SUPPORTING EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATIONAL PROVISION WITHIN A CLUSTER OF DEIS PRESCHOOL AND PRIMARY SCHOOL SETTINGS WITH A SPECIFIC FOCUS ON TRANSITION BETWEEN THE TWO EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS

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April 2010

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1. Introduction

1.1 Research Aims

The aim of this project was to coordinate, enhance and evaluate educational provision for children aged 3-4 years in a cluster of DEIS early childhood settings with an emphasis on the transition for children between preschool and primary settings. The project involved a cluster of two DEIS Urban Band 1 primary schools, and twelve feeder preschools, with a specific focus on developing processes for communication and collaboration between the two educational settings, pedagogy and curriculum, and enhancing parental involvement. A Continuing Professional Development programme was an integral part of the project.

The project aimed to reinforce the approach of the DEIS action plan with its emphasis on not only supporting the infant classes of primary school, but also supporting the educational components of the preschool settings feeding into these classes. A partnership between preschools and school needs to include a respect for differences between the two educational settings, while also ensuring greater levels of consistency for children across settings. The DEIS action plan itself acknowledges that limited early childhood education supports and limited coordination cross-sectorally are two of the weaknesses noted historically with educational inclusion measures (DES, 2005). The DEIS plan outlines supports to students to smooth their progression from primary to second-level education, however this project proposed that more formal supports need to be established at both preschool and infants level to smooth the transition from preschool to primary education.

Within the areas of research, practice, and policy in Ireland, the rights of the child to have her voice heard are becoming widely recognised (Hogan & O'Reilly, 2007). The National Children's Strategy (DHC, 2000) followed by the establishment of the Children's Ombudsman's Office and the Office of the Minister for Children have most notably focused on the need to empower and consult with children in matters relating to their own lives. Indeed such consideration follows from Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which asserts the rights of children to be heard in matters relating to their own lives (UNICEF, 1989). Following on from the above, this project was framed with a vision of children as being both active agents in their own world, and competent participants in the research process.

The Ecological Systems Model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979,1992; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) was the primary theoretical basis underpinning this project, given it's acknowledgement of the shared systems of all the stakeholders and the dynamic nature of the relationships involved in the process. Viewing the transition from preschool to school from this model, the child is influenced by the family and community, the characteristics of the child's past and present learning environments, and the educational values and experiences of his/her caregivers. In this way the child is seen not in isolation, but in terms of the influence of contexts and the connections between these contexts. The emphasis of the project was therefore on developing communication and continuity

between children and their families, preschools and primary schools, while also acknowledging the importance of the wider community context.

1.2   Context of the Project

The underlying principles behind this research project rested on three pieces of research, acknowledging the importance of each in terms of providing a framework within which this project was developed.

The first of these was the "Building Bridges" study, the first formal research into the transition from preschool to primary school for children in Ireland (O'Kane, 2007). The theme of bridges crossing two different environments was the focus of this project. As the research developed the importance of respecting the cultures on each side of the bridge, and the cultural environments of each of the participants in the journey became apparent. The lives of our children are embedded in their social ties to others, and the influences on transition for children were found to be multi-level, from the influence of home, through schools and communities, and historical context. The findings and recommendations of the study played an important part in developing the methodology for the current project.

The second piece of research which was considered to be important in developing this project was the work undertaken by the CECDE with regard to the early education support measure of the DEIS programme (CECDE, 2007).   This needs analysis conducted among participating preschools in the Primary Urban Band 1 group reported on the primary needs identified by these stakeholders. It is clear from the responses of the preschool practitioners questioned where their most pressing needs lay. The practitioners highlighted quality improvement, greater levels of expert advice, and training as key areas of need. The report found that expert advice and training needs contributing 39% and 27% of the responses respectively (CECDE, 2007). Further information on Síolta, curriculum supports and mentoring from an expert in Early Education were also highlighted. The need for in-service training was also noted. Supports requested within the area of "Parental Involvement" were also identified by practitioners. These findings fed into the current research project also and the research design was heavily influenced by the needs identified in that research.

The third, the National Quality Framework - *Síolta* (CECDE, 2006) developed in consultation across the various early childhood settings in Ireland, including preschools and infant classes - was also considered to be an integral part of this project. *Síolta* was considered to be an effective tool with which to support consistency and continuity of approach across the preschool and primary school sector during this period of transition, particularly with its emphasis on improving quality of early childhood experiences for children at both preschool level and in the infant classes of primary schools. *Síolta* was also considered to be an important step towards a consolidation of approach, emphasising continuity and progression between preschool and school, and had an important role to play in developing the ethos of the current project.

Is it also worth mentioning that when the current project methodology was developed *Aistear*: *The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2010) had not been published. However, this framework is clearly very important in terms of complementing existing curricular material, and in terms of providing a bridging mechanism to support children making the transition from preschool to primary school. The framework also transitions across these two educational settings and is discussed further in the discussion and recommendations section of this report (Section 8.4).

2. Background Information

2.1 Educational Disadvantage

The 2008 Survey on Income and Living Conditions reported that 14.4% of the Irish population were at risk of poverty, that means living in families whose income was below 60% of median income, a decrease of 2.1 percentage points from 2007. However, children were identified as being one of the most vulnerable groups in Ireland today with an at risk poverty rate of 18%. The report noted that children were over-represented in this category, making up 26% of the general population, while making up over a third (32.7%) of those at risk of poverty. Children were also the most likely age group of those at risk of poverty of experiencing deprivation, with over half (51.5%) experiencing one or more item of deprivation as compared to 1 in 5 of those 75 years or older, and were also the group with the highest rate of consistent poverty. (Central Statistics Office, 2009).

The Combat Poverty Agency reports that child poverty has a long-term effect, in terms of educational achievement, how children develop physically and mentally, their future employment, and their overall life opportunities (Combat Poverty Agency, 2010). Indeed research has shown that such children have reduced life chances and do less well educationally than their better off counterparts, which can result in a cycle of deprivation and social exclusion that is passed down from generation to generation (Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs, 2001). Research has also found that differences in children's performance levels in the first grades of school become more pronounced over the school years. Children from families with more resources score higher in the earliest test scores, and the gap between them and children from families with low socioeconomic status widens over the years (Entwisle & Alexander, 1999). Furlong (2007) also highlighted the danger of class-differentiation in education which results in the maintenance of class differentiated experiences. He suggests that these different experiences of the educational system begin before the transition to formal school, and may play a part in early school adjustment. Indeed, there is a wealth of research available suggesting that children from designated disadvantaged areas may be at greater risk of experiencing difficulties with the transition to formal schooling (Brooker, 2002, 2005; Yeboah, 2000, 2002;). Learning in school is a product of the classroom and school environment, in tandem with the dispositions of each individual child towards learning, and their exposure to learning experiences. Children from disadvantaged families may not be prepared to cope with the demands of school, and schools may not be prepared to cope with the demands of these children.

However, research has shown that investment in education can have a very important role to play from an anti-poverty perspective. A number of early intervention projects have been established in Ireland aimed at children from disadvantaged backgrounds, and one of the considerations of these projects is the belief that the transition to formal schooling is a major challenge for these children in particular (INTO, 1995). These interventions recognise the importance of ECCE experiences and that early disadvantage will effect children's ongoing experiences in formal schooling. As Flynn (2007) highlights "while it is evident in Irish society that there is no 'quick fix' solution to inter-generational poverty and deprivation, most would agree that education is key" (2007, p.91). Indeed, the OECD have identified good quality early childhood care and education (ECCE) services as being an important support mechanism impacting on children and their families both directly and indirectly (OECD, 2006). In a review of early childhood intervention programmes, Brooks-Gunn (2003) concluded that high-quality early education settings increase children's school related achievement and behaviour, however the impact of such programmes that are continued into the formal education system have the most sustained long-term effect. She also noted that the effects are strongest for disadvantaged children. Discussing the role of ECCE in terms of an anti-poverty strategy in the Irish context, Hayes (2008) advises that it can play a clear role in ending child poverty. However, she asserts that "it must be part of an integrated policy developed in a context where social and economic policies are in harmony" (2008, p33).

Even prior to the additional uncertainties created by the current global economic crisis, many families were grappling with poverty which clearly impacts on their children's wellbeing. The role of educators in mitigating the effects of this stress is clear. Wachs (2009) identifies that in both developed and developing countries chronic poverty causes stresses, and notes that sensitive responses from educators and at a community level can be a support measure to children living with such stress. Indeed the 'Poverty and Potential Report' (Berlinger, 2009) has identified six factors which play a powerful role in generating existing achievement gaps. These are low birth weight; inadequate medical care; food insecurity; environmental pollutants; family stress; and neighbourhood characteristics. Significantly, a seventh factor: learning opportunities (whether preschool, primary school, or after school) was also identified as "being able to mitigate some of the harm caused by the first six factors" (p4). Professor James Heckman, Nobel Laureate in Economics (Bernard Van Leer, 2009a) highlights the economic case for investing in early childhood education as a response to the current recession from two perspectives: stimulus from current expenditure, and long term gains in human capital.

2.2   Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS)

Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) is an action plan for educational inclusion developed and published by the Department of Education and Science. It includes a particular emphasis on early years education by focusing on the infant classes of primary schools, and most notably, supporting the educational components of preschool settings feeding into these classes. The importance of ECCE experiences is recognised and that idea that early disadvantage will effect children's ongoing experiences in formal schooling is acknowledged (DES, 2005). The action plan

specifically notes that intervention during these early years supporting the most vulnerable children from disadvantaged communities "*can be a powerful intervention yielding lifelong educational benefits*" (DES, 2005, p.33).

The plan involves standardising the system for identifying levels of disadvantage. It also involves an integrated School Support Programme (SSP) which brings together already existing interventions for schools, such as Early Start, Giving Children and Even Break, The Home School Liaison Scheme, and the School Completion Scheme. Under the SSP DEIS schools are allocated supplementary resources and supports in accordance with their level of disadvantage. The two primary schools taking part in the current project were DEIS Urban Band 1 schools.

Researcher:	So what do you think might be different about big school to playschool?
Erin:	There will be 10 boys and 10 girls, lots of boys and girls, more, more, more, more, more, boys and girls. There will be loads of tables and loads of boys and girls.
Dara:	And you do lots of drawing and writing
Erin:	And you have to do what the teacher says, if you're bold you go to the office, and you get etention [detention]. If you don't sit down you get etention [detention].

[Child Discussion Group 3, Preschool, 09-03-10]

2.3   The Transition from Preschool to Primary School

The absence of research on transitions in the early years has been noted in the Irish context (Walsh, 2003; Walsh & Cassidy, 2007) despite having been identified as being of great importance educationally in the lives of young children (Pianta & Cox, 1999; Bernard Van Leer Foundation, 2006; OECD, 2006). This transition poses challenges to children, and some children will be more successful than others at meeting these challenges. As the White Paper on Early Childhood Education (DES, 1999a) acknowledges, for those children who have difficulties making the transition to school the gap between them and their peers usually widen over time. The report acknowledges that early intervention to support these children is more cost-effective than treatment later in life. It has been noted internationally that strategies put in place to support children during the transition are particularly effective for children from disadvantaged families (Ramey & Ramey, 1999; Margetts, 2002). These studies have found that support at this time resulted not only in reductions in academic failure, but also higher levels of confidence, self-control and social skills.

During the course of this research project, a free preschool year for children was announced by the Government which commenced January 2010. The scheme is expected to benefit some 70,000 children, aged between 3 years 3 months and 4 years 6 months every year. One of the aims of the policy was to benefit disadvantaged children who do not currently benefit from preschool education. The aim is to "promote equality of opportunity at the most important developmental stage of children's lives. Regardless of income or ability to pay, all children will be entitled to avail of this pre-school service" (OMC, 2009). When launching the policy Minster Andrews noted that pre-primary education is a key determinant of success at primary level, and noted the financial and social returns expected from this investment at preschool level. The Minister also noted that due to the additional childcare places in place following on from early investment programmes, he was confident that parents who wanted to access a preschool place for their child would be able to do so.

The plan allows children (aged between 3 years and 3 months and 4 years and 6 months) enrolled in playschools to receive free pre-school provision of 3 hours per day, 5 days each week over a 38 week year. This equates to a weekly capitation grant to the service provider of €64.50 and parents with children enrolled in these services will not be charged. Children enrolled in full- or part-time childcare services will receive free pre-school provision of 2 hours and 15 minutes per day, five days a week over a 50 week period. This equates to a weekly capitation grant to the service of €48.50, with parents paying for their childcare net of this amount. (OMC, 2009).

This free preschool year should mean that all children come to primary school with some form of preschool experience, however it is still acknowledged that children are coming to school classrooms in Ireland with a diverse range of preschool experiences. The two educational settings have developed quite independently of each other, and the expectations of the school teacher may differ from the preschool teacher. The child is also now facing the demands of heightened academic goals. Although the infants classes curriculum is a play-based one, with a focus on active learning, the child is moving from the preschool environment where his achievements were judged against his own past performance, to the school environment when he is expected to attain particular academic goals, for example in phonics. He will now be compared across the board with classmates, and will be judged on whether he has reached certain standards expected at junior infant level. Thus, the transition to school poses challenges to children, and some children will be more successful than others at meeting these challenges. As noted above, for the children who have difficulties making the transition to school the gap between them and their peers may widen over time.

Children also have to adapt to different teacher expectations in formal schooling (Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta & Cox, 2000; Pianta & Cox, 2002). Hayes, O'Flaherty and Kernan (1997) investigated the educational values and expectations of teachers in preschool and primary schools in Ireland, and found a more academic focus in schools, particularly those classified as disadvantaged. Primary school teachers were more likely to propose that children spend their time on preacademic activities, as compared to their preschool counterparts. A similar emphasis on academic skills in disadvantaged schools was found

by Wright, Deiner & Kay (2000). NicCraith & Fay (2008) reported that findings from infant teacher focus groups suggest that a lot of activities are still teacher led in the infant classroom. Studies have also shown that there is more verbal instruction at school, and a much greater focus on literacy and numeracy (Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta & Cox, 2000; Margetts, 2002).   The academic expectations of parents can also become more emphasised on transition to school.   Infant teachers in a study conducted by INTO (NicCraith & Fay, 2008) reported that parents often did not fully understand the importance of play in the infants classes. They reported that parents held expectations about their children learning to read and write at this level, rather than seeing play as a central approach to learning.

"We live in world now where children are very sedentary, they are stuck in front of the television, or playing games [computer games] and parents are busy, so there isn't the same communication that there used to be. Going out to play doesn't happen any more, they are always playing on the computer, and whatever is happening on the computer doesn't seem to flow back into their language."

[School Principal, Discussion Group 22-04-09]

There are also more formal routines in school with which the children must quickly become familiar. Children are expected to behave in a way appropriate to school life, for example controlling their temper in a situation of conflict. They must listen to instructions, and act on them. They must co-operate with others, and wait their turn when necessary. The rules which they must adhere to are many, compared to the relative flexibility and freedom of preschool. Myers (1997) suggests that to comply with even one of these challenges can be difficult for a child, but when faced with so many new challenges at the same time the stress can be overwhelming. He warns that a vicious circle can develop where levels of stress mean that a child fails to perform well, he then becomes disaffected with learning, and develops a sense of failure.

Finally, as Myers (1997) advises there are many reasons why effort should be put into easing children's transition to school, not least because the benefits impact on the indivdiual children, the school system, and finally to society as a whole. He suggests that as school success in individual terms improves, this will impact on society in many ways as these children bring skills to society as a whole throughout their adult lives.

3.   Key Issues Involved in the Project

In order to achieve the aims of the project, and using the three pieces of research identified above (Section 1.2) the following were identified as being key issues to be addressed during the course of the project:

Communication and Continuity
Parental Engagement
Curricular and Pedagogical Continuity
A Shared Conceptual Framework

3.1   Key Issues Involved: Communication and Continuity

The importance of communication between preschool and primary settings has been noted, and it is recommended that bonds between these two settings should be strengthened. As noted in the background to this report, the ecological systems model of development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1992) was important to the development of this project, in which the child is seen as one part of a process of interaction influencing her development. The most central influence on the child is that of the microsystem, which is any individual setting, for example the preschool or the school, in which the child has most of her direct interactions. The people in these microsystems have the most immediate effect on the child, and if the relationships in the immediate microsystem break down this will cause the child difficulty. The relational network with others, consisting of linkages between any of the various settings in which the child spends time, is also particularly important, and can exert an influence over the child in subtle ways, for example if preschool practitioners and and infants teachers have differences of opinion on the education of the child. The OECD (2002) has emphasized that strong links between the two sectors can have a number of advantages in terms of developing shared goals, educational methods, and creating coherence in staff training and development. If the two cultures can come together and communicate openly while respecting each tradition, the resulting continuity of approach could benefit children making the transition between the two educational settings. Greater partnership could also result in greater agreement about ECCE programme objectives and methodologies.

O'Kane (2007) identified a lack of communication between preschools and primary schools in Ireland, suggesting that there is little congruence in approaches to learning. It was clear that continuity of approach which would lead to optimal learning conditions for children was not taking place. Findings from the study suggest that preschool practitioners and teachers of junior infants classes have only a limited understanding of each others working ideologies and environments. This project aimed to investigate avenues through which the two groups of teachers could develop a greater understanding of each others philosophy and work on ways to develop shared policies and practices. Consistency and continuity between the two settings must be in the best interest of the children crossing from one educational environment to the other, and the two groups should work towards these goals with the interests of these children at the forefront of their minds. Differences between the ideologies of preschool and school have been noted, and differences in practices and cultures of the two groups are acknowledged. As Bennett advises (Bernard Van Leer Foundation, 2006) "*the relationship between primary education and the early childhood sector is neither strong or equal*" (p16). It is suggested that in order to provide some cultural continuity between the two settings, a collaborative approach to sharing information on practice and policies, while exploring images of

transition, would help practitioners from both settings to work towards a common culture for transitions.

An important issue with relation to communication between preschool and primary school teachers relates to the issue of language. O'Kane (2007) noted some differences in the use of language within the two educational spheres. It is unclear whether the differences found are true differences in opinion, different uses of terminology, or a different cultural understanding of certain concepts. This clearly is an important issue. Dunlop (2003) found during a study of continuity and progression in children's early education in the United Kingdom, that teachers in preschool and primary settings had a shared use of terminology, however this did not reflect shared meanings. Differences in cultural expectations, and distinctions in meaning the two groups of teachers take from the same language have been identified in previous Irish research (Hayes, O'Flaherty & Kernan, 1997) and may well be the case here.   As Dunlop and Fabian advise "*a shared language to describe transitions may not be a mutual one*" (2002, p146). Considering the historical and cultural divergence between preschool and primary education in Ireland which covers nearly every aspect of both types of settings, it is possible that this is the case.

3.2.   Key Issues Involved: Curricular and Pedagogical Continuity

O'Kane (2007) reported on the curricular differences between preschool and primary school settings. Although the primary school curriculum focuses on child-centred learning, it is also subject based within a strongly developmental framework, and a greater emphasis on direct instruction was noted in the study. A dichotomy was found in the study between the children's experience of play-based activities at school, and what the children considered to be play, which were times when they could actively control their environment. Findings supported the view that children leave behind the role of 'active explorer' in preschool. Questions were raised as to whether schools are ready to meet the needs of children in terms of providing an active rather than passive learning environment. A tension has been noted in the UK between practitioners belief in play as a powerful learning medium, and the demands of the primary school curriculum, with the pressure for children to reach predetermined standards (Keating, Fabian, Jordan, Mavers & Roberts, 2000). The findings of O'Kane's study would suggest that this may well be the case in Ireland also. She also noted that a curriculum is only as effective as the practitioners implementing it. An understanding of the theories of learning and development which underpin the curricula, and the intricacies and ethos behind the curricula is vital to it being implemented in a way that will provide a richness of both activities and interactions in which the child's learning can be supported and extended. It was not clear from the findings of her study that the curricula of Irish preschools and primary schools offer continuity to children during this transition, particularly in relation to play.

"For most children there is a period of adjusting to school, and that is exactly what it is, adjusting to the new environment. But for some children, say with behavioural problems, you [preschool staff] have strategies that work for that child. You have worked with them, you know them well, you may have brought them around to your way of doing things. These children can have a lot of trouble readjusting, and to know the strategies you use, that is a very big thing, that would be very useful. That is where real value lies in asking questions about strategies you use in preschool."
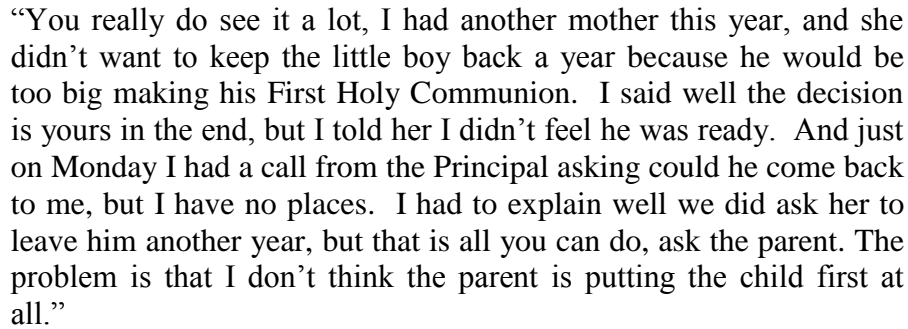
[School Principal, Discussion Group 22-04-09]

This project was developed with the view that in order to facilitate smooth transitions from preschool to primary school for children in Ireland, procedures and practices that promote consistency between the settings need to be developed. These should include a focus on curriculum, indeed providing program continuity through developmentally appropriate practice for preschool and primary school children has been proposed as one of the keys to successful transition (Margetts, 1999; Dunlop, 2003). Indeed Dunlop notes that children's ability to benefit educationally from primary school may be reflected in the degree to which the educators from both the preschool and primary sectors have collaborated in a shared conceptual framework of children's learning. The greater the similarity between the two settings, the more likely that children will be able to use knowledge gained in one setting to develop their learning in the other setting. Greater continuity between preschool and school would assist children applying the knowledge gained at preschool level in the primary classroom.

3.3.   Key Issues Involved: Parental Engagement

The rhetoric in favour of engaging parents in their children's education is high, however whether true engagement is really welcomed in practice could be questioned. Parental involvement has more recently been separated from the concept of parental engagement, which many researchers are now aiming for in their research with parents, children and educators (Harris & Goodall, 2007; Pushor, 2007). The Engaging Parents in Raising Achievement (ECRA) project reported that parental involvement is more likely to be involving parents in school related activities, as compared to really engaging them in their children's education and actively involving them as part of the pedagogic process (Harris & Goodall, 2007). Such family engagement in their children's education has been shown to positively influence children's levels of attainment. One of the aims of the ECRA study was to trial new ways of engaging hard to reach parents in their children's education. Their findings reported that parental engagement is linked to both socio-

economic status, and parental experience of school. Indeed, parents who were viewed as being hard to reach, often had the same view of the school being hard to reach.

"You really do see it a lot, I had another mother this year, and she didn't want to keep the little boy back a year because he would be too big making his First Holy Communion. I said well the decision is yours in the end, but I told her I didn't feel he was ready. And just on Monday I had a call from the Principal asking could he come back to me, but I have no places. I had to explain well we did ask her to leave him another year, but that is all you can do, ask the parent. The problem is that I don't think the parent is putting the child first at all."

[Preschool Practitioner, Focus Group, 15-10-09]

Research has highlighted the importance of such engagement in terms of children's successful transitions (Margetts, 2002; Dockett & Perry, 2004). O'Kane's study (2007) found that during the transition to school the parent has to adapt to the new role of 'school parent'. Schools often have expectations of parents which may not be made as clear as those expected of the child. How the parents fit into this new role, and the expectations that schools have of them, may also impact on the transition for the child. A lack of communication between some parents and staff was noted. Increased communication and better home-school relationships would heighten parents' sense of involvement in their child's education. An 'open door' approach may be advocated in the junior infant classroom, but may not always be effective in practical terms. This is particularly important in terms of the cultural capital of both children and their parents. If the beliefs of parents do not coincide with the pedagogic discourse of the school, this can result in the parent being considered not to properly fulfill the role of 'school parent' as considered appropriate by the school. Clearly open communication between home and school is important in this regard.

Brooker (2005) suggests that educators should always start from the position that parents wish their children to succeed in school, and try to focus on this shared home-school concern for learning, while schools work towards developing more successful dialogue with parents who they consider to be hard to reach. The issue of parental engagement was debated at many levels during the course of this project, and became one of the main arms of the Programme of Continuing Professional Development.

Example of Good Practice: Parent Days

At one of the CPD session on parental involvement, Aideen at the Purple Preschool outlined the Parent Days that take place in her setting. It was agreed that these days are an example of good practice which could be adapted and developed in other preschool settings.

On the Parent days, parents are invited into the setting and they experience the day that their children would experience. As Aideen noted:

> *"The Parents also experience the feeling of how their child may feel entering an unfamiliar classroom with unfamiliar faces. This helps them to understand their child's transition when entering a Pre-school or indeed entering a new class. We talk to the Parents about this when they come for interview and on 'Parent's Day' they now experience these feelings for themselves." [Aideen, Interview, 23-02-10]*

The children are moved into another room and parents attend for the morning in the class that their child would usually be based in. They partake in the usual activities of the day. They make playdough, paint, etc while the benefits to the children of engaging in these activities are explained to them. Aideen explained that this active learning really improved the parents understanding of both their children's development and the value of such activities.

Then the parents watch a video of their children using the school equipment, again the benefits of various activities in terms of the child's development are explained. They are given a talk on the curriculum, eating policy, and therapies the setting offers. They are given a copy of the parent handbook, and certain areas are highlighted to them. The children then collect their parents at the end of the session!

It was recommended that this idea might be trialed by other settings. It may well be necessary to adapt the formula (particularly for settings with less space, or only one room) however settings might consider if such a day for parents would be useful for their individual circumstances.

3.4.   Key Issues Involved: A Shared Conceptual Framework

Dunlop (2003) has raised the issue of the need for a shared conceptual framework between preschool and primary school teachers in order that children are viewed as competent learners across the fields. She proposes that preschool teachers, primary teachers, and parents need to reflect on their differing views of children as learners in order for this to take place. O'Kane (2007) would support this view in Irish terms, and suggests that at present a shared view of children as learners is not present across the preschool and primary sectors. Her study did not find high levels of continuity, or

planning for transition, at preschool or primary level. Cultural differences may go some way to explaining this difficulty with regard to communication and co-operation. However it was noted that differences in the training of preschool and primary school teachers may also play a part. While both groups have different training needs, a true partnership between preschool and primary levels needs to include a respect for differences between the two educational settings.

It was recommended at the outset of this project that the development of the 'Child Snapshot' [a form with which to transfer information on the child from preschool to primary setting] also be used as an opportunity to work towards a shared conceptual framework. The development of the snapshot would bring preschool practitioners and teachers of junior infant classes together and provide opportunities to develop greater understandings. It could commence with an investigation into the language used by the two groups of teachers. The process would be valuable to both groups in terms of allowing for a sharing of pedagogical practice. It would assist the two groups of teachers in reaching out to each other and working together to develop a shared vision of education from 0-6 years, and work towards providing opportunities to ease the transition for children between the two settings. So although the document itself was viewed as being useful in terms of sharing of information, the actual process of development was considered to be of importance in its own right in terms of developing a shared conceptual framework, and indeed in terms of building relationships and communication.

4.   Project Strands

For clarity, the various aspects of the project are broken down into strands outlined below. It is important to note that these aspects are clearly interlinked, and work on individual strands was carried out on a coordinated basis.

