UNDERSTANDING TRANSITIONS WITHIN EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION SETTINGS: THE PERSPECTIVES OF PROFESSIONALS

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Abstract

For a significant number of children attending centre-based Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) settings transitions between age groups are likely to be an inevitable experience. However, the literature on these transitions is remarkably sparse, with only a handful of studies contributing to an understanding of these times of change. To address this gap the present study used semi-structured interviews to investigate the perspectives of eight ECCE managers from six centre-based ECCE settings on how transitions occurred and practices used to support these moves. Thematic analysis identified six themes within the data: times of challenge and opportunity; factors influencing children's adaptation to transitions; what works; what helps; what gets in the way; and; early childhood matters. Suggestions for future research include the need for research on parents’ and children’s perspectives of their transition experiences. The findings also detail a catalogue of strategies used by managers to support transitions, which may help to inform practice in this area.

Introduction

Transitions have gained prominence as a critical area of study in early childhood (Brooker, 2008; Fabian, 2007; Fabian & Dunlop, 2002). The dominant area of attention has been children’s commencement in formal schooling, with ‘transitions’ in early childhood being synonymous with school transition (Kagan, 2010). The significance of school transition is intuitively obvious – beginning school can involve changes in value systems, demands, group dynamics, and cultural traditions (Fabian & Dunlop, 2002; Ramey & Ramey, 1994). Yet, for an increasing number of children starting school is not their first experience of a new environment. Instead, social and economic changes have seen a dramatic rise in the number of children enrolling in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) settings. This has led to interest in children’s transitions into these settings (Dalli, 2000; Datler, Datler & Funder, 2010; Kienig, 2002; Thyssen, 2000). In addition, a small number of authors have also turned their attention to the moves that children experience within ECCE settings (Daniel, 1993; Weinberger, 1996).

Transitions within ECCE settings arise because centre-based ECCE provision in Ireland, France, Greece, Spain, UK and the US tend to adopt a school-based model, whereby children are grouped by age (Neuman, 2002). This structural arrangement necessitates that children make a series of moves from one age group to the next. In many settings children can move on their own and at different points during the year, unlike most other educational transitions. In this way these transitions are ‘hidden’, which may explain why they have been relatively overlooked within the literature. To the authors’ knowledge there have been but six studies that have investigated these moves. These investigations are worth considering here briefly, as this body of work has yet to be reviewed collectively within the literature.

Two of these studies followed infants and toddlers as they joined new age groups in ECCE settings (Field, Vega-Lahr & Jagadish, 1984; Cryer, Wagner-Moore, Burchinal, Yazejian, Hurwitz & Wolery, 2005). Both studies recorded temporary behavioural changes that suggested that some children found the transition stressful. Perhaps most interesting are discrepancies in the studies’ findings regarding the role of peer support. While Field and
colleagues (1984) found that children who moved with a close friend appeared to be less affected by the transition, Cryer and colleagues (2005) found no positive effects where children transitioned with peers.

Three studies, which adopted an exploratory case study design, help in formulating a more comprehensive understanding of these changes and why they might be stressful for some children. Merry (2007) consulted with parents and practitioners to explore the experiences of children moving to an ‘over-two’ programme in New Zealand. In Sweden, Garpelin, Kallberg, Ekström and Sandberg (2010) compared transitions in two settings, one with four units, involving group transitions, and one with two units, involving individual transitions. Recchia and Dvorakova (2012) used observation and practitioner interviews to follow three children as they transitioned from infant to toddler classrooms at a university-based ECCE setting in the US.

One of the most notable commonalities across these studies is the description of rooms as settings with subtle but important cultural differences, or as Recchia and Dvorakova (2012) described them, ‘micro-communities’. Negotiating a new room, or micro-community, seems to involve adjustments to different philosophies, practices, expectations, attitudes, rules, and norms (Garpelin et al., 2010; Merry, 2007). For some children this appears to bring potential changes for their identity, behaviour, relationships, and development. For example, Merry (2007) charted how transitions thrust children from being the ‘expert’ of their peer group to the ‘novice’. Interestingly, Recchia and Dvorakova are the only authors to document positive effects of these transitions, insofar as they appeared to expand children’s social repertoires.

