedyk *et al* 2003; *see also* Delamont & Galton 1986) and some had concerns about increased travel time (West *et al* 2008).

Social issues

West *et al* (2008) reported that around 21.4 per cent of pupils worried about making new friends and experiencing changes to existing friendships (*see also* Delamont & Galton, 1986). Furthermore, around a quarter had safety concerns about older students, with 31 per cent worried about aggression and bullying (Zeedyk *et al* 2003).

As well as representing a mix of academic and social worries, the pre-transition experience is characterised by a mix of positive and negative feelings, which typically manifest as a combination of anxiety and anticipation (Naughton, 1998). In support of this view, Delamont and Galton (1986) used the New School Gates activity (which assessed both types of feelings) and reported that at least 71 per cent of pupils attributed negative feelings to the individuals in the picture (ie post-primary pupils approaching the new school gate on their first day), while at least 66 per cent attributed positive feelings.

West *et al* (2008) reported that familial and individual factors influence the presence and type of pre-transition anxiety. For example, perceptions of higher parental care are associated with reduced academic and social concerns. In contrast, greater concerns in both areas are associated with:

- lower ability
- those judged more anxious by teachers
- a history of victimisation
- lower self-esteem.

Some research evidence suggests that pre-transition anxieties are short-lived. For example, Graham and Hill (2002) reported that most first-years said they stopped being concerned almost immediately. Similarly, Evangelou *et al* (2008) reported that 75 per cent of pupils said they had adjusted well at that point. However, there is some evidence of more persistent levels of concern throughout first year (eg Zeedyk *et al* 2003).

1.2.2.2 The post-transition experience

There is universal agreement that the first few days and weeks at post-primary school remain a time of considerable apprehension (Gorwood, 1986; Measor & Woods, 1984). Tobell's qualitative research (2003) generated five themes that appear to characterise the post-transition experience. These are summarised below.

School as community

Although nearly all pupils in Tobell's work (2003) said they made friends quickly, they recognised that the style of pupil interactions had changed. Specifically, post-primary groups comprise less whole class integration and popularity is perceived as contingent on fitting into a group. In addition, there is little social integration between older and younger pupils (although this had been strongly encouraged at primary school).

The learning experience

Some pupils described confusion at having too many teachers, substitute teachers and recurrent timetable changes. They believed the primary school timetable was more flexible and better suited to their needs. Some also reported that lessons were too short and there were too many subjects.

Feeling lost

The theme of feeling lost (physically and emotionally) was central to Tobell's findings (2003). For example, pupils reported spending time at the end of some lessons worrying about how they would get to the next ones. Although they believed they had received about one month's grace for being late at class, nearly all said it took them much longer to get used to the new school.

Adult or child

Although pupils accepted that the onus of learning was now on them, they did not feel capable of managing this new burden. In short, in primary school they were children and pupils, but in post-primary school they were pupils and young adults.

What makes a good teacher

Perhaps simplistically, many pupils defined good teachers as those who 'make things fun' and 'explain when you do something wrong', but characterised their new teachers as speaking too quickly and excluding pupils who were not good at the subject in question. They also noted that teachers did not always know their names. Taken together, Tobell (2003) concluded that these features suggested the teacher-pupil relationship at post-primary school is not highly reciprocal in nature.

1.2.3 The roles and perceptions of parents regarding transition

Historically, the parent's role in educational systems has been that of client with perceptions of dependency and passivity. Although, the balance of power appears to be shifting (Riddell *et al* 2001), some authors have suggested that more needs to be done, especially for parents of children with SEN (Evans & Vincent, 1997). According to Bastiani (1986), the research and discourse on transition have traditionally neglected the role and voice of parents, alternatively construing transition as an experience predominantly affecting pupils and teachers.

In more recent years, the general educational and specific transition literatures emphasise the merits of a partnership approach in which parents play a significant role (Frederickson & Cline, 2002; Hornby *et al* 1997). In this capacity, parents not only advocate for their children, but access a platform from which they can voice their own opinions and concerns. In the context of transition, this approach is based on the assumptions that:

- The role of parents is influential on the transition experiences of their children (*eg* Alston *et al* 1985).
- Parents may assist in assuaging their children's concerns (*eg* Rice, 1997).
- Attempts should be made to address parents' own anxieties (*eg* Evangelou *et al* 2008).

On the whole, the consensus is that parents may have a valuable and constructive input to the transition process (*eg* McIvor, 1990; Perkins & Gelfer, 1995).

Alston *et al* (1985) conducted a large-scale study that examined parental perceptions of transition planning through questionnaires and interviews. The findings indicated that most parents were generally satisfied with transition planning, and with the quantity and complexity of schoolwork at post-transition. On balance, more than half said they would like more contact with the post-primary school and Evangelou *et al* (2008) identified the following prominent parental concerns:

- bullying (53 per cent of parents)
- safety (30 per cent)
- homework (26 per cent)
- making new friends (24 per cent).

Pupils perceive their parents to be of significant assistance in transition (see Akos, 2002). Specifically, pupils from more supportive home environments tend to experience less academic difficulty through transition, where success comes from joint activities with parents, but is more about the relationship than the activities (Rice, 1997). Evangelou *et al* (2008) also reported that 41 per cent of pupils indicated that 'family alone' helped them most in preparing for transition. Conversely, pupils who experience earlier independence from parental chaperonage have greater transition difficulty (Simmons & Blyth, 1987). Kurita and Janzen (1996) highlighted, in particular, the relationship between familial support and pupil preparedness. In short, they proposed that the importance of support is correlated with level of preparedness, such that the least

supported children are the least prepared for transition (*see also* Baker & Stevenson, 1986).

Parents' direct participation in transition programmes enables them to become role models for their children's involvement in this process (Perkins & Gelfer, 1995); improves communication with teachers (*see* Anderson *et al* 2000); and permits early detection and prevention of problems (Deller, 1980). The impact of these roles may be long-lasting. Specifically, parents involved in the transition process tend to remain involved in later schooling (McIvor, 1990), and increased involvement is in turn related to higher achievement (Paulson, 1994) and a reduction in drop-out likelihood (Horn & West, 1994).

1.2.4 Irish literature on transition

The majority of Irish pupils enter post-primary education at age 12, after eight years of primary school, although pupils with SEN may be exceptions. Post-primary education is compulsory to age 16, with a minimum of three years and completion of the State-set Junior Certificate Programme (JCP) examinations. Pupils who wish to continue their education proceed (often via a Transition Year in fourth year) to the senior cycle and preparation for the Leaving Certificate Programme (LCP) examinations in fifth and sixth years.

Before the late 1990s, there had been no research on the primary to post-primary transition in the Republic of Ireland. Findings from a number of studies investigating pupil experiences of transition in the Irish context, however, are now available (Darmody, 2008; Downes *et al* 2007; Maunsell *et al* 2007; Naughton, 1998; O'Brien, 2004; Smyth *et al* 2004.)

Naughton (1998) was the first to employ a qualitative methodology (ie interviews) to study ($N=101$) transition experiences. Darmody (2008) analysed questionnaires ($N=916$) and data from focus groups ($N=200$), in which pupils were asked retrospectively about their initial post-transition experiences. And O'Brien (2004) used data from pupil essays and interviews ($N=153$). Both O'Brien and Smyth *et al* (2004) investigated pupils' experiences of transition at two post-transition time points (within the first few weeks and in the second term), thus permitting insight into how concerns changed and how long it took for pupils to settle. The findings across these studies are summarised below in terms of common themes in pre-transition concerns and post-transition experiences.

1.2.4.1 Pre-transition concerns

Similar to the international evidence, pre-transition concerns of pupils in Ireland are best characterised as anxiety that relates primarily to academic and social issues (Naughton, 1998; O'Brien, 2004). Findings on these two core themes are summarised below.

Academic issues

Pupils' pre-transition concerns exist in a context in which they rate primary school experiences very highly. For example, Naughton (1998) reported that 91 per cent of pupils considered primary schoolwork to be manageable and 98 per cent considered

themselves to have good learning ability (*see also* O'Brien, 2004). In contrast, academic concerns about post-primary school are consistent with the international data and related to: tests; more homework; more subjects; more teachers; the longer day; getting lost; discipline; and academic differentiation. Again, however, concerns are balanced by a mixture of excitement and anticipation. For example, Naughton reported that 47 per cent of pupils had an equal mix of worry and expectation. Similarly, O'Brien found only a small number of children were very negative in their expectations of post-primary school.

Social Issues

Consistent with international evidence, social worries relate to being separated from best friends, inverted social status and being bullied. Indeed, O'Brien (2004) reported bullying concerns for 15 per cent of the sample.

1.2.4.2 Post-transition experiences

Similar to international findings, evidence from Irish studies has indicated that most pupils settle in quickly. According to Smyth *et al* (2004), 20 per cent of pupils settle immediately; 43 per cent in one week; 25 per cent in one month; and 14 per cent take longer.

For comparison purposes, the following themes characterising the post-transition experience match those recorded internationally and specific or additional areas highlighted by Irish research are articulated.

School as community

Consistent with the international literature, pupils initially have a mix of emotions about post-primary school. Specifically, Smyth *et al* (2004) found 56 per cent had mixed feelings on their first day, 22 per cent had positive-only feelings (excited, happy, confident/relaxed) and 21 per cent had negative-only feelings (nervous, lost, confused/small, *see also* Darmody, 2008). Both studies also indicated that negative emotions were more prevalent among pupils: with lower psychometric scores; who ranked themselves at the bottom of their sixth class; who had no pre-entry contact; or who felt they had little idea of what to expect. Again, pupils were conscious of the new codes of discipline and report that they are harder to adhere to than those at primary school. Reported incidences of rule-breaking were mostly minor, however, with few suspensions. Once again, pre-transition concerns about bullying do not materialise, although a few pupils reported pushing by older students.

The learning experience

In spite of early academic concerns, O'Brien (2004) reported that only a small number of pupils found post-primary schoolwork difficult. While Smyth *et al* (2004) reported this figure to be as high as 43 per cent, they also noted that the majority found the work interesting, were pleased with their progress and believed they were faring comparably with others. As observed internationally, O'Brien reported that liking subjects was associated with liking the subject teachers.

Feeling lost

Consistent with international evidence, O'Brien (2004) reported that getting lost and timetables are early pre-occupations. Pupils in that research, however, reported some relevant positive features:

- They had received useful assistance with timetables and getting around.
- School size was perceived as a marker of status increase.
- Changing classes offered new freedom.

What makes a good teacher

Outcomes from O'Brien (2004) indicated that 95 per cent of pupils had positive perceptions of teachers and Smyth *et al* (2004) reported that 61 per cent believed that school personnel had played a significant role in helping them settle. Nonetheless, pupils overall generated more negative comments about post-primary than primary teachers (*eg* harsh punishment for minor rule infringements).

1.2.4.3 Parents and transition in the Irish context

Two studies have examined parental perceptions of transition in Ireland. That is, O'Brien (2004) interviewed parents ($N=48$) of pupils in sixth class and again in first year about their perceptions of transition. Smyth *et al* (2004) conducted phone interviews with 81 parents to examine their experiences and perceptions. Relevant findings from both studies are summarised below and again these bear strong overlap with international evidence.

- Parents were generally confident their children would settle socially, but had significant concerns about making friends and bullying, and some had concerns about their children's relationships with teachers.
- Parents voiced concerns about organisational features, including school size and a more formal atmosphere. Both subject and teacher diversity were largely perceived negatively. Not all parents were aware of, or happy with, school support structures, such as mentoring.
- Curricular discontinuity was a significant academic concern, with an emphasis on pupils now having greater responsibility.
- Parents of pupils with academic difficulties expressed uncertainty about continuity of resources.

1.2.5 Existing evidence on pupils with SEN and transition

Relative to existing evidence on general samples of pupils, the international literature base on the transitions of pupils with SEN is considerably smaller. In one study which partially addresses this issue, Evangelou *et al* (2008) reported that such pupils did not overall experience a less successful transition outcome than those without SEN. Nonetheless, it is possible that factors which make the latter more vulnerable to poor transitions may have implications for the transition experiences of pupils with SEN (see

Maras & Aveling, 2006; Tur-Kaspa, 2002). This possibility is based on a number of findings.

- Low attainment, low self-esteem, problem behaviour and social challenges are risk factors for poor transition outcomes (eg Anderson *et al* 2000; West *et al* 2008), and are more prevalent among pupils with SEN (Maras & Aveling, 2006; Maunsell *et al* 2007).
- These risk factors have in turn been associated with increases in experienced levels of transition stress and anxiety (West *et al* 2008).
- Certain systemic factors affect the experiences of pupils with SEN in unique ways. For example, specific legislative and policy imperatives on assessment, identification, resource allocation and effective service provision come into play for these pupils particularly when in transition, but not for others.
- Different types or constellations of SEN may render particular factors and/or stressors differentially influential (see Maras & Aveling).