4.1   Strand 1: Detailed Review of Research and Literature

An extensive literature review of current guiding principles and practices with regard to the transition from preschool to primary school was undertaken. This review focused specifically on how best to coordinate and enhance educational provision for children from disadvantaged areas and support them during this transition. A review of structures for examining and monitoring best practice with regard to supports during the time of transition took place. In conjunction with a detailed review of research and literature, consultation with key stakeholders formed a central component of the project. This also informed the design and delivery of the proposed module of continuing professional development.
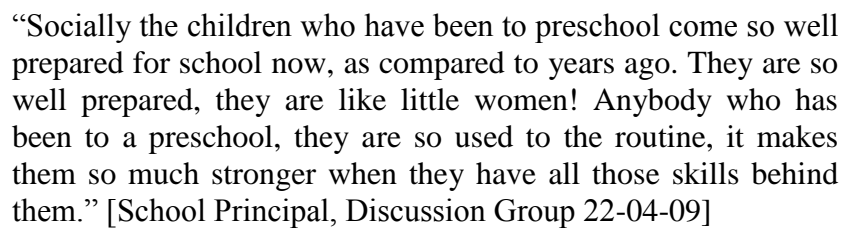
4.2   Strand 2: Case Study Profiles of Settings.

Close engagement with the individual settings supported the development of profiles of settings documented through observation and interviews. A selection of profiles are documented in Section 6 of the report.

4.3   Strand 3: Partnership between the Preschools and Primary Schools

An essential element to the project was developing strategies to promote communication and continuity between the sample of schools and their associated feeder preschools. The role of the project coordinator was crucial in this respect, working with the schools and preschools to develop processes for collaboration and communication. An investigation into the professional language used by the two groups and the meanings associated with such language was the first step in this process.

The preschool practitioners[1] and teachers who took part in the research worked together to identify practical strategies to promote effective transitioning for the children in their settings. Both the literature review and the recommendations from O'Kane (2007) were used to identify strategies for discussion with the practitioners and teachers. From the outset however, it was acknowledged that the stakeholders themselves should be involved in making the final decision on what practices or strategies they believe will best suit their own needs. The development of the Child Snapshot [a tool for the transfer of information on the child from preschool to primary school] was given priority by the stakeholders as being the most important tool to support partnership between the two educational settings, while also supporting the children making the transition between the two settings. See Section 5.4 for the development process for the Child Snapshot.

"Socially the children who have been to preschool come so well prepared for school now, as compared to years ago. They are so well prepared, they are like little women! Anybody who has been to a preschool, they are so used to the routine, it makes them so much stronger when they have all those skills behind them." [School Principal, Discussion Group 22-04-09]

4.4   Strand 4: Curricular and Pedagogical Continuity

A programme of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) was identified as being important in terms of working towards curricular and pedagogical continuity in a coordinated and cohesive way. The CPD was heavily influenced by *Síolta* however input on individual modules was sought through focus group discussion involving preschool practitioners and primary school teachers in terms of the most important areas of pedagogy and practice that needed to be further supported. See Section 5.5 for the development process for the CPD.

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[1] In the interest of clarity it was decided to use the term 'preschool practitioner' during the project, although it is acknowledged that a range of titles are actually used within the sector.

4.5   Strand 5: Parental Involvement

As the transition to school is essentially linked to the child, their family, preschools and schools, the project coordinator worked with the settings to identify methods to increase communication and collaboration with parents. Following an ecological perspective, these groups and the interactions between them have an impact on the transition to school for children, and as such each has a responsibility for children's success in this area. The project stakeholders were involved in seeking the most effective methods for cultivating home-school relationships. Both the literature review and the recommendations from O'Kane (2007) were useful in this regard.   Policies with regard to home-school communication can then be developed which acknowledge the importance of these relationships on children's experience during the transition to school and beyond.

Any child-centred approach to education must also recognise that differences exist between the home and educational environments which may not be conducive to the child realising their full potential. Differences can be found in cultural expectations of parents and staff, differences can be found in the socio-economic backgrounds of parent and staff, differences in ethnicity, religious affiliation, or gender, can cause difficulties with communication between the two groups. It is imperative that the needs of the child are kept central to home-school communication. Training in this area was provided in the programme of Continuing Professional Development. [See Section 5.5 for the development process for the CPD].

4.6   Strand 6: Programme of Continuing Professional Development (CPD)

Informed by the literature review, the *Síolta* framework, and group discussions involving the preschool practitioners and the teachers of junior infants classes, the Research Team developed a programme of Continuing Professional Development for the preschool practitioners. This programme had two main arms: curriculum and pedagogy (heavily informed by the *Síolta* framework) and parental partnership. The full CPD is outlined in Section 5.5 below. The CPD was formally evaluated, thus enabling formal recommendations to be made for future policy and practice developments.

4.7   Strand 7: Cycle of Feedback, Review and Planning

A cycle of feedback, review and planning was implemented throughout the project in order to inform policy formation in this area on an ongoing basis. Adjustments were made to the methodology of the project on the basis of what has been learnt from both the research and evaluation processes. The development of such a review and evaluation process meant that a partnership approach was adopted where all the stakeholders were involved in the research process, and communication between all groups was supported. See Section 5.8 for further details for the cycle of feedback, review and planning.

5.   Methodology / Project Development

5.1   Selection of Area for Study

The study was to involve a cluster of Urban Band 1 primary schools and preschools. After much consideration it was decided to locate the study in Ballymun for the following reasons.

Eight National Schools in the area fall within the Urban Band 1 group, of these 6 accommodate Junior Infant Classes. The Ballymun Whitehall Area Partnership Childcare Providers Network consists of 14 preschool services which are feeder preschools for the above Junior Infants classes. Members of the network are already aware of the importance of facilitating successful transitions for children from local ECCE services to these primary schools. They have already come together with the shared focus of supporting children together with their local primary schools. Each service has children transferring into the cluster of Urban band 1 DEIS schools identified above, and as a group they are aware of the need to establish links with more than one school. One of the clear advantages of working with this group was the commitment that has already been generated regarding the importance of working towards smoothing the transition from preschool to primary school. These practitioners were already a coordinated group working together towards supporting the children in their care. It was decided that to start from scratch in an area with a cluster of settings who had no previous relationship would result in time delays while these relationships were established at the beginning of the project. Working with a group of preschools who had already developed a level of trust and understanding had clear advantages.

The Ballymun Whitehall Area Partnership Childcare Provider Network were also in the process of applying for a joint funding application under the dormant accounts scheme for preschool quality improvement to develop local initiatives that foster successful transitions between preschool and primary school when the decision on selection of area for our study was being undertaken. Clear links between this application for funding and the aims of this project were identified. Having discussed the opportunity for collaboration with the Early Years Programme Manager of the Ballymun Whitehall Area Partnership, it was apparent that these two projects could be linked to some extent, in order to capitalise on the funding available to each project. There was clearly an opportunity for sharing of knowledge and expertise. Good communication ensured that there was no duplication of effort, instead a collaborative approach was taken, which ensured that the resources of each project were used to maximum effect.

The Early Years Programme Manager of the Ballymun Whitehall Partnership is also considered to be a driving force behind the Childcare Providers Network and introduced the concept of an area-based interagency coordinated approach to members of the network. Her commitment to the providers in terms of supporting their funding application, and in terms of uniting this group as a cohesive unit was considered invaluable in terms of gaining access to a group of practitioners already committed to working towards supporting children during the transition to primary school.

Another advantage of working within the Ballymun area was the strong links generally speaking between existing structures within the area, for example the Ballymun School

Principals Network. This network was developed in 2004. One of the aims of the group is to identify priority education development needs. The priorities identified by Ballymun school principals include, professional development for teachers, early childhood education, increased parental involvement, promotion of school attendance. All the principals of the Urban Band 1 group primary schools identified above are members of this group, these pre-existing links should be of assistance when developing coordination and communication between our project sample.

A history of teacher involvement in research and policy making was also evident in Ballymun, for example the Ballymun Whitehall Area Partnership have clearly developed a very positive working relationship with local schools. When developing an education strategy document for the Ballymun area, the Partnership Education Programme Manager initiated a dialogue with Ballymun teaching staff to ensure that their voice would be included in any efforts to develop education locally. Focus groups identified several challenges faced by teachers, two of which were the low levels of readiness for school, and the lack of involvement by parents (Nic Lughadha, 2006). So it was clear that these teachers were motivated to become involved in research studies and that they have already identified issues from this project as being important to their working lives.

Finally, the work of this project would also link into the work of *youngballymun* – a large early intervention project with a ten year strategy to enhance learning and well-being outcomes for children and young people in Ballymun - and its aim to create a learning community within the Ballymun area. This group has identified learning as being a driver for change, and see learning and education a key driver in the fight against disadvantage. This project would link most closely with the Early Years project in *youngballymun*, which centres around children aged 3-5, their families and ECEC providers. The work of *youngballymun* in Early Years has two strands, both of which link very closely to this project. The first is an area-based strategy aimed at supporting quality practice through the implementation of *Síolta* – the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Development and Education. The second strand aims to support school readiness in preschool children aged 3 – 4 years.

"You know we are always telling them about the Health Board information about no sugary drinks in bottles, stuff like that, but they still keep doing it. The worst is the Coke in bottles, and I just throw it out on them…. They do say that in disadvantaged areas, especially areas like Ballymun, that the children's teeth are the worst, you know. And this is why. It's bad habits, and it's probably because it was what they were given when they were young."
[Preschool Practitioner, Focus Group, 13-11-09]

5.2   Identification of Participants

The six National Schools in the Ballymun area which fall within the Urban Band 1 group and accommodate Junior Infant Classes were approached to see if they would take part in the study. First of all the researcher wrote to, and then made follow up phone calls to, the school principals to outline details of the research. Two of the schools were happy to take part, one school reported that their Junior Infants teacher was studying for a Masters qualification at the time and would not have time to take part in the study. The other three declined to take part in the study as they felt that their Junior Infants teachers were overcommitted in their jobs to take on research activities.

All preschools in Ballymun were approached and invited to take part in the study if they had children feeding into to the above two primary schools. The twelve settings who had children feeding into these primary schools all agreed to take part in the study. The initial proposal was to involve 3 primary schools and 6 preschools in the project, as only 2 primary schools were taking part, it was decided to allow all 12 preschools who were keen to take part in the project to become involved.

This group of 2 primary schools and 12 feeder preschools became the research cluster involved in the research activity. They were involved in: one-to-one Manager/Teacher interviews; focus group sessions; meetings cross sectorally; visits by primary teachers to preschools; developing the Child Snapshot; and involvement in the Programme of Continuing Professional Development.

One of the important aspects of the project as highlighted in the original proposal was that the stakeholders themselves were involved in making the final decision on the practices or strategies they believed would best suit their own needs. The Lead Researcher worked with the schools and preschools to develop processes for collaboration and communication between individual settings. She also assisted the practitioners and teachers in identifying practical strategies to promote effective transitioning.

5.3   Junior Infants Teacher Questionnaire

During phone conversations with School Principals when asked if their school would like to take part in the research, issues were identified with regard to reasons why primary schools might not wish to, or feel able to, build relationships with their preschool colleagues. It was not clear if such issues were related to this particular geographical area, however the issues were identified as being very important ones in terms of applicability of the study findings to all primary schools in the Urban DEIS Band 1 area. Therefore it was decided to question the junior infants teachers in this wider group on some of the issues which it was felt would directly impact on the ability to consider the research findings comparatively in national terms.
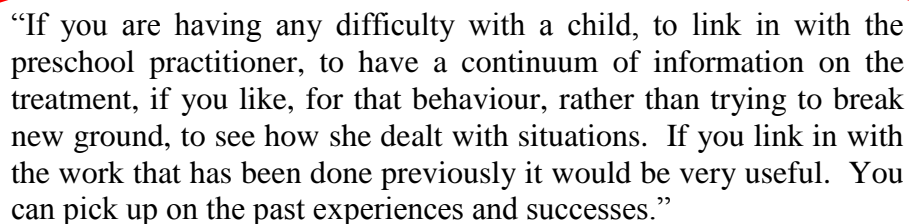
It was decided that self-administered postal questionnaire data was the most appropriate to the needs of the study due to the size of the sample, the low cost of data collection while reaching a nationwide sample, and the low cost of processing the data gathered. In terms of value of the data to be gathered as compared to the low cost of implementation it

was agreed by the course team that this was a very worthwhile addition to the project methodology already under implementation.

All Urban Band 1 DEIS schools were contacted by phone to check if they had a junior infants class, and if so, the name of the teacher(s). If schools had more than one Junior Infants teacher each teacher was addressed. The questionnaire [See Appendix 1] and a covering letter was then sent to each teacher by name (n=304).

The use of phone calls to follow up on the mailing proved to be a very effective use of mixed mode methodology. The direct contact with schools gave the researcher the opportunity to first of all check that the questionnaire had been received, and to forward another copy for completion if requested. Finally, the researcher reminded those who reported that they had received the questionnaire but had not yet completed it that they still had some time to return it, and reminded them how important their views were to the study.

In total, the questionnaire was sent to 304 Junior Infants teachers in Urban Band 1 DEIS schools, and resulted in a response rate of 68% (207 questionnaires). The questionnaire was designed to allow for analysis using SPSS [Statistical Package for the Social Sciences]. To gain an understanding of both groups of teachers attitudes towards transition activities, some sections of the questionnaire required the teachers to reflect on and judge a number of statements. These questions made use of the Likert Attitude Scale (Likert, 1932) to measure the attitudes of the teachers. They were asked to rank statements on a scale of agreement (ie, 'strongly agree', 'agree', 'uncertain', 'disagree' and 'strongly disagree'). This scale is not an exact measurement of attitude, however it is a useful tool to measure intensity of attitude towards any given issue. In addition to gathering baseline statistical data, the use of open ended questions allowed respondents to reply in greater detail on various issues, yielding valuable opinions and information. The data from these questions was used to identify a number of themes of relevance to the study.

> "If you are having any difficulty with a child, to link in with the preschool practitioner, to have a continuum of information on the treatment, if you like, for that behaviour, rather than trying to break new ground, to see how she dealt with situations. If you link in with the work that has been done previously it would be very useful. You can pick up on the past experiences and successes."
> [School Principal. Discussion Group, 20-09-09]

5.4   Development Process for 'Child Snapshot'

The idea of the 'Child Snapshot' was proposed by the Lead Researcher to both groups of infants teachers at the first meeting to discuss the project. Teachers from both schools were in agreement that the tool would be very useful to them in preparation for the new intake of pupils in September. They could see a clear benefit to the children in developing such a tool, and felt it would be of great benefit in terms of planning and preparation also. All were happy to give their time to work on developing the tool. Both sets of teachers were also happy to attend Focus Group Meetings with Preschool Practitioners to help develop communication across the sectors, and to reach a consensus on the best approach to take with the Snapshot. Two of the teachers who took part in the project were also to be junior infants teachers through to the following academic year so there was continuity of staff throughout the project.

The proposal to develop a Child Snapshot was also presented to each of the participating preschool practitioners at the beginning of the project. As was the case with the infants teachers they all advised that they saw a clear value in developing the tool, and would make themselves available for focus group meetings to work on the project. Many noted that they felt the Child Snapshot would clearly benefit the children in their care on transition to primary school, and they were keen to be involved in developing the tool for that reason primarily.

As noted above research has identified an important issue with relation to communication between preschool and primary school teachers in terms of the issue of language, and whether there are differences in the use of language within the two educational spheres. This possible gap in understanding required further investigation, particularly if greater levels of communication between the two groups were to be encouraged. It was decided that in order for a co-construction of understanding transition to take place between the two groups of teachers, there needed to be a mutual clarification of expectations in terms of the skill sets that support children making the transition between the two settings, and a clearer understanding of language use and meanings between the two educational spheres. Therefore it was agreed that an investigation into the professional language used in the preschool and primary school sectors should be the first step in the process of developing the 'Child Snapshot'. With this in mind, practitioners from the preschools involved in the project and the infants teachers were invited to a series of focus group meetings where they discussed the skills that they considered to be most important for the children to possess on arrival at school, and the definitions of these skills. During the course of these focus group discussions, the group reached agreement on the skill sets that they considered to be the most important for children making the transition from preschool to primary. Once skill sets had been agreed upon, the 12 practitioners in the project and 4 infants teachers completed a form defining each skills, and giving practical examples of these skills. Data from the forms were analysed and formal definitions of the skill sets were agreed by the group [see Appendix 2].

Once definitions had been agreed, the project participants began work on developing the 'Child Snapshot' itself. It was agreed that the form needed to be user friendly for the preschool practitioners who would complete the form, and also very clear in terms of readability for the junior infants teachers. Various sample forms in use by individual

schools and preschools were considered. There was full agreement that the form should be very positive in approach, and focus on the achievements of the child rather than work from a deficit model. The language used in the form was debated, and time was spent considering the wording in terms of positive approach, and parental agreement.

Example of Good Practice: Welcoming Ceremony

St Michael's school hold a Welcoming Ceremony for the children who have started Junior Infants during the first term of their arrival at school. Parents are invited to the Ceremony where the children are formally welcomed to the school. This year, having met with the preschool practitioners involved in the project, the Principal decided to invite preschool practitioners along to the ceremony also. The School Principal and infants teacher welcomed the children, their parents and their old preschool teachers to the ceremony. The work of the children was on display, and children were given the opportunity to show off the knowledge they had gained since their arrival at school, in terms of phonics and word recognition. The school Chaplin also spoke at the ceremony welcoming the children and their parents to the school community.

As the Infant Teacher commented afterwards:

> *"The children were thrilled to have their preschool teachers at the Welcoming Ceremony, they really were. It is great for them, it meant so much to them, to see the connection to see there is a relationship, and for the parents to see it too. It is such a good thing. I can see the amount of work that ye [preschool practitioners] all put in last year, I can see it in the kids in there, you can really see the difference. You all put in the work last year, and it is great then to be able to see the kids in the classrooms and to see where they are now."*
> *[Infant Teacher, Focus Group, 20-10-09]*

Staff took photographs of the children holding Welcome Certificates first of all with their parents, and then with their preschool practitioners. The photographs would be displayed in the school to commemorate the event. One preschool practitioner commented:

> *"The very fact that your school is participating in this project says a lot, the fact that you welcomed in the preschool teachers as well as the parents, it does show that the school is very progressive."* [Preschool Practitioner, Focus Group 20-10-09]

It was recommended that this idea is one that all schools could develop.

Once the Child Shapshot had been finalized [See Appendix 3] the group worked on a Letter of Consent for parents which would accompany the form [See Appendix 4]. Again consideration was given to appropriate wording, and language used that would be clear and simple to understand.

The preschool practitioners met with parents to complete the Child Snapshot forms in May-June 2009. All parents asked were happy to sign consent forms and have the information on their child passed to the primary school. It was decided that the most effective way to transfer the information to the Junior Infant teachers was face to face meetings. Therefore meetings were arranged for each preschool practitioner to meet with the relevant Junior Infant teacher(s) to pass over the forms, and to answer any queries if necessary. Follow up focus group meetings were then held with preschool practitioners and Junior Infant teachers in October 2009 to review the process and to evaluate the usefulness of the development process and the forms in terms of transfer of information.

5.5   Programme of Continuing Professional Development

At the outset, it was intended that the Programme of Continuing Professional Development would be offered to both the preschool practitioners and the infant teachers together. It was suggested that such a module would include opportunities for practitioners from preschool and primary school environments to work together to develop their understanding of the impact of the transition to school on young children, and how they might smooth this transition. Such collaboration and knowledge sharing would be beneficial for practitioners from both fields. It would assist the two groups of teachers in reaching out to each other and work together to develop a shared vision of education from 0-6 years, and work towards providing opportunities to ease the transition for children between the two settings. However, as noted in the research proposal, consultation with key stakeholders would form a central component of the project, and due to lack of cover to enable the teachers to leave their classes, it was not possible for the infant teachers to attend the programme. For this reason, it was decided to use the development of the Child Shapshot, and the focus groups that were a part of that aspect of the research project, as the main arena in which the preschool practitioners and infants teachers could meet together, communicate about not only the Child Snapshot, but also about general issues arising, and develop working relationships. It was decided that as Urban Band 1 DEIS preschool practitioners had identified further information on Síolta, curriculum supports and mentoring from an expert in Early Education as being important needs in their area (CECDE, 2007) the Programme of CPD would focus on the preschool practitioners alone, with a Home School Liaison Teacher involved in the training, giving the primary school perspective and creating a link through to the primary school teachers. However, the infants teachers and school principals taking part in the project were also involved in the process of identifying the most pressing areas of need for the CPD itself. The two main areas identified during the cross-sectoral focus groups as being of importance were: Curriculum and Pedagogy (including: Developing Oral Language; Developing Mathematical Concepts / the Language of Maths; Play as a Learning Tool) and Child and Parental Engagement (including: Mental Health Issues; Parental Engagement; How to Support Parents in Supporting Transition; and Parental Involvement at Primary Level). See Figure 1 below.

The programme ran over a two week period in November 2009. The full programme was designed as a pilot CPD programme which could be undertaken by preschool

practitioners and formally evaluated with a view to further development if necessary. The programme ran as a set of daily sessions, each session covering a different aspect identified during the literature review and the focus groups discussions as being of important in terms of supporting children and their families both at preschool level, making the transition from preschool to primary, and with a view to success at primary level. [See Appendix 5 for the full programme schedule/tutor information].
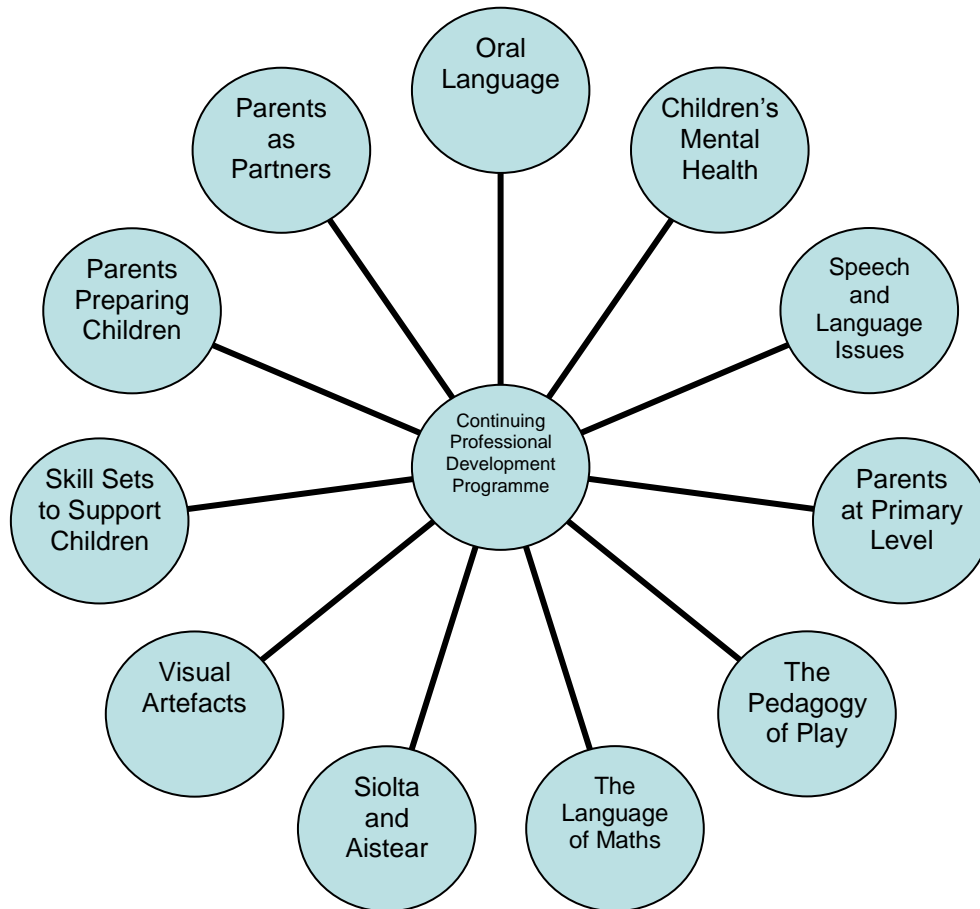
Figure 1:   **Graphical Representation of the Programme of Continuing Professional Development**

Following on from the CPD programme, a CPD pack was developed. This pack contained summaries of each module of the programme, copies of any handouts or information used in the sessions, and information on recommendations arising from each session. It was agreed among the participants that it was important that the documentation from the programme was in a format that could be easily accessed by all members of staff in each setting. Therefore information on each module was presented in a plastic folder, all contained in a Box File for ease of access. The managers of each setting agreed that the availability of the information would be discussed at their next staff meeting, and all staff in the settings would be encouraged to dip in and out of the

CPD pack at their convenience. It was recommended that individual staff members would take one recommendation from the pack and work on it, presenting their experiences back to staff at the following staff meeting. The aim, agreed by all Managers, was that this become a live document, made use of within each setting on an ongoing basis, and further developed by the practitioners in each setting to suit their own individual needs.

Example of Good Practice: Story Sacks

First developed by Neil Griffiths, a storysack is a large cloth bag containing a good-quality picture book with supporting materials to stimulate reading activities. These include soft toys of the main character, props relating to items in the story, a non-fiction book relating to the fiction theme, an audio tape and a language game based on the book. During the Programme of Continuing Professional Development, Dr Maíre Mhic Mhathúna spoke to the preschool practitioners involved in the project about the story sack tradition and asked them to consider a project in which the preschool staff and children develop their own story sacks based on their favourite story in preschool.

Some of the Preschool Practitioners involved in this project are also currently engaged in a project to make story sacks for a story about the transition from preschool to primary school. This project is being funded by the Preschool Quality Improvement funding. This story sack training took place over 11 weeks, the Ballymun Adult Read and Write Scheme (BARWS) delivered the training. The story was chosen about children making the transition from preschool to primary school, and small dolls were made to use in conjunction with the story which were dressed in the uniforms of the local schools. 14 local preschools and 6 DEIS Band 1 schools in the area will be given the Transition Tool Kit, so there will be continuity for the children in terms of the same story being used in the preschool setting as in the infants classroom.
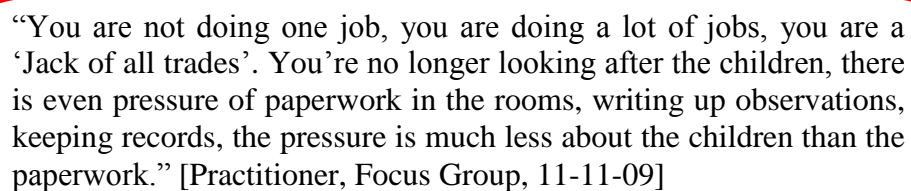
St Martins school also conduct a story sacks reading initiative. Four parents at a time are introduced to the story sack, they are given a demonstration on how to read the story including the characters, and they are given information on how to best use the factual book and the other props in the story sack. The parents then come into the classroom reading the story to small groups of children, using the props to help the children act out the story. There are also activities for parents to use linked to the story, for example listening activities.

Generally practitioners involved in the project felt that Story Sacks were a very useful tool to support children in their learning both at preschool and primary level, and also could be considered to be a useful artifact to support learning during the transition between the two sectors.

5.6   Focus Groups / Interviews

During the course of the project focus groups were held involving preschool Managers, Infant teachers, and a school Principal. These focus groups commenced in order to open the lines of communication between the two sectors. They went on to discuss the skills most important for children to possess on arrival at school, and the terminology used by both groups when referring to these skills. The Child Snapshot was developed during these focus groups and reviewed and assessed following implementation.

Further focus groups were held following the Continuing Professional Development programme which involved preschool Managers, preschool practitioners, and the lead researcher. These covered the following topics: Oral Language Development in Preschool; Developing Mathematical Concepts in Preschool; Parental Involvement in Preschool; Parental Involvement at Primary Level; How Parents can Prepare Children for Primary Level; Play as a Learning Tool; Supporting Children's Learning through the Visual Arts; The Mental Health of Children and Preschool Practitioners; Professionalism and Stress as a Preschool Practitioner. [See Appendix 6 for a full list of the 14 Focus Groups].