These studies also point to factors underlying the necessity of room transitions and how stakeholders perceive these moves. Both Merry (2007) and Garpelin and colleagues (2010) identified legislation and policy as the main reasons that children are grouped by age. In Garpelin and colleagues’ study, where children transitioned individually, maturity was described as the main criterion in determining a move. However, the authors imply that children’s maturity could be quickly reinterpreted if a space needed to be filled. Similarly, Cryer and colleagues (2005) also found that transitions could sometimes be sudden and unplanned. The New Zealand and Swedish studies also point to differences in how transitions are perceived by stakeholders. In Merry’s study transitions were framed as “inevitable” and as a stumbling block to development. This was comparable with one of the Swedish sites where moving was described as a ‘necessary evil’. This site also interpreted adjustment difficulties as a lack of readiness on the part of the child, rather than there being expectations for units to be ready for all children. In contrast, in the second Swedish setting transitions were seen as a rite of passage and a cause for celebration.

The study by Cryer, Hurwitz and Wolery (2000) was a wide-scale survey investigating continuity of care practices in infant and toddler classrooms which found that few settings kept infants, and even fewer still kept toddlers, with practitioners as they moved to new rooms. Respondents indicated that the timing of transitions was influenced by children’s attainment of developmental milestones, followed by age, and then available space in new classrooms. Encouragingly, most respondents reported using a variety of transition practices such as arranging for children to visit their new classrooms. However, practices linked to the promotion of security, such as moving children together, were relatively uncommon.

This small but substantial body of research has provided important insights into ECCE transitions. Taken together, the studies of Field et al. (1984) and Cryer et al. (2005) suggest that transitions can be temporarily stressful for children. Both sets of authors foreground separation from attachment figures as the main cause of children’s difficulties. However, the
exploratory studies, in depicting rooms as micro-communities, point to a larger number of challenges involved in moving on. The findings of this research also hint at conflicts surrounding best practice. For example, although in two studies development was viewed as a leading factor in deciding to move children, it was clear that external demands could sometime force abrupt and unplanned transitions. In addition to providing valuable knowledge, these studies also leave significant questions. Specifically, this research does not address the transition experiences of older children, confining its focus almost exclusively to infants and toddlers. Consequently, the experiences of older preschool-aged children remain virtually unknown. The use of practices to support transitions also requires further exploration. So far research has focused mainly on maintenance in relationships with other strategies limited to the options provided in Cryer and colleagues’ (2000) survey. An exploratory focus would help to cast further light on practices used to promote positive transitions.

The present study
The present study sought to address gaps in the literature by exploring the transition experiences of children of all ages attending ECCE settings and the practices used to support these moves. In line with its exploratory focus, the present study adopted a qualitative approach drawing on the expertise of ECCE managers. Qualitative designs are believed to be useful in positioning participants as expert informants and are seen as being particularly appropriate when the research questions are open and exploratory (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; Barker, Pistrang & Elliott, 2002; Elliott, 1999).

Method
Participants
Eight female ECCE managers from six full-day ECCE settings in Dublin participated in the study from December 2007 to March 2008. Five centres were private and one was a community-based service. Demographic information was available for seven of the eight practitioners. On average, participants were 46.43 years old (SD = 8.70) and had 16.79 (SD = 10.25) years of experience. Six of the seven managers had an ECCE related qualification, with the seventh manager having a degree in a discipline in the social sciences. All participants had also undergone additional ECCE training.