Although existing literature on SEN and transition does show that themes observed with pupils in general are also recorded with those with SEN, other themes are unique to this sub-group. At this point it is important to note that isolating factors associated with SEN *per se* is difficult and only research directly examining the transition experiences of this population will provide insight into their transition issues (see O'Brien, 2001). Maras and Aveling (2006) summarised the key research issue as follows:

... simple comparisons of the effect of transitions on young people with and without special educational needs do not allow for consideration of how particular stressors develop during transition and what measures are needed to minimise their effects. Arguably, it would be more beneficial to compare and contrast the individual experiences of young people with differing types of special educational needs (p198).

This view is consistent with the aims and methods of the current study in that the research attempts to explore the individual pupil experience, especially in terms of pre- and post-transition stressors. In doing so, we also selected pupils with a diverse range of specific needs in order to examine potential relationships between specific needs and specific stressors.

The themes that emerge across existing international and national studies on the transition experiences of pupils with SEN bear strong similarity with pupils in general (Forgan & Vaughn, 2000; Lovitt *et al* 2009; Maras & Aveling, 2006; Maunsell *et al* 2007), but reveal factors that appear to be unique to this sub-group of pupils.

1.2.5.1 Pre-transition concerns

Similar to pupils in general, those with SEN have greatest fears about harder work and bullying. While this group have unique pre-transition concerns about continuity of resources (Maras & Aveling, 2006), they also report that pre-transition visits to the new school are beneficial (Maras & Aveling; Maunsell *et al* 2007).

1.2.5.2 Post-transition concerns

Similar to pupils without SEN, the evidence recorded for pupils with SEN suggests pre-transition concerns about making new friends do not materialise (Maras & Aveling, 2006). Nonetheless, the latter continue to emphasise strongly existing and new peers (especially those in the same year) perhaps because they remain fearful of bullying (Forgan & Vaughn, 2000; Maunsell *et al* 2007). Larger academic and school environment demands, which feature strongly with pupils in general, are also experienced by pupils with SEN (timetables, getting lost, workload, homework, more subjects, more teachers and discipline), although Forgan and Vaughn reported that these features also allow pupils with SEN to experience a sense of greater independence.

Accessing support is the primary theme recorded for pupils with SEN, but not with pupils in general. Maras and Aveling (2006) reported pupil perceptions that knowing about resources on arrival at the new school (and having a sense of continuity) reduced post-transition anxieties. Maunsell *et al* (2007) also reported a pupil preference for accessing support outside of the classroom and other evidence suggests this may serve to reduce stigmatisation by peers (Maras & Aveling).

Research by Maunsell *et al* (2007) is the only published study to investigate transition for pupils with SEN in the Irish context. While this research involved only eight pupils and two parents, the findings overlap once again with those recorded for this sub-group in international studies and are summarised below:

- Pupils had a generally positive perception of primary school, especially outings, teachers, subjects and sports, and indicated they would miss their teachers.
- Pupils had formed generally positive perceptions of the new post-primary school after several visits. They were acutely aware, however, of new disciplinary requirements and their biggest fears centred on hard work and bullying.
- Of the eight pupils involved in the research, four said they were 'happy' with primary school supports and the remaining four were 'very happy'. They were also aware that these supports would be important at post-primary school.

1.3 Section Summary

A considerable body of largely homogeneous evidence exists on the transition of pupils in general from primary to post-primary education in terms of common pre-transition concerns and specific post-transition experiences. In short, some level of pre-transition concern appears to be the norm among pupils and relates to: academic issues; the school environment; and social issues. On balance, pupils at pre-transition also experience excitement and anticipation about all three areas.

Several themes appear to characterise the post-transition experience, including school as community; the learning experience; feeling lost; adult or child; and what makes a good teacher. Overall, pre-transition concerns do not fully materialise and dissipate quickly at the new school for most pupils, although even this majority acknowledge differences between primary and post-primary school, and recognise the need for adjustments across various domains. For a smaller percentage of pupils, especially

those from various sub-groups, pre-transition worries take longer to dissipate and these individuals also appear to experience more difficult transitions in various respects (Smyth *et al* 2004).

Since the late 1990s, studies of transition in Ireland have been reported and overall these bear strong overlap with the international evidence in pre-transition concerns and post-transition experiences.

International evidence indicates that parents play a potentially important role in their children's transitions, but also that they have their own concerns (*eg* bullying, safety, homework and friends). Two studies have examined the transition experiences of parents in Ireland, and the themes overlap again with international evidence on school choice, curricular continuity and pre-transition concerns about social issues.

Relative to the large body of research on pupils in general, the sub-group of pupils with SEN has received less research attention at international and national levels. While some evidence suggests this group overall do not experience a less successful transition, identified barriers to transition may be more prevalent among this group (*eg* low attainment, low self-esteem, problem behaviour and social challenges) and these may affect pupil experiences of transition. Although this group's pre-transition concerns and post-transition experiences are strikingly similar to pupils in general, accessing support is a largely unique theme. Only one published study has investigated the transition experiences of pupils in Ireland with SEN and once again findings overlap strongly with international evidence.

2 Methodology

This section sets out the methodological approach for this study which is summarised thus:

- pilot work
- choice of qualitative methodology
- focus groups design and implementation
- analysis and reporting
- ethical issues.

In total, the research programme comprised several elements in addition to what is reported here. These included psychometric testing with pupils, and quantitative surveys of parents and school personnel. Limitations associated with the quantitative elements of the research meant their potential was not realised, and the psychometric testing was of limited value to the study's aims. Hence, a decision was made with the NCSE to focus on the qualitative elements and related findings in this report.

2.1 Pilot Work

The development of the topics for the focus groups with pupils and their parents was constructed and informed by pilot work conducted immediately before the research. Overall, the pilot work aimed to identify possible methodological, logistical and personal issues for the researchers and the participants that may influence the focus groups which would subsequently comprise the main body of the study. Pilot work comprised two focus groups conducted with pupils with SEN: one with children from a mainstream school in a rural area; the other with children from a special school in Dublin. In addition, two focus groups were conducted with the parents of these children. None of these individuals participated thereafter.

Although the findings from the pilot work were not considered as data in their own right (and as such none is reported), they did raise awareness of several issues. For example, the pilot pupils' focus groups demonstrated that different variations of one question might be necessary before the children understood what was being asked. This was particularly relevant to children with specific types of SEN. In addition, these focus groups emphasised that the children enjoyed being part of the group and the importance of the researcher taking time to get to know pupils beforehand to ensure they felt as comfortable as possible.

One specific issue arose from the pilot parent focus groups. On two occasions parents became distressed during a focus group highlighting an important issue of support for the research team. As a result, all parents were invited to discuss their concerns with the researcher (and with the principal investigator if desired) after the focus groups. Where possible, a list of support services relevant to SEN and/or transition was provided to all parents.

2.2 Choice of Qualitative Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative approach to capture the pupil experience and to bolster this with the experiences of the children's parents.

According to Coyle (2006), 'to hear children's voices, a method is required that values subjectivity, enhances empowerment and allows us to enter the respondents' world of meaning and belief' (p21). Qualitative methodologies can permit access to this world through the children's own self-expression (*see also* Bender & Ewbank, 1994) and readily facilitate sensitivity. Sensitivity is a key advantage of using qualitative methods with children, in creating a non-threatening environment in which the researcher has ongoing access to the child's experience even where this has the potential to induce distress.

Focus groups give children the opportunity to explore and exchange their experiences in a naturalistic setting that is safe and stimulating (Heary & Hennessy, 2002). They also provide a useful context in which more reticent children, such as those with SEN, may be encouraged to offer their account (Beresford, 1997). Nonetheless, it is not uncommon that some children are reluctant to participate in group sessions while wishing to be involved in research (Wilkinson, 2000).

2.3 Focus Groups Design and Implementation

2.3.1 Topics for discussion

A semi-structured format was employed in all focus groups and interviews. Topics for discussion were generated from the literature, discussions with relevant professionals and the NCSE, and pilot work. Designated topics acted as a cue for discussions, but the sequence was set by participants. See Appendix A for pre-transition topics and Appendix B for post-transition topics used in pupil focus groups. See Appendix C for pre-transition topics and Appendix D for post-transition topics used in parent focus groups.

2.3.2 Timeframe

Pre-transition refers to the period when pupils were in sixth class at primary school and formally preparing for transition. Seven pupil focus groups ($N=32$) were carried out during this phase between March and June 2009 (see Table 1). Six parent focus groups ($N=28$) plus three one-to-one interviews (PA34, PA35 and PA39) were carried out in the same period.

Table 1: Overview of the research process

Research phases	Pupils ($N=32$)	Pupils' Parents ($N=31$)
Pre-transition	7 Focus Groups ($N=32$)	6 Focus Groups ($N=28$) & Interviews ($N=3$)
Post-transition	7 Focus Groups ($N=26$) & Interview ($N=1$)	5 Focus Groups ($N=26$) & Interviews ($N=3$)

Post-transition refers to the period when the children entered first year at post-primary school and had direct experience of transition. Seven pupil focus groups ($N=26$), plus

one interview (P14), were carried out during this phase between October and December 2009. Five parent focus groups plus three one-to-one interviews (PA34, PA35 and PA39) were carried out in the same period. An individual identifier 'P' was allocated to each child who participated (eg P10). To distinguish pupils from parents, but to identify the relationship between specific children and their parents, a matched identifier (eg PA 10) was allocated to each parent.

The focus groups' exploration of pupil and parent perspectives represented a snapshot of their experiences late in the transition planning stage (several months before the end of sixth class) and early after the school move (within the first two months of post-primary school). Because different experiences might have been reported had different time points been selected, no attempt is made to generalise the findings beyond this timeframe.

2.3.3 Procedure

Following initial expressions of interest through gatekeepers in the children's primary schools, the researcher contacted parents directly and thereafter met parents and children. A research information sheet was provided and written consent was obtained from both parties. All pre-transition focus groups and interviews with pupils and parents were conducted within four weeks of this meeting.

All pupil focus group discussions and interviews took place in the children's schools, with only the pupils, the researcher, the researcher's assistant and a SNA, as appropriate, present. Allocation to focus groups was governed primarily by logistics (maximum=6, minimum=3). Parental focus groups and interviews were similarly conducted. All interviews were conducted as a result of a specific request from a parent or pupil and after discussions with the relevant parent. The main reason for this request was a participant feeling uncomfortable discussing relevant issues in a group setting. All focus groups and interviews ranged in duration between 40 and 60 minutes — time variations reflected different levels of participant input across the groups.

2.4 Analysis and Reporting

2.4.1 Data recording

Of the 14 focus groups conducted with pupils, three, as well as the single pupil interview, were audio taped. Of the 11 parent focus groups, none was audio taped, although all six parental interviews were. The audio data was uploaded onto a secure, password-protected computer in the Department of Psychology at NUIM and erased from the portable audio recording device. Following verbatim transcription of the coded audio material, the audio data was erased from the computer.

Written records constituted the recorded data for all focus groups not audio taped (ie where recording was interrupted or not consented to at the outset). A research assistant attended all focus groups and took a verbatim written record of verbal exchanges. This record was taken in 'shorthand' (a method of speedy writing by means of substitution of contractions or arbitrary signs or symbols for letters or words). These shorthand

notes were subsequently transcribed in longhand. The inherent difficulties in achieving a complete and entirely accurate record of verbal exchanges while note-taking must be acknowledged. In all cases, written records were edited to replace all names and personal identifiers with relevant participant codes and associated details. These anonymised transcripts were subsequently analysed. Once again, paper-based data were stored in a secure location in the Department of Psychology at NUIM with access restricted to the research team. All material containing identifiers was destroyed to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of data.

The research team operated an 'ethics as process' approach to pupil and parent participation, which allowed for consent to participation and/or recording to be withdrawn without penalty at any time. The emotive nature of discussions in parent focus groups led to the discontinuation of taping in all sessions at participant request. As a result, consent was not provided to audio tape any complete accounts of these groups. A number of parents refused to consent to the audio recording of focus groups in which their children were participating. As a result, consent was not given from the outset to audio tape 11 of the pupil focus groups.

