Educational Research

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rere20

Family–school connectivity during transition to primary school

Elizabeth Tobin, Seaneen Sloan, Jennifer Symonds & Dympna Devine

To cite this article: Elizabeth Tobin, Seaneen Sloan, Jennifer Symonds & Dympna Devine (2022) Family–school connectivity during transition to primary school, Educational Research, 64:3, 277-294, DOI: 10.1080/00131881.2022.2054451

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2022.2054451

© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

Published online: 11 May 2022.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 4311

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Citing articles: 4 View citing articles

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=rere20

EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH
2022, VOL. 64, NO. 3, 277–294
https://doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2022.2054451

OPEN ACCESS Check for updates

Family–school connectivity during transition to primary school

Elizabeth Tobin, Seaneen Sloan, Jennifer Symonds and Dympna Devine

School of Education, University College Dublin, Dublin, Ireland

ABSTRACT

Background: Family–school connections during the transition from preschool to primary school are crucial, as they serve to bridge the gap between the home and school learning environments. In order to support children's learning and engagement throughout their school career, more needs to be understood about the factors that contribute to successful or difficult transition experiences during this critical period.

Purpose: This case study was part of the Children's School Lives (CSL) national longitudinal study of Irish primary schooling. It aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of mothers' experiences of family–school connectivity during their child's transition to primary school in Ireland, exploring how these connections helped them manage their experiences of the transition.

Method: A qualitative, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach was used to investigate mothers' experiences of the transition to primary school from preschool. The analysis drew on data collected from semi-structured interviews carried out with five mothers of children who had started primary school.

Findings: Overall, findings from the analysis suggested that mothers had positive experiences of family–school connectivity during the transition period and indicated high levels of trust in their children's teachers and their abilities. Mothers expressed a desire to be active participants in their child's learning and transition experience, as well as to develop quality connections with their child's school and teachers through regular communication and familiarity with the school environment. However, the analysis identified that experiences among the mothers were mixed.

Conclusion: This study offers insight into the need to develop consistent policy and practice across schools in terms of opportunities to contact teachers, parent–school communication and transition activities held by schools. It highlights the importance of creating strong bridges between families and schools and positive transition experiences for children entering primary school.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 07 May 2021
Accepted 14 March 2022

KEYWORDS

School transition; family-school connectivity; early childhood; parent experiences; parent perspectives; Ireland

CONTACT Elizabeth Tobin elizabeth.tobin@ucdconnect.ie

© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

Introduction

Prior research on children's transition to primary school has emphasised the significance of positive connections between the school and home to support children's adjustment to primary school (Galindo and Sheldon 2012). Supported by ecological system perspectives, such as Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta's Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transitions (Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta 2000), family–school connectivity emphasises the crucial roles played by relationships and environment during the transition. It can offer an important lens to researchers, practitioners and policymakers in efforts to better understand how schools and families can create positive interactions and linkages to support children's learning and engagement throughout their school career (Bronfenbrenner 1979; Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta 1999).

Family–school connectivity may be defined as the intersection between the ecologies of the home and school that influence children's acquisition of school-related skills and facilitate valuable communication and socialisation practices necessary to promote children's success in school (Serpell and Mashburn 2012). It can be studied as the quality of the relationship and quantity of contacts between families and schools through the systems put in place by schools (Serpell and Mashburn 2012). These systems provide opportunities for parents and teachers to develop a bidirectional relationship in order to contribute to children's learning and development (Grolnick and Raftery-Helmer 2015).

International research suggests that family–school connections are particularly influential during school transitions when parents and families require specific input from educators, and children are beginning to form their academic identities (Dockett, Perry, and Kearney 2012). Findings from McIntyre and colleagues (2007) indicate that parents wanted to receive more information from schools about the transition to primary school and understand what they could do to help prepare their child. This included receiving more information from the schools about academic and behavioural expectations through school-led transition activities such as school visits, family meetings and developing parent and professional alliances (McIntyre et al. 2007). Research has shown that parental involvement and engagement in their child's education can help bridge the gap between home and school, lead to improved school effectiveness, improve child outcomes and have a greater impact on child educational outcomes than other environmental variables such as social class, parent levels of education or income (O'Toole et al. 2019). The importance of family–school connectivity at transition points has been further emphasised by the Covid-19 pandemic, with early research in Ireland indicating that schools consider parents as central helpers in educating children at home during school closures (Burke and Dempsey 2020).

Given how crucial this developmental period is for children and families, researchers, educators and policymakers need to better understand the factors that contribute to successful or difficult transition experiences during this phase. As a contribution to this endeavour, the case study reported in this paper aimed to provide an in-depth understanding of mothers' perspectives and experiences of family–school connections during their child's transition to primary school in Ireland. It is hoped that the findings can help inform future policy and practice

on transitions and family–school connections. Before presenting our study in detail, we will contextualise our work with reference to the wider literature and conceptual background relevant to school transitions.

Background

Preschool to primary school transition

The transition from preschool to primary school is a critical period in children's and families' lives, and how parents manage their experiences while navigating this transition with their child can directly impact children's socioemotional, behavioural and academic adjustment to primary school (Webb, Knight, and Busch 2017). Research on school transitions stresses the importance of supportive relationships and communication between parents and teachers at all times but particularly during transitions in order to provide the best possible adjustment outcome for the child (DeMeo-Cook and Levine-Coley 2017). Developmentally, successful adjustment during the transition to primary school can have long-term implications not only for children's future academic and social success but also for their future employability and socioeconomic mobility (OECD 2015). During this developmental period, a child's home and school are the two most influential environments in which learning occurs, and supportive family relationships can help children navigate cultural and academic discontinuities upon school start (Galindo and Sheldon 2012; Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta 1999). These relationships and interacting environmental influences between families and schools are critical factors when navigating and understanding the transition experience for children and families (Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta 2000).