Manager interviews
The institution’s ethics committee approved the study’s protocol. Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were carried out with two manager dyads and four individual managers in the six ECCE settings. Managers were encouraged to take the lead during interviews. Where necessary the researcher prompted participants to discuss the following topics: (a) how and when transitions occurred, (b) practices used to support transitions, (c) the differences between age groups within the centre, (d) the relative importance of different transitions, (e) barriers to effective transitions, (f) child characteristics contributing to the nature of transitions. Interviews lasted approximately 30–90 minutes and were recorded using a dictaphone. Transcribed interviews were returned to managers for review.
Interview analysis

Transcripts were analysed using the principles of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The transcripts were coded and codes were reviewed and separated into potential themes. Themes were reviewed and re-reviewed to create a map that represented a best fit of the data. A credibility check, which involved an independent rater coding 10% of the data set, was carried out. Discussion of the results revealed a high degree of agreement with no additional codes representing themes or subthemes that were not included in the original analysis.

Results

Structure of the settings

Settings were variable in size with enrolment ranging from approximately 31 to 137 children. Two of the settings had two age groups, two had four groups, and two had six groups. In the centres with two groups, transitions tended to be annual, whereas in the other settings transitions were variable depending on several factors, such as the number of children leaving for school. Some settings were located on one floor, with transitions involving moves ‘next door’, while in other settings transitions could necessitate a move across floors.

Findings from the interviews

The analysis identified six major themes relating to managers’ descriptions and experiences of ECCE transitions. Each theme was qualitatively distinct and comprised a number of subthemes (see Figure 1).

Times of challenge and opportunity.

While managers typically described transitions as generally unproblematic: “nine times out of ten they just go”, they also made references to effects transitions could have for children’s emotional and behavioural wellbeing. Some practitioners noted the potential for transitions to be distressing for children: “if the child isn’t ready...then you are going to have all the tantrums”.

Some managers spoke about how this distress could manifest in children’s resistance to attend the setting: “we have had children that come...and won’t go in”. Certainly, several of the managers stated that transitions could be scary for children and likened the experience to those that adults might encounter: “It would be like going into a meeting with a whole group of strangers...it must be ten times worse and daunting for a child”. Managers also spoke about the changes a transition might bring for children’s sense of identity. Here references were made to both positive and negative shifts. For example, although one practitioner spoke about changes in the peer group causing some children to ask themselves “where do I fit in here?”, another noted that the move could make children “feel so big”.
FIGURE 1  Map of thematic analysis carried out on data from interviews with ECCE managers
These accounts of the effects of transitions can be linked to managers’ descriptions of the challenges involved in moving to new rooms. Managers detailed a host of changes and how some could potentially be hard for children to cope with. These included changes to relationships: “if they didn’t meet the staff...in a sense that might be like starting again”, routine: they know this is the time you go to the garden ... and then things suddenly change, they can find it very hard”, and the need to adjust to new approaches: “staff have...their own way of doing things”, expectations, and levels of attention: “up until [the last room] there is an awful lot done for them”. Managers also noted how changes to children’s immediate environment could be challenging: “The room itself obviously it’s twice as big...they feel quite overawed” and the task of facing a new, larger, and older peer group: “would they feel intimidated...because of a lot of the children in the room are older”.

For some managers these challenges meant that children needed certain capacities in order to cope successfully: “The children have to be...fairly strong in themselves”. However, managers’ discussions were not confined to the challenging aspects of transitions. They also spoke, albeit less frequently, about the opportunities that transitions could bring: “It kind of gives the child a spurt, and children that...might have been teary for the last couple of weeks...just blossom all of a sudden.”

Factors influencing children’s adaptation to transitions

Managers described a range of factors that contributed to the success of transitions. At the centre of these factors managers emphasised children’s own individual differences: “no two children would be complete carbon copies of the same page”. One such difference was age, although managers were not in agreement about whether younger children would need more attention or if “they wouldn’t realise”. Children’s personalities were also highlighted. Once again, however, there was a lack of agreement with some suggesting that shyer children would be more vulnerable, whereas for one manager it would be the “children that you would least expect it from...the children that are bravado in the room”. Managers also suggested that children’s language skills and behavioural profiles could also contribute to less positive experience: “children that are suspect ADHD... certainly would have difficulty moving up”.