While audio recording is undoubtedly preferable, note-taking becomes essential when participants refuse to consent to audio recording at the beginning of a focus group, or when they request that audio recording is discontinued during data collection. While the research team envisaged, and sought consent for, the audio recording of all focus groups and interviews, ethical issues made this extremely difficult. Where this was not provided (from the outset or ceased during data collection), it would not have been ethically appropriate for the authors to try to pursue this issue to any greater extent than was done. Unwillingness to give consent by one participant in a focus group at the time of data collection resulted in the absence of taping during that focus group and all participants therein were advised of this fact.

2.4.2 Theoretical approach

An improvised grounded theory approach was used to generate interpretive thematic analyses on an iterative and emergent basis throughout data collection and formal data analysis (Potter, 1998; Henwood & Pidgeon, 2006). The justification for this approach is as follows. The study's *raison d'être* was to generate insight into child and parent perspectives at two time periods either side of transition. Therefore, it was not logistically possible to apply a fully traditional grounded theory analysis. Instead, a pragmatic approach was adopted, whereby preliminary thematic analyses were employed on an ongoing basis throughout data collection (to (re)direct and refine the questions asked of pupils and parents, until those questions yielded no further insights during subsequent focus groups). Unlike traditional grounded theory, the main formal analysis of the data was performed after the completion of data collection.

Grounded theory was adopted because it is relatively unique in providing a tried and tested framework in which diverse qualitative approaches can be blended (Breakwell *et al* 2006). Generally speaking, qualitative analyses tend to restrict their focus either to emphasising what individuals passively experience from given situations (*eg* interpretive phenomenological analyses; Smith & Eatough, 2006), versus how and/or why they

actively construct their reality about those situations in particular ways (*eg* discursive analyses; Coyle, 2006; Edwards, 2003). Crucially however, this study sought to adopt both these complementary perspectives: the 'insider's perspective' of interpretive phenomenological analyses to understand what is important to children and parents; as well as the 'observer's perspective' of discursive analysis, in order to understand how and why those things come to be important to children and parents.

The study's basic aim was to provide naturalistic insights into how prevailing beliefs modify the children's and parents' ongoing experiences of transition. As such, the research sought to elucidate a strongly ecological account in which participants' statements were considered in terms of what they literally mean and what tacit function(s) they serve.

In line with this perspective, focus groups and one-to-one interviews used a semi-structured interview technique to allow child and parent perspectives to unfold naturally. When consensus emerged quickly among focus group participants on a particular topic, the group moderator actively sought to examine aspects of the topic that created a greater diversity of opinion. The focus groups sought to elicit information on what the children and parents believed and also why they held such beliefs. The moderator, therefore, avoided the use of narrow or prescriptive questions and continually adapted the broad topic guide to elicit authentic experiences of participants within a social context.

Throughout data collection, and then later during data analysis, the extant literature was used to set the scene for this study's analysis, rather than serving as a foundation *per se*. The current analysis sought to cast a wide net, exploring novel insights on the transition experiences of children with SEN and their parents. It would be naive to claim any interpretative approach is purely inductive: to interpret, a qualitative analyst must by definition reference his/her prior understandings of relevant topics.

2.4.3 Data analysis

Each focus group transcript was printed as a hardcopy and the transcripts were read and re-read to gain a sense of the data overall. Open coding, theoretical memo writing and the method of constant comparison were then applied to the data in a recursive and reflexive manner (Henwood & Pidgeon, 2006). More specifically, formal data analysis commenced with the formulation of an indexing system that identified passages according to the: focus group from which they originated; page number of the focus group to which they belonged; and participant code(s) of the individual(s) involved. Early readings consisted mainly of open coding which involved providing theory-relevant summary descriptions of the data in the left-hand margins of the hardcopy transcripts.

As the analysis progressed, abstract themes were developed as theoretical memos in the right-hand margin of the hardcopy transcripts, with the aim of capturing more abstract and characteristic functional relationships among the concrete categories identified in the data during open coding. The method of constant comparison was used to generate further theoretical memos that would distil redundancy and resolve incoherence among earlier open codings and theoretical memos.

At the stage where no new theoretical memos were forthcoming from re-readings of the transcripts, collections of similar theoretical memos as higher level thematic codings that were accompanied by transcribed passages, particularly characteristic of each theoretical memo, were created. By the repeated application of the method of constant comparison, coherent themes began to emerge that were at once both individually refined and distinct from each other. During this process, emphasis was placed upon the construction of emergent patterns of themes and concerns across focus groups until theoretical saturation was reached relative to Glaser and Strauss' (1971) concepts of 'fit' (the recognisability of theoretical interpretations across the data) and 'work' (the utility of the insights provided). In other words, emergent themes were repeatedly honed against the data to ensure full and accurate grounding in participant accounts. Analysis persisted until further manipulation and re-arrangement of inducted theoretical categories appeared to yield trivial benefits to an understanding of the children's transition experiences. The focus group data from the pre-transition phase was analysed in this manner first, followed by an analysis of the focus group data from the post-transition phase in the same way, which was then used to retrospectively re-evaluate the earlier analyses provided for the pre-transition focus group data.

Although this study's findings must in a sense be viewed as limited to the particular children and school settings involved, the primary aim was to employ the above integrative theoretical framework to provide insightful characterisations of the types of processes that typically influence children's transition experiences. The ultimate aim was less about providing generalisable information on the specific content of children's experiences of transition, and more about providing transferable insight about the types of processes that are influential in terms of facilitating versus undermining successful transition experiences.

2.4.4 Profile of participating pupils

For the purposes of the study, a sample of schools was stratified according to geographical location (north west, west, east and south) in both rural and urban areas and according to school type (mainstream or special). This was generated by accessing a database provided by the NCSE and supplemented by previously established school contacts known to the research team ($N=15$). As a result, 30 primary schools (22 mainstream schools and eight special schools) agreed to participate. The school types attended by the core sample of 32 pupils are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: School characteristics and numbers of core sample of pupils attending

School type	Number of schools	Number of pupils
Mainstream urban	14	14
Mainstream rural	3	3
Mainstream DEIS (urban & rural)	5	7
Special (urban & rural)	8	8
Total	30	32

The potential pupil sample from these was selected according to their identifiable SEN to ensure that the full range of pupils with SEN was represented and to include all for who full participation was deemed feasible and appropriate. Of the 32 children who made up the core sample, 21 (65.6 per cent) were male and 11 (34.4 per cent) were female. The mean age of this sample was 12 years and two months (range=11 years, 8 months to 13 years, 9 months). Relevant participant characteristics are provided in Table 3 (initial participant codes have not been re-assigned). All information in the table on each child's SEN and more specific needs was obtained from questionnaires completed by each child's sixth class teacher. (No. = Participant number. See *List of Acronyms* for definitions of SEN categories and specific needs).

2.5 Ethical Issues

This study was conducted in accordance with the British Psychological Society (BPS, 2006) and the Psychological Society of Ireland (PSI, 1999) guidelines for research. The research protocol was approved by the National University of Ireland Maynooth Ethics Committee in January 2009. Several schools required separate ethical applications to school-based ethics boards. In all such cases, approval was granted before the research began. Confidentiality of data was emphasised in all phases. Participant codes replaced the actual names of all participants and schools. All data were stored securely with access restricted to the research team.

Under the child protection guidelines for schools (Department of Education and Science 2001, 2004), any person or persons who engage with children under 18 years old on school premises is required to undergo a clearance process with An Garda Síochána. In line with these guidelines, the primary researcher (Dr. Scanlon) submitted an application for clearance and was approved prior to commencement of the research. It was agreed with all participating schools that any information received by the researcher from participants pertaining to matters of child protection, the protocols developed in each school would be followed accordingly.

Informed consent and confidentiality of data are critical features in respecting and protecting research participants. All participants were informed of the study's purpose, the voluntary and confidential nature of participation and the option to withdraw at any time without providing a reason. Once parental written consent and assent were received, each child was approached, the study was explained in age-appropriate terms and the child was invited to participate. Before 'formal' data collection, the researcher established rapport with participants demonstrating sensitivity to their concerns and needs.

Table 3: Participant characteristics of the core sample of pupils

No	Sex	Specific Needs	No	Sex	Specific Needs
1	F	MGLD	22	M	ADHD
2	F	MGLD; ADHD	25	F	Dyslexia
3	M	Asperger's Syndrome	26	F	EDBP
4	M	ADHD	27	F	ADHD; Unidentified Assessed Syndrome
5	F	Asperger's Syndrome	28	F	Dyslexia
6	M	ADHD; Dyslexia	29	M	Dyslexia; Asperger's Syndrome
7	M	ADHD; Dyslexia; Dyspraxia	31	M	Hearing Impairment
10	M	Dyspraxia	32	F	MGLD; SLD; EDBP
12	M	Dyslexia	33	M	Dyslexia
13	M	Dyspraxia; MGLD; Epilepsy	34	M	Hearing Impairment; Visual Impairment; Cerebral Palsy; SSLD
14	M	MGLD; ADHD	35	M	ASD; MGLD; Verbal Dyspraxia; Physical Dyspraxia
15	M	MGLD; Hearing Impairment	37	F	MGLD
16	M	MGLD	38	M	ADHD
17	M	MGLD	39	M	MGLD; Physical Disability
18	M	MGLD; EDBP	42	F	Hearing Impairment
19	F	MGLD; SSLD	43	M	Asperger's Syndrome

The research team adopted an 'ethics as a process' approach, affording participants the ongoing opportunity to negotiate consent to participation. Five children expressed reticence immediately before scheduled focus groups and were given the option to participate through joint parent-child interviews. Parental presence in this context may have influenced resulting data.

With the foremost priority being research participant welfare, the researchers were mindful of the possibility that discussing expectations, concerns and experiences of transition might be distressing for some (both children and adults alike). Individuals displaying discomfort or distress were afforded empathy and the opportunity for a rest break or withdrawal of participation. A small number of pupils did become distressed while recounting their anxieties surrounding transition, but most appeared to enjoy discussing their experiences with the researcher and other peers. Where children disclosed information that raised concern for the researcher (including direct requests for assistance), commitment to the safety and welfare of the child determined appropriate action.

A number of parent participants exhibited considerable distress during their focus groups. The researcher dealt with these situations by listening in an encouraging and

non-judgemental manner so as to empower the parent(s) in question. Parents did not express dissatisfaction with any aspect of the research and reported that being able to voice their concerns and share their experiences with others in a similar position had been a positive experience. After the focus groups, all parents were provided with a list of support services that provided supports relevant to SEN and/or transition.

3 Pupils' Perspectives on Transition: Results

The authors would like to reiterate that the qualitative data reported in this section was based on a small sample of pupils and thus the findings cannot be generalised to the wider population.

3.1 Pre-transition Focus Group Data

Four interrelated themes emerged from analyses of the pre-transition focus group data:

- things I will miss
- fitting in and keeping up
- laying the groundwork: getting to know new people
- experiencing and talking about 'going to the new school'.

Each is described in detail below and illustrated with supporting quotations. All quotations are verbatim excerpts from transcripts, derived from recordings, where available, or from shorthand notes (see above). The quotations presented here were specifically selected to illustrate themes that emerged from the qualitative data and these themes were, in turn, identified on the basis of their recurrence in the data. All pupils are referred to using their individual 'P' identifiers (eg P10).

Things I will miss

Many pupil concerns about transition emerged from the impending loss of the familiar security provided by their primary school community. At the kernel of these concerns were loss of the trust and care of primary teachers, and loss of the solidarity, stability and stature they had derived from existing relationships with primary peers of all ages.

P26: I'll miss me friends, cos we are probably going to be split up and here, like, we all play together and I don't think people play together over there and, like, I'll probably see them around and that, but it might be terrible not being able to see them.

P13: My friends are not going to be there, well some will be, like, out of my class, but I play with some other kids from fourth and fifth [class].

P5: I might make new friends, though I really like my friends here and I think that I will miss them if we are not together, cos, like, everybody minds you and looks out for you.

Pupils described how they would miss teachers who understood, protected and cared for them. Many were anxious about whether they would be afforded the opportunity to get to know, and be known by, post-primary teachers (see 'fitting in and keeping up' for a discussion of this issue). The possibilities for positive new relationships, however, were also evident in their accounts.

P5: Well Mrs X [resource teacher] really looks after me. If I'm having a bad day, you know, she helps me and helps me not to be so anxious and I can go to her room and that makes me feel ok... I will miss Mrs X because she understands me. But I will be alright once I find my new Mrs X when I go over there [post-primary school].

Pupil accounts also illustrated fears of losing a sense of social standing in the transition from primary school (where they were the oldest pupils, entrusted with positions of responsibility) to post-primary (where they would be the youngest).

P12: Sometimes we get to mind them [the younger classes] and we won't get to do anything like that because we will be the youngest and we might have older fellas minding us.