Theoretical perspectives

Our examination of mothers' experiences of family–school connectivity was grounded in Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta's Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition (Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta 2000). This framework acknowledges the role that early transitions play in later school success and conceptualises the potential risks children face during the transition period. Informed by earlier ecological systems theories, such as Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner and Ceci 1994), the model emphasises the role of both within-child factors, such as cognition and socioemotional development, and children's environmental contexts and relationships in the transition (Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta 2000). Specifically, in line with family–school connectivity, the model demonstrates how children's families, schools, peers and community are linked together to create 'a network of relationships that influence children's transition to school both directly and indirectly … and how relationships among the contexts change over time' (Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta 2000, 492; see also Eskelä-Haapanen et al. 2017). The stability or lack of stability within the relationships among these environments and contexts will either support or challenge children's adjustment to school, as well as predicting children's subsequent relationships and how they experience the transitions (Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta 2000).

Parents' lived experiences of the preschool to primary school transition

Considering how important interacting relationships and systems are during children's preschool to primary school transition, it is imperative that researchers explore parent and family experiences during this time. Webb and colleagues defined transitions as the 'social process of discontinuity where individuals move from one state to another [and] is influenced by and influences the various contexts in which it occurs' (Webb, Knight, and Busch 2017, 205). Studies have shown that success during this transition time is linked to positive future outcomes, both academically and socially, throughout children's school and adult lives (Dockett and Perry 2004; Webb, Knight, and Busch 2017). Equally, complications and difficulties adjusting to school during this period have predicted long-term negative effects for children, including academic problems, school dropout, unemployment and mental health issues (Blankson et al. 2017).

Transitions can be both exciting and stressful as children and their families adjust to new physical spaces, roles and relationships (Kang, Horn, and Palmer 2017). Parents' ability to navigate these changes and challenges directly impacts their child's success across the preschool to primary school transition (Webb, Knight, and Busch 2017). When children start school, parents face a shift in their own identity and may also find that opportunities to interact with their child's teachers and school decrease, therefore making it less possible to engage with this aspect of their children's everyday lives (Cowan et al. 2005). This can be challenging, as, up until this time, parents and families play a fundamental role in their child's educational development (Dockett, Perry, and Kearney 2012). During early childhood and the transition to primary school, parents are the managers of their child's home learning environment and children's socialisation activities (Miller 2015). How parents engage in these early school readiness practices is vital in understanding children's experience adjusting to school after the transition to primary school.

Family–school connectivity during the transition

As described above, this shift in family–school connections during the preschool to primary school transition frequently brings about a change in communication patterns between teachers and parents, with parents typically experiencing fewer opportunities to communicate with their child's primary school than preschool (Murphy et al. 2021; Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta 2000). However, when parents become authentically engaged with teachers and schools during their child's transition, the development of long-lasting, effective, and respectful relationships can occur (Webb, Knight, and Busch 2017). It is therefore important to design learning environments that create opportunities for, and support communication between, schools and families and vital that both schools and families believe that families are essential to a child's learning and development (O'Toole et al. 2019; Clarke, Sheridan, and Woods 2009). Research has shown that schools play a crucial role in creating opportunities for family involvement and engagement in their child's learning, as well as fostering connections with families through responsive communication practices with parents (Galindo and Sheldon 2012). These efforts can result in higher attendance, lower levels of absenteeism and lower levels of student behavioural problems (O'Toole et al. 2019).

Family collaboration and connections are key to this transition, and it is particularly important for teachers and schools to develop a level of trust and rapport with parents before the school year starts (Murray et al. 2021). One of the ways that schools can develop these relationships is through transition activities with parents and children: activities that build and strengthen the relationships between families and primary school, ultimately supporting the child's entry to school (Ahtola et al. 2016). Furthermore, these early transition practices are imperative in helping to support positive transition outcomes and have been linked to improved academic performance in reading, writing and mathematics (Bérubé et al. 2018). Optimal transition practices include fostering connections between children, families and schools, resulting in positive outcomes for children (DeMeo-Cook and Levine-Coley 2017). The connections established during these transition practices relate to families' sense of preparedness, which indirectly has a positive influence on children's reaction to school (Bérubé et al. 2018). It is evident that families are aware of the importance of their participation in transition activities on their children's school experience, and, when given the opportunity to connect with their child's school and teacher, many parents are willing to share in the responsibility of supporting this transition (Kang, Horn, and Palmer 2017).

Transition practices represent one of the earliest ways that schools and families can lay the groundwork for future collaborations and partnerships and provide children with access to optimal learning environments (Clarke, Sheridan, and Woods 2009). By establishing these practices early on, parents and teachers can create constructive, reciprocal relationships with shared goals for a child's development and attainment in school (Ahtola et al. 2011; DeMeo Cook, Dearing, and Zachrisson 2018). Parents' beliefs, attitudes and values about school influence their parenting practices and the types of transition activities they may participate in with the school and their child (Miller 2015; Puccioni 2015). However, at the same time, parents may experience a significant amount of stress as they learn to navigate new ways to support their children and collaborate with their child's teachers (Kang, Horn, and Palmer 2017). Prior research has indicated that parents often do not feel prepared entering the school transition period with their child (Miller 2015). Furthermore, within the family–school relationship dynamic, parents may feel as if they do not have the social standing, resources or capital to express their opinions to schools or teachers (Clarke, Sheridan, and Woods 2009). Therefore, the responsibility falls on schools and teachers to initiate interactions with families in a way that reduces parents' feelings of vulnerability and makes parents feel welcomed at school (Clarke, Sheridan, and Woods 2009).