Managers’ discussions also turned to the role that the environment could play in how children adjusted. For example, one manager spoke of the advantages of the centre being organised on a single floor: “because we are all on the one level, all of the parents get to see all of the staff all the time.” Similarly, another manager noted the challenge that might be associated in having to “actually go upstairs, which to them may look like a completely different area”. Another salient feature of managers’ discussions was the attention they brought to distinctions between their own and other centres. Indeed, one manager attributed much of the centre’s success in supporting children’s experiences to its staff: “[it is] a lot to do with how much passion and vigour the staff have”. In addition, those managers who had policies on transitions tended to frame these as valuable guides for practice. The managers explained that their practices were informed by the staff’s experience: “we picked up little tips over the years because situations happened”, initial and ongoing training, and their own personal life experience: “being a mother myself”. More generally, managers alluded to the nature of group care itself as influencing children’s experience. For example, this could mean trying to make decisions “that would be beneficial for everyone involved”.

Factors relating to the family were also described as making a difference to children’s adjustment. Here changes to the family routine, “personal issues”, and family composition were all framed as important influences on transitions. Even distal effects of policies, specifically those relating to funding, community staffing schemes, and maternity leave were
all linked to the continuity of children’s experiences. In keeping with these links to more indirect factors, managers also noted how activities in other settings, such as local schools, could have a knock-on-effect on provision: “there was a mass exodus [to school]...it was very unusual, but we were nearly able to move whole groups at a time.”

What works

Managers spent a considerable amount of time talking about the strategies they employed to support transitions. At the centre of these discussions was the importance of getting the timing right. This was typically framed as a staged process, with children’s age being used as an initial guide and then their development taking precedence closer to the move:

> we forward schedule six to eight months in advance, and we purely do that on age, but the closer we get...we would obviously look at the complete readiness of the child.

Managers also took time to labour the importance of considering children’s “complete” readiness, which was described as encompassing children’s physical, cognitive, and socioemotional development. In addition to assessing readiness, some managers spoke about the need to remain alert to children’s own cues, such as “bad behaviour”, and to considering life at home in deciding when to move children: “wait until they are happy at home, new baby coming along, wait until everything is settled down”.

Another means of promoting adjustment that managers described was to work with the child, with references ranging from “explain[ing things] very clearly” to “distraction”. Some managers also described the value in giving children a say in the transition. For one manager this could be as much as the child instigating the move: “he asked, ‘can I go in there?’”, for another it was children deciding when to visit a room. While this level of involvement was relatively uncommon, most managers spoke about the benefits of tailoring transitions to children’s individual interests and needs. This could, for example, involve using a transition object such as a favourite toy or a piece of routine equipment (e.g. a personalised tablemat).

Nearly all of the practitioners spoke about transitions needing to be gradual with most using a visiting period ahead of a move: “actually visiting that room and seeing it, is a great help”. Avoiding times when children are “tired, and everyone is a bit sensitive” was described as being helpful here. There was however, a lack of consensus over the duration of these visits, with some using an open-ended timeframe, others opting for two weeks, and others using no more than a week to avoid children becoming “confused”.

The majority of managers stressed the importance of familiar people during transitions. This tended to involve references to the support of familiar peers: “if they’re going up with their pals...it makes the transition a lot smoother.” However, this was not always framed as being essential, particularly where one child might be “head and shoulders above the rest”. In fact one manager did not share the view that children should transition together. She explained that “when [children are] ready...they’re ready to socialise and they’ll make friends”. Interestingly, only one practitioner spoke about moving children and staff members together permanently to new rooms.