"You are not doing one job, you are doing a lot of jobs, you are a 'Jack of all trades'. You're no longer looking after the children, there is even pressure of paperwork in the rooms, writing up observations, keeping records, the pressure is much less about the children than the paperwork." [Practitioner, Focus Group, 11-11-09]

5.7   Child Discussion Groups

In a recent research study on transition (O'Kane, 2007; O'Kane & Hayes, 2008) children clearly demonstrated that they were able to express their opinions on school life, and their experiences in school. They could confidently describe their own world-view, and provided insights into life as a junior infant that are both perceptive and informative. At the outset it was intended to allow children to have their views heard as part of the project. To enable them to do this it was decided to conduct child discussion groups in the participating schools and some of the preschools as part of the project. The discussions related to the transition from preschool to formal school and the children's experiences in formal school as compared to preschool. Rather than interview the children, it was felt that group discussions would support the children in talking in a relaxed manner without feeling under pressure to provide the 'correct' answer to the researcher on a one-to-one basis. Having conducted child discussion groups with 4 and 5-year olds in the past, the lead researcher was very aware of the power relations involved when an adult interviews children in a school situation, so instead wanted to give the children every opportunity to relax and share their feelings without feeling under pressure to deliver the right answer. Research has suggested that often children are willing to discuss things when among a group of friends. This can encourage them to have the

confidence to build on, or contradict if they feel necessary, the general conversation, diluting the power relations present when an adult is interviewing one child alone (Hill, 2006; Dockett & Perry, 2005; Punch, 2002). Details of the two types of discussion groups are dealt with separately below:

Discussion Groups with Junior Infants Children:
A letter and consent form were sent to all parents in the infants classes of the two schools taking part in the project advising that the researcher would like to conduct group discussions with children during school time. Parents were advised that only children with parental consent would be invited to take part in the discussions, the decision on whether to take part would then be down to each individual child. Parents were assured that all individual data collected during the study would remain confidential, names of the schools and children would be changed to ensure anonymity on publication.

Children with consent forms were invited to take part in the discussions. Each child was invited individually and asked would they like to join the group, with the aim of giving the child the final say on whether or not they would like to be involved. Each discussion group involved 4-5 children and was facilitated by the researcher. To comply with child protection issues, a teacher was present at all times. Discussions took place in either the junior infant classroom or the school library, depending on availability.

Discussion Groups with Preschool Children:
As with the infants classes children, a letter and consent form was given to all parents in the preschool class of 2 of the participating preschools advising that the researcher would like to conduct group discussions with children in the preschool. As above, parents were advised that children with parental consent would be invited to take part in the discussions, the decision on whether to take part would then be down to each individual child. Parents were advised that all individual data collected during the study would remain confidential, names of the preschools and children would be changed to ensure anonymity on publication.

Children with consent forms were invited to take part in discussions. Each child was invited individually and asked would they like to join the group, with the aim of giving the child the final say on whether or not they would like to be involved. Each discussion group including 4-5 children, was facilitated by the researcher. To comply with child protection issues, one of the preschool practitioners was also present at all times. Discussions took place in one of the preschool rooms.
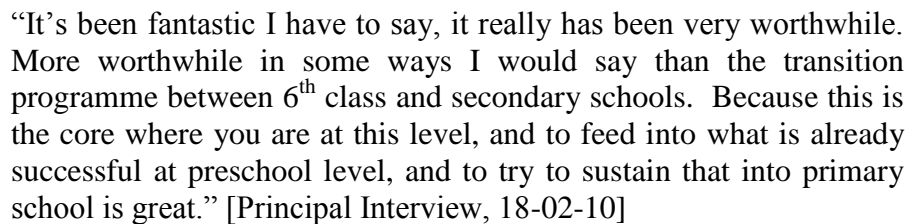
Additional Information:
As in previous research of this type (O'Kane, 2007) the discussions were intended to be child led with children being encouraged to talk on any aspect of starting school. However, pictures of typical school situations were used to prompt discussion, particularly with the preschool children. The researcher also used some prompt questions to initiate conversations. All discussions were recorded, the children were asked at the start of each discussion if they would mind the conversation being taped. Prior to discussions commencing, each child was given the opportunity to talk into the tape

recorder, and listen to themselves talking, to ensure that they were familiar with, and comfortable with, the idea of being taped. After the discussions each tape was transcribed and analysed. In total 60 children took part in 13 discussion groups.

5.8   Cycle of Feedback, Review and Planning

A cycle of feedback, review and planning was implemented throughout the project in order to inform the methodology on an ongoing basis. An emphasis was placed on evaluation, providing regular feedback on the various strands of the project, in coming to judgements regarding the emphasis on any individual measure or adaptation of project methodology. This review and evaluation process adopted a partnership approach where all the stakeholders were involved in the process. Evaluation and review was conducted through individual interview and focus group input, evaluation survey data, and evaluation of each module of the CPD. A Review Team (consisting of the lead researcher, project co-ordinator, a representative of DIT, and a representative of the CSER) were responsible for refinement of the research instruments and methodology for all strands of the project incorporating the feedback from participants. Adjustments were made to the project methodology on the basis of what was learned from both the research and evaluation processes.

"It's been fantastic I have to say, it really has been very worthwhile. More worthwhile in some ways I would say than the transition programme between 6th class and secondary schools. Because this is the core where you are at this level, and to feed into what is already successful at preschool level, and to try to sustain that into primary school is great." [Principal Interview, 18-02-10]

5.9   Ethical Issues

The study complied with research principles outlined by the Research Ethics Committee at Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) and Ethical Approval was gained for all aspects of the project. The Research Ethics Committee is guided in its work by commonly agreed standards of good practice such as those laid down in the Declaration of Helsinki. Guidelines from the Committee advise that the researcher should safeguard the interests of the research participants, and explain to the participants in meaningful terms all aspects of the research project. Anonymity and privacy should be respected and personal information should be kept confidential. Any guarantee of anonymity or confidentiality should be strictly adhered to. Ethical approval for the Child Discussion Group aspect of the project was sought separately to the work involving adult input only. In addition the research has been informed by the extensive work available on researching children's lives such as Clark & Moss (2001) and Clarke, McQuail & Moss (2003).

5.10   Limitations of the Research

The first limitation of the research that must be acknowledged is the small sample size. The project centered on a cluster of DEIS Urban Band 1 settings: 2 primary schools, and 12 preschools, and the results of the study must be interpreted with this in mind.

The time available for the infants teachers to take part in the research was also a limitation in terms of their participation in the project. At the outset, the teachers and principals involved in the project made clear that the hour after the infants classes finish was the most suitable time for them to take part in the research. The preschool practitioners facilitated this situation and made themselves available for focus groups during this period. The principals were unable to release the teachers to take part in the programme of continuing professional development, both cited lack of cover as being the reason for this. Therefore it was decided that the CPD would focus on the preschool practitioners alone, with a Home School Liaison Teacher creating a link through to the primary school teachers, and the infants teachers feeding into the content of the CPD. However, the original aim was to bring preschool practitioners and teachers of junior infant classes together during the CPD to provide opportunities for a sharing of pedagogical practice. It was suggested that this would assist the two groups of teachers in working together to develop a shared vision of education, and work towards providing opportunities to ease the transition for children between the two settings. This opportunity for joint collaboration and sharing of information was therefore confined to the focus group meetings, and to the visits by infants teachers to preschools.

A potential limitation was also identified in the availability of preschool managers and staff to attend the CPD and the focus groups undertaken during the project. However, the Managers identified with the issue of the transition from preschool to primary school as being particularly important for the children in their care. Therefore they made a concerted effort to engage with the research process fully, and to arrange staff cover to allow either themselves or their practitioners to take part in the CPD. However, they did highlight that due to staff shortages, staff illness requiring cover etc, it can be very difficult to commit to such training, and this would not be possible long-term. For staff to engage in future training and research opportunities this issue needs to be addressed.

Another limitation involved the implementation of the *Síolta* framework materials at primary level. The teachers did not feel that they were in a position to formally implement *Síolta* in their classrooms during the period of the project, although the lead researcher did introduce the teachers to *Síolta* and specifically to Standard 13: Transitions. However, it was the preschool practitioners who undertook a more focused approach to *Síolta* during the CPD.

Another limitation of the study identified during the project was the absence of any direct parental perspective. The role of parents in the education of their children during these years was acknowledged as being of great importance during the course of the project. For this reason, the area of parental involvement and parental engagement was a major

focus of the CPD. The role of the preschool practitioner in supporting this engagement across the preschool to primary transition was also considered in some depth. This was closely linked to the findings relating to the parental perspective identified in O'Kane (2007) on school transition in Ireland. However, it would have been interesting to have some information on the views of parents in Ballymun on the process.

One final limitation that must be acknowledged is the current economic situation in Ireland and the implications of this in terms of funding to support the recommendations of the project. Indeed, the funding for the project itself had to be cut in line with current Government recommendations. This has very clear implications in terms of building on the work undertaken during the course of the project. The need to build on, and develop, the structures that have been put in place in this cluster of schools and preschools in Ballymun, is essential and needs to be addressed.

6. Case Study Profiles

6.1 General Information on Ballymun

The unemployment rate in Ballymun is just over 24%, which is over three times the national rate. 59% of people in Ballymun have the medical card, as compared to the national rate of 26%. The Ballymun Partnership also note that the people of Ballymun report low levels of educational qualifications, and a large number of people are in unskilled or semi-skilled jobs (Ballymun Partnership, 2004).

However, the Partnership also report that one of the major strengths of the Ballymun area is the close community networks in the area. Nearly a third of the population report that they are involved with a local community group. They also report a general belief in 'second chance' education within the area, with a high percentage of people aged 15 and over reporting being involved in some form of education, and a third of people surveyed reporting having attended a training course in the past 12 months. Over 60% of respondents said that they would like to be involved in a training course in the future. (Ballymun Partnership, 2004a).

Further research into education and schooling in Ballymun has reported that there is a "huge gap in mainstream educational performance between Ballymun and the national average" (Ballymun Partnership, 2004b, p2). However, although reported actual achievement is poor, the aspirations of parents are high, with nearly all the parents in the study reported that they would like their children to go on to third level education. Over three quarters of respondents rated schools in Ballymun as 'good' or 'very good'. Well over three quarters of people surveyed reported that they enjoyed living in Ballymun and wanted to continue to do so.

Research has already identified that "many children in Ballymun have not developed the skills necessary to benefit from school when they enroll in Junior Infants class at the age of 4 or 5" (youngballymun, 2006, p6). The report also notes that the literacy and communication skills of many of the children in Ballymun are under developed, and
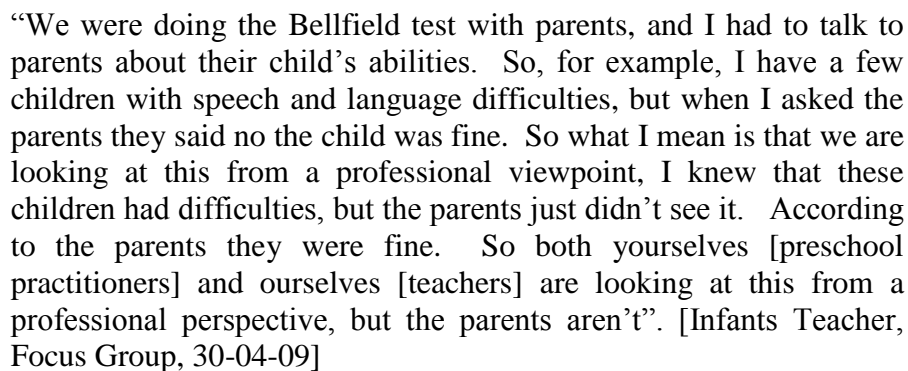
highlighted the impact of this on potential for their long term academic achievement. Indeed the report notes the importance of breaking the cycle of educational disadvantage in the area.

Ballymun is undergoing a process of regeneration at present, as part of this regeneration tenants are being moved from tower blocks into new housing. One issue mentioned by participants in the study was the difficulty of the de-tenanting process which left some tenants living in half-empty blocks of flats while they waited to be re-housed. Preschool practitioners also reported that the new housing had in some ways disrupted the community spirit that had been very strong in the blocks of flats. It was generally noted that the changes that are taking place in Ballymun at present through the regeneration process have resulted in both opportunities and difficulties for residents in the area, both families and the children themselves.

6.2   School Profiles

6.2.1   St Michaels School

The Mission Statement of St Michaels School is to promote the development of a learning environment through the provision of a quality and comprehensive system of education that is inclusive of all children. The school has classes from Junior Infants through to 6th Class, and has a enrolment of approximately 133 children, 10 of whom are Junior Infants, and 16 Senior Infants. The school is located central to blocks of flats in Ballymun that are undergoing regeneration at present. The principal advised that this had resulted in a drop in enrolment figures during recent years, as families were being re-housed in different areas. Towards the end of the project she reported that Dublin City Council had advised her that the building company who were undertaking the work on new housing local to the school had gone into liquidation, which will effect up to 800 families. She noted that this "has implications for the future between the people who are still there and the people who would have expectations of having new houses there, so it is serious for the future really." [Interview 18-02-10].

"We were doing the Bellfield test with parents, and I had to talk to parents about their child's abilities. So, for example, I have a few children with speech and language difficulties, but when I asked the parents they said no the child was fine. So what I mean is that we are looking at this from a professional viewpoint, I knew that these children had difficulties, but the parents just didn't see it. According to the parents they were fine. So both yourselves [preschool practitioners] and ourselves [teachers] are looking at this from a professional perspective, but the parents aren't". [Infants Teacher, Focus Group, 30-04-09]

The school participates in a School Completion Programme and a Mentoring Programme (for children in senior classes with behavioural problems). It is also involved in the Incredible Years programme, in the Senior Infants classes, which promotes a positive approach to behaviour and given the children skills to relate to their peers and adults. It also had a breakfast club for children before school, an after school homework and activity club. From a parental involvement perspective, the school has a Parents Room which is open each morning for parents to drop in for a cup of tea and a chat. The school also organizes classes for parents and a crèche is available for younger children when such classes take place. The school also has a Home School Liaison Officer. Finally, the school encourages parents to become involved in shared reading, maths/science for fun, and operates a children and parents enjoying reading book lending scheme. The Principal spoke about the importance of such endeavours:

> *"Also the parents are being more involved, you know, if you can get them in at infant's level you can build on that. At Senior Infants level we do a little story time, and the parents come in for the story time, we read the stories, but it is getting to be quite popular, which is nice. And we have a core group of parents who are interested, and they are working on an oral language and listening course, based on a set of language games. The parents in the infants school are going to roll it out for the two classes, we will have them working in pairs, you know, they can be a little bit reticent if they think they are going to be asked to do something. You have to be aware of their own abilities. Behind it all you still have the school thing, you know, in terms of how well they did themselves."*
> *[Interview, 18-02-10]*

The Junior Infants teacher also reported that she uses 'Jessica Bear' a bear who lives in the infants classroom, but who visits the homes of children, as a tool with which she can build a greater understanding of the children's home lives. Jessica is sent home with a sleepover bag containing set of pyjamas each day, and also has a school uniform which the child then puts onto her in the morning for her return to the classroom. The child then tells the class about how Jessica spent her evening. The primary aim of the Jessica Bear project is to work on the children's oral language, and indeed she is used in a circle time type of activity where children can question the child whose home Jessica has visited to ask questions about her visit, and to discuss her activities. However, the teacher reported that particularly during the initial transition to school the Jessica Bear activities also helped her to develop a greater understanding of the children's home life [Junior Infant Teacher, 12-3-10]. The infants teacher in St Michaels originally trained as a preschool practitioner before going on to complete her primary teaching qualification. She noted that this does impact on her practice. One example she noted was that at the beginning of the primary school year she organises her classroom in terms of working areas similar to that in a preschool (home corner, dressing up corner, etc) as she feels that this helps smooth the transition for the children from preschool to primary in terms of continuity of approach [Junior Infant Teacher, 12-02-10].

The principal of St Michael's is relatively new to the position, and advised that she was very keen to build relationships with local preschools. At our first meeting she knew the names of some of the local preschools. Indeed she advised that she had visited one of the preschools that week to ask if she could leave information on her school with them to disseminate to parents. She called in without an appointment, but found the staff very welcoming. They showed her around the premises, even though the manager was not there at the time, and she was very pleased that they welcomed her so openly [Interview 09-02-09]. She was taking a proactive approach to meeting the local preschool practitioners, and she advised that she was keen for her staff to liaise with the preschool teachers. Although she did note that her infants teachers were under great time pressure, and that was the biggest barrier from her perspective to their building relationships. Therefore, at the outset of the project, she recommended the hour after the infants classes finish as the best time for her teachers to give to the project [Interview 09-02-09].

She advised that she does take on some students who need additional support through the primary system. It saddens her to then see that some of these students have great difficulty with the transition to secondary education. As there is less support at that level, many of these pupils drop out early in secondary, this she feels reflects on her school. However, supporting these students is clearly very important to her. But she feels that some parents see her school as being a school where more difficult students attend, this reputation then puts off other more committed parents [Interview 09-02-09]. She is very keen to build up the reputation of the school, and new enrolments. She feels that possibly local preschool practitioners and parents are not aware about the good atmosphere within her school. During the year she held an open day inviting parents, preschool practitioners, and children along to see the school for themselves. She also invited preschool practitioners to the Junior Infants 'Welcome Ceremony' in September 2009 along with the parents of the children. She also had the idea of bringing live chickens into the school for the children to see, and inviting staff and children from the local preschools along to see the chickens, thus building relationships with the staff and children, while making them feel welcome in the school environment.

The infants teachers at St Michaels school were not as familiar with local preschools as the school principal. They did not know which feeder preschools the children came from, other than children who had attended the Early Start class attached to their school. However, they reported good communication with the Early Start teacher, in fact one of the infants teachers had previously worked in the Early Start classroom so had a unique perspective and understanding of both sectors. Indeed, she reported a good relationship with the infant teacher when she worked in Early Start and spoke of the value of cross-sectoral meetings to share information [Interview 09-02-09]. During initial interviews with the two teachers, discussions revolved around the ethos of communication and continuity that is an integral part of the project. The teachers reported that they were very keen to become involved with the local preschools, and to build relationships. They also advised that they would welcome a better understanding by the preschool sector of what takes place in the infants classroom. The teachers noted that developing these relationships with the preschool sector, and opening the lines of communication were a particularly important aspect of the project from their perspective.

Discussions also took place with the infants teachers on *Síolta*: The National Quality Framework for Early Education, and the researcher gave the teachers background information on the *Síolta* manual for the infants classes. During discussion, they reported that many of the areas involved in Standard 13 [Transitions Standard] were ones that they already put into practice in their classroom. Although the teacher who had previously worked in an Early Start classroom had a good understanding of preschool practice, the other infant teacher reported that she had never been inside a preschool. Both were keen to visit local preschools. As discussed above, both saw a clear value in developing the Child Snapshot, and were keen to take the time to be involved in that aspect of the project. It was agreed that training needs identified by the preschool group which would be addressed in the Programme of Continuing Professional Development would be open to teachers to attend also if they felt it appropriate, however, the issue of lack of cover to undertake such training during school hours was identified immediately both by the teachers and the principal.

> "This child, the school were only able to keep the child for an hour a day, they just couldn't cope with him. We had told the parents he wasn't able for school, we had sent him for assessment. But then he got a speech and language appointment for the first day of school, and we had been ringing and ringing and ringing, trying to get the appointment for him, and mammy sent him to school instead. He was getting frustrated, particularly with the speech and language problems, you know. The school couldn't cope with him, with the high numbers, you know…..So he came back to us, it was very sad for the child, he couldn't understand why he couldn't go to school, I told him he was a helper in with us."
> [Preschool Practitioner, Focus Group, 20-10-09]

6.2.2. St Martins School

St Martins school opened in 1967, and has a vision of providing a secure, stable and stimulating learning environment for the children. Similar to the situation in St Michaels, St Martins school is located central to a different block of flats in Ballymun which are also undergoing regeneration at present. Families from these blocks are being re-housed in other areas of Ballymun, and it is intended that the tower blocks be demolished. Again, the principal advised that this had resulted in a drop in enrolment figures, as local parents were enrolling children to schools within walking distance of their proposed new accommodation. This meant that her usual intake of two Junior Infant classes was expected to be reduced to one class in September 2009 [Interview, 29-01-09]. The school principal was keen to be involved in the research project as she felt that the issue of children making a successful transition from preschool to primary school was an important one. As she explained:

"One big issue we would have is that we have very little prior knowledge of the children coming in. When the children are enrolled in school the parents will not disclose anything relating to the child, the medical history, past history if they have been involved with another agency, anything like that. There is a reluctance in case you will not accept the child into the school. It's rare that they would give any information, even something like speech therapy, they don't want to disclose that. So by getting that information from the preschool, it's a huge help. It helps the teacher to understand where they are coming from, particularly if they have difficulty in settling in. The first opportunity we have to talk to the parents is the parent-teacher meetings in February, so they would have been in six months, and that is a lot of lost time." [Interview, 23-02-10].

She explained that although she has difficulty accessing information from parents, she believed that they would happily give this information to the preschool practitioners. She felt that the fact that these relationships were so well developed when the children were leaving preschool means that parents would trust the preschool practitioners with this information. She explained that this was one of the main reasons she wanted to be involved in the project, to have access to this valuable information about the children in advance of them starting school in September. She noted that this information was valuable in terms of continuity of services, such a language therapy, and in terms of both her planning and preparation and that of the infants teachers for the new school year. She explained:

"Some parents drop off attending services like speech therapy, they think that now the child is going to school they won't need it any more. So if we have information on the child at an earlier date we can try to reactivate that early on. There really is a lack of follow through on most services, and I suppose that was one of my main reasons for wanting to be involved in the project, to enable us to gain that information early, so that we can link in with the services, and keep them with the services that they had been involved with." [Interview, 23-02-10].

However, she did highlight some difficulties in the availability of her teaching staff to take part in research projects in terms of time commitment. She advised that they would have one hour after school finish each day when they would be available to participate, however she did not have teaching cover to enable them to leave their classrooms during class time. It was agreed that their involvement would take part during this time in order to facilitate their needs. The idea of holding an information evening on transition was discussed with the principal however she advised that the school never hold events in the evening as parents will not go out in the evening, this issue is explained further below. All school events must take place during the day to encourage parental involvement. It was agreed that the possibility of a discussion with parents would be held with the Home School Liaison Teacher.

From a parental involvement perspective, in the March of each year the school has an open morning which prospective parents are invited to attend. Parents attending a cookery course in the school make cakes for this open morning, and attend with a view to

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building relationships with new parents. The parents who register their children are then invited into the school again in June, when they are given a talk on the school, and invited to look around the school. Parents are given an information pack on the school, including information such as: a 'Welcome to our school' handout; Attendance booklet; Code of Behaviour for Students; Anti-bullying Booklet; etc. Children are given a pack which includes crayons, colouring sheets, scissors, etc. Once the child is attending the school, they can become involved in a parent reading scheme where children and parents are invited in to the school after class one day where a story is read to the children. The children and parents are then given a pack with a copy of the book, and a laminated set of questions for parents to extend the learning from the book. An activity sheet and colouring sheet are also included in the pack for the children. Children then return the book after a week, when the process is repeated with another book [Home School Liaison Teacher, 13-11-09]. Another initiative is a story sacks reading initiative. Four parents at a time are introduced to the story sack, they are given a demonstration on how to read the story including the characters, and they are given information on how to best use the factual book and the other props in the story sack. The parents then come into the classroom to take four groups and read the story, and use the props to help the children act out the story [HSLT, 13-11-09].

Three infants teachers in St Martins school took part in the project, one of these teachers was involved throughout the project. The second teacher went on maternity leave during Summer 2009, and her replacement took part in the project from the new term in September 2009. As was the case in St Michaels none of the teachers were local to the area, and so had little knowledge of the local preschools. During our first interview they advised that they did not know the names of any local preschools. When given the list of local preschools, they recognised one, which is the preschool most close to the primary school [Interview 09-02-09]. During initial interviews the researcher and the teachers held discussions on the ethos of communication and continuity that is part of the project. The teachers reported that they were very keen to become involved with the local preschools, and to build relationships. They also advised that they would welcome a better understanding by the preschool sector of what takes place in the infants classroom [Interview 09-02-09]. Discussion also took place on *Síolta*: The National Quality Framework for Early Education, and the research gave the teachers background information on the *Síolta* manual for the infants classes. The teachers felt too overcommitted in their roles at present to give time to incorporate *Síolta* into their classrooms directly. However during discussions on *Síolta* they noted that many of the principals were areas that they already put into practice in their classroom, and welcomed working on the project within the ethos of the *Síolta* framework. The teachers also welcomed the concept of the 'Student Snapshot'. They were in agreement that this was a good idea and were happy to work on developing the tool during the course of the project. Both noted a huge range in ability in children entering the JI classroom and commented that this could be quite challenging aspect of their role as infants teachers [Interview 09-02-09].

The Home School Liaison Teacher in St Martins also became involved in the project, with a specific interest in parental involvement at both preschool and primary level. She

advised that much of her role is personal involvement with parents, including greeting parents at arrival time and at home time each day. She also makes home visits, and is responsible for developing a programme for parental involvement [HSLT, 13-11-09]. She became involved in the Programme of Continuing Professional Development, and worked with a sub-group of preschool practitioners in developing a 'Tips for Parents of Children Starting School' booklet as part of the CPD.

When asked about the important issues for her school at the moment the Principal reported that the issue of break-ins and safety was a huge one for her at present. [This issue was highlighted also by the Managers of the Green Preschool, the Yellow Preschool and the Purple Preschool – All located in the same area of Ballymun]. She reported that the school had been broken into again, and this time with over Euro 20,000- worth of damage. She explained that because of half vacant blocks of flats, gangs of youths were hanging around them at night. The phone lines of the school had been on many occasions, even the power lines to the school had been cut, to enable thieves to break in to the school. The school had spent a large budget on interactive whiteboards, however, 8 out of the 17 whiteboards had been stolen. In order to steal the boards the thieves were armed with "very serious weapons, angle grinders and crow bars" [Interview, 23-02-10] and were damaging other equipment while carrying out the burglaries. She reported that this most recent incident had badly affected her staff, the children, and indeed herself. The children she advised were very upset and unsettled. "We had a staff planning day on Wednesday, and it was my first opportunity to talk to the staff about it, but the teachers all feel very insecure. The mood was very down, it is hard to describe it, but it has really knocked us back. Up until this we have been able to pick ourselves up and get on with it, but now it has got too big for us." [Interview, 23-02-10]. She referred to the situation generally in terms of personal safety in the general areas as follows:

> *"It's dreadful, and I don't see what the answer is. There are so few people living in those flats now, and the gangs use the empty flats. It is definitely impacting on the children. I had a child here whose mother told me that her daughter was feeling very threatened. She lived in the flats across the road, and she would ring her mother at the bottom of the flats to come down and get her, she would go in after school and would not come out again, she was terrified to come out. It's terrible. They were prisoners in their flat. It really has got very bad since Christmas, in fact even before Christmas, it is very bad at the moment. I don't know what it is, there is a group of very disaffected youth there now, and there is no hope for them, no opportunities. They are very angry, and they have no positive male role models, we are such a female community here. I think positive male role models are sorely lacking." [Principal Interview, 23-02-10].*

She also advised that there was another issue specifically in relation to the transition from preschool to primary that was of concern to her at the moment. She was very pleased about the new free preschool places available to children as she noted that children who have attended preschool are so much more ready for the school environment than those who have not gained this experience. However, she was worried that the age limits in place with regard to the new free preschool places would encourage parents to send their

children to primary school after 4 years and 6 months, as compared to starting when they were older, which she feels is more beneficial. She explained:

> *"I do have a concern though that preschools would say to schools that children are not ready, sometimes the parent listens sometimes they don't. However, this new free preschool system means that the preschool will not get paid after that date, or the parents would have to go back to paying themselves if they wanted to keep the child at preschool. So it mitigates against children who aren't ready for school. It is an issue that needs to be flagged, it is taking the decision away for parents to allow their children that extra time, and they are so much more settled when they are that bit older…Economically now it will be harder, even if the preschool practitioners advise the parents that the children should stay even longer, and the parent just pay, it will be harder for them to pay. It is a real issue, it is another factor that is entering into the whole transition to school area. The Government is very much determining the age that a child should start school, but the legal age that a child needs to start school is 6, but this 4 years and 6 months deadline will be seen as determining the age that they should start." [Principal, Interview 23-02-10].*

> *"I just feel that the whole process was so positive, particularly in terms of communication. The whole process has been great. People are being so open, they are all sharing information, which is great. I think it is really brilliant that this has been undertaken, and feel it has been a benefit for all of us in terms of better communication. So well done!"*
> *[Infant Teacher, St Michael's School, Focus Group, 20-10-09]*

6.2.3   Summary of School Profiles

Both the primary schools who took part in the study were DEIS Urban Band 1 primary schools. The principals of the two schools were keen to be involved in the project as they had both already identified the transition from preschool to primary school as being an important issue for the children in their care. They advised that they would welcome involvement in activities that would smooth this transition for the children. Both also advised that they were keen to build relationships with local preschools, as they noted that there was a need for greater communication in this respect. They also explained that they have little knowledge of children prior to school start, but that they felt that the preschool practitioners have a wide range of information about children which would be very useful to pass through to the primary system. Both principals also noted that although there was a coordinated approach to the transition from primary to secondary school, there was no such general coordination at the preschool to primary level, and that it was badly needed.