For some, life at post-primary school was potentially hazardous because of this loss of social stature. This concern is illustrated by the following exchange between two boys.

P13: I suppose you just have to get used to it and then it will be ok but, the only thing is, like, we will be the youngest and we might get bullied and that, and I heard that some boys got their heads put down the toilet and then they flush it, and on your first day you get beaten up, especially the boys. I don't think it happens to the girls.

P10: Yeah, I heard that about our school too. You'll just have to learn to run fast.

Customs taken for granted in primary school, such as no homework on Fridays, staying in the same classroom (and having a sense of ownership over it) and a sense of 'belonging to a teacher' are undermined in transition with the introduction of unfamiliar customs. Nonetheless, some children welcomed this change.

P6: I'm looking forward to changing classrooms cos I get really bored and that's how I get into trouble.

Others were more reluctant, as illustrated by one girl's account of a practice class during a visit to the post-primary school.

P5: It was a bit strange cos, like, the teachers just came in and started the class and gave you homework at the end and we had to write it down and they only gave us a few minutes cos in the community school they only do that, like, give you a few minutes and then you had to pack up really quick and go to the next class.

Although self-organisation and self-reliance may appear to be relevant issues, it is perhaps more accurate to present an analysis that is not so much within the child, but one which emphasises difficulties that arise from the temporary discontinuities in social conventions and expectations. That is, pupils had concerns about their ability to follow the new rules and these concerns were manifest in desires to fit in and stay out of trouble. This point is developed in the two subsequent themes.

Fitting in and keeping up

Pupil accounts suggest prospective concerns about post-primary school were inherently social. Broadly, these concerns were twofold:

- about learning to fit in among the various strata of the new social structures (peers of the same age, older peers, teachers, school rules)
- about keeping up with the school curriculum, as couched in terms of potential social disapproval.

As one girl (P32) replied when asked if there was anything she was worried about:

... getting bullied and people not being nice to me. I wouldn't like that.

Similarly, one of the boys (P33) said:

If they [teachers] don't like you and you don't like them, they might give out to you all the time and then you will always be getting into trouble.

Social anxieties were also linked to the geography of new social spaces.

P5: I think it's going to be really scary and noisy especially at the lockers cos it can get really busy. My brother told me, he is there already, and there's loads of pushing and shoving and you have to really mind where your locker is going to be and some of the boys are really big.

Pupils were keenly aware of the need to be prepared for the new array of rules and expressed strong fears about doing something 'wrong'. Their accounts suggest that organisational rules cannot be separated from social rules because the former are a product of social convention. A key issue here is that pupils were acutely aware of their own lack of knowledge of the new rules and social conventions, and recognised that these were distinctly different from primary school. For example, many pupils referenced fears about the embarrassment of inadvertently interrupting a class by opening an incorrect door, or breaking the rules and coming into conflict with teachers.

P5: Oh, if I got a bad note I would be so upset.

P33: My friend told me about all of the books you have to remember to bring every day and if you forget your book they give out to you and they give you lines.

P7: You will have loads of teachers and they might all have different rules and if you don't do what you are supposed to do you will be sent to the principal.

P28: I suppose if you do as you are told you won't get into trouble and sure they would have to give you time to get to know the rules and that, wouldn't they?

Pupils articulated anxieties about getting to know, and being known by, new teachers.

P13: I think that having different teachers might be good, but it might be hard getting to know all of them and they won't know us.

Not being understood by teachers held the possibility that inadvertent rule violations would not be tolerated.

P5: I will be afraid that I'm going to be late and the teachers will give out to me. So I will have to be up really early so I can make sure I am on time. But my mam sometimes doesn't hurry up and I'm saying 'come on mam hurry up we are going to be late'. But it's ok here because they know me, but they won't know me over there and they won't know that I really try hard not to be late.

For many pupils, the implication of a teacher's reprimand for inadvertent rule breaking is that teachers do not approve of them as individuals. For example, a rule violation is synonymous with being labelled 'bad'. This interchange between two girls illustrates the perceived dynamic between teacher reprimands and pupil interpretations of a teacher's feelings.

P27: I won't miss anything here [in primary school]. Ah well, I might miss the little ones, like and that, but I can't wait to get out of here cos my teacher and the principal, they hate me. So I won't miss them.

P25: They don't hate you [other pupil's name], you just are always talking and getting into trouble.

Unsurprisingly, pupils who perceived that they had experienced similar social rejection in primary school seemed to expect teachers to reject them in the new school. The following quotation from P4, although spoken in a sarcastic tone, illustrates primarily the pupil's perception that suspension from the new school was inevitable.

P4: I'm looking forward to getting suspended.

Concerns about being able to keep up with the school curriculum were intertwined with fears of social disapproval and rejection.

P33: I think the work will be hard and you might get into trouble for not getting it done, like, all of the homework and trying to remember everything.

P39: It's great doing subjects, but what about all the books and the homework? My friend says there is loads to do and it's hard and the teachers get cross with ya if ya don't do it right.

With this in mind, it may be important to recognise the potential for pupils with SEN, in particular, to feel like they cannot fit in and become accepted for who they are. Indeed, SENs may make a pupil's social anxieties surrounding transition all the more potent.

Moderator: How do you know it's going to be rally hard?

P6: Because loads of fellas tell you. Especially maths, maths is really hard over there and you have loads of exams and all that [pause] and if I don't take my tablet, like sometimes I forget and that, I will get myself in trouble, but I won't tell them that I didn't take it because I just want to be the same as everybody else and I don't want to be treated any differently, that's why I want to do those things.

The quotation illustrates how P6's desire to fit in with his peers (to be like everybody else) may have served to hamper his ability to keep up and fit in with the teacher. Indeed, many of the other pupils manifested a similar reticence to seek teachers' assistance in case they appeared different from classmates. Such concerns seem particularly germane given that Evangelou *et al* (2008) established that pupils with SEN are bullied more often than pupils without SEN. It, therefore, seems all the more important to encourage trust in teachers among pupils with SEN.

Laying the groundwork: getting to know new people

The preceding themes point to the importance of the child's sense of belonging in the transition to post-primary school. In anticipating this, participant accounts acknowledge a move away from the familiar, almost familial, social structures of primary school, towards the more complex and relatively unknown customs of post-primary. The importance of establishing relationships with teachers and peers was a key concern.

P34: I think it would be good if we met some of the teachers before we start and they might get to know our names and they would know who we are when we start.

The complexities of new academic challenges and social rules facing pupils were construed as less intimidating, once they were reassured that they could trust teachers and other pupils in the post-primary school, as they had done at primary. Pupils who had the opportunity to meet prospective teachers couched their expectations in terms of whether the teacher was nice or cross. Teachers served as a benchmark for pupil interpretations of the new school environment.

Opportunities to interact with other pupils in post-primary school were also significant.

P26: The girls that were there on the day of the exam, they were nice, they told us not to be so worried.

P25: Some of the other girls that, like, go there already were helping the teachers and they were very nice.

Similarly, participants were eager to establish relationships with peers.

P34: It would be good to know a few more people before we go, so if we met them beforehand that would help, because when you started you would get to know them more

Establishing a continued sense of belonging to a social network facilitates feelings of safety and security, as illustrated in the following exchange between two boys.

P38: The older lads, some of them are huge and they might beat you up.

P22: Nobody is going to touch me... I have loads of friends in that school.

Experiencing and talking about 'going to the new school'

Pupil accounts reflected a strong desire to get a head-start in terms of understanding the practicalities of the new school system and having enough information to know what to expect. As one girl (P25) said when asked if there was anything the school could do to make transition easier:

... if you could see the books and that, or see the teachers or something, or just know what it's going to be like.

The importance of experiencing the new school in advance is also highlighted in the following comments.

P29: We are not there, so we don't know what it's going to be like.

P28: I can't really imagine what it's going to be like cos our parents were with us [when visiting the school] and, like, they're not going to be there when we are going to the school.

Some pupils had opportunity to visit their prospective post-primary schools. Although this was welcomed by some, others expressed a wish for more information.

P31: That was good when we went to the school, but there was loads of us and you couldn't ask any questions. So it would be good if you could ask some questions, like our parents did.

P34: There will be a lot of us and I don't know where to go if I get sick or get a headache.

Pupils also recounted information about post-primary school they had received from primary school teachers and parents. These accounts emphasised:

- how difficult life at the new school would be
- how they should not let the school down by under-performing or behaving badly.

Three boys said this.

P6: The teachers keep telling you and going on about it and, like, about not letting the school down and behave yourself.

P15: Well the teachers and the other helpers, they just keep saying that when you go over to secondary school that we will have to work and that but nobody asks you what you think about it.

P16: Even me ma is telling me there will be more work.

Pupils recognised the likelihood of more and harder work in terms of more subjects, as well as the demands of choosing subjects.

P6: ... there will be so much to get used to, like the new subjects and if I don't get the subjects that I want I'm not going... I want to do metalwork and woodwork because I want to do things like that and not all that learning stuff that is going to be really hard.

Many pupils expressed worries about limited information and time to make good decisions about subject choices.

P7: I do be thinking about my new subjects. Like, what if I don't like them and then I can't change them? Cos you have to make a choice now and that's it, you have them forever then.

However, new subjects were also a source of excitement.

P19: The woodwork and art looked good. They have rooms just for you to do them in and you get to make things.

P7: I would like to do art and metalwork as well and I really want to do cooking, so then I can cook for my mum.

P2: And here's what I might make in woodwork, eh, a chair. I might make a chair, and eh, it'll say, it'll say 'grandad' at the back.

P5: It might be hard getting to every class, but I'm looking forward to the new stuff like science and that, and you know you have to have a special uniform for PE and your own uniform as well. So that might be hard in case you forget your stuff for PE, but you do it loads so it will probably be alright.

In particular, pupils were enthusiastic about subjects that offered the promise of making tangible objects, rather than learning abstract concepts. Their enthusiasm was linked to a sense of choice and ownership over a process that may lead to praise and esteem from others.

3.2 Post-transition Focus Group Data

Three themes emerged from the focus groups conducted with pupils during their first term in post-primary school.

Settling in

Pupil accounts centred on the negotiation of new rules and new relationships with peers, older pupils and teachers. The strangeness of first encounters and of being the youngest pupils in the school was evident in recollections of their first days.

P1: It was scary the first time I walked in.

P3: It was really strange and there was people you didn't know and you didn't know what to say to anybody.

P26: I was a bit scared as well cos I didn't know who was going to be in my class.

P4: ...all of the other fellas were looking at you... like, cos we were only the first years.

P25: ...you felt really small... not on the first day cos it was just us, but when the older girls came in the next day...

Organised activities and games helped to establish good rapport and a sense of school community in the early stages after transition.

P33: ... we played musical chairs that was a bit stupid but kind of fun and you had to find somebody whose birthday was the same time as you.

P31: ...we had to look at a timetable and then we had a room hunt; that was great. We were all mad looking for the rooms and they told you which stairs you could use and that.

For many pupils, pre-existing relationships served to buffer the awkwardness of those first days (this had been anticipated in pre-transition discussions, see 'fitting in and keeping up').

P15: I was a bit nervous, yes. But it was ok on the first day... All of the lads were here so that was good cos you knew some people. So that was good.

For many pupils, concerns about fitting in and finding their place in the school with teachers and other pupils (articulated at pre-transition) persisted. Social discontinuities were particularly palpable before pupils had the opportunity to embed themselves within the new school culture. Many were initially perplexed by the different rules presented by teachers, as this exchange among three participants indicates.

P4: They have different rules, you just have to know what they want.

P2: But that's just confusin'.

P38: I know what you mean.

Similarly, one girl (P26) commented:

One week you can do something and then you can't. It gets very confusing sometimes and then some of the teachers have different rules from the others.

In practical terms, pupils were concerned about being given out to, and articulated the sense of injustice at inadvertent rule-breaking and subsequent censure.

P28: ...I was really upset cos I was only asking for a pencil, but she said I should have put up my hand...but I just forgot to... One day this teacher said to me 'Do you know that you're not supposed to do that?' and I says 'No' and she still gave out to me.

P31: He [the teacher] didn't give me time to explain or anything, he just gave out and I got ten lines for being late too.

Trying to understand numerous teachers with whom they had daily contact, and to figure out the differences in their various interpretations and implementations of rules, were problematic.

P32: I thought it was better in the primary school with the teacher and that. I don't like having loads of teachers. It can get very, like, you don't understand them all and some of them are ok, but some of them get really cross with ya.

P2: They don't like you to ask them questions, so you learn not to ask questions. I got into trouble for that with some of them.