All of the managers spoke at length about the importance of involving parents in transitions. Most practitioners reported that the transition would be up for discussion, with an element of comprise being used to find a plan that suited everyone. Another important element here was recognising that parents could have concerns about transitions, such as worries that their child was moving too soon or not soon enough. Indeed, some practitioners emphasised that transitions could also be challenging for parents: “it’s for the parent also to adjust”. With this
in mind, practitioners outlined the value of offering parents guidance, feedback, and reassurance. This process was not described as being didactic. Instead managers spoke about the need to be empathetic, non-judgemental, sensitive, and ultimately appreciative that “no two parents will be the same, just the way no two children are the same”.

Other practices included staying positive, cultivating a team effort and ensuring that staff members communicated and shared information: “filling [others] in on all the little things... when he gets tired he likes his blanket.” Overall, and even for one practitioner who conceded that she had “never really sat down and really thought about it”, managers were confident in their centre’s transition practices: “we’ve got it pretty good, we’ve got it spot on really”.

What helps

In addition to specific transition practices managers also referred to other, more general, factors that contributed indirectly to the success of transitions. For example, several managers spoke about the value of a child-centred approach: “our ethos is that the children are the centre of the place, and any decision that is made is a child-centred decision.” In keeping with this, practitioners emphasised the importance of knowing children well: “the ultimate thing for us is knowing the child and what works and what doesn’t.”

Flexibility was also mentioned frequently, in that although settings would have “a way of doing [things], there wouldn’t be hard and fast rules”. Practitioners also spoke about the importance of consistency, particularly in staffing: “because then there is a relationship with the children”. Another important aspect of provision emphasised was familiarity, which managers described as occurring naturally in the setting: “There’s a lot of comings and goings and different jobs that need doing so they would be very familiar with the faces”. Interestingly, familiarity extended beyond individuals to other features of the setting: “even the beds...are all the same in all the rooms”.

At a more specific level even general working practices were pinpointed as contributing to positive moves. Such practices included documentation and observation.: “the [developmental] folder moves with the child from room to room, which is fantastic...you can imagine...everything that has been captured in there”. The value of a keyworker approach was also noted, particularly in fostering the parent-centre relationship so that the parent is “not getting four messages”. Other practices mentioned included keeping the rules simple and providing opportunities for children to have their own space and possessions: “everybody has their own little cubby”. Lastly, two of the managers spoke about the benefits of keeping change to a minimum to avoid unnecessary transitions.

What gets in the way

Despite the large number of practices and provisions that were seen as contributing positively to transitions, managers also spoke about barriers to transitions. Here practitioners noted that too much change could overwhelm a child: “mum is due to give birth to a new baby...all those things happening at once are usually way too much for the child”. Another seemingly significant barrier described by managers was the tendency for parents’ own anxieties to become transferred to children: “Children are very intuitive....a child senses anxiety from the parent and it becomes a cycle.”

There was also a sense that there were a number of constraints that affected how well centres could support transitions. Indeed, references to such limitations were evident in the reality clauses that managers often tacked onto their descriptions of practice (e.g. “as much as you
can”) and doing one’s best: “because it’s not the ideal world, but...you aim for the best.” For one manager these constraints left a gap between theory and practice: “I know it’s a big thing with the bonding... and there is Bowlby and all this... but yeah putting it into practice”. Financial pressures were specifically identified by one manager as an unavoidable practical constraint: “if you have to pay a staff maybe you may have to move up a child before they’re ready”. Another constraint identified related to policy restrictions, specifically ratio requirements: “But obviously we have very strict ratios...that we have to stick to as well, so that would play a part in it”.

Early childhood matters

Although this theme was not always directly related to transitions, several practitioners were keen to stress the importance of early childhood. Indeed these references, such as those concerning the significant amount of time children spent in ECCE settings and the importance of this time as a critical developmental period: “because if you don’t get it right at this stage you will pay for it later on” seemed to frequently creep into interviews. In line with this, managers spoke about children’s ECCE experiences standing to them, such as in being a “great step in order to send them to national [primary] school”. Here managers emphasised how ECCE contributed to children’s holistic development (academic and socioemotional development). As part of these significant experiences some managers spoke about the importance of transitions, with one manager noting that it was “much bigger” than what she had studied at college. Overall, there was a sense that practitioners felt that ECCE was not getting the recognition it deserved: “I think it should be recognised, I mean it is a profession...we don’t just come in and mind the children.” And some managers emphasised how this undervaluing of ECCE was at complete odds with the quality of the service they provided.