Parental involvement in the primary school system was noted by both the Principals and the infants teachers of the school as being of particular importance in terms of positive child outcomes. The staff at both schools were working on initiatives to improve parental involvement, and noted that it was particularly important to try to gain parents trust in the early years of school if any long term involvement was to be possible. The infants teachers at both schools were in agreement that the best preparation for children to smooth their transition to school was in terms of language and communication skills, independence and self help skills, social skills, and emotional skills. They requested that the CPD programme being undertaken as part of the project have a focus on developing oral language, and the language of mathematics, as these were preacademic areas in which the children would particularly benefit from greater support.

None of the infant teachers were local to the area, or had ever visited the local preschools prior to this project, but they welcomed the opportunity for such visits, and for opportunities to work with the preschool practitioners in developing the Child Snapshot. However, the issue of when such contact would take place was identified by Principals and teachers at both schools as being an issue, with the hour after the infants classes finish for the day being identified as the most convenient time for undertaking activities such as these.

6.3   Preschool Profiles

Five of the preschools were chosen for profiling, as they were considered to be representative of the type of preschools participating in the project, while also making the diversity of experience clear. The profiles were developed through visits to the settings, and interviews with the Managers to gather background information and documentation on the settings, how they have developed, issues they are currently facing, and issues that they are currently facing in relation to the children in their care and their transition to the primary school system. These profiles were deliberately written in a way which highlights different aspects of preschool life, and different issues that the preschools are facing at present. The aim is to give readers a greater understanding of the type and range of settings that were involved the project. They also aim to offer an insight into the training and experience of the Managers, and the issues they are facing in the day to day running of preschools in Ballymun. The individual profiles are outlined below.

You know, we [childcare workers] are professionals nowadays. As well as my Diploma in [NUI] Maynooth, I also did a Diploma in 2001 and 2002 in UCD in Nursery Management, Level 7, so you know we really should be considered as professionals. I do feel that there are a lot of people in the childcare sector who have worked for so long and have so much knowledge, but it is never respected or recognised. Now that bit of paper is so important, but I also value my years of experience as much as I value that piece of paper. I could have done that Diploma earlier, but I don't believe I would have gained as much from it without the wealth of experience that I have gained over the years. [Red Preschool Manager Interview]

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Example of Good Practice: Language Development

At one of the Focus Group Meetings exploring the issue of Language Development and in particular Oral Language one of the preschool managers outlined various methods used by her preschool to help children develop their language skills and word recognition skills.

When the children arrive in the morning one of their first tasks of the day is to choose the breakfast cereal that they will eat for breakfast. The names of the children have been printed and laminated so that they have to find their own name, and place it on a picture of the cereal of their choice. She uses these names for various other activities where children have to make a choice, thus helping the children to recognise their own name through everyday use. She advised that parents tell her that the children continue this activity at home and out and about, pointing out the letters from their names to their parents.

During the CPD Programme the Oral Language tutor[2] discussed with this manager how this work could be extended even further if incorporated with a 'Literacy Walk'. This is a walk around the local area with the aim of identifying words and letters that the children might understand. For example, children can be asked to try to spot the letters of their names, or various signs and identify their meanings, or numbers on everyday objects (say bus numbers). The group agreed that this was an idea that would be easy to undertake and enjoyable for the children. Variations of the external walk that were mentioned were a trip to the supermarket, or a walk around the preschool setting identifiying all the signs that can be found. An additional activity here might be to take photographs of items found on the walk to be made into a book on return to the preschool.

As the Manager reported:

"I think it is a great idea, and very easy to do, you could take them out and there would be lots of things that you would never think about that they would notice with letters from their names… Even the signs, do they know what the signs mean, say the fire alarm sign, you could ask them do they know what it means? There are lots of things. Even when they are out and about with their parents, if we are doing it, they will continue to do it with their parents. Signs for toilets, or security in the centre, they will recognise things like that. As you see things it will add to the language, say an escalator, then you would talk about it going up and down, you know."

6.3.1   Blue Preschool

Margaret is the manager of the 'Blue Preschool', a Nursery which was founded in 1971. She advised that it was the first Heath Services Executive Nursery in the Ballymun area. She originally trained for three years in ECCE in England, and then went on to study

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[2] Dr Maíre Mhic Mhathúna, Head of the Department of Social Sciences, Dublin Institute of Technology

Management for another year. She then studied the Montessori Method. Finally, she returned to Ireland, and has worked for 27 years in Ballymun. She reported that she has "enjoyed every minute of my time here, I have had a wonderful experience working in Ballymun" [Interview 22-4-09]. In Ballymun, she has also studied the Marte Meo[3] approach, undertaken Child Protection training, Manual Handing and First Aid training.

The 'Blue Preschool' is located in the centre of a residential area, close to flat complexes involved in the regeneration process. The building itself was the old Health Centre in Ballymun, which was renovated and adapted to become a Nursery. The building is owned by the Health Board, and the Nursery is 90% funded by the Health Board (this funding covers staff salaries and general running costs). The parents then pay a small fee, which would cover the other 10% of their total income.

Margaret both taught in the Nursery and managed the Nursery up to five years ago, however she is now a full-time manager. Apart from herself, the Nursery has 10 full time staff, 2 part time staff, 1 cook, 1 cleaner and 1 secretary. They have four classrooms; 16 children in each of three classrooms and 1 smaller classroom with 10 children. At present the Nursery caters for 58 children. The children attending the centre are aged from 2 years and 9 months up to those about to enter school in September, usually between four and five years. Margaret is hoping that the Nursery will soon move to a new two storey building, but at the moment they are waiting for funding to make this move possible. The new building would mean more places, and the Nursery would also be able to cater for babies. However, Margaret noted that "funding is a big issue at the moment" [Interview, 22-4-09] so a date for the proposed new building is not yet available. Indeed, Margaret noted that they are working within a very tight budget, and spending is limited. Margaret also advised "Ballymun is lacking very much in facilities for childcare, especially those for children from zero to two and a half years, and lacking in affordable childcare as well" [Interview, 22-4-09]. Speaking about the Ballymun regeneration she noted that "it hasn't turned out the way it was supposed to turn out" [Interview, 22-4-09]. She felt that although they have "a chemist, a Garda Station, a Civic Centre, a hotel, there is no real town centre, even for the elderly it is very poor. Even in the shopping centre, there isn't even a butchers for the elderly people to do their shopping. There is nothing in Ballymun, and I think it is a big let down." [Interview, 22-4-09]

Children are referred to 'Blue Preschool' by the Public Health Nurse, and Margaret noted that places at the Nursery are limited. She advised that "it is very hard to turn people away, I could fill two Nurseries" [Interview, 22-4-09]. As children leave to start school, new places become available for other children to start at the nursery that September. The Public Health Nurses make the decisions about the children with the greatest need for a place in the nursery. Last year Margaret noted that she had 40 children leaving the

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[3] The Marte Meo programme, aims "to identify, activate and develop skills to enable and enhance constructive interaction and development….the central MARTE MEO focus at all the various levels to encourage people to use their own strength to advance and stimulate developmental processes on the part of children, parents, professional caregivers and supervisors and thus learn to optimally utilise their capacities" (p1). http://www.martemeo.com/site/about/faq.cfm

Nursery, while in June 2009 there are only 28 children leaving to begin their primary education. Clearly this impacts on the number of places available.

Margaret noted that as children start in her service at such a young age they spend a good deal of their formative years in the Nursery. The nursery runs a full day session, 9am-4pm, and Margaret noted that most children spend 6-6.5 hours a day in the Nursery.   She also advised that attendance at the Nursery is excellent. Margaret reported that staff at the Nursery follow the developmental progress of children very closely, and know the children very well. She noted that this means that staff have a bank of knowledge about each child which could be very useful to pass to the primary school teacher. During interviews Margaret spoke about her beliefs about the importance of smoothing the transition from preschool to primary school. She mentioned on a few occasions the lack of communication between preschools and primary schools in Ballymun as being an issue. She summed up her interest in the area of transition, and the impact that is has on the children in her care as follows:

> *"We have the children for two and a half years, we know them well, we know what they are capable of. I feel it would be very good for the teachers to communicate with preschools so that they can continue to work on the progress that we have already made with the children. As I said at our last meeting, the children get a good start here, and we often wonder when they go to primary school, will they get left behind? Will they get left behind before they even get started? Our children have great potential and we hope that potential will continue in the primary school. I think that it is brilliant that meetings between the preschools and the teachers about the transition are taking place. They need to network together, and they don't. This will be the first time it has happened. Now I have to say I have a very good relationship with the Principals, they would know me well, and the Home School Liaison teachers would come into me and talk about the children. But I think it's more important to talk directly to the teacher who is going to be working with the child." [Interview, 22-4-09]*

She noted on more than one occasion that although the schools do initiate contact with her, the importance of dialogue with the particular teacher who will be working with the child must be recognised. "I think it's important, I really do. Interestingly enough at our staff meetings here we have often said that it would be good to be able to talk to the teachers themselves. We have often said it. I really think it is important that it is taking place". [Interview, 22-4-09]

Margaret also expressed some concerns about the move from a play based learning system at preschool to a more formal academic approach at primary level. She was also concerned that the primary sector needs to better understand and recognise the professionalism within the preschool sector. She noted that:

> *"The children here get such a good start for primary school. They go to primary school so well prepared. They are able to put on their own coat, they are able to dress themselves, they are able to sit at the table and able to tidy up. They are*

able to do so many things, they are so independent themselves before they even go to primary school, it's not as if they are just starting out. They get a fabulous start, they get a start that some other children just don't" [Interview, 22-4-09].

Margaret was asked about the practices of the Nursery in terms of smoothing the transition for their children to primary school. She advised that before a child is due to leave she will meet with the parents and will ask how they are feeling about the move. She will ask if they feel the child is ready. She will discuss any concerns they might have. The parents will ask her advice on the move, she will discuss the progress of the child, but she always advises that the final decision is theirs. We discussed her relationship with parents generally, and she advised:

"I really have a very good relationship with parents. My door is always open there, I am usually here, my door is an open door, parents know that they can come in any time, and they do, they come in and sit down and talk to me. It's very important for them to know that they are listened to. For example I had a parent in the other day, whose child is going to school in September, and he is really ready, and she was just saying that she was really happy she had left him another year, because he wasn't ready last year. She said she would love to leave him another year, and I said no, that he really was ready to go! But she said she was dreading it!" [Interview, 22-4-09].

"You know when you think about it, the amount of things that we do with them at preschool, they are like Piaget's little scientists, as compared to primary school, which has much more working on books, you know. They really do get the idea of things like weighing stuff to see what is heavier and floating in water and things, you know, when they have a chance to play with stuff they really do get the idea, but I really don't think they have the chance to play like that at school."
[Preschool Practitioner, Focus Group, 16-11-09]

6.3.2   Red Preschool

Kira is the manager of the Red Preschool. The preschool is located in a 3-bedroomed flat in a block in Ballymun across the road from one of the participating primary schools. Kira has been involved in childcare for about 25 years. She became involved when her own daughter was in playschool and she was asked to cover for the playschool leader. This experience led her to undertake a training course with the IPPA, and open a playschool in her own home. She remarked, "the tutor herself transformed her kitchen

every day into a preschool, and I thought well if she can do it, I can do it! So I ended up doing that for about 7 years! Dropped the kids off at school every morning, then came back and did the playschool." [Interview 1]. However, as her own children were getting older she reported that the intrusion into the family home became more difficult. The opportunity came up to work part-time in a crèche and she did that for about two or two and a half years. She advised that although she enjoyed her time there, it was difficult having been her own boss for so long to adapt to being an employee. She also advised that during this time she realised that she definitely wanted a career in a Management position, where she felt she had more autonomy, yet did not have the financial risk associated with ownership. So when she heard about a job as a manager in a local crèche she applied. She secured the position and stayed there for 5 years until the owner had to close the crèche due to bad health. During this period Kira completed a Diploma in Education through the National University of Ireland in Maynooth. She advised that it was this training, combined with experience of fostering children that secured her present position of Manager of the Red Preschool in 2001.

Kira reported that when she started in the job, the staff had a limited amount of training. Initially there were a small number of children and a small number of staff, and the setting only opened 9.30am-1.30pm. It was located in a 2-bedroomed flat, and Kira's office was at the end of the kitchen table! Kira encouraged the staff to commence FETAC training. She also introduced two sessions, the original morning session, and an afternoon session. The staff also expanded to include a fully qualified Senior Childcare Worker, and a part-time Childcare Worker. She reported that this is still the full official staff complement: two full-time and one part-time fully qualified staff. The setting also has up to 9 CE workers, 6 childcare trainees, two housekeepers, and a secretary. Kira advised that the setting caters for 17 children per session. Three babies, 6 toddlers, and 8 preschoolers, in both the morning and afternoon sessions. This means there could be up to 40 different families using the setting, as some of the children might do two days, some might do three, so as well as the children who are doing the full week, so they are dealing with a large number of families. Since she started with the Red Preschool they have moved into a 3-bedroomed flat, which means they have four rooms including the sitting room. Kira's office is in a separate flat across the hall from the preschool.

Kira spoke of the main difficulties she is facing in the Red Preschool. She reported her main concern is that the setting is still located in a block of flats and at present there is no sign of this changing. She reported:

> "The Capital Grant is gone, with the economic downturn. We feel we are providing a quality service under sometimes difficult conditions, and we are meeting the needs of a lot of families and a lot of children. We are dealing with the extended family, as an organisation we are very aware that we are dealing with the family, not just the children. Once you get inside the door of the crèche it is lovely, but the lead up to that, the surroundings of the area, are not appropriate for a child to have to come through every day. But, when they knock them down, it might be the end of 20 years of hard work in terms of building a quality service that might be gone, we don't know. We were near to moving a few times, but it

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fell through as the accommodation wasn't suitable in terms of the children. So we are left now, along with all the other organisations and families based in the flats, left scrambling for poll position in terms of whatever premises might be left. So that is really the big problem, the housing situation." [Interview 1]

She also mentioned another problem with regard to the turnover of CE staff. In the past, she advised that CE staff could sometimes stay with the setting for up to 3 years, however in recent years the policy seems to be one year then the CE staff member leaves. This has implications in terms of the training of the CE staff member, but also in terms of crèche management. She elaborated:

"Last year I got four girls trained to FETAC level 5, they were lovely girls, we had worked so hard with them, we had all been working on improving standards, bringing in Siolta, we were working on High Scope too. I was at the stage where I was feeling that we were really getting to a place where you really feel it is all coming together. Then we lost them and we are back again with girls with no childcare background at all, and you feel you have lost so much, you have to start it all over again. It is so difficult. But then I am very lucky in terms of the permanent staff being there for a long time. I am there 9 years, the part time Child-Care Worker is there about 7 years, and the Senior Childcare Worker is there 5, and we are a very good team, we really are." [Interview 1]

Continuing on the theme of staff relationships, Kira mentioned the importance of such a good team of permanent staff members. She commented that she has a very good relationship with her Senior Childcare Worker, and that they work very well together:

"I really value her opinion, I would have a lot of respect for her opinion. I haven't always had that, and it is such a big thing, you know. I don't know how I would manage not having that support again... it is so good to be able to talk over anything with someone with the same high level of training, you know, you can really talk things through, and tease things out then." [Interview 1].

With regard to the free preschool year, Kira didn't apply for it last year because all of her parents avail of the Subvention scheme[4]. All but one is entitled to Category A [Parents in receipt of Social Welfare Payments in the Community Childcare Subvention Scheme], so they were better off staying with that scheme. However, now that the free preschool scheme is compulsory for preschools that are receiving the CCS scheme, she put in an application this year, although she noted that she does not expect parents to avail of the scheme. She did note however some issues with the scheme, the first one being with the name of the scheme, advising that it might have been better called the preschool subsidy or allowance. As it is called the free preschool year, she reported that parents tended to believe they could just avail of a year of free preschool education, and so the conditions with regard to age of the child, and hours of free attendance had to be explained to them

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[4] The Community Childcare Subvention Scheme is open to community-based not for profit childcare services and targets resources at services used by disadvantaged parents or guardians of children to enable them to avail of reduced childcare fees.

very clearly. She also mentioned the same issue as mentioned by the Principal of St Martins School with regard to the age band for the free preschool place and parental beliefs that the Government was saying that this is the correct age for children to start formal schooling. However, she did mention the need for the preschool sector to support the scheme as it is the first attempt to provide very necessary free preschool places for children, she noted:

> *"I would like to think it was done because it was time to start really looking at that age group, and start providing them with the services they deserve and need, and that is the way we are taking it, we are trying to really support it. But to be honest I think it was done to take the sting out of taking the Euro 1000- back off parents. But we were very conscious not to be negative about it, I mean it is the first real recognition of the child's need for free preschool education, so we really are trying to be as positive as we can about it, for that reason. But it really was given to us to take in and manage, it would have been better to have some consultation on it, and maybe some of these issues with it could have been worked on." [Interview 1]*

With regard to the transition from preschool to primary school, Kira noted that in her opinion during times of change such as this a child needs additional support and reassurance. She noted that her relationship with the new Principal of St Michaels school was developing, and advised that the Principal was working hard to build relationships with local preschools. Kira reported that she found her to be very approachable, and she advised that she is really hoping to continue to develop this budding relationship. With regard to communication with the primary sector as part of this project, she noted that:

> *"Meeting the teachers and developing the Snapshot was so useful... although [principal] could see a real value in communicating with us, it is so important for the teachers, they are young girls just coming out of college, they have only been working a short period of time, so they have a whole career in front of them, it is so important that these relationships have developed at this point in their careers… Hopefully they now have a respect for us which they will take on with them through their career, and that is very important. It is a new level of understanding which will continue, they will bring it forward with them, and that is very important from our perspective." [Interview 1]*

Specifically with regard to the Child Snapshot, she mentioned that one parent fed back to her that the teacher had mentioned being very pleased with the Snapshot information and in the case of her daughter had said that the information from the preschool had perfectly reflected the child and her abilities. In addition, she noted:

> *"I used the Snapshot again recently with a child that we are having a bit of difficulty with to kind of assess for ourselves how he would be in terms of being ready for school. So I sat down with the parent then, and explained that instead of doing it with her we had done it first, just to see where the child was at. I went through it all with her, and she completely agreed with what we had written, she*

completely agreed with all of it. Se we were able to say to her, well we have done this a few months ahead of schedule, so that we can think about the areas we need to work on, we explained to her that we now had a good space of time to work with the child to help them develop. So it was really useful for that aswell." [Interview 1]

Example of Good Practice: Building a Vegetable Garden

Aideen and her team at the Purple Preschool came up with a very innovative way to involve fathers in the preschool. They had a patch of land at the back of their garden which they could find no use for due to its size and shape. They decided to build raised beds and to start a vegetable garden in the beds. This meant that some work would have to be done to prepare the land and develop the vegetable garden area. They invited fathers of the children to come into the preschool on a Saturday to help dig the plot and develop the vegetable garden. They were very pleased with the number of fathers that became involved in the project, and they found that the day helped build relationships with staff and fathers as they worked together. The kept a photographic record of the development of the garden which they have on display in the preschool. They also noted that fathers are now showing more interest in the children's work on the garden. As Aideen noted:

> *"The atmosphere was busy, chatty and very friendly. The day finished with everyone sitting down in the Staff Room with a mug of tea and a 'breakfast roll' and lots of chatter and laughter. One of the Fathers said 'I have made new friends here to-day'."* [Manager, Purple Preschool, 23-02-10]

This example has been highlighted as an example of good practice in parental involvement and relationship building, and an example of how imaginative thinking can help to involve fathers in the life of the preschool. It is suggested that many preschools could adapt this activity in some way to try to encourage fathers to become involved in a meaningful way with their child's preschool activities.

6.3.3 Yellow Preschool

When the project commenced, the Yellow preschool was based in a block of flats on one of the main thoroughfares in Ballymun. It was located in a three bedroomed ground floor flat, which meant that they had the use of four rooms. Directly opposite the Yellow preschool was another preschool based in a flat which was the mirror image of this one. The Yellow preschool was linked with that preschool, and two others, and they were last four community playgroups linked together as the 'Ballymun Preschool and Playgroup Association', all based in the flax complexes. All four of the preschools were involved in the project. Miriam the manager of the Yellow preschool advised that:

"At one time there would have been about 30 playgroups, at least one in every tower of flats. That was way back in the 80s. That was probably the only childcare available at the time. The parents would have had a lot of involvement, that was the only way they could be run at the time. Little by little other childcare centres opened up, things changed, and now there are only the four remaining playschools" [Interview, 28-05-09].

Miriam advised at the time of that interview that they had about 14 children in each of the playschools. "We took on some more recently and that is because we are loosing 10 in September who are going to big school, so we will have a new intake. We may well be full again in September, it's hard to know." [Interview, 28-05-09].

Miriam herself became involved in the community playgroups when her own daughter went to playschool. At that stage every mother was asked to do a morning, so she would do a morning, and she really enjoyed it. She advised that if there was a staff shortage or anything she would volunteer to stay, she would always offer to cover. She then did a course in childcare, the playgroup leader was leaving and Miriam was asked would she like to take over. She advised that was about 26 years ago and she is still there now. [Interview, 28-05-09].

At the time of our first interview, in May 2009, Miriam spoke about the importance of the transition to primary school for the children in her care. However, prior to that transition, she advised that the Yellow preschool itself was in the process of a major transition. The preschool was expected to move from the flat, to a new purpose build preschool in the locality. Miriam advised that the playgroups are looked after by the Community and Environment Section of Dublin City Council. Three years ago they spoke about a purpose build crèche in a local Community Centre, and said that perhaps the four playschools might be interested in going there. She advised that at the time they went to have some talks, and they were still having talks, but they were still not sure how things are going to work. However, she noted that it would make a very big difference to the four playschools. The four Managers would become four workers, if employed in the new setting, under another Manager, who would be under a Board of Management. The age groups of the children would also change, the new setting would look after babies up to school going age, and maybe have an after school club. Whereas at that time the playschools were used to children from two and a half up to school-going age. Miriam noted that the new age group is one that some of the childcare workers would not have much experience with. The new setting would also be open all day, although the staff would not necessarily have to work all day. They would also open all year, as compared to the current situation where the playschools open during school terms only. She also noted that she was not sure what input they would have on decision making. This was clearly a time of great change and uncertainty for the Yellow Preschool. Miriam also noted that she was very unsure of the impact the move would have on the children and the parents currently using the four playschools. She noted:

"In terms of the children and their families, it will be further away, so for children maybe living in this block, their parents may not want to go all the way

up there. So it would be moving the playschool away from them… The ones that would be left in the flats they would be the ones who would not come up…It is the impact on the child, it is the child is the loser you know. I mean if the child is a bit late and they are in the next block, or above in this block, they will walk down. But if they are a bit late and we are in [new setting] they won't walk down. They're not going to do it." [Interview, 28-05-09].

We spoke about how the move might have the greatest impact on the most vulnerable children. This led to a discussion about the regeneration process, and the impact it was having on some of the local children, who were still waiting to be re-housed. Miriam advised:

"Whatever about years ago, it is very difficult now for the ones left in the flats. I remember at the beginning of all this I was talking to a social worker who was saying to me that we would see the level of crime really increase with the regeneration. She was saying that for the youngsters because their whole environment is changing, their space is gone you know, and I really saw that....So they are leaving people in half empty blocks. When the block was full you felt safe, you knew your neighbours, but living there now in a half empty block is very different. I know some people and it has really affected their children living like that…now the Corporation might say they will move people to another block of flats, but moving is such a big, stressful thing, that some people just don't want to do that. Move for six months, to move again. But for others, they have had to do it, the whole anti-social behaviour was the last straw, and they have had to move because they were terrorised. They have been flooded, and flats around them have been burnt out. Now they [the flats] are secured, but they can still be opened, and they are dangerous. I have seen things where kids have got into the flats, now people were told by Dublin Corporation to leave things in the flats and they would be disposed of, but they were disposed of in many cases over the balcony by the teenagers who got in…That is the reality, but it is not what they are portraying. And it is all having an impact on the children." [Interview, 28-05-09].

Miriam reported that the Managers of the four playgroups were very supportive of each other. They have known each other and worked together for years, and felt much the same in terms of the uncertainty facing them. They had agreed as a group to keep going and to take on new children for the coming September as they did not know that a move would definitely take place. As Miriam noted:

"The uncertainty was hard, but we decided we would just keep on doing what we are doing. We are intending to continue in September. They have places here in September, and we are telling them we will keep the places. Parents are asking me questions, but we don't have the answers. It is very important for parents to know if they have a place, and to know where the child will be. We had to take on new children, because we have to assume we will be here. Our first priority is the children, that is why we are here, you know." [Interview, 28-05-09].

She also advised that the managers were finding the issue of having to apply for the jobs in the new setting an issue. It was clear in our discussions that the women were finding this difficult when they felt they had been working in these jobs for years quite successfully, and yet they were now being asked to demonstrate that they were able to do the job they were already doing. As Miriam explained:

> *"As one of the girls said, an interview is to make sure you are suitable for the job, but we have been in the jobs for years now, so were we not suitable all those years? You know… They speak as if we will be there, but there are no certainties. I think it is just after working here for all this time, it is hard to know what you can find out in an interview, what can I tell you that I haven't proved a million times?" [Interview, 28-05-09].*

This issue may well be linked to the issue of professionalism within the childcare sector, a theme that recurred during the project.

The Lead Researcher met with Miriam again in December 2009 and it had been formally confirmed that the Yellow Preschool was moving to the new setting. Miriam had considered applying for the position of Manager, but had decided that this would remove her from working with the children, which was where she was happiest, so she had decided to apply for one of the staff positions instead. Miriam applied for, and secured the position. At the time of our final interview in February 2010, Miriam was working in the new complex. She noted at this time that it was a time of great change for her and the staff that were now working in the new preschool.

> *"Well it's a much bigger setting, it's an organisation rather than a community playgroup. There is the baby room, and there are two staff in there....There is a toddler room, which is a big room, they might have 12 children there, they have three staff in the morning, and two in the afternoon… they have part-time sessions, mornings, and the free preschool places from 2-5 in the afternoon session. Then there is the preschool room… with two staff in the morning and two in the afternoon." [Miriam, Interview 04-3-10]*

She noted that the new setting was a very different environment particularly as it was now a business rather than a community not for profit setting. She admitted that she was finding the new position and the new environment challenging. She noted that what she had envisaged as being a transition for the last remaining community playgroups in Ballymun had not been so. She felt that it was instead the end of the playgroups and the beginning of something completely new. Indeed she noted:

> *"When we closed our community playgroup we packed everything and sent it to the new centre. Now there was a lot of stuff and some of it appeared old and shabby and was dumped. I was surprised how this affected me but I suppose nobody knew how hard we had to save for equipment as we had no funding. So therefore we valued whatever we had, we relied on donations and sometimes we*

were lucky to have parents making equipment for our groups, for example easels. They provided the same experiences for the children as the equipment from the Hope Catalogue." [Miriam, Interview, 04-03-10]

She also did feel that the new setting could have better used the experience and relationships staff had developed with parents and children at the old settings. She also reported that parents still come to her to advise them and support them, and to ask questions about the new setting, indeed she had attended the open day in order to support the parents making the transition.

