

SCHOOL READINESS: PERCEPTIONS OF OCCUPATIONAL THERAPISTS AND PRE- SCHOOL TEACHERS



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School Readiness: Perceptions of Occupational Therapists and Pre-School Teachers

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Abstract

As many of the skills that early childhood educators focus upon are also a focus in occupational therapy¹, the area of school readiness is paramount to the profession (Cronin and Mandich 2005). On-going debates surround the meaning of school readiness but emerging consensus recognises it is a multi-dimensional concept, which must reflect the child's personal readiness and consider contextual influences (Kiernan et al 2008).

This pilot qualitative study explored perceptions that occupational therapists² and pre-school teachers have of school readiness, and consequently implications for the professional practice of OT's. The aims were to ascertain the skills and abilities participants perceived as most important in preparation for school, explore collaboration between OT's and pre-school teachers and investigate the importance of social and emotional development for school readiness.

Four individual, semi-structured interviews were completed; two OT's and two pre-school teachers. Thematic analysis revealed three themes: starting school as a period of transition; importance of social and emotional development for school readiness and the experience of mainstreaming children. Findings suggest that both professions place emphasis on social and emotional development rather than academic knowledge. Play emerged as a context for child development. An ecological understanding of child development emerged as a consideration for practice.

¹ OT

² OT's

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Introduction

There are many times of transition during a child's life, including the transition from early childhood to school (Prigg 2002). This transition has been termed a 'critical period' for a child's academic and social development: a limited phase of a child's life in which certain environmental conditions or stimulation alongside biological potential, will influence adaptation (McBryde et al 2004). OT's frequently assist children with these transitions (Prigg 2002) however there is a lack of research exploring school readiness from an Irish OT perspective. This pilot study will hopefully elucidate potential issues that can be dealt with in future research.

As successful performance in school impacts children's adjustment and future well-being, school readiness is considered a serious social and political concern (Shonkoff and Phillips 2000). Increasing early childhood education and child care provision, advanced knowledge about early childhood development, and decisions about public spending, all oblige professionals working with young children, and their parents, to carefully consider school readiness (Denham 2006). Evidence suggests that socio-economic background, access to early education programmes, academic and social skills, gender and behaviour are all implicated (Kiernan et al 2008; McBryde et al 2004). The domains that tend to be emphasized in preschool curricula include cognitive, language, social-emotional, and academic skills (Gagnon and Nagle 2001). Based on research findings in relation to the factors involved in school readiness, the below research questions guided interviewing:

What skills and behaviours are important when preparing a child for school?

Do OT's and pre-school teachers collaborate with each other during this process?

How important are social and emotional competencies for a child transitioning to school?

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Literature Review

What is school readiness?

School readiness is difficult to define, owing to its basis in early psychological, developmental and learning theories regarding child skill acquisition (Rodger and Ziviani 2006). School readiness has been described as the foundation on which all later learning is built as children who develop well early in life are in a position to elicit positive experiences and interactions, facilitating their subsequent development and later life achievement (Heckman 2000). Understanding of school readiness has moved from a child-centred definition demanding demonstration of certain skills, to an ecological view in which transition to school is conceptualized with regard to context (McBryde et al 2004).

Much attention centres on the school readiness of vulnerable children, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds (Kiernan et al 2008). Doyle et al (2010) examined the relationships between school readiness and socio-demographic inequalities in a disadvantaged urban area of Ireland, concluding that child, family and environmental factors impact on school readiness, (2010). *Preparing for Life* is an early intervention/prevention programme taking place in disadvantaged communities of Dublin, working with families from pregnancy until their child is ready for school. This programme suggests that less than half the children in disadvantaged communities are school ready at age four or five resulting in problems later in childhood and adulthood (Northside Partnership 2005). Given OT's holistic understanding of environment and how this affects occupational participation, this current trend of Irish research is salient for family-centred practice and approaching school readiness in a manner that is inclusive of children and families from diverse socio-economic backgrounds.