Discussion

The primary aim of the present study was to develop a deeper understanding of ECCE transitions. To this end we consulted with a group of experienced ECCE managers who we considered as being expert informants. This consultation yielded a rich thematic framework on the nature of these moves, portraying transitions as times of challenge and opportunity, as well providing insight into the factors influencing transitions, direct and indirect features of provision that help support and impede effective moves, and the importance of early childhood generally.

Firstly, this research illustrates that transitions vary in part because of how settings are structured. Building on Garpelin and colleagues’ (2010) findings, that transitions look different in different settings, this study reveals marked variation in the number and nature of children’s transitions across settings. In some centres children faced only one transition, whereas in others children could embark on as many as five moves. Transitions also varied physically with some moves involving stepping into the room “next door” and others involving a jump to the room “upstairs”.

Consistent with previous research on children’s transitions within ECCE settings, this study found that moves involve considerable demands for children. More specifically, these results converge with early studies which highlight the challenge of separation from attachment figures (Cryer et al., 2005; Field et al., 1984), and more recent investigations which point to wider demands such as children’s adjustment to new environments, practitioners and peers, rules and expectations, routines, and levels of attention (Garpelin et al., 2010; Merry, 2007; Recchia & Dvorakova, 2012). These results endorse the suggestion that moving between
rooms involves the negotiation of different micro-communities (Garpelin et al., 2010; Recchia & Dvorakova, 2012). In this way the findings suggest that attachment theory alone cannot account for the demands of transitions. Instead our findings coincide with Recchia and Dvorakova’s (2012) suggestion that transitions warrant an eclectic theoretical approach that can account for the wider sociocultural dimensions of children’s experiences.

As with previous research, the findings of the present study suggest that moving on can be difficult and even daunting for some children. This ties in with children’s own reports about starting school (Dockett & Perry, 1999). Perhaps unsurprisingly then, managers reported that transitions could impact on children’s emotional and behavioural wellbeing, as children find their place in a new room. This relates to Merry’s (2007) findings that transitions can throw children’s sense of identity into flux, and those of Recchia and Dvorakova’s (2012) who found that some children were initially disorientated following moves. Interestingly, however, practitioners described transitions as being mostly unproblematic and even as a positive influence on development. These accounts diverge from the stakeholders in Merry’s (2007) study who portrayed transitions mostly as a stumbling block to development. Rather our findings provide preliminary support to those of Recchia and Dvorakova (2012) whose research suggests that transitions may act as a stimulus to development.

In discussing the factors that influence transitions practitioners referred to diverse ecological contexts. This is in keeping with the view that ecological approaches offer a suitable theoretical framework from which to understand transitions (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). At the centre of these contexts were children’s own individual characteristics such as their age, temperament/personality, and language and behavioural profiles. This corresponds with previous literature, which has implicated children’s age and personality as factors influencing their adjustment (Cryer et al., 2005; Field et al., 1984; Recchia & Dvorakova, 2012). Managers in this study also highlighted the impact of immediate environments on transitions. The significance of immediate environments coincides with associations between the quality of children’s rooms and their adjustment (Cryer et al., 2005), and the general view that children’s immediate physical surroundings can be an important mechanism in effective transitions (Weinberger, 1996). At a broader level managers described how policies relating to funding streams, maternity leave, and staffing schemes had brought a knock-on-effect for the continuity of ECCE provision. Such accounts lend support to recent suggestions that policies that affect children, even indirectly, need to be evaluated broadly so that unintended consequences can be identified (O’Donoghue-Hynes & Hayes, 2011).