"The whole point of this move was that there was going to be a transition, it would be gradual and we would be involved all through the transition period. But as time went by the goal posts kept moving. There was no real transition... Out of the 4 playgroups with 10 staff only 3 staff ended up working in the new centre. When we eventually closed up it was really emotional, after all I had worked in my playgroup for more than 25 years, we survived floods, break-ins, fires, vandalism, sometimes I wonder how we kept going – but we were dedicated to the children. In the end we closed and it was like 'pack up your stuff and hand in the keys'. As it turned out it was not a transition in any way, it was in fact the end of something and something new started. We were not included in the final process at all. We really didn't have a lot of information for parents. For example, parents were asked to pay a 'bond' we were not aware of this, if we had known we could have explained to parents. This caused stress to some parents, if they didn't pay they didn't get a place. I understood the reason for this, and because of the new system I would agree, but I just felt it could have been handled better. I was aware of issues and concerns that parents had, but I was not asked to contribute." [Miriam, Interview, 04-03-10]

However, Miriam's final point was that the most important thing was that the children had adapted well to the change of location. She advised that the continuity of staff definitely helped them in this regard, and this really brought home to her the importance of continuity at times of transition for children. In fact she commented that some of her parents wanted to make sure that she would be working in the room with their children before they sent the children to the new setting. As she concluded: "The children adapted very well…The kids are fine, and that is the main thing, it is such a change for us, but we have to remember that the kids are fine." [Miriam, Interview 04-3-10].

"I think that it is brilliant that meetings between the preschools and the teachers about the transition are taking place. They need to network together, and they don't. This will be the first time it has happened. Now I have to say I have a very good relationship with the Principals, they would know me well, and the Home School Liaison teachers would come into me and talk about the children. But I think it's more important to talk directly to the teacher who is going to be working with the child."
[Preschool Manager Interview, 22-4-09]

Example of Good Practice: Parental Involvement

St Michael's school are currently involved in a project aimed at both supporting children's oral language development and parental involvement. A Speech and Language Therapist runs the project and she comes to the school each Wednesday afternoon. The project commenced with parents coming into the school for 'Story Time' story telling sessions in the school library run by the Speech and Language therapist and the infants teacher. When the parents gained more confidence, they became more actively involved in working on oral language games with the children. So the parents work with the children either one-to-one or in pairs on the games provided by the Speech and Language therapist. The infants teachers (junior and senior infants) and the resource teacher are also involved in the project. The junior infant teacher reported that a group of parents are involved in the project, and that the sessions have helped her improve parental involvement at that level.

The teacher also reported on another project which was being used to support a child with little English and to develop parental participation on the school. The teacher discovered that the mother of a new child with little English language was extremely talented at art. She invited the mother to come into the school to develop large paintings of the characters in the children's readers. The life-sized art work is now finished and will be displayed in various locations around the school. The pieces which specifically relate to the infants readers are to have speech bubbles added to them with sentences from the readers on them, and will go on display in the area surrounding the infants classrooms. The teacher noted that it was a great opportunity to build her relationship with the particular parent, while also supporting the child's transition to the infants classroom. She noted:

"Especially as the child doesn't have English, I think it really made her feel more a part of the group. Other parents were coming in to see the paintings, people from around the school were coming over to have a look at them, so it really showed the child that she and her mother were valued by the school." [Infant Teacher, 12-03-10].

6.3.4   Green Preschool

Gemma is the manager of the Green Preschool. She used to bring her own children to playgroups when she was younger, she then began to get involved in their summer projects with the children. She was asked to become involved in the playgroups as a Community Employment (CE) worker. She worked there for a year, and was encouraged by staff to go to college to train in childcare. So she went to Marino College for two years full time and studied for her Diploma in Childcare (NNEB qualification). Another CE worker also attended Marino with her and they supported each other through the Diploma. She laughed as she reported that all the other students were young girls, and on the first day in college, the other students all went quiet when Gemma and her colleague

came into the room as they thought they were the tutors. She completed the FETAC Level 5 training at the same time as the NNEB, as she had been told that it was the new qualification which was needed by many childcare settings, although she reported that the Diploma was much more intensive.

She noted that the Ballymun Partnership supported her at the time, they paid for her training and that of her colleague. They were pictured at the time in the Northside People as they were women from the community, training in childcare to return and support their own community, working in childcare. However while they were training there was no childcare available for their own children! She was forced to get a home help to enable her to continue her studies. After finishing these qualifications, she went on to study for a Management qualification part time, in the evenings after work, in a private college. She did note that this was very difficult, balancing this study with working all day, however she had family support which helped. She was the only student to fully complete the course and graduate, an achievement of which she was very proud. She did note however, that although she had gained these qualifications the pay in childcare was very poor, and Jobs Initiative jobs were the only options available. Both herself and her colleague secured jobs under the Jobs Initiative scheme. They worked from a flat in a tower block at the time, and just used one room in the flat for the crèche. This expanded to another crèche, and they took over the whole flat to cater for both toddlers and preschoolers. The Youthreach crèche developed a mobile crèche which Gemma then ran, until it gained a permanent premises. At this point she was finished her management course, and she saw a management position for the 'Green Preschool', she went for interview and got the job. That was in June 1999, and she has been working there ever since.

The 'Green Preschool' is located in an adapted Industrial Unit in a local Industrial Estate rather than central to the flat or housing complexes. In the 'Green Preschool' Gemma is the manager, she has a Senior Childcare worker, and a Jobs Initiative worker. The preschool did have a Community Employment worker until recently but she was seconded to another centre. The loss of that worker has made a big difference to Gemma in terms of balancing her office work with work on the floor. The crèche was set up by the Ballymun Women's Resource Centre and the Ballymun Partnership. She noted that particularly in the early days "it was my baby, I would be up there till 8 o'clock at night, and up there on Sundays getting everything ready for the Monday" [Interview, 18-02-10]. Initially she only had 5 children, but this expanded to 15 children. In the past Gemma hasn't had to advertise the crèche, but has generally speaking been full with children of parents working in the industrial estate.

> *"Usually we would have run on word of mouth. We only cater for 15 children and we would always have been full. I think it is because it is a small setting, and there is a real family atmosphere. I treat the children as I would want my children treated."* [Interview, 18-02-10].

She also has a good relationship with the parents in her setting, and noted that she will tell staff to try not to judge parents or to jump to conclusions about them, as they really do not know what has been happening in the parents home life that might make them act

in a difficult way. She also tries to support parents who have difficulty paying fees in terms of flexibility. "You know you have to come back to the children, they are the ones in our care, we try to do the best of everything for them. We are looking after them, and we need to support the parents to support the child" [Interview, 18-02-10].

The issue of childcare fees is one of the important issues that Gemma is facing at the moment. She noted that she has recently had to increase her fees and she is very aware that this has had an impact on the parents using her setting.

> *"You see now they [the Government] are supporting the individual child, but by doing that there are no longer staffing grants. So we have to look at our outgoings for the whole year, rent, heating, everything, then we have to divide these costs by the number of children attending the setting. So we have to be self-sufficient, we have to work out our charges for parents on the basis of our outgoings, so that makes us self-sustainable. That has brought the fees way up. Our fees used to be Euro 110- [a week] now they are Euro 180- that is a huge jump for parents." [Interview, 18-02-10].*

Gemma reported that most of her parents fall into Category A [Parents in receipt of Social Welfare Payments in the Community Childcare Subvention Scheme], mostly lone parents, the highest payment. "So the government pays Euro 100- and the parent is to pay Euro 80-. But most of the parents would have difficult paying the Euro 80- so they go to their welfare officer, and the welfare might pay Euro 40- and the parent pays Euro 40-. But they are taking the community out of the community crèches, you know. So we are a community crèche, but I'm not, not with them fees, you know" [Interview, 18-02-10]. Her numbers have been dropping and she feels that the increase in fees have a lot to do with that.

She sees the new free preschool place initiative as an opportunity for her to take on more children for an afternoon session. She had tried this last year but feels that parents were very unsure of what the free preschool place meant, particularly in comparison to the subvention scheme, and it did not work out. She advised:

> *"Everybody was very badly informed about the whole free preschool place thing. So I went online last year and I got all the information. I did up a sign, that was the only time I've ever advertised, I found out all the information and advertised the free preschool places, we have a slot in the afternoon, and I thought if we could get children in there on the free preschool place, and I didn't have one reply! Not one person came forward. I downloaded information and I handed it out to parents. Now even our own parents thought they could apply for it, but they can't apply for it, because they are on the Subvention [the Community Childcare Subvention Scheme] and you can't have both. They are better off on the Subvention because they get the 100 Euro, whereas on the free preschool place they only get the 2 hours 15 minutes. But I had to explain this to them they thought they could get both. So I applied to join the scheme, I had to send out all my qualifications and that, but then when nobody applied I had to ring them and*

say I wouldn't go with it this year. I told them I don't even have one child to start on the scheme. I think it was because people were misinformed. I mean we had so little information on it, most people were confused, I had to look it all up myself to find out all about it. If we were confused, what hope had parents got. But I am hoping that there will be more information out there next time." [Interview, 18-02-10].

So her aim is to advertise the scheme again this year, and hopefully build up enrolment in the afternoons with this scheme.

When asked about the difficulties she is facing at the moment, however she noted one of the major difficulties she is facing is the constant break-ins to her office. Although the 'Green Preschool' is located in an Industrial Estate, Gemma's office is located in a flat in a block of flats currently involved in the regeneration process. She noted:

"Every week we are getting broken into, we are still waiting for Dublin City Council to come out to fix the grid. But they [the people who break in] have bolt cutters and angle grinders that they have robbed off the sites previously, and no matter what metal you seal with doors with they can cut through it. They are taking the computers, there is no cash in the office, it's the computers they want. They literally wreck the place and leave it with graffiti all over it." [Interview, 18-02-10].

This clearly has a major impact on Gemma's working life, she reported that she can leave nothing that might have confidential information, say for example information on accounts or payments, in the office as it could be taken. This means that she has to take a lot of sensitive information with her when she leaves the office, and has to work from home a lot.

"The paperwork can be an issue, but the office space is my main issue. I am running around with two big bags of stuff, stuff I need to work with but I can't leave it in the flat, paperwork you know. If I am in the crèche and I need something I have to run to the office for it, then I am working in the office, and they need me in the crèche for something. I would love to have an office in the crèche. If you are meeting parents aswell, it is very hard, there is nowhere to meet them and have a private talk, you have to go out to the hallway, which isn't really great." [Interview, 18-02-10].

There are clear links to what some of the other childcare workers have also reported in terms of some of the downsides of the current status of the regeneration process. Mentioned have been the issue of half empty blocks of flats, which can then be used by gangs at nights, and generally have been reported by practitioners involved in the study as not being safe places at night. Gemma reported:

"Last year, they wrote 'You've been robbed by your worst nightmare, and we'll be back, ha, ha.' There are awful gangs hanging round there. And some of them

have actually moved out to the new houses, but they are coming back. Dublin City Council moved our offices from an empty block of flats down to this block. They done three flats up for us, and they're wrecked already. We're only in them since May last year. The block is full of people, but we are getting broken into nearly every week, and either your computer is gone, or your network is down, your printer is gone" [Interview, 18-02-10].

With reference to the transition from preschool to primary, Gemma had initially reported that she had no contact with local schools at all. She advised that although she knew that some of the preschools who were located very close to local primary schools had limited contact, she had never been in contact with any local primary school. Although Gemma was involved in the development process of the Child Snapshot she didn't have any children making the transition to either of the participating schools this particular year, although she has had in the past and expects to have children attending these schools again in future years. However, she chose to go through the Child Snapshot form with parents of children leaving her preschool anyway as she reported that she saw a clear value in using it in this context. She advised that she was very keen to work with the Child Snapshot again:

> *"Definitely, you need it in every school. It would be really great to have it in every school. That would be fantastic, think what a difference it would make. Everyone working with the same thing. I would definitely be happy to continue with it. Not only just to pass to the teacher, but also working with the parent, you know. We talk to the parent, they have some idea then themselves of where the child is at." [Interview, 18-02-10].*

"Parents don't believe me when I say that the legal age a child has to go to school is actually six, they just don't believe me, they think that once a child hits their fourth birthday they should be in school. The parents just don't want their child to be the one going to school older than the other children."
[Preschool Manager, Focus Group 20-10-09]

6.3.5   Purple Preschool

Aideen is the Manager of the Purple Preschool. She started out in childcare by studying for an NNEB in England, she then returned to Ireland, where she was told that she was one of only three people in Ireland with that qualification at the time. She began work in a preschool in Henrietta Street in Dublin. She became the Deputy Manager of that setting. However, in 1982 she was headhunted to start up the Purple Preschool in Ballymun. That preschool was originally developed by a single parent group, and they had fought to develop a formal setting, in liaison with the Health Board. Aideen started up the

preschool in a prefab in the grounds of St. Michaels school, with an agreement that if they maintained the prefab they could have it rent free. Aideen worked at the time with three other teachers. They catered from babies up to after school children. The preschool was located there for about six years. Funding from the Health Board was quite irregular at the time, however she noted that they good times working there. She noted that they took the children on plenty of trips and hopefully gave the children some great memories:

> *"We went out somewhere nearly every Friday, and I always said what we are doing is giving them memories...They know what life could be or should be, they know they are valued, we all need that feeling, and more than anything else that is what we wanted to give them. Because you can take that through life with you, and you will pass it on. It does work. The feeling that you are cherished, that you have a worth."* [Interview 23-02-10]

Then the school decided to sell some of the school grounds to house a preschool, Aideen's preschool could not afford it, and instead the ground was secured by another preschool who are still located there to this date.

At that point Aideen negotiated a move to the grounds of St. Martin's school. The preschool moved there and Aideen noted that "from the minute we walked inside the door they made us welcome! We had two classrooms, a kitchen, and my first little office." [Interview 23-02-10]. At this point Aideen saw a need to put more of a structure on the setting, and changed to providing a part-time service for the children, mornings or afternoons, thus catering for all the children. Then in 1998 the school was being renovated, but this meant that they needed to take back the classrooms that the preschool was using. The preschool bought a piece of land at the side of the school that was owned by the Diocese, and build the current premises. The project was funded through a combination of funding from the Health Board, European Funding and Urban funding. They are now a Limited company. They are also grant aided by the Health Board.

Children are referred to the Preschool either by the Public Health Nurses, Social Workers, the Mater Child and Family Centre, St Michael's House, or parents can self-refer. There is a selection committee, and the Committee will accommodate the children from the Health Board referrals if possible. However Aideen noted a difficulty with this situation as she explained: "My whole contention with all this is, the very fact that you are in Ballymun, I feel that means you need a place. I feel sorry for the exceptionally good parents, because they are considered to be OK, so you are being penalized because you are a good parent. It's not right." [Interview 23-02-10]. Aideen noted that she is very involved in the selection process, and she explained that she needed to know about the children coming in every year to cope with their needs. She needs background information, so that she can deal with each child individually. She always conducts a parent interview with new parents in which she learns a not about the child. She also uses this opportunity to tell parents all about the service, and she signs a contract with parents at that point.

With regard to transition Aideen explained that the Purple Preschool takes a lot of time considering how to smooth each transition that the child encounters, whether during the day, settling children in to the service, or when making a move from room to room. The Preschool has a well structured process in place. As Aideen explained:

> *"We don't close in the summer, what we do is we let a few children go each week, some for school, and some moving up. It's nice because the old ones help the new ones settle in. So we would maybe take two children into each room each week, so a few more go and a few more come in. Even the move from one room up is a huge transition for some of the children. We start by sending them up on messages, then they might go up on a visit, then the teachers might swap, so they have the teacher they know go up with them while they get used to it, and they love that. Then she might say, well I'm going back down, you finish what your doing and I'll come back up for you in a few minutes. And the other teacher would say, don't worry I'll bring him back down, you know. So we really make the transition very gradually."* [Interview 23-02-10].

The preschool caters for 115 children, ranging from 2 years and 3 months through to school going age. They are spread across four rooms, Room 1 to Room 4. They organise the rooms by age and stage of development, moving children up through the rooms at their own pace, rather than at a certain age. The setting runs both morning and afternoon sessions.

Aideen herself studied at Dublin Institute of Technology and has a degree qualification in ECCE. She explained that as more students were coming out with degrees, she decided to return to study for the qualification herself. She explained that the degree qualification hadn't been available before that, but she noted a few practitioners in Managerial positions felt that they should also go back and do the degree. When asked about the curriculum in place at the preschool she explained:

> *"We have our own curriculum, anything that is going to work with the child we will use it. I think Siolta and Aistear really work for us, Aistear in fact is really us! We have our baseline work for Siolta almost done. I've spoken to a lot of staff from other Nurserys who say it is very repetitive, but it should be, a curriculum should be repetitive, if you look at comparative studies of curricula, they are repetitive. The same things will come up in terms of quality. We have our curriculum written out, but we need to try to find a way to break it down."* [Interview 23-02-10].

Aideen's curriculum document covers a wide range of areas: physical development, emotional development, science, pencil work, outdoor play, supporting parents, so many different areas and identifies links between the areas. She reported that all the staff had input into the document.

> *"I suppose we have been developing over the years, and that is who we are now. We know their needs, but we have been developing ourselves...We have looked at*

all kinds of things, first we looked at funding, then we looked at salaries…once we had the salaries up and going we could look at qualifications. Once we had the salary sorted we could say to staff with better qualifications we can offer you the correct salary. Now all through that, regardless, the quality was there, we were looking at that all the way through, it didn't come in afterwards, we were looking at it all the time." [Interview 23-02-10].

Aideen highlighted the same concern as the Principal of St Martin's School about a possible follow-on effect of the free preschool places:

"The age band for the preschool places does dictate when the child will go into the school. Six is the legal age, but by putting an age limit on it they are dictating when the child will start….It struck me very forcibly that there are children who will qualify in this first one who we won't want to go to school yet, we might not think they are ready, but the parents will feel that they are. There are one or two parents that I asked would they not think about waiting, but I don't know, and if they are over the age band you have to send a note stating why they weren't in school. So you have to justify why they were not ready for school, say if they have special needs or the schools policy whatever. So it is really saying that this is the right age for your child to do to school." [Interview 23-02-10].

She also linked this issue with the issue of professionalism within the preschool sector, in that if a child waits longer at preschool, the preschool practitioner is not considered to be among the list of professionals authorized to sign the form explaining why the child is availing of the preschool place later than the recommended age limit. The form must be signed by professionals such as primary school staff, or a speech and language therapist or a psychologist. Aideen explained her upset that she, with a degree level qualification in education and years of practical experience was not entitled to sign the form.

"We had a little guy here who presented at school last September, but he had no English at all, and the school asked us to take him, and we had to go over to the school to get a letter to say why he should not be in school, but should be here instead. We had to go over to the school, and get a letter to say why he should still qualify for it. We weren't 'qualified' to write the letter, it had to be the school or the speech and language therapist or whoever. So my degree and years of experience are not seen as professional enough!" [Interview 23-02-10].

She went on to explain her frustration at having to have a 'professional' endorse her letter explaining why a child was not ready to start school, and advised that the situation leaves her feeling very undermined.

6.3.6   Summary of Preschool Profiles

The preschools involved in the project were located in a variety of areas in Ballymun, mostly either within the blocks of flats themselves or in purpose built buildings beside the blocks of flats. All of the settings were funded in some form, for example through the

Health Services Executive or Dublin City Council. None were private commercially run preschools. Very often the parents were availing of the Community Childcare Subvention Scheme payments to support their childcare costs. In most of the preschools staff are supported by Community Employment workers, Jobs Initiative workers or FAS trainees.

The Managers of the preschools had all been working in Ballymun for long periods of time, many had commenced working in early education on a voluntary basis when their own children were young. This had led to an interest in working in the area, and they had gained their qualifications while working. The Managers were all members of the Ballymun Whitehall Area Partnership Childcare Providers Network and as such had already come together with the shared focus of supporting local children. They were also aware of the importance of facilitating successful transitions for children from local ECCE services to primary school.

The Managers all highlighted the need for greater communication with local primary schools, and all were keen to be involved in such communication, and to be involved in opportunities for collaborative work. During interviews they often spoke of the bank of knowledge that they had accumulated about children and their parents in the time that children had been attending their services and how they felt that this knowledge was lost once the children left their settings. All felt strongly that such valuable information should be passed with the child to the primary sector to support the transition from one setting to the other. Generally speaking, the practitioners felt that communication between preschool and primary sectors should be made not only with the Principal, but also importantly with the infant teacher herself.

Some themes highlighted in terms of issues and concerns of the preschool Managers were: a belief that children in disadvantaged areas start school too young, and a fear that the free preschool places might determine the age that parents sent their children to school; concerns about the professional standing of preschool practitioners as compared to their counterparts in primary settings; concerns about anti-social behaviour and the impact that this is having on children's lives in Ballymun; demands placed on the Managers of preschools in terms of mounting paperwork, and working on ensuring that individual settings are self-sustainable. However, there was also a general consensus among the group that preschool practitioners should welcome involvement in research and development activities over and above their role within the preschool thus supporting the children in their care, and they were happy to take the lead in the development and implementation of the Child Snapshot. There was also an enthusiasm among the group and a willingness to give the time and energy necessary to participation in activities which would support these children and their families.

6.4   Thematic Analysis of Primary School and Preschool Profiles

A thematic analysis of the profiles of both the schools and the preschools was conducted, and the following themes emerged. The first 5 themes were areas in which a commonality of approach and perspective was clear. These are:

Importance of the Transition from Preschool to Primary
Involvement in Transition Activities
Need for Communication and Coordination
The Age that Children Start School
Pressures of Time

Example of Good Practice: The SSCAN Approach to Supporting Peer Interactions

As part of the Continuing Professional Development aspect of the project, Sinead Kennedy, Speech and Language Therapist Manager with the Mater Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CMAHS) introduced the settings to a new approach to supporting peer interactions within the preschool settings. The practitioners then took this information back to their individual settings as part of the CPD actions, to put the approach into practice. This approach is recommended as an example of good practice.

The SSCAN approach to supporting peer interactions involves:
Small groups;
Setting up an appropriate activity;
Careful observation;
Adaptation of response;
Now extend the activity.

Sinead stressed the importance of helping the child who is not attending or participating in the activity become aware of what the activity has to offer, for example by making your language easy to understand, doing something interesting with the materials and waiting to see what the child does. The child who is attending but not participating should be encouraged to use the materials and get involved in the activity, for example by suggesting a role in the game or something she could do with the materials, commenting about something you know she likes or has done in a previous activity. The child who is attending and participating but not interacting needs to be encouraged to initiate either to the practitioner or the other children, for example by following the childs lead, imitating what she is doing with the materials and joining in the play using your own materials. When the child gets to the point that they are attending, participating and interaction then the practitioner should engage the child in extended interactions then continue to SSCAN the group, ensuring that one child does not control your attention in the group. Remember to always use sincere questions and comments to keep the child in the conversation.

Importance of the Transition from Preschool to Primary

Across the two sectors, whether school principals, infants teachers, preschool managers, or preschool practitioners an awareness of the importance of the transition from preschool to primary school was identified. During interviews and focus group discussions the importance of this transition for the individual child, both in terms of social and emotional development and school success was noted. It was clear that across both

sectors a growing awareness of this issue has been building over recent years, although it was also clear that the notion of the two sectors meeting to work together to support the children making the transition had not been put into practice in any real way. Both sectors noted that although in some cases there was communication between across the two educational settings by the Principal, or the Home School Liaison Teacher, the two groups of teachers (infants teachers and preschool practitioners) with the greatest awareness of the needs of the individual children have little or no coordination and communication.

Involvement in Transition Activities

Perhaps closely linked to the theme above was the recurring theme identified across both sectors that all participants in the project welcomed the opportunity to be involved in activities which would support the children making the transition between their settings. During interviews and focus group discussions the four different groups of staff (school principals, infants teachers, preschool managers and preschool practitioners) all spoke of their willingness to engage in the research project because of their belief that the transition across these two sectors is of specific importance to children. Both groups advised that they would support activities, both at policy level and in practical terms, that would smooth this transition for children. They advised that they felt this would help them support the children themselves in managing the transition.

Need for Communication and Coordination

Both groups spoke about the need for greater communication and coordination across the two sectors. Staff in both sectors spoke about their willingness to build relationships with the other sector, and both groups mentioned that they felt this was important specifically in terms of supporting children. Both sectors spoke of the rich knowledge base that had been developed at preschool level, and the importance of this valuable information being transferred across to the primary sector. All staff were keen to be involved in opportunities for collaborative work.

The Age that Children Start School

The age at which children in Ballymun start school was also highlighted as being a concern by both sectors. All participants spoke about the concern that parents in disadvantaged areas saw four years of age as the most appropriate age for children to start school. Financial considerations, and the fact that school opens for longer hours than sessional preschool settings, were identified as being an issue in this regard. Both sectors raised concerns that the new free preschool places might reinforce this belief in local parents [children can start the scheme at 3 years and 3 months, finishing by 4 years and 6 months]. There was a concern that this might be viewed by parents as being the Government 'recommendation' as to the age by which a child should have started school. Both sectors felt that many children in disadvantaged areas would benefit from starting school older than these age limits might encourage.

Pressures of Time

Both sectors reported increasing demands being placed on them in terms of managing their time. Within the primary sector it was noted that it was not possible to become involved in off-site activities during school hours due to lack of teaching cover. Principals also noted the increasing demands being place on teachers in terms of activities additional to the mainstream class work. Within the preschool sector there was more flexibility in terms of cover to engage in additional activities. However, both Managers and staff noted the additional demands being placed on their time in terms of paperwork.

Across the themes identified above a common perspective was clearly identified, however other themes also emerged during analysis, where participants from the two sectors had different perspectives. These three themes were:

Local Knowledge
Parental Partnership
Professional Standing

Local Knowledge

None of the infant teachers or school principals who took part in the project were originally from Ballymun. None of the infants teachers had ever visited the local preschools prior to this project, although the school principals did have relationships with the Managers of some of their feeder preschools. However, the Managers of the preschools had all been working in Ballymun for long periods of time, most were local to the area, as were most of the preschool staff. This difference was reflected in the concerns raised by many of the preschool practitioners about the anti-social behaviour that was taking place in Ballymun during the course of the project and the regeneration process. They clearly had a personal interest in these issues. This may also have had an impact on the concern expressed by the preschool practitioners for 'their' children. In many of the interviews and focus groups the preschool practitioners expressed a 'loyalty' to the children of Ballymun which was different in many ways to the educational concerns expressed by the teachers. This may also have some impact on the relationships that the preschool practitioners have with parents as outlined below.

Parental Partnership

Staff in both sectors spoke of the need to involve parents in their children's education, and both groups were aware of the need to support parents. Again both groups noted this as being of particular importance in terms of positive child outcomes. However, there was a difference in the levels of parental partnership noted within the two sectors. Although the schools were working very hard to involve parents in school life, and to engage them in classroom activities, the preschool sector had much more well developed strategies for parental partnership in place. This may partly be linked to the issue of trust raised by the primary sector as being very important in order to achieve any form of long term

involvement of parents. Indeed the difference between the relationship with parents at preschool and primary level was acknowledged by both sectors.