Purpose

Within this context, the aim of the case study reported here was to address the gap in understanding mothers' lived experience when their child is transitioning to primary school from preschool (Connolly and Gersch 2016). We used qualitative data collected within the wider Children's School Lives (CSL) national longitudinal study of Irish primary schooling (Devine et al. 2020) to examine mothers' perceptions of elements of family–school connectivity during the transition to primary school in the Irish context. The CSL

qualitative studies began in June 2019 and sought to provide an in-depth exploration of experiences in preschool and the transition to primary school in Ireland from the perspectives of mothers, early years practitioners and children.

Two research questions guided the case study reported here: (1) *what are mothers' experiences of family–school connectivity within Irish primary schools during the transition to primary school?* and (2) *how does family–school connectivity influence mothers' management of their experiences during their child's transition to primary school?*

Method

Ethical considerations

The CSL study underwent a rigorous ethics review process and was approved by the authors' university human research ethics committee in November 2018. The study underwent two revisions in a rigorous peer review procedure (Devine et al. 2020). Five preschools (one linked to each of the five CSL case study primary schools) were recruited to the CSL preschool transition case study in May–June 2019. Parents of children attending these preschools were invited to participate in the study. Study information and consent-to-be-contacted forms were provided to parents; parents who consented to be contacted later in the year were emailed with an invitation to participate in an interview (n = 21). The five mothers who agreed to participate were sent an additional consent form and then asked to consent verbally during the recorded interview. Transcripts of the interviews were anonymised, and pseudonyms have been used for all participants involved.

Methodological approach

An approach informed by Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used to facilitate an in-depth investigation of the mothers' experiences of their children's transitions. IPA is a dynamic, qualitative research process, which comprises both description and interpretation of an event or experience. Rooted in the philosophies of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger (Hale, Treharne, and Kitas 2007), it offers a discovery-oriented process, which allows for detailed exploration and subsequent description of the participants' views on certain phenomena or experiences (Smith, Jarman, and Osborn 1999; van Manen 1997). As researchers seek to get close to the participants' worldview, it is important that they recognise their own preconceived ideas and biases when analysing and interpreting the participants' expressions and reflections of their worldview (Hale, Treharne, and Kitas 2007). In line with the chosen methodology, a small, homogenous sample of mothers was recruited to ensure the interview questions were meaningful to participants and the data were relevant to the phenomena under review (Connolly and Gersch 2016; Smith, Jarman, and Osborn 1999). Furthermore, this allowed for a rich analysis of similarities and differences within a group whose members were defined as similar (Pietkiewicz and Smith 2014).

Participants

Participants were five mothers of children in their first year of formal schooling (Junior Infants, which is equivalent to Kindergarten), living in middle-class, urban areas in Ireland. Mothers were interviewed in November and December of 2019 to learn how the transition went for their children, as well as learn about their experiences as parents in their preschool, their experience as a parent during the transition and their early experience with the primary school teachers and staff. The mothers' children all participated in the CSL preschool transition study and started primary school by September 2019. Of these five mothers, three were mothers to boys and two were mothers to girls. Children ranged in age from 4 years and 10 months to 5 years of age and attended three separate primary schools (two all-boys' schools and one all-girls' school). All mothers were married: three were in full-time employment, one stayed at home full-time and one worked part-time. Four of the five mothers were born in Ireland.

Data collection

Data were collected through audio-recorded semi-structured interviews with the five mothers. Four interviews took place on the phone, and one was conducted in person. The interview schedule consisted of 32 questions, and each interview lasted approximately 40 min to 1 h, depending on how much each participant wanted to say. The semi-structured nature of the interview was used to prompt the conversation and focus the direction of the participants' reflection and conversation with the interviewer. The same interview schedule was used with each participant; however, a strict protocol was not followed by the interviewer, as some questions may have been elaborated on, while others were not relevant to certain participants. Interview questions were reviewed by multiple researchers involved in the study before interviews were conducted.

The interview schedule was designed to cover a broader range of topics for the wider CSL study. Specifically, it investigated parents' experiences of their children's preschools, their early experience with the primary school, transition activities hosted by school, opportunities for contact with child's teachers and the type of contact they had with teachers and the school, opportunities for involvement, questions about their child and their family and their child's initial experience in the primary school. For the current study, the focus of the analysis centred on the questions that highlighted the topic of connections with the school and teachers during the transition. Questions included the following:

1. What factors may have impacted the transition experience and made it easier or harder?
2. Is there anything you wish you had known beforehand? If this is not your first child starting primary school, is there anything you know now that you wish you had known with your first child?
3. Who talked to you about your child's transition to junior infants and starting primary school?
4. What were you excited about for your child? What were some of your worries?
5. How have you found the new primary school?

6. Have you met with your child's teacher yet? What did you talk about?
7. Is there anything you would like teachers to know about the experience of starting at a new school?
8. What sorts of activities did you and/or the school do with your child to help with their transition to school? Is there anything more you wished could have happened?
9. Are you involved in the classroom or the school in any way?
10. Do you know what sort of things your child does in school daily?