Asking questions, provoking questions

Support offered through formal peer mentoring arrangements was particularly important in assisting pupils to negotiate social interactions and gain relevant information. Pupils acknowledged that mentoring provided: information; practical and emotional support; friendship; advice; and advocacy.

P34: Mine [the mentor] is one of the girls from the older years and she's nice... She is very nice to me.

P31: Loads of us were thinking about bullying and that, but the mentors help out with that. So I think there is always somebody to help you if you want.

P26: I was panicking and saying 'Oh God, she's going to kill me' and then she [the mentor] came into the locker room and she saw me crying and she sorted it out.

Indeed, mentors played a particularly important role for pupils who were intimidated or reluctant to ask teachers for help.

P39: It's good, like, to have an older fella to ask things, like, and not be asking the teachers. Like, sometimes you might just feel stupid asking them, like the teachers, but now they are ok [the teachers]. But, you know it's just easier to ask them [the mentors].

P28: If you are not sure of something, you don't mind asking somebody that you know, but I wouldn't ask somebody that I didn't know. I would be too embarrassed.

P38: The teachers tell you to ask questions and that if you need anything just to ask them. I just don't like asking.

Participant comments on the indirect disclosure of their SEN to peers (*eg* by being absented from regular classes to access support services or by being exempted from particular subjects) acutely illustrate their awareness of the potential to be stigmatised and their reluctance to not fit in.

P4: Well, at first I did, like, I didn't want fellas to know where I was going.

P28: It's a bit embarrassing, like, cos the other girls ask you why you are not doing Irish and you don't know what to say. So, I just say 'I just don't'. I mean I don't want to tell them that I have dyslexia.

P7: I feel, like, I just wouldn't want the teachers to know. I'd just rather be treated as everybody else, like.

However, in spite of the potential for stigma, some pupils were aware of the need for support and highlighted problems that emerged from differences in the support they had received at primary school.

P4: Well, like, in my last school I had somebody to help me. I used to go to him for extra classes and that and they don't have that here, though I think some of them go and get some help. Do you think you could ask them about that for me?

P6: Ehm, well it's a lot different, the resource class here, cos over there I had a specific time to go over, and I'd come over, and, like, some days we'd do schoolwork. But here, it's, like, only when I'm upset I come, I've only come here [to the resource room], like, four times.

It's not as bad as you think it's going to be

In spite of initial fears, and even after experiencing some difficulties, many pupils gave post-primary school a qualified endorsement, as follows.

P1: It's not that bad... I would be saying to them [other first year pupils] not to be worrying cos the teachers are there to help ya and they do, like, and it's ok really.

P3: Yeah, it's not half as bad as you think it's going to be and you get to know your way around ok.

Initial concerns about negotiating the new physical environment, going from class to class and working within new timetables were supplanted by growing confidence and autonomy.

P12: Maybe three/four weeks later we got, like, more used to the freedom, like, the move from class to class. The subjects, I like. I actually like movin' from class to class. When you're movin', it, like kinda, clears your head of the other subject.

P6: It felt easier cos all the homework I got on Tuesday, most of it's not due til Thursday. So, if I'm busy on Tuesday, I don't have to do it til Wednesday.

The enthusiasm pupils had previously expressed for new subjects was mirrored in their accounts.

P4: I like some of the new subjects. Metalwork is deadly, like, and the computers are cool too. It's way better than primary school.

P19: Yeah, it's alright, better than primary. There's loads of new stuff, like em, subjects to do, but you don't have to do all them. At the beginning you do all of them and then you see what you want to do.

Similar to pre-transition sentiments, the children held a strong preference for 'making' and 'doing' subjects over more academic subjects.

P32: I like home economics cos you do cooking and that and make stuff and I like art and sometimes science because sometimes we do experiments and that. Yeah, I like those, but I don't like all the reading and maths and that. Oh it's very hard.

Again, subjects that involved tangible outputs (*eg* web pages and planning Christmas gifts in woodwork) which could then be admired by teachers and parents were particularly valued, as they provided opportunity to receive praise and to build esteem.

3.3 Section Summary

Four interrelated themes emerged from analyses of the pre-transition focus group data.

- 'Things I will miss' illustrates the connection between concerns about engaging in the transition process and ways in which the familiar security of primary school might be lost.
- 'Fitting in and keeping up' deals primarily with concerns about being able to obtain and utilise valuable social information.
- 'Laying the groundwork: getting to know new people' describes the sense of security which pupils with SEN seek through trusting social relationships with teachers and peers.
- 'Experiencing and talking about transition' focuses on pupil perceptions of the transition planning process. Many pupils explained how it was crucially important for them to have the opportunity to gain experience of the practicalities of the post-primary school routine.

Three themes emerged from analyses of the post-transition focus group data.

- 'Settling in' relates to pupils' impressions of their first days in the new school and difficulties in negotiating new rules and relationships.
- 'Asking questions, provoking questions' highlights barriers and facilitators to receiving information and help-seeking behaviour, and points to the benefits of peer mentoring relationships. The indirect disclosure of a pupil's SEN status to peers and the potential for stigmatisation are also captured in this theme.
- 'It's not as bad as you think it's going to be' describes positive post-transition experiences, such as enjoying new subjects, and gaining autonomy and independence by accommodating to the new school routine and environment.

4 Parental Experiences of Transition: Results

The authors would like to reiterate that the qualitative data reported in this section was based on a small sample of parents and thus the findings cannot be generalised to the wider population.

4.1 Pre-transition Focus Group Data

Four distinct but interrelated themes emerged during analyses of the data from the parental pre-transition focus groups ($N=28$) and interviews ($N=3$). All quotations are verbatim excerpts from transcripts, derived from recordings, where available, or from shorthand notes (see above). Once again, the quotations presented here were specifically selected to illustrate themes that emerged from the qualitative data and these themes were, in turn, identified on the basis of their recurrence in the data. All parents are referred to using their individual 'PA' identifiers (eg PA10), which distinguish them from pupils, but also indicate relationships between specific pupils and their parents (ie PA10 is the parent of P10).

Losing ground

Parent accounts articulated the potential for transition to represent a retrograde step for their children in terms of social integration and overall happiness. There was a clear sense that hard-won gains accrued in primary school could be significantly undermined or even destroyed. Parents were invariably uneasy and nervous about this possibility, and focus groups were frequently briefly suspended as parents became upset in contemplating this future. As an aside, it is important to reiterate that the researcher dealt with these situations by listening in an encouraging and non-judgemental manner, so as to empower the parent in question. Consider the example of PA16:

Ah, em, a bit nervous now. And even talking about it makes me nervous for him.

In particular, anxieties frequently stemmed from fears about losing the familiarity, comfort, support, security and understanding which parents and children had experienced in interactions with primary school communities, and in tandem the security and esteem these afforded.

PA35: Oh I am very nervous about it all especially as he has been so well looked after here [the primary school]. She [the child's SNA in primary school] knows what upsets him and how to calm him down. Now he has his bad days and he can get upset sometimes, but they understand him here and so do the other children and he rarely has trouble with any of them and he gets invited to the parties from the other wee boys and girls and their parents have been very good as well. I suppose too we are a wee small community here and people get to know you well. When he moves into the town it will be different and he will be with other students who will be much older than him.

Parents worried that the post-primary school would not be so accommodating.

PA5: Mrs X [child's primary school teacher] is very good to her. Actually she is very good to all of us and X [child] is used to that and even thinking about getting used to new people and other kids and older kids and that – well it just makes me worry and that. I really do worry. I do.

Paradoxically, parents ruminated on how their children's positive experiences of primary school might render them ill-equipped to deal with the abrupt changes at post-primary. Consistent with pupil data in Section 3, this sentiment appears to be in accordance with the social convention interpretation provided previously in that the positive social experience pupils had become accustomed to in primary school led to some level of shock when faced with the new and unexpectedly demanding social conventions of post-primary school. The following quotation illustrates this:

PA5: She will always work hard at school and doing well is important for her. So I know that she will do as well as she can. Sure, in some ways they are like lambs to the slaughter. I'm sorry [at this point the parent became upset and needed to take a break].

Although parents expressed concerns about academic success, social integration in the post-primary environment was of paramount importance.

PA43: You know, I'm not that worried about the subjects, but more about the social side of things for X [child]. If that clicks for him, then everything else will settle down for him. I mean, if he gets very anxious, then you can forget about anything else because he just will find it very hard to even get himself there... and being bullied as well. I mean, it's hard enough for kids, but for kids like X, well, he just doesn't read situations like other kids and he is very vulnerable to that. So that's more on my mind than anything else.

In particular, parents generally reported that their children found it difficult to make friends of their own age and preferred to befriend younger children. Accordingly, parents feared that their children may find it difficult to be the youngest among their peers at post-primary school. This perceived immaturity is highlighted in the next comment.

PA18: He is probably a little bit more immature than the others in his class and he doesn't really have any firm friends in the school or anything like that. He, em, plays with the younger kids and it's the same at home. X [child] is so innocent, compared to some of the lads his age. He wouldn't stand a chance against a bully at all. The school that he is going to will have over 1,000 pupils and coming from a primary school, well I just think that's very daunting for anybody.

Similar to concerns about their children integrating with same-age peers, parents were worried about whether post-primary teachers would offer the care and understanding their children had received at primary school.

PA25: The primary school where X [child] goes has been good for her and she is doing well. She gets her support, and that, but I don't think she will get that in the secondary school and I mean I think she will need it more than ever then.

Crucially, parents were very concerned about whether teachers would develop an understanding of their children as individuals and take the time to get to know them. PA38 illustrates this anonymity:

But, like, I think it's different in the primary school because you know, like, the teacher gets to know them and the master helps him out because he does try, and that. But, going over to the other school will be different, won't it, like, because they will have so many different teachers to cope with and the teachers won't know them.

Parents had specific concerns that post-primary teachers would not appreciate differences between pupils with and without SEN.

PA7: ... I think all of the kids will find it difficult at first, like, all the homework and new subjects and teachers, and that. God, I remember it well myself. But what I think might be different for X [child] is that it will take him longer than the others to settle in because he finds organising himself so hard and it's then that you will see the difference. Like, if you have no problems to start with then, yes of course, it will be hard at first but then you get used to it. But it takes him a good while to learn anything new and to get to grips with new routines and so that's where I see the problems. And then he might get left behind and teachers expect him to be up to par with everybody else. If they take the time to get to know him, then that's ok, but, sure, do they have the time to do all of that?

At the heart of these concerns was the fear that teachers may misinterpret their child's behaviour as trouble-making, when it may have been an inadvertent result of the child's SEN. PA34 highlighted this issue:

I would just hope that all of the teachers would know about X's [child's] problems and not put too many demands on him and know what he can do, and that, and them not thinking that he is just being lazy.

Getting off on the right foot was especially important.

PA6: So, it's good for them to get off on the right foot from the beginning and you don't want them getting a reputation with different teachers, like.

Information is critical: 'I'm not asking for the moon, but a bit more information'

As illustrated in the preceding theme, parents were concerned about their children becoming stigmatised and disadvantaged, and they strongly related this possibility to a lack of information being distributed to post-primary teachers. Such negative

consequences for a child are illustrated in the comments of PA27 in discussing an older child who had attended the same school.

Ah sure, I had a path worn to the school over my other daughter and she has mental health issues and attends X clinic. But, she gets very depressed and she self harms as well. Now she's in treatment and I sent all of the information to the school before she started and when she started, then sure, when I went to the parent teacher meeting, none of them knew anything. And she had gone downhill. Sure then, I knew why – they hadn't a clue. They were saying she wasn't motivated and gave in no homework and, sure, I knew nothing about this at all. And I made sure that I brought everything up to the school, but it just ends up in a drawer somewhere or in the principal's office.

Similarly, parents said they had received little information or reassurance on the availability of resources or supports for their children at post-primary school. Indeed, not knowing was a source of considerable distress and frustration.

PA7: But, it would be great if we could just have an appointment with somebody to talk about them going over and that... it's the not knowing. Like, if you knew there was a system, then you would say 'ok well they know what they are doing and everybody else has to do that as well so that's alright'. But we don't and that's my point.

Some parents interpreted this lack of information as a wait-and-see policy along with the DES, and believed this approach undermined the schools' competence and commitment to accommodating their children's SEN.

PA17: I think that probably helps if you know the school. But, they [the post-primary school] have also said that they would have to wait and see what type of support X [child] would need and that this probably wouldn't happen for a few months. So naturally, I'm worried about this... I'm just not sure why they say 'they will have to see what type of support he will need'. Maybe they know what they are doing.