Professional Standing

At no stage during any part of the project did a member of the primary school staff express any concern about their professional standing. However this was an issue that was raised at various points by preschool practitioners and was also highlighted in some of the Preschool Manager interviews as being a concern. This was raised in terms of the professional status necessary to act as a signatory for child referral for services such as speech and language therapy. It was also noted in terms of acting as a signatory on the form outlining why a child might want to avail of the free preschool place at an age above the recommended age group. Once again, neither a preschool practitioner or manager is classified as a 'professional', as mentioned by Aideen [Manager Interview] this is very undermining.

7. Key Findings

7.1. Outcomes from Preschool and Primary School Partnership Process

The Partnership Process initiated during the project and worked on while developing the Child Snapshot form was evaluated through focus group meetings, interviews, and a formal evaluation sheet [See Appendix 7]. This evaluation sheet was sent to 12 preschool practitioners and 4 infants teachers, it was returned completed by 10 preschool practitioners and 3 infant teachers. Data from the formal evaluation is attached as Appendix 8. A summary is outlined in Table 1 below.

The quantitative data was overwhelmingly positive with 100% of the respondents reporting satisfaction with the process in terms of their understanding of the importance of the transition from preschool to primary school. All respondents felt that involvement in this project had helped them support the children in their care through the transition from preschool to Primary school. They were overwhelmingly positive about individual aspects of the project: meetings between preschool practitioners and infants teachers; considering and reaching agreement on the most important skills for children to have on making the transition to school; developing the Child Snapshot form; meetings with preschool practitioners/ infants teachers to hand over Snapshot forms and discuss children; co-ordination of the project; and visits by infants teachers to a sample of preschools.

In their Evaluation Sheet comments, the following are some of the points made:

> *The highlight of the transition project for me has been for the primary teacher and I to meet and to discuss where each child is at in their development, and the best way to approach any difficulties the child may experience when they move to primary [Preschool manager]*

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It was great to finally get to meet the preschool practitioners and visit the preschools to get an idea of what they do. [Infant Teacher]

A wonderful supportive opportunity for building up relationships, sharing etc, between preschool and primary [Preschool manager]

The project has helped the children through the transition, eg, developing the Snapshot, talks [between preschools practitioners and teachers], looking at different areas of development [Preschool manager]

	Yes	No
Do you feel that involvement in this project has given you a better understanding of the importance of the transition from preschool to primary school?	100%	0%
Do you feel that involvement in this project has helped you support the children in your care through the transition from preschool to Primary school?	100%	0%
Focus Group meetings between preschool practitioners and infants teachers in order to develop the Child Snapshot form were of benefit to me and the children in my care.	100%	0%
Meeting with preschool practitioners/ infants teachers to hand over Snapshot forms and discuss children were of benefit to me and the children in my care.	100%	0%

Table 1:   Summary of Project Evaluation Form Data
**   (N=13) 10 Preschool Practitioners and 3 Infant Teachers**

Generally speaking the respondents were very positive about the Child Snapshot, and about the opportunity to meet with the participants from the other sector.

Project participants, whether school principals, teachers, or preschool practitioners also all spoke very positively at focus groups and interviews about the benefits of the preschool and primary school partnership. During focus groups to evaluate the process, the benefits of the 'Child Snapshot' were spoken of in terms of it's use as a tool to transfer information on the child from preschool to primary school setting, however it was also noted that the process in itself had been very worthwhile in terms of relationship

building and developing a shared conceptual framework [See Section 5.4 for information on development process]. During these focus groups the discussion often returned to the importance of the two groups having worked together on developing the document. The importance of working on the language used, and reaching agreement on definitions for skills was also noted. It was agreed that meetings to discuss the skills had also been useful in terms of developing an understanding of each others sectors. In fact it was noted that many practitoners were surprised at the level of agreement among the two sectors in terms of the importance of the skills identified.

"Now I had known these names for years [preschool practitioners], for 17-18 years, but had never met them. It had never occurred to anyone to say why don't you all get together and meet, so what you have done is a fantastic thing. You have forged a link between two different stages in a childs development, and you have brought better understanding to the people who are working at both stage. It's huge. What you find is that you have people who are working just as hard for the development of the children in playschool, as we are ourselves here in primary school. We all want the same thing, and the better the understanding of that is important."
[School Principal, Interview, 18-02-10]

During the evaluation the issue of how to transfer the information included in the Child Snapshot was also discussed. There was agreement that passing of information at a face to face meeting had been an important part of the process. Some of the preschool managers also noted that although they may have met the school principals in the past, they did not know the infants teachers in the schools. As outlined in the example below, it was noted by some of the practitioners that this relationship with the teacher as compared to the Home School Liaison Teacher, or the school Principal is important. However from the perspective of the infants teachers, not only the relationship building, but also the information on children was found to be of great value. Some of the reasons for this are highlighted below:

"It was great in terms of support, just, you don't feel that you are on your own. You have this information before you start". [Infant Teacher, Focus Group, 15-10-09]

"And in terms of what worked with a particular child, whatever that has been used already that works with the individual child, that is important." [Infant Teacher, Focus Group, 15-10-09]

"I found the forms so useful. There was one child in particular, it was all ticked yes, and when the child came in, I couldn't see the child show those skills, but the teacher had written down little notes to explain. For example, notes about situations where the child would show the skills, or even situations where they might not show the skills, so that was just so helpful to me. The little notes personally did really help. [Infant Teacher, Focus Group, 20-10-09]

"It's all about early intervention, for each child to reach their own potential. For understanding them and accepting them for who they are. It helps you zone in on what you need to do for an individual child". [Infant Teacher, Focus Group, 15-10-09]

"Really it has been communication working at its best, and working at its best for everybody at both levels and the children themselves." [School Principal, Interview 18-02-10].

The preschool practitioners noted an additional benefit in going through the forms with the parents, as highlighted by the Manager below:

On Completing the Child Snapshot with Parents:
"And if they are completing it with us, who they have known for a long time, and built up a relationship with, again it is less threatening. I find even in the beginning when they come to the preschool, they're inclined to go back to being children themselves, they're nearly scared of the big bad teacher, you know what I mean. And they feel the same way then when they are facing the schools. They do go back to the bad experiences they have had at school themselves, and they don't realize it is different now. I find that they either come over so timid, that they are just afraid of saying anything to you, or else they go to the opposite way, and are nearly 'well you're not going to mess my child up like you messed me up'. You know what I mean, you get both ends of it. So I feel very strongly that the preschool setting where a relationship has already been established, can be used to make them see the school differently, to make them see that it is no longer like the school they left. I think this is a great opportunity to help to do this".
[Preschool Manager, Focus Group, 20-10-09]

There was general agreement that the form had been useful in highlighting the strengths of the children with parents, and also highlighting the areas where the child could benefit from some extra support before starting school. Many of the preschool practitioners

reported that parents often send their child to school aged 4 without really considering properly if the child has the necessary skills to succeed at school. As one Manager advised:

> *"The only children I have that are kept till they are five starting school are the children of childcare workers, they are the only ones, all the others are sent at four. And those children would have been more ready for school, but the childcare workers knew the children were better off in the crèche till they were five." [Preschool Manager, Focus Group, 20-10-09]*

However as another preschool practitioner advised the issue is that parents don't properly understand the skills that are necessary for their children to have to succeed at primary school:

> *"I do think that parents need to be better informed, they need to be more informed, the more they know the better, they just think that the child should go when they are four, the child is four and that it that, the more informed they are the more they will think it through" [Preschool Practitioner, Focus Group, 20-10-09]*

It was noted that the form was a useful tool in this regard, as it made parents consider the skills that the preschool practitioners and the infants teachers actually value:

> *"Even in terms of talking to the parents, it made them focus too on the things that we are looking at to see if the child is really ready for school. If you sit with the parent while doing it, it helps them to focus on what they [the children] are capable of. It might also be useful to go through the form with the parent very early, so that they can help the child in any areas that are 'still developing'." [Preschool Practitioner, Focus Group, 20-10-09]*

This general theme of the need for parents to better understand the skills that will support their children on arrival at school was one that was regularly discussed during focus group meetings. This concern fed into the development process of the Programme of Continuing Professional Development, and it was decided that it would be very useful as part of the Parental Engagement arm of the CPD to work as a team in developing a booklet to give to parents to educate them on the skills that will be of greatest benefit to their children, as discussed below.

7.2   Programme of Continuing Professional Development

A formal evaluation of the Programme of Continuing Professional Development was undertaken in the form of a survey undertaken after each module of the CPD [See Appendix 5 for the Schedule of the CPD, and Appendix 9 for the Evaluation Form]. The full CPD was also discussed at focus group level with the Managers of each of the settings. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with 100% of participants advising that their expectations were met by each module of the CPD. Each attendee was asked to

complete an evaluation form, data collated from the returned forms is attached as Appendix 10, please see below for a summary of the data (Table 2).

Module Title	Excellent	Very Good	Good	Poor
Parental Engagement Ms Anne Fitzpatrick Dublin Institute of Technology (n=8[5])	80%	20%	--	--
Oral Language Dr Maire MhicMhathuna Dublin Institute of Technology (n=8)	40%	60%	--	--
Children's Mental Health Speech and Language Issues Dr Jo-Anne Browne, Clinical Psychologist Ms Sinead Kennedy, SLT (n=12)	80%	10%	10%	--
Play as a Tool to Support Children During Transition Dr Carmel Brennan, IPPA (n=10)	80%	20%	--	--
Tips for Parents to Help Prepare Their Children for School Dr Mary O'Kane, Dublin Institute of Technology (n=10)	80%	20%	--	--
Parental Involvement at Primary School Ms Marie Comerford Home School Liaison Officer (n=10)	80%	20%	--	--
The Visual Arts as a Tool to Support Transition Aideen Jones, Art Tutor (n=8)	50%	50%	--	--
Developing Mathematical Concepts Through Play Dr Mary O'Kane Dublin Institute of Technology (n=8)	80%	20%	--	--
The *Síolta* Framework Joanne Waters, *Síolta* Coordinator, Ballymun Sandra O'Neill, *Síolta* Coordinator, Preparing for Life (n=8)	100%	--	--	--
The Most Important Skills for Children on Transition from Preschool to Primary School, Dr Mary O'Kane Dublin Institute of Technology (n=8)	80%	20%	--	--

Table 2:   Summary of the Evaluation of the Programme of Continuing Professional Development

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[5] Number of returned evaluation forms.

As noted above after the formal CPD each preschool and primary school was provided with a CPD Information Pack. These packs contained all the learning materials from each module of the CPD, but also contained the formal recommendations and action plans which were to be individually tailored to the needs of each individual setting. The findings from each of the separate modules however are outlined individually below, along with the individual recommendations formulated for each setting to action after the completion of the formal CPD programme.

On Parents Relationships with Primary Schools:

"They just see it as they went through school, they had to go through it, the block was always there…You bring your child to school, you just leave them at the door, you just collect them at the door, and that's just the way it is."
"They are afraid of the teachers. The teachers are just seen as being the boss, and you just do what they say."
[Preschool Practitioners, Focus Group, 09-11-09]

7.2.1   The Importance of Parental Involvement

The importance of the role of parents at preschool level, at primary level, and for children as they make the transition from preschool to primary was identified as being a key issue both in the literature review and in focus group discussions. Parents are a child's first educators and supporting parent's engagement with both the early years service and primary setting is an effective way to make a difference to the lives of children and families. In this module Anne Fitzpatrick from Dublin Institute of Technology explored ways of working to promote partnership with families. The session also focused on the most recent best practice guidelines in Ireland, Aistear (NCCA, 2009).

Formal Recommendations Arising From Session (These are to be actioned by the individual settings):

1.   Allocation of the role of Parent Partnership Officer to a member of staff. This person will co-ordinate any activities involving parents undertaken by the setting, and parents will be made aware that this person is their main point of contact for general issues.

2.   Parent Newsletter to be coordinated by the Parent Partnership Officer.

3. Parent Days when parents are invited into the setting to gain a greater understanding of the day that their children experience in the setting.

4. Inviting parents into settings to talk to children about things such as their job, a hobby, or a pet. It was felt that if the Parent Partnership Officer was building relationships with parents she might approach them to see if any parents would be willing to come in and speak to the children. This would show parents that their skills were valued by the preschool practitioners.

5. A 'Welcome Back' form for settings to circulate to parents after the summer break, or the Christmas holidays.

7.2.2 Developing Children's Oral Language

Oral language was agreed by the preschool practitioners and the infants teachers in the project as being of huge importance to children in Ballymun as they make the transition from preschool to primary school. Dr Maire Mhic Mhathuna from Dublin Institute of Technology ran this module centred around how preschools can help develop oral language in children, in preparation for the emphasis on oral language in the infants classes. Both Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and the primary school curriculum were considered as part of this module.

Formal Recommendations Arising From Session (These are to be actioned by the individual settings):

1. Consider the physical environment when encouraging children to engage in reading activities, and space in which to encourage the development of oral language.

2. Introduction of story sacks.

3. Conducting literacy walks. An additional activity here might be to take photographs of items found on the walk to be made into a book on return to the preschool.

4. Encouraging 'mark making' in the preschool setting, though the use of pads and pens in a contextually appropriate way for imaginary play

5. Work towards providing a literacy rich environment.

7.2.3. Children's Mental Health and Speech and Language Issues

This session was a collaboration between Dr Joanne Browne, a Clinical Psychologist, who works with the Mater Child and Family Services, and Sinead Kennedy, Speech and Language Therapist in Ballymun. Joanne conducted a session on how to support children

in areas relating to their mental health, while Sinead covered the area of children's speech and language development and difficulties.

Formal Recommendations Arising From Session (These are to be actioned by the individual settings):

1. Making known the 5 Key Steps for Emotion Coaching (Gottman, 1997) to the practitioners at each setting.

2. Putting into place the SSCAN technique for supporting peer interactions (see example of good practice) for supporting peer interactions.

3. The issue of self-care for practitioners themselves generated much discussion and the need for support and supervision sessions for practitioners was noted.

4. Finally, the issue of the professional standing of preschool practitioners and the contribution of this standing to stress was noted. Practitioners requested that this issue be highlighted in the final project report.

7.2.4. Play as a Tool to Support Children in their Preparation for Primary School

Dr Carmel Brennan from the IPPA ran this workshop on how we can use different play situations to help prepare children for the transition from preschool to primary school. The session worked on the ideas of how children make sense of school through play.

Formal Recommendations Arising From Session:

1. Links between this module, and the CPD modules on oral language and developing mathematical concepts were noted, and it was felt that the recommendations outlined in the Oral Language and Developing Mathematical Concepts sessions covered some of the recommendations from this session also.

2. Engaging in role play school situations was noted as being an excellent way for children to build realistic expectations of school while also developing a positive viewpoint towards the primary setting.

3. Many participants noted an interest in developing the concept of play as a learning tool to a greater extent in the future.

"The children do ask us if they can go to the toilet, some of the new children will ask why they have to ask us, and we will explain that we just have to know where they are, otherwise we would be looking for them, they know that we just want to keep them safe…An explanation makes all the difference, rather than just telling them what to do. An explanation is worth so much more than just an order. So the child understands, and you are keeping them safe…
So telling them all about big school, you need to explain both what they have to do and why they have to do it. They need to know the why of why they have to follow the rules, then it will make sense to them."

[Preschool Practitioner, Focus Group, 12-11-09]

7.2.5. Developing the Skills for School Success

Dr Mary O'Kane facilitated this module on the most important skills for children to possess starting school and why these are important for children. These were: independence, social skills, self-esteem, language and communication skills, and the ability to concentrate and listen for short periods of time. The practitioners agreed that parents in their settings often focus on age and academic skills only when preparing their children for school. The group considered how to support parents in supporting their children in this way. They discussed the need to make parents aware that they could help prepare their children by helping to develop these skills in very simple ways. It was agreed that in this way, the transition to school could in itself be used as a tool to build relationships with parents, and to help them support their children in developing these important skills.

This was one of two modules of the CPD[6] which produced a concrete outcome in terms of a practical tool that the practitioners could work with to support the children in their care. In this module the group began work on developing a 'Tips for Parents' Handout, which would be circulated by all preschools taking part in the project to parents with children starting school.   The groups decided to work on developing advice for parents under the following headings:

> **Independence Skills**: In practical terms, can the child put on and take off their coat themselves? Are they confident in using the bathroom? Can they open and close their schoolbag and lunchbox? Can they easily handle their lunch?

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[6] The Developing Mathematical Concepts Module also produced a practical output for use by preschool practitioners, as outlined below.

Social Skills: Can the child get on with other children? Can they play and mix well with their peers? Do they share? Interact well with others? Take turns? Have a positive attitude towards other children and their teacher?

Self Esteem: Give the child jobs to do around the house that can help develop both their independence and confidence in their own abilities. Praise their good work. Encourage them in tasks. Speak positively. Show an active interest in their activities and achievements. Let them work at their own pace, encourage rather than rush them. Don't criticise your child's efforts.

Language and Communication Skills: Try to schedule daily reading sessions with your child. Encourage them to take part in the process by turning pages for you, or by asking them questions about what you are reading. Encourage them to think up their own ending to a book, or to re-tell the story to you in their own words.

Concentration and Listening Skills: Reading sessions, as noted above, help the child to develop linguistically, but they also help with concentration skills. Board games are also useful in this regard. They introduce children to the skills of turn taking, and waiting their turn. Encourage the child to finish jigsaws, help and support them, and their concentration span will develop.

Having agreed that these were the most important areas to cover, the group worked on developing a handout for parents which covered these areas but was also written in very parent friendly language. The handout would also need to be suitable for parents who might have some literacy issues themselves. So time was taken to ensure that the language was clear and concise.

It was agreed that the lead researcher and a sub-group of practitioners in tandem with a Home School Liaison Teacher would continue work on developing a leaflet for parents after the CPD. This would need to be written in parent friendly language, to be circulated by preschool practitioners to parents of children starting school prior to them leaving preschool. During December 2009 and January 2010 the lead researcher developed a leaflet, which was circulated to all members of the sub-group for input. The leaflet was formally agreed, and printed. The leaflet was circulated to all preschools in February 2010 with a view to preschool practitioners handing it out to parents in April 2010. [See Appendix 11 for the Final Tips for Parents Booklet].

Formal Recommendations Arising From Session:

1. In April 2010 Preschool practitioners will hand out the 'Tips for Parents' Booklet to parents with children starting school in September 2010. They will discuss the skill sets in the Booklet with the parents in terms of the most important skills for children to possess to smooth their transition to primary school. The preschool practitioners will continue to use the Booklet over the

coming years to support their parents in making decisions about whether their child is ready for school, and in terms of developing these skills in children. This will help the parents to view the decision about whether their child is ready for school in terms of skills rather than age. In this way, the transition to school will be used as a tool to build relationships with parents, and to help them support their children in developing these important skills.

2. It is recommended that formal assessment should take place to evaluate the impact of the Tips for Parents booklet both from the perspective of parents and preschool practitioners.

Example of Good Practice: Preschool Involvement at Primary Level

The new Principal at St Michael's school is working hard to build relationships with her feeder preschools. She has invited children in to Open Days at the school, however she has found that more innovative ideas for involving preschool children and staff in the life of the primary school to be more successful. During the course of the project two particular invitations made to the preschool practitioners and their children were noted by the practitioners as being particularly exciting for the children.

The first of these was when the children were invited into the school to see some live chickens that the Principal had arranged to visit the school with their owners. The preschool practitioners noted that this was a very enjoyable learning experience for the children, and also introduced them to the school environment in a very age-appropriate way. Children also mentioned this trip during the child discussion groups, and mentioned meeting older children that they knew previously from the preschool during this trip. Thus the links between the preschool and the primary school were firmly established for the children.

The second trip was arranged when a puppet show was visiting the school. Again the local feeder preschools were invited to view the puppet show along with the infants classes. The children again had the opportunity to visit the primary school during a very enjoyable age-appropriate activity, while being exposed to life at primary school in a very positive light. Again the children had the opportunity to meet their ex-preschool colleagues during the visit, while also meeting the school staff, and becoming familiar with the physical environment of the primary school.

7.2.6. Developing Mathematical Concepts through Play

Dr Mary O'Kane ran this module on how to prepare children for the primary school curriculum with a focus on developing mathematical concepts through play. During discussion groups held as part of this project, infants teachers and principals had raised the issue of the need for children in Ballymun to have a greater awareness of both

mathematical concepts and mathematical vocabulary. Participants reviewed the current literature on the importance of enhancing children's natural interest in maths while building on their own experience and knowledge and integrating maths with other activities and other activities with maths. It was agreed that it was possible to actively introduce mathematical concepts, methods and language through a range of age-appropriate play based experiences.

The group discussed the sort of mathematics instruction that is appropriate at preschool level. It was agreed that play is the best way for children to learn about maths at this level. The practitioners were encouraged to build on everyday experiences, and integrate conversation about maths into these experiences. This can be done quite easily in the preschool classroom, for example:

- Counting: How many are in class today? How many boys? How many girls? How many cups do we need for lunch?
- Measurement: How tall are we? Who is the tallest? Who is the smallest? How far can my paper aeroplane fly? How far can I throw the ball? How tall has my flower grown?
- Shape: How many different shapes can we see in the room? How many circles? How many triangles? Who has a circle on their clothes? Is anyone wearing a rectangle?

Practitioners were encouraged to use the language of maths, as above, which will help the children to build their mathematical vocabulary. The concept of developing a programme of games and art activities which would support the preschool practitioners in connecting mathematical ideas was proposed. The Lead Researcher conducted some desk research into various activities and games that could be used to support children in learning mathematical concepts and developing the language of maths. Participants in the module worked with these resources to develop a programme of preschool games to develop mathematical concepts and vocabulary in children. The group broke into sub-groups each of which reviewed a selection of the resources provided by the lead researcher. Each sub-group rated the activities in terms of their suitability for the children in their care. The sub-groups vetted games and activities recommended for developing concepts such as shape, colour, size, weight, and general mathematical vocabulary. They then reported back on each activity, explaining why this activity was either suitable or unsuitable for inclusion in the programme. The sub-groups explained each activity to the main group, while also explaining any adaptations to the method that they considered necessary, they also discussed any possible methods for extending the learning in each game or activity, or links that could be made to other learning areas.

It was agreed that the lead researcher and a sub-group of practitioners would continue work on developing the programme of mathematical concepts after the CPD. Following on from the review process outlined above, during December 2009 and January 2010 the lead researcher wrote up the final pack of games and activities which was circulated to all members of the sub-group for comment. Following comments, the information was formally agreed. The programme of games and activities was circulated to all preschools

in February 2010 with a view to preschool practitioners commencing using the programme immediately. A copy of the programme will be held in the formal CPD Folder in each setting so that practitioners can make use of it on an ongoing basis. [See Appendix 12 for a sample of games and activities from the developing mathematical concepts programme].

Formal Recommendations Arising From Session:

1. The preschool practitioners will continue to work with the programme of games activities was developed. These games were chosen as being the most useful to introduce maths in a concrete way, while also making this fun for the children. But the programme is not an exhaustive list, it is intended to be a starting point to develop ideas for working with children in the area of developing their mathematical concepts and language.

2. It is recommended that some form of formal assessment should take place to evaluate the impact of the programme.

7.2.7. Preparation for Primary School Curriculum: Supporting Children through Art

Art Tutor Aideen Jones ran this session on how we might work with children though art to prepare them for the transition to primary school. The module looked at how art can be used to prepare the children for 'big school', their expectations and new roles, and also in terms of developing their self esteem through art to help them in this transition.

The role of the preschool practitioner in terms of allowing the child to communicate their concerns about starting school was highlighted. Art activities were discussed in terms of how they can be used as a tool with which to support such communication, indeed it was noted that such art activities could be usefully used as a follow-on to circle time discussions which practitioners currently engage in. Aideen then outlined how art activities can be used to allow children to put their feelings into words when they do not have the vocabulary to do this. She discussed how to use art activities to develop a sense of belonging and identity in the preschool, which the child then can take on to their school experience. She also noted that quiet or insecure children can particularly gain from developing this sense of identity, and art activities can often allow the time and space for such children to develop these skills through sharing of information. She reminded practitioners that talking about the important things in the child's life is the most useful place to start developing such communication. Although Aideen acknowledged that often art work is more formally structured at primary level, however she advised that the skills and qualities that are developed through art in the preschool setting are ones which stay with the child for life.

The module also focused on the concept of a 'Personal Portfolio' of artwork and photographs for children to take with them to primary school. It was suggested that such a portfolio could be driven by the child, and who takes ownership of it. By keeping the

portfolio focused on the interests and important things in the child's life, it becomes something that they will be happy to take to their new teacher and discuss at primary level. In this way the Personal Portfolio was suggested to be a useful tool to support children in finding their sense of identity in the primary classroom.

Formal Recommendations for Individual Settings Arising From Session:

1. Information about supporting children's social and emotional development through art should be brought back to each individual setting to be formally actioned.

2. It was decided that recommendations with regard to the Personal Portfolio needed to be investigated further, and discussed at primary level, before implementation.

7.2.8.   Síolta the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education.

Joanne Waters, Early Years Quality Coordinator (Barnardos & youngballymun) and Sandra O'Neill, Síolta Coordinator (Preparing for Life) facilitated this workshop which specifically focused on Standard 13 of Síolta: Transitions. Joanne reassured practitioners that the Framework was not designed to be a curriculum (although it can be used alongside any early years curriculum) or an inspection tool, the aim is not about identifying weaknesses but about building on strengths. She also located the framework in terms of research into transitions. Practitioners broke into groups to reflect on each of the four Síolta Transitions components in terms of the transition from home to preschool, and preschool to primary school. Participants discussed how their settings met each component.

It was agreed that each setting needed to properly consider all the information on an individual basis, however recommendations agreed as a group were circulated to each individual setting for action (within the CPD Pack). The general recommendations which is was felt were applicable to every setting under each of the four components considered were as follows:

Component 13.1 Smooth transitions are facilitated and promoted through the provision of consistent key relationships within the setting:
-       Preschool practitioner visits to primary schools
-       Preschool practitioner attendance at school Open Days
-       Sharing of information via the Child Snapshot
-       Story Sack training initiated by the Childcare Officer of Ballymun Partnership

Component 13.2: The setting promotes smooth transitions by ensuring there is appropriate liaison within the setting and between settings;
-       Preschool practitioner meetings with primary school teachers
-       Preschool practitioner attendance at school 'Welcome Ceremonies' for infants
-       Inviting teachers and school principals to visit preschools

- Sharing of information via the Child Snapshot form

Component 13.3: Parents, children and relevant professionals are consulted and involved in ensuring that transitions are made as smooth as possible for children;
- Important to pass preschool practitioners/parents knowledge about children to schools
- For children with any additional needs this is even more important
- Techniques used successfully with children at home/preschool should be passed on to the primary sector
- Important for the children to know that their preschool teacher / infants teacher / parents have a mutual respect for each other.
- Finally, as with the other components it was agreed that mutual visits were very important.

Component 13.4: The setting has written records of all policies, procedures and actions regarding transitions within the setting, and makes them available to all stakeholders.
- All settings to work on exploring and discussing a policy for transition.

7.3   Questionnaire Findings

As outlined above in Section 5.3 the questionnaire was sent to 304 Junior Infants teachers in Urban Band 1 DEIS schools. The questionnaire resulted in response rate of 68% (207 questionnaires). The questionnaire was designed to allow for analysis using SPSS [Statistical Package for the Social Sciences]. Open ended questions were also included to provide a qualitative aspect to the findings. The data from these questions was used to identify a number of themes of relevance to the study.

The first section of the questionnaire focused on communication and consistency between preschool practitioners and junior infants teachers. Findings were as follows:

90% of the teachers were in agreement that there should be greater communication between Junior Infants teachers and preschool practitioners to help smooth the transition for children to school. However, when asked if there should be greater consistency between the curriculum at preschool level and junior infants level to help smooth the transition for children to school, agreement was slightly lower at 79%.

85% were in agreement that it would be helpful for preschool practitioners to have a greater understanding of life in the junior infants classroom in order to help smooth the transition to school for children in their care. The same number were in agreement that in reverse, a greater understanding by junior infants teachers of life in preschools would be helpful in smoothing the transition for children to school.