Interviews were open-ended and conversational, and the interview schedule was used to guide the conversation between the participants and researcher.

In addition, a reflective journal was kept by the primary researcher (the first author) to examine her own preconceived experiences and biases about the transition to primary school. The primary researcher was a former kindergarten teacher in the USA, who had worked with children and families transitioning from preschool to elementary school, as well as being an early career researcher of the preschool to primary transition. It was, therefore, imperative that this researcher constantly sought to ensure that the themes and interpretations elicited through the data collection reflected the participants' own perceptions of experiences rather than assumed themes and interpretations based on the researcher's own perceptions of these phenomena.

Data analysis

The transcripts were analysed in five phases. In the first phase, the first author read and re-read each individual transcript, in order to become fully immersed in the language and relayed experiences of the participants. Smith, Jarman, and Osborn (1999) recommend this first stage to be used as a means to become intimately familiar with each participant account; through this careful reading, initial comments, summaries, associations, connections and early interpretations are formed.

The second phase consisted of developing a set of initial codes for each individual transcript. Following the IPA approach, each transcript was coded individually, with no assumption being made that the emergent codes would be replicated in the other transcripts. The initial codes were created using line-by-line coding, whereby each segment of text was appraised to evaluate the central meaning conveyed by the participant. Initial coding for each of the transcripts was carried out independently by the first author. Then, two of the fully coded transcripts were reviewed by the first author, along with the second and third authors. Agreement on the central meaning of text segments and naming of codes was forged through discussion between the three authors.

Next, the initial codes from each transcript were transferred to a separate document, and similar or duplicated codes were clustered together with supporting quotations from the text. The first author used these clusters of codes and 'key quotations' to help look for further connections within individual transcripts. Fourth, the final set of initial codes were synthesised into broader units of meaning to create themes within each transcript. Finally, from these themes, a list of superordinate themes was created and listed. All coding processes were reviewed, discussed and agreed upon by the second and third author.

Findings

In this section, the findings from the analysis are presented thematically. Where pertinent, de-identified quotations from the data are included to illustrate and illuminate the findings; all names are pseudonyms. The superordinate and emerging themes were listed and organised by their relevance to each research question for the five participants in the study. The themes from each transcript were tabulated (Table 1 and Table 2) so that they could be ordered and displayed across the five participants. This allowed for a case analysis of converging and diverging themes and experiences.

The first research question – *What are mothers' experiences of family–school connectivity within Irish primary schools during the transition to primary school?* – sought to capture mothers' experiences of family–school connectivity during the transition to primary school and elicited seven initial emerging themes. These seven themes were then synthesised into three superordinate themes: (1) policies about contacting the teacher, (2) experience of school ethos and pedagogy and (3) power dynamics within mother–school relationships. Table 1 lists the superordinate, emerging themes and examples of supporting quotations for this first question.

Table 2 lists the superordinate themes, emerging themes and supporting quotations relating to research question two: *How does family–school connectivity influence mothers' management of their experiences during their child's transition to primary school?* Six emerging themes transpired from data across the five transcripts; these were then synthesised into two superordinate themes: (1) mothers and teachers as partners and (2) supportive nature of transition activities.

Table 1. Themes relating to the first research question: mothers' experiences of family–school connectivity.

Superordinate themes	Emerging themes	Supporting quotations
Policies about contacting the teacher	Communication and information sharing	*I try not to interact with them because they're just too busy, unless there's a problem. But they have certainly been able to call me over . . . I know we'd be welcomed if there was a problem.* (Gina)
	Frequency and opportunities to contact teacher and spend time in the classroom	*Yes. She keeps saying if you have any trouble come to me before or after school . . . Or you know, book an appointment to see her.* (Nia)
	School policies about teacher contacts and communication of these policies to parents	*It kind of disappoints me that we don't have another one at the end of the year, you get a school report . . . it's good, it's detailed but I suppose to sit down with the teacher again . . . would be beneficial . . .* (Maura)
Experience of school ethos and pedagogy	Trust in the abilities of the teacher	*She's a very good teacher, I think she's very diligent . . .* (Maura)
	School leadership and impact on the school community	*There's a lovely attitude from the principal, which seems to filter down through the teachers . . .* (Kathleen)
Power dynamics within mother–school relationships	Wants and needs as a parent from teacher and school during the transition period	*I'm okay with it I suppose, it's just when I'm being nosey, I'd like to know what they do.* (Rachel)
	Empathising with teacher responsibilities and role	*. . . you know it's like 25 parents talking to a teacher and I can see how the teacher . . . could be bombarded with trivia as well so I can see why they've changed [the policy on contacting teachers].* (Maura)

Table 2. Themes relating to the second research question: how family–school connectivity influences mothers' management of their experiences.

Superordinate themes	Emerging themes	Supporting quotations
Mothers and teachers as partners	Learning about the school curriculum	*They kind of felt he was trying to figure out his level and maybe pushing back a little bit on discipline in the class, and they mentioned it to me and I just said you need to push back because really he just needs to know what the boundaries are and once he knows those, he's fall in line with it.* (Gina)
	Homework and home learning support	*His teacher also helps me with that . . . She asked me to you know, look at the YouTube things, the resources, you know, where I can help [son] with his homework.* (Nia)
	Partnering on child behaviour and academic needs	*They kind of felt he was trying to figure out his level and maybe pushing back a little bit on discipline in the class, and they mentioned it to me and I just said you need to push back because really he just needs to know what the boundaries are and once he knows those, he's fall in line with it.* (Gina)
Supportive nature of transition activities	Informal and formal transition activities and becoming familiar with school	*There was – they have a meeting in kind of May . . . it's just an introduction of just very general things about the school and how they operate.* (Maura)
	Managing emotions around transition and supporting parent conversations with child about starting school	*I expected to feel kind of emotional on his first day of school. But I didn't, he was ready, he was in a really nice, safe environment.* (Kathleen)
	Learning about school routine and teacher expectations	*About four weeks into school, the school got all the parents in just one afternoon, just to speak to us about the setup of the classroom, the general rules she had.* (Kathleen)

In the sections that follow below, key findings from each superordinate theme are presented and discussed, starting with themes relating to research question 1.