This situation led some parents to feel angry and disenfranchised from the transition planning process. PA2 illustrates these sentiments:

She [the Home School Liaison Officer] said that we would just have to 'wait and see' because the school applies to the Department of Education. But they decide who gets the help, like and that, and so we won't know until September until they start, like. I think it's disgraceful leaving people waiting to see if their child is going to get only what they are entitled to, like.

In a similar vein, participants strongly criticised the seemingly automatic, unfair and needless loss of support they had petitioned so hard for at primary school. The following quotation illustrates this sense of injustice and the impact it might have on a child.

PA39: But, like I said, we have had to fight to get everything for X [child]. So, now we have to do it again because his services don't automatically go with him to X [post-primary school] - which makes life very difficult. I mean X's [child's] condition is not going to change. If anything, it's getting worse and the older he gets that is the way it's going to be. So he has to go for all the assessments again and then also to the HSE for medical things, and that. So, we have been busy since last January getting all of that done. The real thing I am worried about is the SNA. We still don't know if he will get one and I think that if he does not get one I will be getting called up to the school to help out with the toilet, and that, and I don't think that is fair at all. I mean X [child] is entitled to his education like everybody else and you don't see other parents having to go up to the school and doing those things and I said that at the meeting. So no, I suppose I'm not happy. I'm a bit stressed and very cross still at the SENO and to be honest you get so tired having to fight all of the time. I mean we shouldn't have to.

The lack of information and reassurances on resource continuity was exacerbated, according to parents, by their uncertainty about who was responsible for their child's transition.

PA25: Well I suppose if you knew who to talk to and that.

In response, parents were very eager for post-primary schools to streamline and co-ordinate transition planning through a single contact person who could communicate with all relevant parties. The following comment illustrates the frustration at this perceived lack of co-ordination:

PA39: It would make it easier if it could all be done together... I mean, the HSE and the education people do not talk to each other. So, every time you go to see somebody you have to tell them the whole story over and over and over again. And now we have to do that all again. I don't see why they cannot work together, surely it would make everything easier especially for us? But I don't suppose they think that way. They don't know what it is like, they just have to do their jobs and sometimes they can be very difficult.

I'd like help, but I don't want to make trouble for my child

As outlined in the previous theme, many parents were sensitive to post-primary teachers stigmatising their children because of their SEN. Indeed, this sensitivity was exacerbated by parent views of transition and gaining resources as part of a convoluted and overly bureaucratic system. These frustrations led some parents to conclude that post-primary schools perceived their children as an unnecessary imposition.

PA27: I think I gave up on that a long time ago. Sorry, but that probably sounds a bit unfair. But, it's only when you have a child with problems that you realise the system is set up for those that don't have problems. So, when teachers see somebody like my X [child] coming in they don't want to have to deal with her.

For parents, accessing supports for their child's SEN appeared to inadvertently stigmatise them and this had potentially direct consequences for their children.

PA28: I know some parents who don't want to tell the school in case their child gets picked on by the teachers.

PA34: ... you don't want to single out your own kid, or yourself even.

Similarly, P6 gave this account of her son with ADHD:

Well, although I want X [child] to have support and that, I don't want him to be labelled by the new school as a troublemaker or that because he actually isn't. But when people see ADHD they just think 'Here comes trouble'. And he's grand once he takes his tablets. Like, I would like the school to take that into consideration instead of labelling him before they even get to meet him.

In a similar vein, parents were conscious not to be overly-involved with the post-primary school because they believed that this was not appreciated by the schools. PA2 summarised this sentiment as follows:

I don't think the school really wants to involve the parents... schools don't like you telling them what to do.

However, some parents did demonstrate a lack of involvement with the transition process, because they felt intimidated and as a result declined pro-active post-primary school initiatives to involve parents in the transition process. The following exchange illustrates this.

PA3: They have a parents' group and a room to make tea and stuff and they give talks to ya about things, and that.

PA4: That sounds great, X [parent's name]. And will you go, do you think?

PA3: I'd like to go, but I dunno. I'm not very good in things like that, specially in schools. Sure, I wouldn't know what to be saying at all. But I think it's good.

PA26 added:

I'd find that very hard now going up to the school all the time. Like Mrs X [teacher] in the primary school has always been a great help to me. I'm not very good with teachers, and that. I always feel, eh, you know, a bit intimidated.

Parents also spoke of unwillingness on their behalf to discuss issues pertaining to their children's SEN without the protections of confidentiality or sensitivity. They were especially hesitant to discuss these matters with parents whose children did not have SEN (such as at open days). Comments from PA25 and PA27, respectively, illustrate this.

PA25: To be honest now I don't think that a meeting like that is the place to discuss those things though... I mean X [child] would die if she was sitting there beside me and I asked a question about something about support or anything like that.

PA27: I would prefer to do it on my own or maybe with other parents whose kids also had some problems, not in front of everybody else.

Alternatively, most parents indicated that they would prefer to meet a post-primary school representative in a more confidential and sensitive setting.

Challenge and support

When asked about aspirations for their children at post-primary school, parents emphasised a sense of belonging over academic attainment. PA27 summarised this:

I'm more concerned that X [child] will settle. That is more important to me than the academic side of things, because if she is upset she won't do anything anyway. But, if she settles in, then I will be happy with that. I know I should be thinking about her academics as well, but just at the moment that's not my priority for her. If she settles and has a group of friends around her, that's what is important for her at the moment.

PA43: For him it will be a challenge trying to fit in with a system that is not geared around him. If he can manage that I think he will be doing very well.

Nonetheless, parents recognised the importance of a sense of achievement for their children and the need for challenge in this regard.

PA7: I would hope that he can get some more confidence in himself and achieve at something that makes him feel like a success and I think that's down to the system... if the system sets you up to fail then that's what will happen. I think that X's [child's] expectations of himself are lower because he finds school difficult.

Specifically, they believed that teachers and SNAs had a role to play in cultivating their children's confidence in schoolwork. PA25 discussed the impact of her child's primary school resource teacher:

Ah yes, X's [child's] resource teacher has been very good. And she always tells X that she is not stupid and well able to do all of her work and just try. X will miss her alright. She has definitely benefited from it. Her confidence came back and everything. Just like you say, X [other parent's name], they do suffer if they think they can't do the work all the time.

Parents believed this confidence would ultimately give the children more choices about how to live their lives independently.

PA6: I just want X [child] to be happy and become independent so whatever that might mean for him. I mean, like, an apprenticeship or something. Well then, that's ok by me. I mean once he can get a job and have a life, then that's ok.

PA4: I'll just be happy if he stays in school and gets some exams so that he can get a job or do whatever he likes, but at least he will have a choice, like.

4.2 Post-transition Focus Group Data

The parent focus groups and interviews conducted during their children's first term at post-primary school yielded three themes.

Social support is key to settling in

Similar to pre-transition concerns, parents continued to focus significantly on their children's social integration and its impact on other domains. PA43 summarised this emphasis:

... well the organisation, as I said, and then if he is upset or anything he can go to this room and all of the teachers know that he can ask for time out and there is a system. Oh yes of course, he gets his resource and that with Mrs X [resource teacher], but it was more important to have things in place for him socially. The academics will follow.

When asked how her child was getting on, another parent (PA31) spontaneously answered in these socially oriented terms:

Aye. X [child] is doing ok. Loving the sport, and that, and making friends. He seems to be getting on fine. No problems so far.

The same respondent indicated the belief that the children were also focused on social matters:

... they really just want to be the same as everybody else.

Unfortunately, many parents described situations which indicated that these social concerns had become realities even in the early days at post-primary school, such as PA25:

Well X [child] is very quiet and I think she is finding it, em you know, difficult, like, to make new friends. But she is getting there ... but she finds it hard.

Some parents attributed these difficulties in making new friends to the loss of friendships with younger primary school pupils, which was consistent with sentiments expressed at pre-transition. PA7 distressingly reflected this situation in her comments:

X [child] still misses primary school. I think he finds it hard. Like, he has not really made any new friends... In the primary school he hung around with the younger ones in the school, not the lads or girls in his class. So, I think he probably finds the whole friends bit difficult... I'd be afraid that he would just get left behind, you know. He talks about the kids from his primary school more than anybody new, but it might just take time with him, you know. But I do worry about him [parent becomes upset].

In contrast, it seemed that children who already belonged to a community of existing friends or relatives (moving to, or already at, the same school) perceived transition as less worrying and more exciting. Consider these relevant comments from PA3 and PA28:

PA3: X [child] was delighted to be going because all of her cousins are there. So, she knows loads of people and she couldn't wait to start. So, em, the first day was no problem... The cousins being in the school already was good for X and she has settled in now.

PA28: Yeah X [child] was fine the first day, a bit nervous, like and that, and she had made arrangements to meet some of the girls, so they could walk in together.

Parents also talked glowingly of transition planning initiatives by support services and schools in terms of fostering an early sense of school community. PA17 gave this example:

Well, the kids went off on a hike for the day and were all split up from their friends. And they had to get to know some other kids, and that, and they brought lunch, you know em the usual, but he really enjoyed it.

Although it would be useful to determine how many parents had access to these initiatives, a frequency count runs contrary to an interpretive thematic analysis. Nonetheless, the key issue is that all parents who mentioned these programmes did so in a positive light. They believed that these initiatives reduced the children's anxieties about transition. This view is consistent with the theme 'laying the groundwork' in the pupils' data which suggested that the children also viewed transition planning activities positively. PA43 illustrates this with her description of a summer camp and other activities:

X [child] of course was anxious. But, I told you about the summer programme that they ran in the school. So, that really, really helped him. I can't emphasise that enough. It did him the world of good and definitely reduced his anxiety. The school used his July hours and did out a programme for him and some other students that were going to start in the autistic unit and they did a couple of things in July. Like, they went to the pictures and bowling and in the school they worked out timetables and got to know the school, em you know, the layout and that. It worked very well for him. Now he still found it difficult at the beginning, but I don't think it was as bad for him as it could have been.

Consistent with previous themes, parents also felt that it was important for their children to feel supported and welcomed by post-primary school staff.

PA25: I felt that the evening [welcoming first years] was important for the kids because the evening was just about them, like just the first years. And they felt very important and X [child] said to me afterwards that the first day they had a lovely welcome as well.

Parents also believed that a watchful eye over their children (as appropriate) was an important part of staff's positive attitude. This exchange between PA2 and PA38 illustrates this sentiment:

PA2: I don't think he has settled in yet, but the school, like em, they seem to be taking that into account and keeping an eye on him, like.

PA38: That's good though, isn't it like. They are looking out for my fella as well.

PA2: So I think that will help the boys settle down more, once they know that the school is looking out for them.

Similarly, PA34 said her son was so impressed with assistance from his mentor that he hoped to be a mentor himself.

X [child] enjoys it and finds it works for him [the mentoring programme], but it's not about his behaviour or other people annoying him, it's about helping him to get around and his safety. And I think he realises that for him it's important... X is even saying that he would like to be a mentor when it's his turn, you know, when he is in fifth year.

Communication problems

Consistent with their accounts of transition planning, parents generally reported that information on their children's SEN had not been distributed or used appropriately. PA39 angrily reported the following incident in which her child had not been allowed to use the bathroom.

I mean all the other wee girls and boys stared and... he was right upset... Well he was having problems about the toilet so I had to go up and sort that out... He didn't get there in time because the teacher wouldn't let him out, so I had war with the school... I asked to see the principal and then he and Mrs X [resource teacher] had a meeting with me... It was obvious that the teachers had not read the notes and Mrs X had given them to them, so it was not her fault. She is very good and none of the teachers were aware about the chair [specialised to address a severe physical disability] either, so they don't know how important it is for him and he was just in bad form all the time and tired.

Similar difficulties emerged with cognitive rather than physical challenges. PA17 described the situation with her son's dyslexia:

When I went up to the parent teacher meeting, I was shocked that none of them [teachers] knew that he was dyslexic and some of them were saying things about him. That is like em. The problem's that he has dyslexia and not because he's lazy or anything.

These issues appeared to result, in part, from a lack of ready access to teachers. PA6 said this:

Well for me everything takes so long to get sorted... I'd like to talk to the teachers to actually tell them what he's like... and when I went to the first year head I was told the same 'wait until the parent teacher meeting' [three months into the school year.

Such delays led these parents to feel somewhat perplexed, misunderstood, 'written off' and unable to prevent otherwise avoidable problems for their children. PA6 illustrated this in the following way:

I think that for parents like us, em, there should be some type of system where we can voice our fears and, em you know, talk to somebody before things get out of hand.