The teachers were asked if they believed they have information on how to support children making this transition which would be useful to pass to preschool practitioners.

The teachers were less decisive on this issue, with 69% responding yes, 18% were unsure, while 11% did not believe they had specific information to pass on.

They were then asked if they believe that their local preschool practitioners have information about how to support children making this transition that would be useful to them. 60% believed this to be the case, however, only 6% believed that this was definitely not the case. 31% reported that they did not know if preschool practitioners had such information, which shows a clear lack of understanding of the preschool sector, and would support their responses above that they would value greater communication.

Indeed comments later in the questionnaire highlighted the lack of communication, for example:

> *"Apart from a letter from Barnardos re: a Traveller child I have never communicated with a preschool" (080b)*

> *"I would like to see a lot more communication happen. To date I have never spoken with any of the preschool teachers in the area" (113e)*

The teachers were then asked if they had any comments to make specifically with regard to communication between primary schools and preschools, as shown in Table 3, 86% had specific comments to make.

The majority of these centred around three main areas: (28%) spoke about the fact that communication between the two sectors is little or non-existent at present. Many more teachers (22%) advised that they would welcome communication as it would be beneficial for all parties, children, parents, preschool practitioners and teachers themselves. Another 19% spoke about the value of Early Start preschools, which they reported present in their school, and highlighted the value of this approach. These responses are summarised by the views of the following teachers:

> *"In our school we get verbal reports on all children coming from our Early Start preschool into Junior Infants. However, nothing is ever sent regarding children from other preschools. That is why I feel a standard report should be filled in for <u>every</u> child from <u>every</u> preschool." (020d)*

> *"Early Start staff exchange profiles and vital information relating to each child's strengths and weaknesses" (168).*

These teachers drew clear links between the Early Start programme and communication and consistency across sectors. However, there is no standardised approach among the early start settings and the infants classes they feed in to.

The rest of the teachers addressed a wide range of issues with regard to communication, as outlined below in Table 3.

Comment	Frequency N=207	% of Total Replies
Communication practically non-existent	57	28%
Communication is beneficial for all parties	45	22%
Early Start classes result in better communication	39	19%
Attempts some form of communication	13	6%
Too many feeder preschools to communicate with	7	3%
No need to communicate other than additional needs	3	1.5%
Role of Home School Liaison Teacher NB	3	1.5%
There is a need for greater consistency	2	1%
Other varied responses	5	2%
Missing	33	16%

Table 3: **Teacher Comments with Regard to Communication Between Preschool and Primary Schools.**

The teachers were then asked if they felt it would be useful to have specific information on children transferred from preschool to primary school? 91% felt that this information would be useful. The teachers were asked to expand on this, and to explain why in their opinion the transfer of such information would, or would not, be useful. Of the 187 teachers who responded, 66% spoke about the benefits in terms of having a greater understanding of children and their families. These teachers highlighted that these benefits were not only for teaching staff, but important for the children and parents themselves, as the following examples highlight:

> *"It is vital, as it is very important that the Junior Infant Teacher has as much information regarding the child's needs, strengths, background and family situation to support the child as best she can during this transition" (012)*

> *"Background knowledge means that teachers can be prepared / create a routine / independent behaviour strategies that have worked for child who may have had difficulties in preschool…[information] would help me to prepare for and settle children in September, be aware of any potential difficulties identified by preschool staff" (010b)*

The next most popular response (18% of teachers) focused specifically on children with special needs or difficulties, which they felt the transfer of information, would benefit. Again many of these mentioned the benefits both for the school and the children themselves, in terms of early access to information on difficulties the child might be experiencing, both for the benefit of the child themselves and for the other children in terms of class compilation.

The teachers were then asked if there were any specific issues which would discourage them from communicating with preschool practitioners. 187 teachers replied to the question, with the majority (60%) advising that there were no specific issues which would discourage them from communication. The focus of the questionnaire then changed to issues which might cause difficulties for teachers of junior infants classes in terms of developing communication with their local feeder preschools. These were issues identified by Primary School Principals during the initial identification of primary schools willing to take part in the project [Section 5.3]. See Table 4 below.

Barriers to Communication with Preschools (n=207)	Missing Data	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Lack of Time is a Barrier	2% missing	51%	16%	14%	8%	10%
Lack of Support (Teaching cover) is a Barrier	2% Missing	50%	18%	15%	6%	9%
Lack of Training in Preschool Sector is a Barrier	2% Missing	10%	10%	25%	16%	37%
I Would Need for Clear Value in Communication	2% Missing	25%	16%	19%	13%	25%
Overcommitted in Teaching Role which Impacts on Ability to take on Additional Tasks	2% Missing	8%	8%	27%	19%	35%

Table 4:   Barriers to Communication with Preschools[7].

The main area in which the teachers were in agreement was the issue of lack of time and lack of cover being barriers to their being able to communicate and build relationships with preschool practitioners, with 68% and 67% respectively in agreement that these two would cause them difficulties in terms of developing communication.

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[7] Data have been rounded up/down and therefore may not total exactly 100%

In contrast they were not in agreement that a lack of training in the preschool sector would cause them difficulties in communicating with preschools, with 53% disagreeing with this statement, while a further 25% neither agreed or disagreed, only 20% reported this issue as being a difficulty for them. The teachers also generally disagreed (54%) with the statement that they were overcommitted in their teaching role and therefore could not commit to additional tasks intended to build relationships with preschool providers, while a further 27% neither agreed or disagreed, only 16% reported being overcommitted and therefore unable to take on additional tasks. Findings with regard to the statement that teachers would need to see some clear value our outcome to encourage them to communicate with local preschools were widely spread, as shown in Table 4 above, and of no statistical significance.

Following on from this question the teachers were asked for specific comments on the difficulties that might prevent communications with their local preschools. 60% of teachers made specific comments in this regard. 28% of these were concerned with issues of lack of time and lack of cover to facilitate such communication, as explained in the following comments:

> *"Time. Junior Infants are very demanding both in school when you teach them and when they're gone, they need so much organisation and preparatory work, more than any other class" (013d)*

> *"If I would leave my class with covered supervision to meet for a half day with preschool teachers to discuss children who are being passed on – this would be INVALUABLE" (006a)*

Although, many teachers identified time as an issue, but did however feel that they would be happy to meet after school hours.

> *"Perhaps meetings could be set up after school. If the information I would receive would help me in my teaching I would happily give up my time to meet preschool practitioners" (010c)*

> *"Meetings could easily take place during the hour after children go home" (031b)*

> *"Infant teachers could use their planning time of the last hour every day when the infants go home to meet with the preschool providers, especially those very local to the school. Even if this only took place for a few days during the school year" (061)*

Indeed time spent actively training with preschool providers was also highlighted by some as being worthwhile:

> *"Perhaps a joint in-service type day for preschool and primary teachers on the importance of play in early education and the different types of play" (060).*

"Perhaps training could be implemented during the school day, perhaps during the last hour of the day when the junior infant children go home?" (064a)

The teachers were then asked if there was anything that would actively encourage them to become more involved in initiatives fostering communication with local preschools. 176 teachers replied. 25% of these reported that the primary thing that would encourage them to become involved in communication with the preschool sector was a belief that it would support the children in their care, and be of benefit to these children, and many of these mentioned the benefits for families also. A further 23% reported that greater time, or indeed just the opportunity being available for communication would encourage them. This was closely linked to the next most popular response, by 18%, who reported that some form of coordination and support in terms of organising opportunities for communication, or initiatives to support communication would greatly encourage them to become involved.

At the end of the questionnaire the teachers were asked if they had any further comments they would like to make about the process of transition from preschool to primary school. Responses were spread over a very wide number of areas, the areas in which were most consistently mentioned were the importance of communication and transfer of information between the two educational sectors (15%) with most of this group reporting that they were very much in favour of such communication. Other areas which were mentioned in this section were: the benefits of preschool experience; the belief that better preparation for primary education was necessary; and variations between levels of professionalism in preschools.

On the Child Snapshot form:

"It's all about early intervention, for each child to reach their own potential. For understanding them and accepting them for who they are. It helps you zone in on what you need to do for an individual child".
"And in terms of what worked with a particular child, whatever that has been used already that works with the individual child, that is important."

[Infants Teachers, Focus Group, 15-10-09]

7.4   General Outcomes

Over and above the outcomes outlined above, there were some additional themes which arose during analysis of data from focus group meetings as part of the project, which it is

important to mention. The first two themes relate to how preschool practitioners are viewed by society and the professionalism of the sector. These issues are closely linked and tied in to the stresses that the sector is feeling generally speaking, as outlined both by Managers in focus groups working on the Child Snapshot, and also by Practitioners during general focus groups. These themes are discussed below under two headings: Self-care for Preschool Practitioners, and Professionalism in the Preschool Sector. A third theme which was identified during the course of the project is the issue of training and staff development, a factor which was noted by both the preschool and the primary sector. These three additional themes are discussed below under the following headings:

       7.4.1.   Self-care for Preschool Practitioners
       7.4.2.   Professionalism in the Preschool Sector
       7.4.3.   Time for Staff Training and Development

7.4.1   Self-care for Preschool Practitioners:

The issue of self-care for preschool practitioners generated much discussion during the course of the project. There was a general feeling that such support was very much needed and that a little time for 'supervision' when staff members are given time for a one-to-one discussion just to air their problems, discuss the stresses of the week, and particularly their concerns for specific children. As one practitioner highlighted when talking about how stressful it is to refer a child, for either speech and language assessment or psychological assessment, then face up to a year waiting on a waitlist:

> *"You are left trying to do more in your own setting. So you are left in your room, trying to do the best for that little girl or little fella, trying to do the best you can for them. You are saying to the other staff, will you do that for me, and I will try to spend some time with them. You are trying to think, what can I do while they are waiting? You are going to sleep at night and it's running around in your brain. What can I do?"*
> *[Preschool Practitioner, Focus Group, 11-11-09]*

This is a good example of why practitioners need to take care of their own mental health, and talking through the issues arising in the setting was agreed to be important. It was agreed that both Managers and Staff need some time out, to talk though the issues that they are facing in their role. The issue of staff cover (which also came up during the CPD as an issue and is mentioned again below) is one that was linked by some practitioners to the stress levels they are facing as the following practitioner highlights:

> *"In the setting where I work, now we're not under pressure all the time, we do have a laugh and that. But the face that's on if someone rings in sick, and you are under such pressure, you never believe they are sick, there's no empathy for anyone. On a Monday morning, you are thinking she's probably at home watching Jeremy Kyle! [laughter] But this is the attitude when you are under real pressure, when someone phones in sick, you just don't believe it."*
> *[Preschool Practitioner, Focus Group, 11-11-09]*

Another Manager agreed:

> *"I know a lot of the girls are very dedicated, I will crawl in because I am dedicated. But that is the reason that I just feel sick when I arrive in at 8 on a Monday morning and at 10 past eight or whatever the phone goes, and I think straight away, oh no, and I don't want to answer it. You're thinking who's not coming in today?"*
> *[Preschool Manager, Focus Group, 11-11-09]*

In fact on reflection the Managers highlighted their role as Manager, and some of what that role involves, as being a cause of much of their stress:

> *"The paperwork is huge, even in the rooms now the amount of paperwork is huge. I do say I would prefer to be back on the floor. The managers job is just too stressful, it is better being on the floor with the children."*
> *[Preschool Manager, Focus Group, 11-11-09]*

> *"I swear I'm the manager, but I'm also the cleaner. I am very hands on, but I do everything, manager, cleaner, shopper, everything. It is go, go, go. I sometimes feel that I am so burnt out with that, you know. But then I go home on a Friday, have a good cry, pick myself back up, and I am back to work on Monday. But you know what would be lovely, to come up to a room for maybe half a hour, have music playing and maybe just lie on the floor. But you would have to do it after hours and after hours you just want to go the hell home!"*
> *[Preschool Manager, Focus Group, 11-11-09]*

This is clearly an issue that needs to be addressed, Management and staff that are reporting such stress levels cannot be in a position to be generating a positive learning environment for the children in their care, and if they are, at what cost to their own health?

7.4.2   Professionalism in the Preschool Sector

Concerns were also expressed during the evaluation of the CPD, and during focus groups that the primary sector needs to better understand and recognise the professionalism within the preschool sector. Some of the preschool practitioners reported that they felt that at times both parents and teachers saw them as a 'babysitting service'. The visits made by the primary school teachers to some of the preschools to learn about the preschool environment proved very successful in this regard, as noted in the evaluation comments by primary teachers. The teachers responded very positively to the visits, often reporting that they had no idea that their local preschools were such well co-ordinated and well organised learning environments. Every visit had a positive response, and again these visits were considered to be an integral part of developing an understanding of the preschool section.

"I also feel that the teachers sometimes feel we are babysitters, and I think it is important that teachers realise we are not babysitters, we are professional people, and we are trained to work with this age group. The children who leave the nursery have been given time to develop their own gifts and talents, and I think that should be recognised when they go to the primary school. I think the teachers should begin where we have left off. The children when they leave here are not just going in to learn for the first time."
[Preschool Manager Interview, 22-4-09]

However, this concern about professionalism was not only limited to primary school teachers, the general issue involved the respect shown generally speaking to childcare practitioners in terms of their professional standing. It was noted that when making referrals to the Early Intervention Team two professionals have to authorize the referral. Early Childhood Workers are not considered to be professionals and this is a situation which causes a huge amount of resentment, when they are the staff that often have recognised the difficulty, and are working with the child trying to support him and ensure that his needs are met. This issue is highlighted by the two practitioners below:
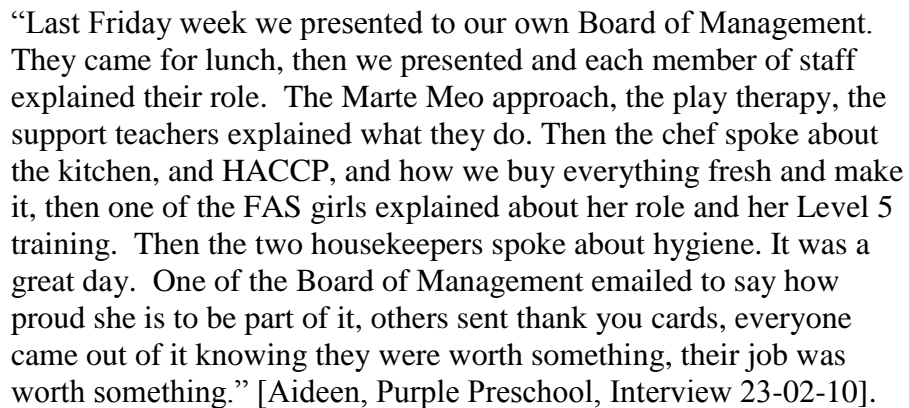
"You are working with the child 24:7 and are very aware of his needs. You are very aware of his developmental level, and you are aware that you are not viewed as a professional. You have become aware of a difficulty, you have recognised this, you have tried to support him, but you are not recognised as a professional. The Early Intervention Team will not recognise you as a professional, so you have to get a GP or a public health nurse or whoever to sign the form. You may have worked with a parent for some time, gained their trust, spoken about the problem and supported them as they are dealing with it, then you have to send them off to someone else. You have them on board, often after a long period of discussion, because very often they are in denial, you have them on board, take out the referral form, fill it in, and then tell them that they have to go down to the GP. And the GP might not even know the child, might know nothing about the problem, but you have to send them down." [Preschool   Practitioner,   Focus Group, 11-11-09]

"The parent might take a lot of time to come round to the idea that there is a problem. They might say that they had noticed something, but then friends or what ever have told them not to worry, they don't really want to face that there is something wrong with the child. You go through it all with them, then you have to say to them, that you are not allowed to sign the form, they have to go to someone else and start the whole thing all over again." [Preschool Practitioner, Focus Group, 11-11-09]

It was acknowledged that such frustrations impact on the stress levels felt above. It was requested by practitioners and managers that this issue be highlighted in the final project report.

7.4.3.   Time for Staff Training / Development

Another issue that arose during the course of the CPD was the issue of the time and expense involved in staff training. This is an issue that has been identified in research where ECCE employers have a difficulty in allowing staff to attend training, both for reasons of difficulty with cover for the children, and with a lack of funding to arrange staff to cover for those on training courses (Centre for Social and Economic Inclusion, 2006). The Preschool Managers in the project also highlighted this as being an issue. They made a concerted effort during the course of this project to allow time to take part in the research, they also made an effort to arrange staff cover to allow either themselves or their practitioners to take part in the Programme of Continuing Professional Development. However, it was agreed that an intensive two week training programme as was the case in this pilot would not be easy for many preschools to allow staff attend in terms of providing cover. The Managers advised that due to work commitments, due to staff shortages, staff illness requiring cover etc, it can be very difficult to commit to such a programme. For staff to engage in such training we need to become more inventive about the roll-out of such programmes.

"Last Friday week we presented to our own Board of Management. They came for lunch, then we presented and each member of staff explained their role. The Marte Meo approach, the play therapy, the support teachers explained what they do. Then the chef spoke about the kitchen, and HACCP, and how we buy everything fresh and make it, then one of the FAS girls explained about her role and her Level 5 training. Then the two housekeepers spoke about hygiene. It was a great day. One of the Board of Management emailed to say how proud she is to be part of it, others sent thank you cards, everyone came out of it knowing they were worth something, their job was worth something." [Aideen, Purple Preschool, Interview 23-02-10].

The School Principals involved in the project also noted an issue with lack of cover to allow staff to attend offsite training. From the offset the Principals advised that the only time available for their staff to become involved in the research project was after school hours, with the hour between the infants pupils leaving and school close as being the most convenient time for teachers to be involved.

7.5   Child Discussion Group Findings

A total of 13 child discussion groups were held involving a total of 60 children, in 2 preschools and 2 infants classes.

Generally speaking the children in the preschool settings were confidently able to give details of their lives at preschool. When asked what they did at preschool, they could cheerfully outline a range of activities, mostly centering around play. Usually a barrage of answers were given to this question, often mentioning colouring, painting, and playdough; playing in the home corner, with cars, and with other materials. The library was often mentioned, and the children had no difficulty in listing off the numerous toys they played with.   They also took the opportunity to describe various activities as highlighted in the following exchange:

Janice:	And you stick your hands on the paper
Aideen:	You put the paint on your hands, and stick your hands on the paper, ye stick your hands on the paper
Katelyn:	And you go 'duh' 'duh' 'duh' with your hands and it makes the hands on the paper.
Aideen:	And then you have to wash your hands.

[Group 1, 09-03-10]

Some of the children also spoke about the 'jobs' they do at playschool:

And we do jobs, we have lots of jobs, you can do the cups for breakfast, or do the cups for lunch, or you can be on the train [leading the line of children as they move from room to room]

[Zoe, Group 3, 09-03-10]

Their images of what took place at primary school were naturally less coherent than infants children. Many reported that they would be engaged in very similar activities to those at preschool, as the following clips highlight, but there was no great degree of certainty about what would take place, with the children often stating that activities 'might' happen at school. When asked what 'big school' would be like children reported that there would be home corners, and cars, and dolls, and toys in big school. Others had some very inventive ideas about big school:

> Kaitlyn: And we'll cycle round, we'll all cycle round all day.
> Sian: My brother lives in big school.
> Donnacha: I think there will be a farm [toy farm] we have a farm
>   [Group 1, 09-03-10]

Having said that, there was the occasional child who could confidently discuss life at primary school, as Erin explains below, she and her mum had been discussing what primary school might be like:

> I'm going to [name of school] and I'll be doing my homework, and I'll be doing Irish dancing, and…I would do..I don't know. I might talk to the teacher, and I might tell her my name. I will sit down in my chair, and I will do my homework… My mammy tells me all about big school… And you have to do what the teacher says, if you're bold you go to the office, and you get etention [detention]. If you don't sit down you get etention [detention].
>   [Erin, Group 3, 09-03-10]

It is interesting that although Erin is very well informed about primary school, and clearly her mother has been telling her about what is expected of her in that setting, she has also been told about detention and being sent to the Principals office, which are not things that an infants child would normally experience. This might highlight some of the mis-information being passed to preschool children about primary school.

Two things that the majority of children reported with certainty were that they would be wearing a uniform at primary school, and that they would need a school bag. These two areas were mentioned on many occasions when asked what would be different at 'big school' as compared to preschool, or when asked what they thought 'big school' would be like.

> Derek: And I'll get a schoolbag
> Aideen: Yeah, and I'll get my uniform
> Researcher: Yes, you'll do that before you start, won't you?
> Aideen: Yeah, and you'll get school socks
> Derek: And you'll get school shoes
> Aideen: And you'll get school socks, and school stuff.
>   [Group 1, 09-03-10]

Janice: …and your mammy has to buy your Airform [uniform]
                 from the shop
Researcher: Yes, your uniform, you're right, she has to buy it for you.
Janice: And I'll wear an Airform.
Derek: And a tie for around your neck
Janice: And you have to do anything the teacher says.
                                                    [Group 1, 09-03-10]

Researcher: What do you think she might need when she is going to school?
Erin: A school bag, and she's going to need a [name of school] thing,
                 the skirt, the jumper, black shoes and socks…
M: You mean a uniform?
Erin: Yeah
M: And what do you think she might need to put into the school
                 bag?
Erin: A pencil and paper for doing her homework, and…
Tom: Her lunch
                                                    [Group 3, 09-03-10]

Finally, the children were asked why did children go to primary school? The preschool children could not explain why they would go to school, most explaining that they just had to go, while a few children developed this further to say that they would go because they were too big for preschool.

Researcher: One last question guys, why do you think boys and girls go to
                 school?
Derek: 'Cos… 'cos… 'cos… ye have to!
Researcher: Why do you think you have to?
Janice: 'Cos your mam will make ye
Researcher: And why do you think your mam wants you to go to school?
Derek: 'Cos ye just have to!
Researcher: And why do you think the teacher wants you to go to school?
Janice: 'Cos they want you to do the homework.
                                                    [Group 1, 09-03-10]

Researcher: Why do you think we go to big school?
Quinn: Because we do.
Donnacha: Because you will be too big, and you won't be able to fit in this
               school.
Zoe: Yes, because you will be too big
                                                              [Group 3, 15-03-10]

Not surprisingly, the Junior Infant children could much more clearly and confidently
discuss life in primary school.

Elma: And we do all our sounds and our letters, look, up there [points to
               sounds on wall]
Cara: And we do our spellings
Kerry: We do spelling tests, we do homework.
Researcher: Wow, wait till I tell the boys and girls about that!
Cara: And we have lots of books, and we do colouring, and writing…
                                                              [Group 1, 12-03-10]

Ciara: You do your homework, you do it at home
Clodagh: You do your sounds
Ciara: There are no things to play with like in the playground in
               playschool.
Clodagh: We learned a new sound 'wuh' [all demonstrate 'wuh']
Researcher: Wonderful sounds, and what else do you learn in school?
Sinead: We do matching stuff, and we colour, and we do pictures and cut
               them out. And you must be good in school.
                                                              [Group 3, 16-03-10]

They were also quite clear on what the researcher should tell preschool children about
primary school:

Researcher:	Can you tell me what would we tell the children at playschool about big school?
Molly:	We had more toys at playschool, and we had lunch, and we reaed.
Cathy:	And today we did that actually, we readed, and we did our writing.
Researcher:	So what else do you do at big school?
Cathy:	We did masks, and we did an obstacle course.
Janice:	We do our sounds and our work. We do our Irish.

[Group 1, 12-03-10]

Researcher:	The boys and girls at playschool need to know what to bring to big school, what should we tell them?
Janice:	School jackets.
Molly:	Uniform.
Cathy:	And your hair [they must have their hair tied back in school]. See mine!
Janice:	And your skirt…and your school bag…and your folders….and your lunch.
Janice:	And you have to have pencil cases, and crayons and pencils.
Cathy:	And we do lots of work!
Janice:	Sometimes we play first, and sometimes you do your work.
Cathy:	And sometimes we do our writing.

[Group 2, 12-03-10]

The children in the Junior Infants class were also very clear on why they went to school, as the following excerpts highlight:

Researcher:	Can I ask you one last thing girls, why do you come to school?
Janice:	Because we love it!
Molly:	And our Ma's said so.
Researcher:	Oh, that's lovely! But why do you think your mam wants you to go to school?
Molly:	Cos she's going to work.
Janice:	So we can learn to read and to write, so we come to school.

[Group 2, 12-03-10]

Researcher: Can I ask you one last thing girls, why do you think you go to
                school?
Kira: You have to go to school, you have to go to school so your
                mammy has to tell you. You have to go because you are a big girl
                now, you go to school when you are a big girl.
Cara: And you have to go so you can learn things.
Kerry: We all learn stuff in school.
Kira: Yeah, we learn our spellings, and our sounds and our words, and
                I know my numbers, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6…

                                                        [Group 1, 12-03-10]

Researcher: Can I ask you one last question, why do you think you come to
                school?
Katie: Because we have to learn everything at school to go to work.
Laura: You don't be late, you be in school early.
Ellen: To learn some words, and we have homework books.

                                                        [Group 1, 16-03-10]

Finally, the children could very clearly explain the rules governing school life, and they
cited these as being important for the preschool children to understand.

Researcher: And is there anything else that is important for little children to
                know when they are starting school?
Lauren: Yeah, you're not allowed talk when teacher is talking
Sarah: And you're not allowed interrupt
Ciara: And you're not allowed to roar when you are inside
Clara: You are only allowed to roar when you are outside
Ciara: And you're not allowed run in the classroom, you are only
                allowed run when you are outside

                                                        [Group 2, 16-03-10]

Sinead:	The rules are to be good in school and to put up your hand when you want to speak.
Clodagh:	And you put up your thumb [gives thumbs up sign] when you want to go to the toilet
Researcher:	Wow, that's a good one.
Ciara:	Walk in school, no running or you might fall and hit someone
Eimear:	You have to be quiet
Aoife:	And you have to be nice to your friends
Eimear:	And, what was it? …no running in the school.
Aoife:	You can run out in the yard
Eimear:	No kicking
Aoife:	And no raising your foot
Ciara:	And '**bí ciúin**' [Be quiet in Irish]

[Group 3, 16-03-10]

The children clearly demonstrated that they were well able to express their opinions on school life, and their experiences in school. They could confidently describe their own world-view, and provided insights into life as a junior infant that are both perceptive and informative.

8. Discussion and Recommendations

8.1 Child Snapshot Form

The evaluation of the Child Snapshot form was overwhelmingly positive as noted above, both in terms of the process of development, and in terms of the transfer of information. Indeed, 91% of teachers who responded to the questionnaire also felt that the transfer of information between settings would be useful. When asked why, 66% spoke about the benefits in terms of having a greater understanding of children and their families, and highlighted that the transfer of information would benefit teaching staff, children and parents. These views were also supported by the preschool practitioners, infants teachers and school principals who took part in this project. The school principals of the two participating schools are very keen to continue working with the form, as are the preschool practitioners, and both sectors stressed the importance of meeting face to face to facilitate the transfer of information.

"We would definitely be happy to continue with it [Child Snapshot form] without a doubt, and we would be happy to continue with the meetings to pass on the information. There is a very clear value from it. We do it with the Early Start teachers, they come in and discuss children. It would be such a pity not to continue with the work." [School Principal, St Michael's, Interview, 18-02-10]

"It was definitely very useful, in terms of having all the information on the children. We informally have links at the other end, the primary-post-primary

transition, that informal exchange of information, and it is very important, and it is equally important to have that exchange at the preschool-primary level."
[School Principal, St Martins, Interview, 23-02-10]

It is recommended that the roll-out of the Child Snapshot be expanded to include all the primary schools in Ballymun. The Lead Researcher of the project is meeting with the Ballymun Principals Network, with the full support of the Principals of the two participating schools, to discuss this recommendation. This could be supported by a coordinated schedule developed as a follow-on from this project. There was a general consensus among the preschool practitioners in the project that they would be happy to take the lead in continuing on use of the forms, and that they would be happy to initiate contact with local schools to arrange transfer of information each June for the children moving to primary school each September. It is recommended that this pilot be formally evaluated after the 2010 roll-out, with a view to permanent application in the Ballymun area. It is also suggested that the development process could be used in other disadvantaged areas as an exemplar of good practice, easily adapted for wider application.