Policies about contacting the teacher

Our analysis identified that the mothers in our study experienced different levels of quality and frequency of communication with their child's school and teacher, as well as access to opportunities to connect with the teacher directly. Although there were standard policies across every school, such as parent–teacher meetings in November or December of the school year, other policies on contacting the teacher varied. Some positive connection building and communication experiences were described, with belief expressed that the child's teacher was receptive and clear about opportunities to talk formally or informally. For example, Gina spoke of an open and supportive communication policy:

> But it's just the vibe in [son's] school is very open. It is very much like "we're here to help you".

However, it was also the case that more mixed experiences were shared. For instance, Rachel spoke of feeling unsure about how she could get in contact with her child's teacher outside of the parent–teacher meeting:

> I don't think so, I'm not sure. I'm not really sure whether you do [get to contact the teacher]. I don't think so . . .

In addition, Maura described a recent change in policy related to allowing parents inside the junior infants' classroom:

> They have kind of changed the policy about speaking with the teachers . . . we used to bring them [children] into the classroom . . . but now you're not allowed inside the school in the morning.

whilst also identifying strengths in the school's communication policies, including 'a very nice secretary who is approachable . . . ' and the use of email for correspondence.

Experience of school ethos and pedagogy

According to our analysis, experiences of school ethos and atmosphere contributed to mothers' overall perception of connectivity with their child's teacher and school principal. All mothers spoke highly of their child's teachers and trusted in their teaching and classroom management abilities. This is reflected, for example, in Kathleen's description of her child's teacher:

> She's a very warm, caring person. She's very good to the boys, I think she takes a very mammy-ish approach, which is kind of what they need in junior infants, rather than somebody who will be strict and stern.

The mothers we interviewed were also appreciative of school leadership. The two quotations below indicate how school principals were regarded as role models, embodying the ethos of the school and community:

> The principal is just amazing . . . And that's just fostered a really nice environment in the boys' school, where the parents are really encouraged to get involved and help out, and there's always lots going on. (Kathleen)

> I really think it's a nicely run school and the principal is – she's female and she's a really lovely role model for the girls, she's really stylish, she's very pleasant but firm you know and you can tell they really look up to her. (Maura)

Power dynamics in mother–school relationships

The data indicated that the mothers we interviewed frequently weighed their own wants and needs for family–school connections against clear recognition of the pressures they perceived teachers to be under, such as large class sizes. A sense of this was evident in Kathleen's reference to adjusting to new information sharing opportunities and policies in primary school:

> that's really hard to adjust to, because you're used to knowing everything about their day . . . But then again, I can understand why you can't do that, the teacher hasn't got time or she shouldn't be in a position where she has to say to a parent, okay, get out.

Furthermore, Rachel expressed similar sentiments in this regard, in the context of receiving information about her daughter's routine in the classroom.

Mothers and teachers as partners

The mothers in our study spoke often about the ways that family–school connections helped manage their experience of their child's transition to primary school, as well as their ability to support their child through this transition. They made reference to their conversations with teachers about their child's behavioural, academic and socioemotional adjustment in the classroom. Specifically, the interviewees talked of the bidirectional relationship formed with the teacher through shared information. As the mothers shared their knowledge about their child with the teacher, the teachers provided them with resources on ways to support their child's learning and wellbeing at home. An apt example of this was when Nia referred to a period when her child was absent for a week while sick. She reflected that the resources provided by the school allowed her to help her son stay on top of his work during this period of time at home:

> We could still follow … we just saw the website from the school. So the phonics and whatever … .it gives you clear methodical guidance … so he didn't miss anything.

Similarly, Gina described working together with her child's teachers within the first month, after they reached out to her about concerns with his behaviour in school. As Gina explained:

> We do it together as a team and come to us if there's any issue. So, they would expect that of us, that we would come to them.

There was also reference in the data to mothers feeling reassured about their child's progress in school at the parent–teacher meeting. For instance, Rachel had made mention of her initial concerns about her daughter's artwork and fine motor skills at the beginning of the year. Specifically, she was worried about the quality of her daughter's handwriting and had wondered whether it was a sign of an underlying problem. After she spent time in the classroom during her parent–teacher meeting, Rachel observed:

> I suppose her learning, and then being left-handed as it is, is a bit awkward. That was just a concern, and as I said the teacher says there's massive improvement … don't write her off just yet, if she needs extra help further down the line we'll deal with that when it comes to it.

Supportive nature of transition activities

A significant theme in our data related to the types and importance of transition activities held at school, and how these early connections with the school helped or hindered the mothers in preparing themselves and their child for the start of school. An illustration of this is Nia's discussion of the whole class parents' meeting that her son's teacher held at the very beginning of the year. She felt that it provided clarity for her, as a parent, about the upcoming year:

> The teacher had a meeting with the parents, all the parents of the class. She explained all about the curriculum and you know what her expectation were to the parents, what the involvement should be and you know, a bit of guidance. So, it was a very informative session.