Irish Early Education policy:

From an Irish context, *The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment* is the non-statutory organisation advising the Minister for Education and Skills on curriculum and assessment for education. Aistear (Framework for Early Learning developed by this organisation), identifies the goals of childhood as wellbeing, identify and belonging, communication and exploring and thinking (NCCA 2009). Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education, developed by the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education on behalf of the Department of Education and Skills outline the Principles of

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Quality, providing the context for quality practice in Early Childhood Care and Education in Ireland. The principles relating to the findings of this pilot study include the role of parents as the main educators of children; the impact of relationships on a child's development and learning; the impact of environment on wellbeing, learning and development and play as central to the well-being, development and learning of young children. The *National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People*, commissioned by the Department for Education and Skills (DOES 2011) states that some Irish children are not developing their numeracy and literacy skills as they should (p. 5). Ruairí Quinn, Minister for Education and Skills stated that "the introduction of these frameworks (Aistear and Síolta) in recent years... has resulted in new opportunities to focus on supporting early literacy and numeracy in the full range of ECCE³ settings" (2011). This suggests that early opportunities for development and learning are of current political concern.

Relevance of school readiness for occupational therapy

OT's frequently receive requests from parents and preschool teachers to assess school readiness (McBryde et al 2004) therefore it is a valid area for research. Physical health, cognition, language, and social and emotional development underpin school readiness (Anderson et al 2003). Aside from neurobiological factors, various environmental and contextual factors implicated in readiness for school include childcare experiences, (Long et al 2005; Connell et al 2002) family environment (Magnuson et al 2004) socio-economic status (Bierman et al 2009), relationships with caregivers, and physical and psychosocial exposures in the care-giving environment (Anderson et al 2003).

The domains that tend to be emphasized in preschool curricula include cognitive, language, social-emotional, and academic skills (Gagnon and Nagle 2001). Previous studies evaluating children's adjustment to school frequently measured academic skills, whilst social and emotional factors were often neglected (McBryde et al 2004). The critical importance of social and emotional skills in transitioning to school and for overall development is well documented (Bierman et al 2008; Hemmeter et al 2006). However "the disconnection between the importance of social and emotional domains of development, and their status within educational programming and assessment, has long been lamented" (Denham 2006). Irish primary

³ Early Childhood Care and Education

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school teachers considered social skills with peers the most important skills for 4-to 5-year olds (Ojala 2000). Some evidence suggests that parents prioritise academic skills over behaviour when determining their child school ready however parents also recognise the importance of social and emotional competencies (Diamond et al 2000). Research into the role of OT is essential in order to explore the profession's current practice and possible guidelines for future practice.

Ecological Perspective

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological view of child development became popular for analysing the context where children's learning and development takes place. OT's are particularly well trained to consider various contexts and an ecological perspective can be useful in examining the child within social, school and family contexts (Gagnon and Nagle 2001). Therapists must remain mindful of the impact on children today of "rapid change in family and community social structures, the economic realities for families, the perceived safety of and restricted free space in urban physical environments and the increasing use of virtual communication technologies" (Rodger and Ziviani 2006; p. 18). The "powerful association between child and youth outcomes and the characteristics of home, school and community environments" is well established (p. 80). OT's strive to enable children's participation and provide them with opportunities to engage in meaningful occupation (2006) therefore a comprehensive understanding of various environments influencing school readiness can advise clinical practice.

Consideration of ethnic backgrounds and parenting styles promotes understanding of child development within various cultural contexts (Wang and Phinney 1998). Josman et al (2010) concluded that children should be examined with reference to the "norms and the experience common in their culture" when the suitability of Western standardized assessments for cognitive performance among Palestinian and Israeli children starting school was explored (p. 662). As Ireland is becoming increasingly multicultural, clinicians must remain cognisant of the impact of cultural context on child development.