Similar to pre-transition concerns, many parents described considerable stress and upset, and persistent uncertainty about the lack of SEN supports. These sentiments, as well as the implications for the children, are demonstrated by PA27's angry quotation:

Well X [child] was very upset the first few weeks and, em, we got no notification of what type of support she was going to get and I thought that she would get an SNA, but she hasn't and that is a big problem for her. And she still has no resource or learning support yet. And I have been up to the school and one teacher told me that because of her behaviour she was holding the rest of the class back. I mean, they just don't seem to have any understanding of her needs at all. I mean, imagine a teacher telling me that X is responsible for the rest of the class not learning. So, she started putting her out. That's the answer – throw them out of the class.

Even when allocation decisions had been made, some parents were not informed. Consider comments by PA27 when she was asked if anyone from the school had contacted her over applications for SEN support for her child:

Not at all, nothing. I got no notice at all, I had to ring up myself and they [school] said that she had not been allocated the SNA and that she was probably not entitled to one. Like that, they had tried to get one in for her, but they were told 'no'.

Once again, some parents were reluctant to pursue schools for information in case this reflected negatively on their children.

PA25: No I haven't heard anything either, but the parent teacher meeting is coming up so I will ask then. You don't want to be asking them already. Like I know that I should but I thought I would leave it till then. I don't want to cause problems for her either.

Prevention is better than cure

Invariably, parents who seemed most satisfied with their children's transition had received secure tangible supports for them before, or very early in, attendance at post-primary school and had experienced extensive transition planning. PA35 provides a good example of these two features and their impact on her son.

I can't believe how well he is getting on. He really is doing very well here and they have been wonderful with him. Mrs X [resource teacher] is very reassuring with him and is very positive about him as well and he has settled in very well. Much better than I had even imagined... I think it's because of all the planning that went into it. Do you remember I was telling you about the programme he was doing? Well he did that all over the summer. It was part of his July hours and he went to the centre in X [place name] and they did a lot of social skills with him and getting himself around, and that. And then he was in the school for a couple of the days as well getting to know the staff. The programme itself, I think, has been what has made the whole thing work. Definitely, I think the programme, but, also em you know, we have been planning this since X [child] was in fifth class.

In contrast, parents who seemed most dissatisfied and distressed by their children's transition experience were those for whom the SEN supports were not in place early on. For instance, one mother (PA39) was particularly upset, as the following comments attest:

Don't talk to me about when he started. The first day he goes up and there is no chair for him [specialised to address a severe physical disability] and his wheelchair wouldn't fit through some of the doors, so he had to come home. He was right upset. They told him and told me that it would be there, but no, it wasn't, and then the wheelchair couldn't get in. His is not a regular one, like, it is very big, so that's why he uses his chair in the school... the school rang me and told me what had happened and so I came and picked him up... He was right upset... It wasn't there until the following week, so he couldn't really attend, like.

Reassurances from schools did little to ease these parents' growing anxieties for their children's education, as demonstrated by PA38:

... he is finding it difficult to manage and I would have liked all of that sorted out before he came here... The primary school sent over all of his reports, and that. So, I'm not happy with the fact that it takes so long to get him what he needs, like, it takes too long. And I know they [school] are looking into it now, but that should have happened before now.

PA27 added:

I think the whole system is a sham and that things happen too late or not at all even... I've been through it once and it's happening again and again and nothing changes. My child will still need support all through her school life, that's what the reports say and that's what the doctors say. I think they just want her to go a special school and not have to deal with her or kids like her in the mainstream systems at all... and yet she could stay here if they only provided the support that she needs.

Once again, parents believed that the lack of resources was exacerbated by the lack of one person co-ordinating transition and SEN provision for their children. PA39 said this when essential equipment for her child's physical disability was not available:

... one was blaming the other. I rang the primary school because they were supposed to organise it, but they said it was the secondary school and nobody had come to collect it and they thought that they must have got another one... Sure, they were all giving out, but that's no good to me. I mean I'm running around all of the time and then even when you do it's still not enough. I was right annoyed I can tell you and I told them too.

Parents were often hugely impressed and validated when schools had contacted them and involved them in matters regarding their children's SEN, and believed this type of proactive approach also delivered benefits to the children. PA43's comments provide an example:

The school certainly does not leave him out of anything just because he has Asperger's. It's quite the opposite. A couple of weeks ago they were going on a field trip for geography and his geography teacher rang me and told me that they were going and had told X [child] about it, but did I have any questions or was there anything he could do to make sure X would be ok?... I was gobsmacked, but very impressed that he would do that, you know, take the time to ring... But, it took the anxiety out of it for him because they told him a lot about it beforehand and that's what he needs. And if he said that he didn't want to go, I think they would have pushed him, you know, to include him.

4.3 Section Summary

Four themes emerged from analyses of the parents pre-transition focus groups:

- 'Losing ground' characterises their worries about the loss of community support provided by the primary schools and the potential for the children to become stigmatised early in post-primary school.
- 'Information is critical: I'm not asking for the moon, but a bit more information' describes parent dissatisfaction and disappointment over the accessibility, timeliness and coherence of the transition planning process they had experienced.
- 'I'd like help but I don't want to make trouble for my child' articulates parents' hesitancy to petition post-primary schools for help for fear of making trouble for their children.
- 'Challenge and support' represents the consensus among parents on the need to prioritise their children's sense of fulfilment over academic success.

Three themes emerged from analyses of the parents' post-transition focus groups.

- 'Social support is key to settling in' characterises parent beliefs that their children's social experiences with peers and teachers are the bedrock to successful transition into post-primary school.
- 'Communication problems' articulates parental frustrations in attempts to obtain support for, or to resolve difficulties with, their children's SEN.
- 'Prevention is better than cure' reflects their views on the timing and nature of the SEN support their children had received since arriving in post-primary school.

5 Issues Raised by the Research

This study set out to explore the experiences of pupils with SEN making the transition from primary to post-primary school in Ireland. A qualitative approach was employed with the pupils to capture the richness of their experiences, especially given their special educational needs. This also served to recognise the value of the pupil voice in understanding experiences of transition. The authors hoped to broaden this understanding by also exploring the experiences and views of the children's parents. This aspect of the research was in tandem with a partnership model of education in which parents play a significant role on behalf of their children and themselves.

5.1 Issues Pertaining to Pupils

5.1.1 Security

The first theme 'things I will miss' from the pupils' pre-transition focus groups captured the strongly perceived sense of security that had emerged for them within their primary school environments. This is a universal finding in transition studies of pupils with and without SEN, and facilitates some of the sense of loss and impending doom that characterises pre-transition concerns. This security has two key elements: first, a sense of stature with peers; and second, a sense of being cared for, and known by, teachers. Both appear to be critical assets of primary school life that become dominant pre-transition concerns.

Loss of social stature is perhaps an obvious worry for sixth class pupils who move from being the oldest in a small school to being the youngest in a much larger school. Some of the elevated stature of the former results not only from age superiority, but from responsibilities for managing younger pupils in various ways and this, in turn, enhances self-worth (in spite of their disabilities, many of the pupils here had been given such responsibilities). Indeed, much of the pupils' anxieties about transition concerned exposure to older pupils, who were frequently perceived as threatening. Thus, the new school environment appeared to invert the sense of responsibility and security that had come with elevated stature. The theme 'fitting in' clearly reflected this concern.

An aspect of security and stature recorded in this study – and which appears to be unique to pupils with SEN – concerns the extent to which this group are more likely to socialise with younger pupils. This finding is not commonly recorded with primary school children without SEN. Mixing with younger children, however, may make it even harder for pupils with SEN to settle into post-primary school, because they are now the youngest in that environment. As a result, older pupils would likely seem even more daunting because they are considerably older than those with whom they have learned to feel safe.

Teachers were intricately bound within the pupils' sense of security at primary school. This is likely facilitated simply by the logistics of having only one teacher per year. Nonetheless, this arrangement may be central to the binding of social and academic issues in pupil perceptions of teachers. In other words, 'even if you don't perform well academically, the teacher can still like you'. This is, of course, the opposite of what is

perceived to happen at post-primary school, where teachers are readily demarcated by subject and viewed as a barometer of one's competence in that subject. This view also featured strongly in the findings from parents and is perhaps not surprising for pupils with SEN who commonly have academic challenges. As a result, pupils, at least from the perspective of parents, leave an environment in which social and academic matters are intricately bound (and perhaps security in the former offsets low attainment in the latter for some pupils with SEN) in secure pupil-teacher relationships, and enter a new world where social and academic issues appear separate, and teachers mediate only the latter. The theme 'keeping up' recorded here with pupils was also strongly related to the fear of teacher reproach, thus suggesting that teachers were perceived by pupils primarily as subject- and peace-keepers. The possible presence of low academic attainment for pupils with SEN, as well as potential limitations in understanding rules that must be followed (*eg* in pupils with learning disability), may make these pre-transition concerns greater for these individuals, relative to those without SEN.

Indeed, the theme 'experiencing and talking about transition' indicated strong pupil desires to get off on the right foot with teachers and pre-entry contact eased concerns about this to some extent. It is perhaps unfortunate therefore, that some of this contact was perceived as less than positive in emphasising the size of the forthcoming academic challenge and the fact that pupils should not let the school down by under-performing or behaving badly. This type of negative and information-based approach potentially serves only to reinforce pupil concerns about teachers as academic moderators with whom they have no other social contact except the possibility of getting into trouble for performing badly or breaking rules. It may also reinforce existing pupil worries about their own academic competence. A valuable insight, therefore, suggested by the findings here is that pupils would view pre-entry contact more positively, and it would be of greater benefit to them, if it did not reinforce pre-existing stereotypes of post-primary school as academically focused, and in doing so undermine a strong sense of security built up across the years by broadly caring primary school teachers.

The post-transition theme 'asking questions, provoking questions' not only highlighted pupil reluctance to approach teachers, but also suggested the benefits of peer-mentoring schemes, where older pupils do some of the work in easing and mixing academic and social concerns. Mentors, for example, mediate between teachers and pupils when teachers appear unapproachable. The perceived chasm between primary and post-primary teachers would certainly suggest the importance of this form of mediation early in the settling-in period before social relations with teachers have been formed.

Only a few pupils from this study indicated that they had not formed positive relationships with primary school teachers. The limited findings did not suggest that they had greater pre-transition worries *per se*. In fact, they might have fewer worries because of relief in leaving teacher relationships perceived to have gone sour and may (at a broader level) wish to leave the small primary school environment in which they believe that teachers generally dislike them (there was some evidence of this type of perception). On balance, however, it may also be the case that these pupils leave primary school without a strong sense of security in teachers and are more mistrusting as a result. Some support for this view comes from the data from several children. They

reported perceptions that teachers disliked them at primary school and they perceived similarly that they would also be disliked by post-primary teachers. Unfortunately, these perceptions may undermine teachers' efforts with new pupils.

In summary, the children's data recorded here highlighted poignant discontinuities in pupil perceptions of primary versus post-primary teachers. Relationships with the former were a mix of social and academic affairs with which most pupils with SEN, like those without SEN, felt secure. Perceptions of post-primary teachers were considerably different and were a strong vein in pre-transition worries. Pupils perceived them as academic and rule gatekeepers who were more to be avoided or pleased, than to be approached for assistance. This may be a particular source of concern for pupils with low academic attainment. The findings also caution that pre-entry contact should incorporate efforts to alter pupils' negative stereotypes of teachers and avoid undermining a sense of security in teachers established for most pupils during primary school years. Pupils with a history of negative interactions with primary school teachers will need more attention in this regard, both at pre-entry and early in post-transition. Taken together, these findings also suggest that early post-primary suspensions, or the delivery of poor exam grades, may be counter-productive to pupils, because they signal that they are not (and perhaps cannot be) liked by those teachers. This in turn negatively affects subject liking, academic performance and general motivation for school.

5.1.2 SEN support

Pupils here knew they had received support (*eg* a resource teacher) for their SEN and generally perceived this to have been of benefit. For example, some pupils articulated a dependence on resource teachers and other supports and attributed, to some extent, their academic and personal success at primary school to this network of assistance. In short, one might argue that one reason these pupils do not have a different profile of pre-transition concerns is because the presence of SEN support (especially resource teachers) allows them to keep up with others and the school environment generally. Indeed, the strong fears of parents, and also pupils, at possibly not having assistance at post-primary school support this view. Unfortunately, many families here had inadequate information on pending supports which exacerbated pre-transition concerns for both them and their children.