However, Gina expressed her desire that her son's school would have hosted a more formal visit to the school as a transition activity for families. As she explained, this would have helped support her conversations with her son at home before the school year started:

> I think for [her son] it would have been nice . . . for him to go into the school at some time before he actually started. That was the one thing that kind of bothered me . . . it is nice when kids have been in through the door of the school once before to be able to say, well we went there and it was lovely and remember the pictures on the walls. Whereas I had no frame of reference for him.

There was some reference in the data to similar, formal transition activities held the previous spring, where children received their school uniform and learned about their new environment. Further, informal transition activities offered prior to school start were mentioned by Kathleen. These included the principal opening the school yard to families over the summer:

> We had been told – come in, bring a picnic, visit the playground, and familiarise yourself and enjoy the little play structure there. And just really familiarise the kids with the school.

It was evident from the data that, while transition practices were not consistent across schools, every school provided some opportunity for parents and children to become more familiar with the new school and routine before the start of the school year.

Discussion

The aim of the case study reported here was to gain an in-depth understanding of a small group of mothers' experiences of family–school connectivity during the transition to primary school and explore how elements of this connectivity influenced their management of their experiences. The importance of parental engagement in their child's learning is well established, with links between parental involvement in school and children's improved behaviour, mental health, attendance and academic outcomes (O'Toole et al. 2019). It is, therefore, critical for schools and teachers to create strong practices of communication and information sharing between parents and the school in order to help support parents as they navigate new routines and experiences during this time (DeMeo Cook, Dearing, and Zachrisson 2018). The current study highlighted the particular elements of family–school connectivity, which helped mothers feel supported and prepared during their child's transition to primary school.

Understanding the positive and negative family–school connectivity experiences of mothers in the Irish context was of particular importance because, while there is extensive awareness of the significance of family–school connectivity, research indicates a lack of regularity in school practice in Ireland (O'Toole et al. 2019). This appeared to be reflected in the mothers' mixed experiences regarding opportunities and school policies on contacting the teacher, although it was generally evident that the mothers we interviewed spoke positively about their experience of family–school connectivity. There was a high level of trust in teachers, and a strong sense that teachers partnered with them to engage in their child's learning, working out any academic or behavioural issues their child might have experienced. This finding is of note, as international studies

suggest that facilitating communication and collaboration between parents and teachers can boost children's academic outcomes and socioemotional skill development (Murphy et al. 2021).

Another area of connectivity highlighted by mothers in our study was related to opportunities to spend time in their child's classroom. Research has shown that schools that allow parents inside at drop-off or collection times create an environment in which parents feel welcomed and that their opinions are valued (O'Toole et al. 2019). By inviting parents into the classroom, schools can build high quality, reciprocal relationships with parents and create a welcoming environment, which can help to alleviate some of the stress parents may feel during the transition, as their role in their child's education changes (Miller 2015). In contrast, schools that limit parents' access to the school during these periods prevent opportunities for informal conversations and communication, creating a feeling that parents are not welcome (O'Toole et al. 2019).

Ultimately, the duty to initiate interactions with parents falls on the school (Clarke, Sheridan, and Woods 2009; Grolnick and Raftery-Helmer 2015); schools therefore need to be cognisant of parents' feelings around communication patterns. Research indicates that parental involvement relies heavily on teacher invitations to participate in school-based engagement and that they respond positively to invitations from teachers (Green et al. 2007). Within family–school relationships and connections, teachers are often viewed as the expert, possessing the power to uphold their values and epistemologies (O'Toole et al. 2019; Clarke, Sheridan, and Woods 2009). Therefore, families tend to begin these relationships at a disadvantage and may lack the social standing, capital or resources to confidently express their opinions or ask questions about their child's education without invitation (Clarke, Sheridan, and Woods 2009). Overall, the goal of family–school connectivity should be to form a multifaceted, bidirectional relationship, with a genuine invitation issued by teachers and schools to work together with parents to promote children's learning (Serpell and Mashburn 2012).

Establishing early patterns of communication with families and parents is a particularly important part of family–school connections during the preschool-to-primary school transition, as parents have the greatest influence on children's learning during this developmental period (Dockett, Perry, and Kearney 2012). Furthermore, parents' feelings of preparedness during the transition will influence children's adjustment to school (Bérubé et al. 2018). During this time, parents most frequently engage in their child's learning through helping with homework, discussing school whilst at home, volunteering or being involved in school committees. Therefore, answers may be sought from the school before and throughout the school year in terms of their academic expectations (Bérubé et al. 2018; Dockett, Perry, and Kearney 2012). Our study underscores the need for schools and teachers to support parents by clearly communicating their expectations and providing resources on the curriculum so that parents can support their child's learning at home.

Transition practices represent a vital opportunity for schools to support and inform parents and children before the start of the school year. Activities around transition are often hosted by the school and can be valuable opportunities to provide information

to parents and children about their new environment, as well as chances to form relationships with new adults and peers entering children's and parents' lives (Bérubé et al. 2018). Examples include conferences, registration, open houses, shared written materials and family orientations to help parents familiarise themselves with school policies and practices (DeMeo-Cook and Levine-Coley 2017). Such activities are often linked to parental involvement and also affect how parent and school relationships develop over time (Bérubé et al. 2018). Furthermore, well-planned transition activities have led to children's better learning and adjustment outcomes in school (Ahtola et al. 2011).