8.2 Programme of Continuing Professional Development

The evaluation of the CPD Programme was also very positive, and many practitioners highlighted the need for such training programmes in terms of supporting children making the transition from preschool to primary school. The topics selected for inclusion in the programme were identified during the literature review phase of the study, but were also discussed and agreed at focus group level. For example the issues of oral language, and developing mathematical concepts and the language of maths, were identified by the Principals and the infants teachers in the project as being of particular importance at primary level, and it was agreed by the group that preschool was the ideal place for work on better developing these areas to take place. This joint discussion and consideration of the most important areas for training meant that there was a general agreement cross-sectorally that the training was being targeted in the most effective way.

Some Comments from the CPD Evaluation Forms:

I would recommend this to all childcare workers…
It refreshed the memory and brought to mind the good work we do..
Raised many issues to deal with in our settings..
Very enjoyable course..
All the information was great I feel I have learned a lot..
Made me reflect on what I do and how to improve what we do…

The formal recommendations arising from each session of the CPD are to be actioned by each individual setting however, it is suggested that this follow-on work could be formally evaluated. This would be a very worthwhile exercise if funding was made available for an evaluation which could then feed into future development of the CPD itself.

However, one issue that was identified at the time of the CPD was that an intensive two week training programme, as was the case in this pilot, would not be the most effective approach in terms of providing cover for staff attending training. The Preschool Managers taking part in the project advised that due to work commitments and staff shortages it can be very difficult to commit to such a programme. Therefore it is suggested that we need to become more inventive about the roll-out of such programmes. The School Principals involved in the project also noted an issue with lack of cover to allow staff to attend offsite training. From the offset the Principals advised that the only time available for their staff to become involved in the research project was after school hours, specifically in the hour between the infants pupils leaving and school close.

With the above in mind, it is recommended that an investigation take place into developing an online CPD Programme for both Preschool Practitioners and Infants Teachers. It is clear that the individual modules of the programme were received very positively in terms of the learning and development of the practitioners, these should be developed further, and modified in some cases, in terms of the most effective approach for an online programme. The Dublin Institute of Technology has expertise in the development and roll out of such training programmes at undergraduate and postgraduate level. The DIT could be approached to collaborate in the development of a programme which could also be formally accredited and act as a building block towards the proposed requirements in training for the sector.
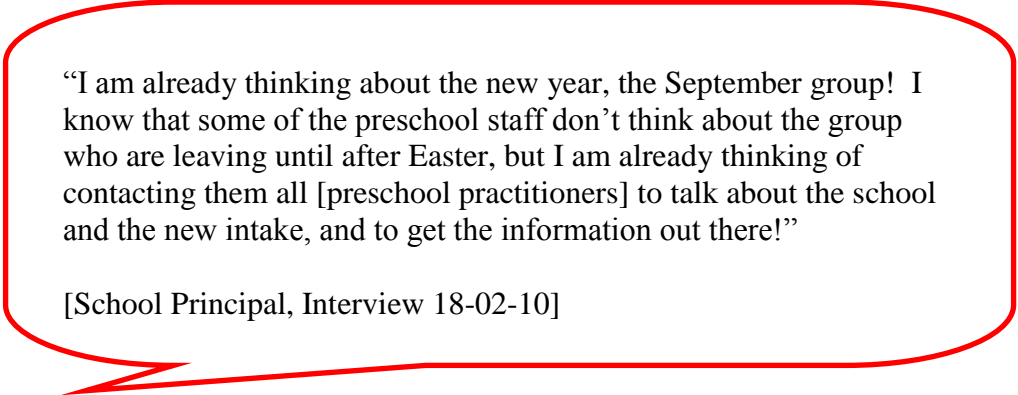
8.3   Communication and Continuity

The focus of the project from the outset was on working with both preschool practitioners and teachers of junior infant classes to develop processes for communication and collaboration between the two educational settings. Findings from the questionnaire highlighted the need for a greater understanding of both sectors of the educational environment of their counterparts. Indeed, 85% of infants teachers were in agreement that it would be helpful for preschool practitioners to have a greater understanding of life in the junior infants classroom, and the same number were in agreement that in reverse, a greater understanding by teachers of the preschool environment would be useful.

The benefits of communication and continuity were apparent during the development phase of the Child Snapshot, indeed the process of development was recognised by the participants as being of value in its own right in terms of developing a shared conceptual framework and in terms of building relationships. Principals, infants teachers, and preschool practitioners all noted the importance of communication and discussion across the two sectors as impacting on their individual understanding of the transition from one educational arena to the other. At the commencement of the project the infants teachers

did not even know the names of their local preschools, and preschool practitioners, some of whom may have known school principals, had no knowledge of the teaching staff. However, the process of working on this collaborative project with the aim of supporting the children in their care assisted this group of teachers and practitioners in terms of communication and continuity.

It was also suggested by the Principals in the project, and many of the respondents to the questionnaire that the last hour of the day when the junior infants leave the school is the optimum time for the infants teachers to take part in meetings with preschool practitioners. In the questionnaire data the need for co-ordination of such opportunities for communication was raised by teachers. It is recommended that some form of coordinated approach to the communication between preschool practitioners and infants teachers needs to be developed, and this last hour of the infants teachers working day is the ideal time in which to meet. Over and above the programme of CPD discussed above, time spent actively training with preschool providers was also highlighted by some of the primary school teachers who took part in the questionnaire as being worthwhile, and it is recommended that additional joint in-service training in the area of transitions at a local level is one way in which this might be achieved.

One point of note in this regard is the location of such in-service training. One aim of this project was that staff from the primary schools should be given some practical experience of observing preschools, and preschool staff should gain some experience of the primary school settings, to experience the realities of working in both situations. The teachers in the project all made arranged visits to a selection of their feeder preschools, where they observed the working environment, discussed policies and practices, and were introduced to the preschool curriculum in action. The focus group meetings which took place as part of the project during the development phase of the Child Snapshot all took place in the primary schools. Indeed, the primary schools also worked on various initiatives bringing preschool staff and children onto school premises [See Examples 2, 3, and 8, 'Examples of Good Practice' noted above for details of some of these initiatives]. It is suggested that the in-service training suggested above should take place on either preschool or primary school premises to facilitate greater understanding of the two working environments.

"I am already thinking about the new year, the September group! I know that some of the preschool staff don't think about the group who are leaving until after Easter, but I am already thinking of contacting them all [preschool practitioners] to talk about the school and the new intake, and to get the information out there!"

[School Principal, Interview 18-02-10]

8.4   Curricular and Pedagogical Continuity

Linked to the above, the issue of curricular and pedagogical continuity was also identified as being of importance during the course of the project, indeed this became one of the primary arms of the programme of CPD. Teachers who took part in the questionnaire were also in agreement that there should be greater consistency between the curriculum at preschool level and junior infants level (79%).

During the course of cross-sectoral focus group discussions while reaching agreement on the most important skills for children to possess on arrival at school, the need for curricular and pedagogical continuity became apparent. There were some concerns that this might mean a push-down of academics at preschool level, however this was clearly not the case. The general agreement was that the preschool setting was very much an environment for learning through play, and that support for children in terms of their development should be provided in a play based manner. However, it was also agreed that learning at preschool through play could be a very effective way to prepare children for the primary school setting. There was complete agreement that the children should not take an academic approach at this level, but that there was an opportunity to develop their pre-academic skills appropriately for the preschool environment. Two areas were identified as being of particular importance: developing oral language, and developing mathematical concepts (such a shape, size, colour) and the language of maths (for example more/less, taller/smaller, a lot/a few). Both of these were addressed for these particular preschools in the form of the CPD, and the follow-up work which was developed after the CPD.

However, it is recommended that further training and exploration of these preacademic learning areas needs to be developed beyond the scope of the current project. During the CPD the training on the use of play as a tool to support children in their preparation for primary school, many participants noted an interest in developing the concept of play as a learning tool to a greater extent in the future. It is also recommended that the Ballymun preschool practitioners would benefit from further exploration of this area.

Practitioners in the CPD also worked on a review of their individual implementation of Síolta, specifically focusing on Standard 13: Transitions, and how the individual settings met each component. Although clearly recommendations needed to be properly considered on an individual basis, the following recommendations were considered to be applicable to every preschool setting taking part in the project, and it is recommended that these could also be considered and easily implemented on a wider level:

- Preschool practitioner visits to primary schools, and return visits of infants teachers to preschool settings.
- Sharing of information between preschool and primary school settings via the Child Snapshot.
- Techniques used successfully with children at home/preschool passed on to the primary sector.

- Settings to develop written records of all policies, procedures and actions regarding transitions within the setting, and makes them available to all stakeholders.

It was also identified by some of the preschools in the project that *Aistear*, the Framework for Early Learning (NCCA, 2009) was very relevant to them in terms of complementing existing curricular material, and supporting children at times of transition. Indeed, one of the aims of *Aistear* is to bring greater coherence to children's learning and to increase connections in learning throughout early childhood (Fitzpatrick & Forster, 2006). The components of *Aistear* are based around four interconnected themes: (i) 'Well-being', clearly important in terms of self-esteem and confidence on making the transition to school; (ii) 'Identity and Belonging', important during the time of transition when children are moving from one learning community to another; (iii) 'Communicating', identified above as being a very important both for children, and between the preschool practitioners and primary teachers during the time of transition; and (iv) 'Exploring and Thinking', which involves children making sense of the world, and indeed at the time of transition, their new learning environment. It was suggested that *Aistear* could be a step towards providing coherent links between preschool curricula and the infant level curriculum in the primary classroom. As the NCCA advise: "*continuity and progression in learning across early childhood is essential in supporting children to learn to their true potential*" (2004, p36). It is recommended that this should be examined in the future when *Aistear* has become more widely used in Irish preschools and primary schools. It is also suggested that this framework could be a very useful tool to employ in further research in supporting children at points of transition.

8.5   Parental Involvement

One of the issues identified in focus groups and interviews early in the project was a lack of understanding by some parents of the important skills for children to possess when making the transition to school. Indeed, similar findings were reported in an earlier needs analysis conducted in Ballymun (CSER, 2006) which identified that some parents of four year old children reported that children should have an understanding of some basic preacademic skills on starting school, but did not feel that either social skills or communication skills were of importance during this transition.

With this in mind, a booklet was produced as part of the project "Tips for Parents of Children Starting School" by the lead researcher, in conjunction with a sub-group of preschool practitioners and a Home School Liaison Teacher [See Appendix 10]. The booklet is being distributed after Easter 2010 to parents in all the participating preschools who have children starting school in September 2010. It is recommended that a formal evaluation of the effectiveness of the booklet take place, with a view to further developing it for use on a wider basis.

"I do think that parents need to be better informed, they need to be more informed, the more they know the better, they just think that the child should go [to school] when they are four, the child is four and that it that, the more informed they are the more they will think it through." [Preschool Practitioner, Focus Group, 20-10-09]

Analysis of the Focus Group Transcripts highlight a clear need to support parents who find it difficult to engage with primary schools. At times it was reported that this was due to difficulties in their own lives, drugs and alcohol were mentioned as being an issue. It was suggested that preschool practitioners clearly have a role here, having already worked on building relationships with such parents, in terms of supporting home-school relationships. The fact that they often have very well developed relationships could be used to help build relationships with the parents and schools. The use of the Child Snapshot in terms of preschool practitioners completing the document with parents, while discussing the need for schools and parents to work together to understand the needs of the children was identified as being an effective approach to supporting these home school relationships. It is intended to further develop the use of the Child Snapshot as outlined above, and it is recommended that the use of the document as a tool to support parental involvement with schools be considered during the future roll-out of the Child Snapshot. It is also recommended that the strong relationships between preschool practitioners and parents being harnessed as a way to initiate home-school relationships be investigated formally.

8.6   Review of Key Recommendations

The findings from this project clearly link in with the work of the Early Years project in *youngballymun*, which centres around children aged 3-5, their families and ECEC providers. Both in terms of their area-based strategy aimed at supporting quality practice through the implementation of Siolta, and their work in supporting school readiness in preschool children aged 3 – 4 years. It is recommended that the findings from this project be fed directly into the work of *youngballymun*. This research project also linked closely to the Ballymun Whitehall Area Partnership Childcare Provider Network project on Transitions. The lead researcher worked closely with the Early Years Programme Manager of the Ballymun Whitehall Area Partnership, in order to ensure that the resources of each project were used to maximum effect and capitalise on the funding available to each project. There was clearly an opportunity for sharing of knowledge and expertise, and taking a collaborative approach to supporting children making the transition between the preschool and primary settings. It is recommended that further initiatives in this area continue such communication and collaboration. It is also important when supporting children at points of educational transition that stakeholders tap into services already available in the local area, a greater connection between early intervention programmes already in place would better support the children of Ballymun.

Table 5 below gives a review of the project recommendations. There is a degree of overlap between project themes, however for clarity they have been broken down under the following headings:

Child Snapshot Form;
Programme of Continuing Professional Development;
Communication and Continuity;
Curricular and Pedagogical Continuity;
Parental Involvement; General.

Issues Relating to Child Snapshot Form:	Recommendation:
Staff from both sectors were in agreement that the transfer of information from preschool to primary level was important. However, this has not been put into practice in any real way. [See Section 3.1, 4.3, 7.1, 7.3, 8.3]	**(1)** A coordinated approach to communication between the preschool and primary sector should be developed.
Tools to support such coordination and communication between the two sectors should be developed. [See Sections 3.1, 4.3, 5.4, 6.4, 7.1, 8.1]	**(2)** It recommended that the roll-out of the Child Snapshot be expanded to include all the primary schools in Ballymun.
All project participants agreed that the Child Snapshot was a very valuable tool for the transfer of information from preschools to primary schools in Ballymun. [See Sections 5.4, 7.1, 8.1. 8.3]	**(3)** It is recommended that this pilot be formally evaluated after the 2010 roll-out, with a view to application on a wider scale.
Both sectors agreed that the development process of the Child Snapshot was useful in itself in terms of building cross sectoral relationships. 91% of Infant Teachers who responded to the questionnaire advised that the transfer of information between preschool and primary would be useful. [See Sections, 5.4, 7.1, 7.3, 8.2, 8.3]	**(4)** It is recommended that the development process could also be used in other disadvantaged areas as an exemplar of good practice, easily adapted for wider application[8].
The preschool practitioners noted an additional benefit in completing the forms with the parents in terms of highlighting the areas where the child could benefit from some extra support before starting school. [See Sections 3.2, 4.5, 8.1, 8.5]	**(5)** It is recommended that the Child Snapshot be used in this way as a tool to support parental involvement at this point of transition.

Issues Relating to the Programme of Continuing Professional Development:	Recommendation:
'Tips for Parents' Booklet has been handed out to parents with children starting school in September 2010 [See Sections 5.5, 7.2.5,	**(6)** It is recommended that funding be made available to formally evaluate this booklet, both from the perspective of

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[8] This exemplar is currently being used by the Preparing for Life Group in Darndale as an example of best practice, which is to be modelled for development in the Darndale area.

8.2, 8.5]	preschool practitioners, but also seeking the perspective of parents, thus including a greater level of parental involvement in the process.
The preschool practitioners have agreed to continue to use the Booklet over the coming years to support their parents in making decisions about whether their child is ready for school, and in terms of developing these skills in children. [See Sections 7.2.5., 8.2, 8.5]	(7) It is recommended that this Booklet continue to be used on an ongoing basis as a tool to build relationships with parents, and to help them support their children in developing these important skills. Support for annual review, editing, and printing will be necessary.
The issue of supporting children's mental health in the early years was noted during the CPD. [See Sections 5.5, 7.2.3, 8.2]	(8) It is recommended that all settings use the 5 Key for Emotion Coaching, and the SSCAN technique for supporting peer interactions into place in their settings. These are approaches which could easily be undertaken on a wider scale.
The issue of self-care for preschool practitioners themselves generated much discussion and the need for support and supervision sessions for practitioners was noted. [See Sections 6.4, 7.4.1, 7.4.2, 8.2]	(9) It is recommended that support and supervision sessions for practitioners should be implemented in the participating preschools where possible.
The issue of the professional standing of preschool practitioners and the contribution of this lack of standing to stress was noted. [See Sections 6.4, 7.2.3, 7.4.1, 7.4.2, 8.2]	(10) It is recommended that this is an issue that should be researched and investigated at national level. Funding should be made available to better understand the issues and to highlight the level of professionalism within the ECCE sector.
The full range of formal recommendations arising from each session of the CPD are being actioned by each individual setting. [See Section 7.2, 8.2]	(11) It is recommended that this follow-on work could be formally evaluated. This would be a very worthwhile exercise if funding was made available for an evaluation which could then feed into future development of the CPD itself.
It was identified at the time of the CPD that the individual modules of the programme were received very positively in terms of the learning and development of the practitioners. The most effective method to roll out such training for preschool	(12) It is recommended that an investigation take place into developing an online CPD Programme for both Preschool Practitioners and Infants Teachers. The Dublin Institute of Technology could be approached to collaborate in the

practitioners and infants teachers needs to be identified. It was decided that we need to become more inventive about the roll-out of such programmes. [See Sections 5.10, 7.4.3, 8.2]	development of a programme which could also be formally accredited and act as a building block towards the proposed requirements in training for the sector.

Issues Relating to Communication and Continuity:	Recommendation:
All staff taking part in the project, and 90% of teachers who responded to the questionnaire agreed that there is a need for greater communication and coordination across the two sectors. [See Sections 6.4, 7.1, 7.3, 7.4.3, 8.3]	**(13)** It is recommended that more coordinated structures (such as those developed in this project) need to be put into place nationally for preschool practitioners and infants teachers to communicate. These would facilitate communication between the two sectors, which would in turn enhance the quality of the transition experience for children.
Staff in both sectors spoke about their willingness to build relationships with the other sector, and both groups mentioned that they felt this was important specifically in terms of supporting children. [See Sections 6.4, 7.1, 7.3, 8.3]	**(14)** It is recommended that additional joint in-service training in the area of transitions at a local level is one way in which this might be achieved. Such training should be supported and funded.
The issue of when such joint in-service training would take place was identified. [See Sections 7.3, 7.4.3, 8.2, 8.3]	**(15)** It is recommended that the last hour of the infants teachers working day is the ideal time in which to undertake joint in-service training. It is also recommended that in-service training on transitions should be provided as an option in the career development period in July for primary school teachers. This should also be made available for preschool practitioners to attend.
The issue of where such joint in-service training would take place was identified. [See Sections 7.4.3., 8.2, 8.3]	**(16)** It is suggested that the in-service training suggested above should take place on either preschool or primary school premises to facilitate greater understanding of the two working environments.

Both sectors noted that the two groups of teachers (infants teachers and preschool practitioners) with the greatest awareness of the needs of the individual children have little or no coordination and communication. [See Sections 6.2, 6.3, 6.4, 7.1, 7.4.3.]	**(17)** Linked to the above it is recommended that these two groups of teachers need to be involved in the above communications initiatives, rather than just Principals and Home School Liaison Teachers.
Both sectors spoke of the rich knowledge base that had been developed at preschool level, and the importance of this valuable information being transferred across to the primary sector. All staff were keen to be involved in opportunities for collaborative work. [See Sections 6.2, 6.3, 6.4, 7.1, 7.3, 8.3, 8.4]	**(18)** This is linked to the recommendations above with regard to the Child Snapshot.

Issues Relating to Curricular and Pedagogical Continuity:	**Recommendation:**
During the course of cross-sectoral focus group discussions while reaching agreement on the most important skills for children to possess on arrival at school, the need for curricular and pedagogical continuity became apparent. [See Sections 4.4, 5.6, 7.2.2., 7.2.4., 7.2.6., 8.4]	**(19)** It is recommended that further exploration of these learning areas needs to be developed beyond the scope of the current project.
There were some concerns that this might mean a push-down of academics at preschool level. The general agreement was that the preschool setting was very much an environment for learning through play, and that support for children in terms of their development should be provided in a play based manner. [See Sections 4.4, 5.6, 7.2.4, 8.4]	**(20)** It is recommended that learning through play at preschool is a very effective way to prepare children for the primary school setting. It is not recommended that children take an academic approach at this level, but there is an opportunity to develop their pre-academic skills appropriately for the preschool environment.
During the CPD training session on the use of play as a tool to support children in their preparation for primary school, many participants noted an interest in developing the concept of play as a learning tool to a greater extent in the future. [See Sections 5.5, 7.2.4, 8.4]	**(21)** It is also recommended that the Ballymun preschool practitioners would benefit from further exploration of this area. Support for a further research project on the pedagogical benefits of play is recommended.

Issues Relating to Curricular and Pedagogical Continuity (Continued):	Recommendation:
During the CPD the training session on the use of play as a tool to support children in their preparation for primary school identified the role play of school situations as being an excellent way of supporting children making the transition from preschool to primary school. [See Sections 5.5, 7.2.4, 8.4]	**(22)** Role playing the primary school situation at preschool level is recommended as a very simple way in which preschool practitioners can support children in building realistic expectations of school while also developing a positive viewpoint towards the primary setting
Practitioners in the CPD also worked on a review of their individual implementation of Síolta, specifically focusing on Standard 13: Transitions. Some recommendations were considered to be easily implemented on a wider level. [See Sections 1.2, 3.3, 5.5, 7.2.8, 8.4]	**(23)** The following recommendations Linked closely to Síolta are considered suitable for wider application: preschool practitioner visits to primary schools, and return visits of infants teachers to preschool settings; techniques used successfully with children at home/preschool passed on to the primary sector; settings to develop written records of all policies, procedures and actions regarding transitions within the setting, and makes them available to all stakeholders.
It was also identified during the project that *Aistear*, the Framework for Early Learning was very relevant in terms of complementing existing curricular material, and supporting children at times of transition. Indeed, one of the aims of *Aistear* is to bring greater coherence to children's learning and to increase connections in learning throughout early childhood. [See Sections 1.2, 8.4]	**(24)** It is recommended that the potential for *Aistear* to provide coherent links between preschool curricula and the infant level curriculum in the primary classroom should be examined. It is also suggested that this framework could be a very useful tool to employ in further research in supporting children at points of transition.

Issues Relating to Curricular and Pedagogical Continuity (Continued):	Recommendation:
During the CPD programme the session on Oral Language highlighted specific recommendations for preschools to put into place which should support children in their oral language development. [See Sections 5.5, 7.2.1, 8.4]	**(25)** These simple recommendations developed during the CPD are ones which could easily be applied on a wider basis. Consider the physical environment when encouraging children to engage in reading activities, and space in which to encourage

	the development of oral language; Introduction of story sacks; Conducting literacy walks; Encouraging 'mark making' in the preschool setting, though the use of pads and pens in a contextually appropriate way for imaginary play; Work towards providing a literacy rich environment.
Following on from the CPD programme session on Developing Mathematical Concepts, a programme for Developing Mathematical Concepts through play at preschool level was developed. The preschool practitioners who took part in the project will continue to work with the programme of games and activities. These games were chosen as being the most useful to introduce maths in a concrete way, while also making this fun for the children. [See Sections 5.5, 7.2.6, 8.4]	**(26)** The programme is not an exhaustive list, it is intended to be a starting point to develop ideas for working with children in the area of developing their mathematical concepts and language. It is recommended that the preschool practitioners will continue to develop the programme on an individual basis. It is recommended that some form of formal assessment should take place to evaluate the impact of the programme.

Issues Relating to Parental Involvement:	Recommendation:
Staff in both sectors spoke of the need to involve parents in their children's education, and both groups were aware of the need to support parents. [See Sections 4.5, 5.5, 7.2.1, 7.2.5, 8.5]	**(27)** The recommendations developed during the CPD are ones which could easily be applied by preschools on a wider basis. Allocation of the role of Parent Partnership Officer to a member of staff; Parent Newsletter coordinated by the Parent Partnership Officer; Parent Open Days; Inviting parents into settings to talk to children about things such as their job, a hobby, or a pet; a 'Welcome Back' form for settings to circulate to parents after the summer break, or the Christmas holidays.
Following on from the CPD, a booklet was produced as part of the project "Tips for Parents of Children Starting School". The booklet is being distributed after Easter 2010 to parents in all the participating preschools who have children starting school in September 2010. [See Sections 4.5, 5.5, 7.2.1, 7.2.5, 8.5, Appendix 10].	**(28)** It is recommended that a formal evaluation of the effectiveness of the booklet take place, with a view to further developing it for use on a wider basis.

Analysis of the Focus Group Transcripts highlight a clear need to support parents who engage with preschools but find it difficult to engage with primary schools. [See Sections 5.6, 6.4, 8.5]	**(29)** It was identified that preschool practitioners clearly have a role here in terms of supporting home-school relationships. It is recommended that the strong relationships between preschool practitioners and parents being harnessed as a way to initiate home-school relationships be investigated formally.
The fact that preschool practitioners often have very well developed relationships with parents could be used to help build relationships with the parents and schools. The implementation of the Child Snapshot could play an important role here. [See Sections 5.4, 6.4, 7.1, 8.5]	**(30)** It is recommended that the use of the Child Snapshot as a tool to support parental involvement with schools be considered during the future roll-out of the Child Snapshot. The discussions between preschool practitioners and parents during completion of the Child Snapshot provide an unique opportunity for preschool practitioners to work with parents who might have concerns about the home/school relationship.

General Issues:	Recommendation:
Professional Status of the Preschool Sector: The issue of professionalism within the preschool sector needs to be addressed. [See Sections 6.3, 6.4, 7.4.1]	**(31**) It is recommended that further research into this area should be conducted. It is also recommended that a review of situations where preschool practitioners are not considered a professional in terms of acting as a signatory for children to access services needs to be undertaken.
Self-care for preschool practitioners: The issue of self-care for preschool practitioners generated much discussion during the course of the project. [See Sections 6.3, 6.4, 7.4.2]	**(32)** It is recommended that support in terms of time for 'supervision' be provided for preschool staff. This should be in the form of a one-to-one discussion to air their problems, and to discuss their concerns for specific children in their care.
Pressures of Time: Both sectors reported increasing demands being placed on them in terms of managing their time. This impacts on availability at attend in-service training. [See Sections 6.3, 6.4, 7.4.3]	**(33)** This issue needs to be addressed in terms of support and funding for staff from both sectors to attend in-service training opportunities.

8.6   Concluding Comments

As noted in the literature review earlier in this report the impact of child poverty has a long term effect in terms of educational achievement and overall life opportunities (Combat Poverty Agency, 2010). It is clear from some of the issues highlighted during the course of this project that the children in disadvantaged areas such as Ballymun are at risk of doing less well educationally than their better off counterparts. The recommendations of this project are of importance not only to the cluster of preschools and primary schools who took part in this project, and the children that they serve, but also have wide ranging consequences for the general area and implications in terms of reducing the cycle of deprivation that is often passed down from generation to generation in disadvantaged areas.

The research highlighted in the background information for this project has shown clear links between disadvantage and risk of difficulties during the transition from preschool to primary school. With the introduction of the new free preschool year for children, more children from disadvantaged areas will now attend preschool settings. However the issue of whether this investment into ECCE is being capitalized on at primary level needs to be considered. It is imperative that following on from this financial investment into the educational future of these children, that this initiative is followed up with supporting the transition of these children from the preschool to the primary school environment. The impact of such early intervention *without* successful transition to school has to be questioned. Benefits gained during early intervention may not automatically transfer to the new school context. Acknowledging the long-lasting effects of difficulties experienced at the early stages of education, there is clearly a need to support children's adjustment during their transition to school. These years lay the foundations for future educational experiences, and need to be of sound structure if positive educational experiences are to be built upon them. The educational system faces children with some major transitions and it is often stated that successful first transitions contribute to later school success and the capacity to negotiate further transitions (Dunlop, 2007).

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