5.1.3 SEN and making trouble

The heterogeneity of the broad category of SEN suggests that experiences of transition vary. For example, pupils with attentional challenges and emotional disturbance may be more likely to get into trouble for rule violations, whereas those with learning disabilities may not. The data recorded some pupils who highlighted their worries about the relationship between their needs and the potential for rule-breaking. In simple terms, the pupils had pre- and post-transition concerns that they would not be given the latitude that was necessary because of their SEN. For example, physical or self-organisational factors made it more likely that some pupils would be late for class. In other words, it may take longer than one month (*eg* for a child who finds self-organisation difficult) to come to terms with the complexity of a new post-primary school

environment. The failure to appreciate this resulted in some pupils feeling they were not understood by teachers even though they were trying to do their best. This issue is exacerbated by pupil reluctance to speak with teachers and general cautiousness about discussions on their disability.

5.1.4 Stigmatisation for having SEN

Being perceived by others as different because of SEN was another strong vein in parent and pupil themes. The parental theme 'I'd like help but I don't want to make trouble for my child' articulates hesitancy to advocate for their children at the new school. Developmentally, early teen pupils strive hard to keep up with peers on many dimensions and are sensitive to potential differences that might be frowned on. This sensitivity likely explains why pupils with SEN are reluctant to ask for latitude, even though not doing so runs risks of negative consequences. Pupils had concerns about both peers and teachers in this regard. Specifically, they did not wish to be stigmatised as different or lower than peers, and did not want teachers to generalise about what they would or could not do (eg parents frequently raised the stereotype of trouble-maker). There was no way of confirming that pupils here had been victims of these generalisations but the issue was they remained sensitive to them, even at the cost of getting into trouble or not getting the assistance they needed. This compromise, in and of itself, highlights the extent of the potential consequences of stigmatisation as perceived by pupils. This presents a challenge to an educational context that seeks to provide adequate support but must do so in an inclusive rather than a differentiating way.

5.1.5 Pupils' perspectives of their SEN

This study was limited in not directly asking pupils how they may have perceived the potential impact of their SEN on their transition experience. Aspects of the focus group data, however, offer insight here. All pupils were acutely aware of a perceived difference between themselves and others, if only on a specific dimension (eg academic attainment) and the findings clearly show pupil sensitivities in this regard. They were keen to start the new school with an unspoiled reputation, although they fully recognised the challenges this presented. Perhaps paradoxically, pupils also acknowledged their need for additional support and most gave glowing evaluations of the benefits of this support at primary school. Interestingly, the findings depicted no overt pupil tensions on the paradoxical need for discretion with a simultaneous need for help that was not needed by peers. It appears they did not recognise the potential incompatibility of these two issues and held a simpler view: they wanted help but didn't want others to know.

The data provide no indication that pupils felt their SENs, by necessity, hampered transition or success at post-primary school. Pupils, especially boys, with a previous history of problem behaviour and negative teacher interactions, were the only exception. They appeared to believe the previous cycle would continue, and of course the international evidence supports this for pupils with and without SEN. This is likely exacerbated by general pupil perceptions that the rules at post-primary school are more complex and teachers likely to be stricter.

5.1.6 Differences between mainstream and special school transitions

Because the number of special schools which participated in the research was small and much smaller than that of mainstream schools, it is difficult to draw firm conclusions on potential differences in pupil experiences of transition. In this context, the research recorded some such differences.

First, continuity of resources was greater across the transition to special schools, largely because many of these pupils were moving between strongly interconnected primary and post-primary special schools. Only one child in the sample moved from a mainstream primary to a special post-primary school and this child's parent expressed certainty that appropriate resources would be in place there. No child was moving from a primary special to post-primary mainstream school. Overall, parents thought special schools were better equipped resources-wise but believed it was not necessary for their children to go there.

On the whole, pupils attending special schools appeared happier than their mainstream counterparts. Specifically, their pre- and post-transition discussions indicated they did not appear to face the same level of social and academic challenge. This results in part from not having to integrate with pupils without SEN, less pressure over curricula and a stronger emphasis on learning at one's own pace. Indeed, it was also noted that special school staff provided a strong supportive and accepting environment for SEN, which likely facilitated the pupils' general lack of pressure and enhanced learning motivation and engagement.

5.2 Issues Pertaining to Parents

5.2.1 Losing ground

It was somewhat unexpected to note that parents' deep sense of loss almost matched that expressed by their children. The pre-transition focus group theme 'losing ground' characterised the loss of the community support, familiarity and social cohesion primary schools provide. This experiential overlap suggested parents had been heavily involved in the primary school years and the reported sense of them giving up hard-won gains also reflected this. This finding highlights the important role played by parents of pupils with SEN in primary education and suggests the benefits that parents received in return. These were benefits, not only of being secure in the knowledge that their children were well supported, but a sense of a school community. In the context of parental and pupil sensitivities to being on the outside, these findings suggested that at primary level, these parents felt they were on the inside despite their children's SEN. Hence, for parents the transition represented much more than simply the loss of educational supports. The findings speak clearly to the need for post-transition practices to include parents in a way that exceeds provision of information on their children. They also suggest these parents, due to their children's SEN, may require a greater level of school involvement than usually required by parents of children without SEN. The findings indicated that parents found transition a considerable source of anxiety and they believed that open

communication with schools was a key vehicle for discussing and alleviating this for themselves and their children.

5.2.2 Social over academic competence

The pre-transition theme 'challenge and support' indicated that parents valued social inclusion for their children over academic success, which again mirrored aspects of the pupils' data. Most parents, however, perceived their children as socially immature. It was not surprising, therefore, that the post-transition focus groups generated the theme 'social support is key to settling in'. Interestingly, parents did not rely entirely on schools to provide this through systems such as mentoring, but noted additional benefits from pre-existing friends or relatives attending the same school and transition planning initiatives by support services. Similar to findings recorded with the pupils, parents believed social and academic issues were inseparable, and that academic attainment was best couched in a secure social environment in which teachers played a key role.

5.2.3 Communications as conferred power and trust

Thirteen of the 31 parents reported unhappiness with the level of pre-entry contact and most of these expressed significant concerns about communication failures. Their dialogue reflected anger, frustration and lack of power or advocacy for their children at a time when both parents and children were vulnerable. In most cases, the lack of communication concerned their children's SEN and provision for it including:

- failure to distribute SEN information to teachers
- lack of ready access to teachers
- lack of timely SEN resources
- lack of information from schools to parents.

Some parents interpreted these failures as evidence of a 'wait and see' policy which undermined school commitment to these pupils. Parents highlighted the need for a school-based transition co-ordinator (e.g. a teacher) with whom they could discuss these issues. They also suggested the possibility that one DES representative outside of schools may be responsible for co-ordinating transition and SEN provision. Similarly, parents repeatedly made reference to the contracting economic environment and associated educational cutbacks, and strongly proposed that such a climate was becoming increasingly less conducive to open dialogue among the DES, schools and parents. Some suggested that school pastoral teams might play a stronger role in transition, perhaps not unlike that of the home school community liaison (HSCL) model.

The DES-funded HSCL programme is designed to assist pupils susceptible to educational disadvantage (including those with relevant SEN). It operates only in schools granted with DEIS status (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools). Its central principles and philosophy acknowledge that schools cannot work in isolation and can be more effective by collaborating with other agencies to minimise the effects of educational disadvantage (DEScience, 2007b). In essence, this is a partnership model in which parents play a key role. The HSCL personnel make first contact with relevant families when pupils are

in sixth class and liaise with learning support staff at both primary and post-primary schools to facilitate transition.

At pre-transition, some parents explicitly referred to a lack of trust in the new schools. It is therefore critically important that post-primary schools get off on the right foot with parents and treat them in a manner that is not disempowering. The potential consequences of parental alienation are long-term and negative, especially for the children. Even when schools do not have information (*eg* on DES decisions), this situation could be discussed in a facilitative rather than a disempowering or sceptical manner. Open and regular dialogue with parents and even pupils would likely be beneficial. A wealth of research attests to the pivotal importance of sound communication at all levels during transition.

5.3 Broader Implications of the Research

5.3.1 The benefits of having a significant other

The importance of having a significant other is reflected in numerous relationships which surround transition and in many of those discussed here. First, many pupils strongly perceived their primary school resource teacher as a significant other in numerous matters that extended beyond transition. Specifically for many, resource teachers functioned as a liaison between them and school; between them and academic demands; and even between the pupil and other peers in the context of social difficulties.

Second, the intense and warm relationship shared between the sixth class teacher and pupils indicates that this teacher also functions as a significant other. Indeed, primary school teachers have detailed knowledge of many aspects of pupils' lives and this is essential to being a significant other. Hence, it is noteworthy that pupils here (and elsewhere) reported concerns that post-primary teachers would not know them or their names and had more negative perceptions of them, relative to primary teachers. Furthermore, most studies (including this) indicate that teachers are among the most notable features of primary school which pupils miss.

Third, this may offer yet another reason why mentoring is evaluated positively by all and is reported to be beneficial. Specifically, mentors become significant others, especially when previous significant others have been lost (*ie* primary teachers and resource teachers) and as yet no significant other peer relations have been established.

Fourth, evidence suggests that parents are significant others for their children in transition and in education generally. Indeed, parents' impassioned discussions of their children in the study's focus groups support this view.

Fifth, in focus groups parents expressed the strong desire to have a significant other with whom they could discuss transition. Indeed many expressed considerable frustration at this absence, especially given the lack of communication about their children and tense parent-school relations. One parent said: 'If only there was someone to go to.' It is interesting to note here that as well as functioning as significant others for their

children's transition concerns, parents themselves were also seeking a significant other with whom they could discuss transition.

Sixth, best friends, siblings or cousins may also function as significant others to the newly-arrived pupil, especially where no new friendships have been sufficiently initiated. Indeed, evidence elsewhere and here highlighted pupil perceptions of these groups as a significant means of alleviating initial social worries and for seeding broader social networks. In summary, the significant other role is pivotal on many levels during transition.

5.4 Section Summary

The children's data highlighted perceptions of discontinuity, particularly between primary and post-primary teachers. The strong sense of security provided by the former undoubtedly served many positive functions for pupils, but perhaps paradoxically facilitated pre-transition worries about new teachers and new rules. This finding suggests that transition may be facilitated by creating early positive teacher perceptions before and after entry to the new school (*eg* encouraging teachers to remember pupil names). Such efforts may be even more important for the small number of pupils who perceived themselves as having had negative interactions with primary school teachers. These individuals would likely benefit from assurances that future teacher interactions need not inevitably be negative.

Pupils and parents generally perceived their SEN support as beneficial and some attributed their success at primary school to same. Hence, the availability of similar support early on entry to post-primary school may facilitate transition because, at the very least, pupils and parents may believe that the children cannot reach their full potential without it.

The children's data showed some worried about the impact of their specific SEN on the risk of rule-breaking (parents had similar concerns), and thus believed that they may require more time to adjust than other pupils. When such latitude was not available, some pupils perceived a lack of understanding by teachers on their SEN. This is exacerbated by pupil reluctance to speak with teachers and general caution over discussions of their needs. Taken together, these findings suggest that transition may be facilitated by allowing more latitude to pupils whose SEN may affect rule-following and other aspects of school adjustment (*eg* lack of self-organisation may lead to late arrival for classes or impede homework completion).

Pupils reported similar concerns about peers becoming aware of their SEN and the fear of stigmatisation. Parents also showed awareness of these anxieties. Although, as noted previously, schools have a responsibility to provide adequate support, transition would likely be facilitated by schools demonstrating sensitivity to these concerns and possibilities.

Parent data suggested they too had experienced a strong sense of security with their children at primary school and feared it would be lost in transition. This pertained particularly to success in securing SEN support and confidence that their children fitted into the school community. Transition was a considerable source of parental anxiety and

some parents criticised a lack of communication in some schools, particularly regarding their children's SEN and related support. These findings suggest transition may be facilitated for parents when they play a partnership role in their children's transition and post-primary education. Some parents suggested that school pastoral teams might play a stronger role in transition, perhaps not unlike that of the home school community liaison (HSCL) model.

5.5 Concluding Comments

This study sought insight into the experiences of pupils with SEN and their parents on the transition from primary to post-primary education. The results highlighted the mix of tension and anticipation recorded so often in the literature, although largely with pupils without SEN. Consistent with a smaller body of evidence on the transitions of pupils with SEN, these findings confirmed at one level that in general the transition experiences of these children did not necessarily differ from those of children without SEN. However, transition for these pupils is not straightforward because they are, at personal and contextual levels, influenced in numerous ways by their SEN and its impact on their social and academic lives. Overall, one might conclude that stimulating and positive transition experiences are possible for pupils with SEN. However, the role of SEN supports in these experiences must be explored and it must be recognised that the children's needs are a dominant influence on their transition experiences and those of their parents. Although these transitions may look like those of children without SEN, findings here suggest they probably do not feel the same.

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