One transition activity specifically discussed by the mothers in the current study was the opportunity to familiarise their child with their new school. Studies have shown that familiarisation with their child's new environment is one of the most important transition activities for parents (Ahtola et al. 2016; McIntyre et al. 2007). The individual experiences captured by our study are illuminating and can contribute to informing future practice on transitions.

Limitations and implications for future research

Our study was conducted on a small scale, with a homogeneous sample, in order to gain rich, in-depth knowledge of a specific population's experience of a phenomenon (Pietkiewicz and Smith 2014). The study therefore makes no claims of generalisability or applicability of the results to other populations. Future research would benefit from exploring the experiences and perceptions of mothers in settings such as rural areas, diverse communities and disadvantaged communities, as parents from these communities are not always considered equal partners and decision makers by schools (O'Toole et al. 2019).

Furthermore, research on family–school connectivity would greatly benefit from the perspectives of other caregiver experiences within families. For example, it is important that fathers' perspectives are investigated, as fathers have significant influence on children's development and behavioural outcomes (Parent et al. 2017). Perhaps because mothers have been, and continue to be, the primary caregivers, fathers' perspectives tend to be either not captured in research or only captured through mothers' eyes (Parent et al. 2017). Furthermore, grandparents are also important source of emotional and economic support for families (McNally, Share, and Murray 2014). It is noteworthy that the perspectives of grandparent caregivers were captured as part of the CSL study and would benefit from future analysis (Devine et al. 2020).

Conclusion

The importance of family–school connectivity during the transition from preschool to primary school cannot be emphasised enough. The case study reported here provides an in-depth interpretation and understanding of a small sample of mothers' experiences, feelings and emotions as they navigated the transition with their child. Our findings suggested that the mothers' experiences of family–school connectivity during the transition period were generally positive. However, there were some mixed experiences in terms of the mothers' desire to be active participants in their child's learning and transition experience, as well as to develop quality connections with their child's school and teachers through regular communication and familiarity with the environment. In all,

family–school connectivity draws attention to not only the number of contacts throughout the year between families and schools but also the *quality* of these contact experiences – and how, together, they can help form supportive, trusting and committed relationships between teachers and parents.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) [2016/01213/12806].

ORCID

Elizabeth Tobin http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6500-0170
Seaneen Sloan http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1643-3690
Jennifer Symonds http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4259-6124
Dympna Devine http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1201-6611

References

Ahtola, A., P. M. Björn, T. Turunen, P. Poikonen, M. Kontoniemi, M.-K. Lerkkanen, J.-E. Nurmi . 2016. "The Concordance between Teachers' and Parents' Perceptions of School Transition Practices: A Solid Base for the Future". *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research* 60 (2): 168–181. doi:10.1080/00313831.2014.996598.

Ahtola, A., G. Silinskas, P.-L. Poikonen, M. Kontoniemi, N. Pekka, and J.-E. Nurmi. 2011. "Transitions to Formal Schooling: Do Transition Practices Matter for Academic Performance?" *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 26: 295–302. doi:10.1016/j.ecresq.2010.12.002.

Bérubé, A., J. Ruel, J. April, and A. C. Moreau. 2018. "Family Preparation for School Entry and the Role of Transition Practices." *The Journal of Educational Research* 111 (4): 398–403. doi:10.1080/00220671.2017.1284039.

Blankson, N., J. M. Weaver, E. M. Leerkes, M. O'Brien, S. D. Calkins, and S. Marcovitch. 2017. "Cognitive and Emotional Processes as Predictors of a Successful Transition into School." *Early Education and Development* 28 (1): 1–20. doi:10.1080/10409289.2016.1183434.

Bronfenbrenner, U. 1979. *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Design and Nature*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Bronfenbrenner, U., and S. Ceci. 1994. "Nature-Nurture Reconceptualized in Developmental Perspective: A Bioecological Model." *Psychological Review* 101 (4): 568–586. Retrieved from. https://www.imprs-life.mpg.de/27210/22_bronfenbrenner_ceci.pdf

Burke, J., and M. Dempsey. 2020. "Covid-19 Practice in Primary Schools in Ireland Report." Maynooth University School of Education. Retrieved from: https://www.into.ie/app/uploads/2020/04/Covid-19-Practice-in-Primary-Schools-Report-1.pdf

Clarke, B., S. Sheridan, and K. Woods. 2009. "Elements of Healthy Family-school Relationships." In *Handbook of School-family Partnerships*, edited by S. L. Christenson and A. L. Reschly, 61–79. New York: Routledge. doi:10.4324/9780203876046.

Connolly, M., and and I. Gersch. 2016. "Experiences of Parents Whose Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) are Starting Primary School". *Educational Psychology in Practice* 32 (3): 245–261 doi:10.1080/02667363.2016.1169512

Cowan, P. A., C. P. Cowan, J. C. Ablow, V. K. Johnson, and J. R. Measelle. 2005. *The Family Context of Parenting in Children's Adaptation to Elementary School*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

DeMeo Cook, K., E. Dearing, and H. D. Zachrisson. 2018. "Is Parent-Teacher Cooperation in the First Year of School Associated with Children's Academic Skills and Behavioural Functioning? *International Journal of Early Childhood* 50, 211–226 doi:10.1007/s13158-018-0222-z ."

DeMeo-Cook, K., and R. Levine-Coley. 2017. "School Transition Practices and Children's Social and Academic Adjustment in Kindergarten." *Journal of Educational Psychology* 109 (2): 166–177. doi:10.1037/edu0000139.