Importantly these findings also detail a range of strategies used to support transitions. This catalogue is valuable because research on transition practices, outside of continuity of care, is incredibly rare. The breadth of practices described here coincides with, and extends upon, those recorded by Cryer and colleagues (2000). These strategies also converge with ideas of best practice that until now have lacked empirical investigation (see Adams & Parlakian, 2010; Daniel, 1993; Weinberger, 1996). For example, managers in this study emphasised the benefits of planning transitions around changes at home, which Daniel (1993) argued can avert a more traumatic reaction to transitions. Another salient practice described by participants was continuity in children’s peer relationships. This lends weight to previous findings on the benefits of peer support during transitions (Field et al., 1984; Garpelin et al., 2010; Recchia & Dvorakova, 2012).

Findings also point to barriers to effective transitions, another area that has received little empirical attention. These barriers were frequently alluded to in the reality clauses that fringed practitioners’ descriptions. Indeed, the findings suggest that there may be a divide between theory and practice. This division seems not to be the upshot of a lack of awareness, but rather the result of the various demands of centre-based provision. Among these
restrictions were ratio requirements and funding constraints. These reports provide further context that may help in explaining the occurrence of abrupt transitions (Cryer et al., 2005; Garpelin et al., 2010). They also hint towards the quality compromises that have been linked to market-led approaches to ECCE (see Moss, 2009; Penn, 2011, Sumsion, 2006).

Finally, and somewhat unexpectedly, given the topic of discussion, practitioners were keen to impart a strong message about the importance of early childhood. In many instances practitioners seemed frustrated with the lack of recognition that ECCE received. These views coincide with other commentaries of the Irish ECCE sector (Duignan, 2007). Although at first blush this finding may seem out of place in a discussion on transitions, this is not necessarily the case. Specifically, as macro level factors, such as societal values, lay the blueprint for other ecological systems (Sugarman, 2001), it follows that beliefs about early childhood may percolate through to the nature of ECCE provision.

Any interpretation of the study’s findings should be made in light of several limitations. Firstly, although this study aimed to include settings that represented different types of ECCE provision, notable categories, such as naíonraí (ECCE provision operated through the medium of Irish) are missing. Furthermore, centres were not selected to reflect variances in quality or geographical location. Thus, given the profile of the current participants, it seems possible that these settings are of a higher quality than the national average. The nature of a one-off consultation also limits insight on a phenomenon that is dynamic in nature. Transitions are likely to be best understood by consultations that are timed to coincide with their occurrence. Having said that, most of these managers planned and implemented transitions on an ongoing basis.

Despite the study’s limitations, its findings offer new and valuable directions for future research and practice. With these qualitative findings converging and extending on results from quantitative investigations (Cryer et al., 2005; Field et al., 1984), it seems appropriate to further pursue investigations concerning the relative contribution of individual and contextual factors to children’s adjustment. This research also provides a basis for extending this work to older preschool-aged children whose transitions were framed as no less important by the present sample. Such efforts should be carried out in tandem with qualitative studies drawing on the perspectives and expertise of parents and children, whose voices are all but absent from this literature. The catalogue of practices documented here also demands attention. Research is needed to determine their use in larger samples of professionals as well as their relative efficacy in supporting positive transitions. Nonetheless, there is no reason that these strategies should not contribute to immediate discussions of best practice. After all ECCE professionals are well positioned to determine whether these practices offer a useful extension to their current provision.

Conclusion

Although ECCE transitions are inevitable for many children, information on these changes is remarkably scant. This study attempted to tackle this knowledge gap by carrying out a qualitative consultation with a group of ECCE professionals. This consultation has highlighted that transitions may bring considerable demands for children, which can manifest both as challenges and opportunities. The nature of a transition appears to be determined by a variety of dynamic ecological factors, although their relative contribution remains unclear. Encouragingly, managers report using a wide range of practices to support positive experiences for children. However, there are certain practical constraints that appear to create boundaries on what is possible. These findings represent an important progression in
understanding transitions. They help in mapping a direction for future research and offer ‘food for thought’ for ECCE practitioners.

References


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