Devine, D., J. Symonds, S. Sloan, A. Cahoon, M. Crean, E. Farrell, T. Blue, and J. Hogan. 2020. *Children's School Lives: An Introduction*. National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. Retrieved from: https://cslstudy.ie/news .

Dockett, S., and B. Perry. 2004 Starting School: Perspectives of Australian Children, Parents and Educators . *Journal of Early Childhood Research* 2 (2): 171–189. doi:10.1177/1476718X04042976.

Dockett, S., B. Perry, and E. Kearney. 2012. "Family Transitions as Children Start School." Family Matters 90:57–67.

Eskelä-Haapanen, S., M. K. Lerkkanen, H. Rasku-Puttonen, and A. M. Poikkeus. 2017. "Children's Beliefs Concerning School Transition." *Early Child Development and Care* 187 (9): 1446–1459. doi:10.1080/03004430.2016.1177041.

Galindo, C., and S. Sheldon. 2012. "School and Home Connections and Children's Kindergarten Achievement Gains: The Mediating Role of Family Involvement". *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 27:90–103 doi:10.1016/j.ecresq.2011.05.004.

Green C. L., Walker J. M., Hoover-Dempsey K. V. and Sandler H. M. (2007). Parents' motivations for involvement in children's education: An empirical test of a theoretical model of parental involvement. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 99(3), 532–544. 10.1037/0022-0663.99.3.532

Grolnick, W., Raftery-Helmer, J. 2015. Core components of Family-School Connections: Towards a Model of Need Satisfying Partnerships S.M. Sheridan and E. Moorman Kim Foundational Aspects of Family-School Partnership Research Research on Family-School Partnerships (Switzerland: Springer, Cham.) doi:10.1007/978-3-319-13838-1_1.

Hale, E. D., G. J. Treharne, and G. D. Kitas. 2007. "Qualitative Methodologies I: Asking Research Questions with Reflexive Insight *Musculoskeletal Care* 5 (3): 139–147 doi:10.1002/msc.109 ."

Kang, J., E. Horn, and S. Palmer. 2017. "Influence of Family Involvement in Kindergarten Transition Activities on Children's Early School Adjustment." *Early Childhood Education Journal* 45: 789–800. https://doi.org/0.1007/s10643-016-0828-4

McIntyre, L. L., T. L. Eckert, B. H. Fiese, F. D. DiGennaro, and L. K. Wildenger. 2007. "Transition to Kindergarten: Family Experiences and Involvement." *Early Childhood Education Journal* 35 (1): 83–88. doi:10.1007/s10643-007-0175-6.

McNally, S., M. Share, and A. Murray. 2014 . "Prevalence and Predictors of Grandparent Childcare in Ireland: Findings from a Nationally Representative Sample of Infants and Their Families." *Child Care in Practice* 20 (2): 182–193. 10.1080/13575279.2013.859566.

Miller, K. 2015. "The Transition to Kindergarten: How Families from Lower-Income Backgrounds Experienced the First Year." *Early Childhood Education Journal* 43 (3): 213–221. doi:10.1007/s10643-014-0650-9.

Murphy, C., J. Matthews, O. Clayton, and W. Cann. 2021. "Partnerships with Families in Early Childhood Education: Exploratory Study." *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood* 46 (1): 93–106. https://doi.org/10.1177/1836939120979067

O'Toole, L., J. Kiely, D. McGillacuddy, E. O'Brien, and C. O. Keeffe. 2019. "Parental Involvement, Engagement and Partnership in Their Children's Education during the Primary School Years." *National Parents Council*. https://researchrepository.ucd.ie/handle/10197/9823

OECD. 2015. *Starting Strong IV: Monitoring Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care*. Paris: OECD Publishing. doi:10.1787/9789264233515-en.

Parent, J., R. Forehand, H. Pomerantz, V. Peisch, and M. Seehuus. 2017. "Participation in Child Psychopathology Research." *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology* 45(7):1259–1270.10.1007/s10802-016-0254-5. ".

Puccioni, J. 2015. Parents' Conceptions of School Readiness, Transition Practices, and Children's Academic Achievement Trajectories . *The Journal of Educational Research* 108 (2): 130–147 doi:10.1080/00220671.2013.850399 . .

Rimm-Kaufman, S., and R. Pianta. 1999. "Patterns of Family-School Contact in Preschool and Kindergarten." *School Psychology Review* 28 (3): 426–438.

Rimm-Kaufman, S., and R. Pianta. 2000. "An Ecological Perspective on the Transition to Kindergarten: A Theoretical Framework to Guide Empirical Research". *Journal of Applied Development Psychology* 21 (5): 491–511.

Serpell, Z., and A. Mashburn. 2012. "Family–school Connectedness and Children's Early Social Development". *Social Development* 21 (1): 21–46. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9507.2011.00623.x.

Smith, J. A., M. Jarman, and M. Osborn. 1999. Doing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis Murray, M., Chamberlain, K. *Qualitative Health Psychology: Theories and Methods* (London: Sage) doi:10.4135/9781446217870.n14.

van Manen, M. 1997. *Researching Lived Experience*. Kindle ed. New York: Taylor and Francis.

Webb, G., B. A. Knight, and G. Busch. 2017. "Children's Transitions to School: 'So What about the Parents? or 'So, What about the Parents?" *International Journal of Early Years Education* 25 (2): 204–217. doi:10.1080/09669760.2017.1301808.