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Methods

Research Design and Data Analysis

Whilst “quantitative data deal with numbers, qualitative data deals with meanings” (Dey 2005 p. 10). This methodology seeks to understand the experiences and perspectives of participants, therefore was deemed appropriate for this study (Polgar and Thomas 2007). As there is little qualitative research exploring the understanding of school readiness from the perspective of both OT’s and pre-school teachers, it is hoped to illuminate potential areas for further research.

Ethical approval was granted by the Education and Health Sciences ethics committee at the University of Limerick in May 2011. This pilot study⁴ posed minimal ethical issues; however, participants were given the opportunity to withdraw from the process at any stage and were reassured that if any emotive or uncomfortable subject matter arose, the interview would terminate immediately.

A process of thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. This method identifies, analyses, and reports patterns i.e. themes within data (Braun and Clarke 2006). Themes capture something important about the data in relation to the research question and denote a level of patterned meaning within the data set (2006). Concepts within the data were coded, closely linked concepts were grouped into sub-themes and related categories were grouped together as themes (Holloway 1997). See appendix (iii) for a table illustrating how categories and themes were analysed.

Participants:

The OT participants were recruited through the AOTI database and pre-school teachers were recruited through www.childcare.ie an online childcare directory. Ethics was sought to interview up to ten participants; five OT’s and five pre-school teachers. However, only four participants were recruited due to time restrictions. See Table 1 for inclusion and exclusion criteria and table 2 for participant demographics.

⁴ Smaller version of a proposed research study, conducted to refine the methodology of the later one. It should be as similar to possible proposed study as possible, using similar subjects, the same setting, and the same techniques of data collection and analysis (Miller-Keane 2003)

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Table 1:

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion criteria
OT's <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • English speaking • Male or female • Currently working in a paediatric setting (or who have done so within the last two years) with children from the age of three upwards, • Minimum work experience of three years 	Those who could not speak English and who had worked for less than three years.
Pre-School Teachers: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Male or female (presently working or who have worked in a preschool within the last two years) • FETAC Level 5 qualification in childcare (or equivalent)/ Montessori training • Minimum work experience of three years 	As above

Table 2:

	OT's	Preschool Teachers
Years of Experience	7-25 years	10-20years
Age range	29-45	32-46

Participation was voluntary. Written participant information sheets were provided by the researcher, with additional questions answered, prior to obtaining consent. Information provided to prospective participants included details about the purpose of the study, data collection methods and measures to provide confidentiality of participants. A signed consent form was collected from the participant prior to interview.

The OT's interviewed worked with children from 0-6 years, in community based services with a variety of conditions such as cerebral palsy, learning difficulties, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, developmental coordination disorder, Autistic Spectrum Disorder and Down Syndrome. Both pre-school teachers had experience of children with diagnosed physical/sensory conditions. As qualitative research

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recognizes the multifaceted interpretations of human experience (Braun and Clarke 2006), pre-school teachers were interviewed to explore the multiple perspectives of stakeholders implicated in preparing children for school. Pre-school attendance is associated with school readiness (Kiernan et al 2008) and as OT's often collaborate with pre-school teachers in preparing for this transition (Prigg 2002) exploring the role of pre-school teachers in facilitating the transition to school is significant to OT practice.

Interview procedures and materials

A semi-structured interview guide was used to elicit participant's experiences and perspectives on school readiness. A structured interview was not chosen as they are often used to generate quantitative data and semi-structured, in-depth interviews are frequently used by health professionals (Whiting 2008). A semi-structured format was chosen to encourage participants to reflect freely on their experiences while providing specific prompts with regard to the topic. This format also allowed participants to identify and explore personal experiences (Patton 1990). Interviews lasted 30-50 minutes and took place at participant's place of work. Each participant was interviewed on one occasion. Interviews took place in a quiet room, one-to-one with the researcher. They were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim by the author. Although an interview guide was used in order to cover broad topics, a flexible approach was adopted in order to enable participants to elaborate on certain topics. In each case it was slightly different as a result of being semi-structured.

Trustworthiness, validity and reliability

Confidence in the validity of the research findings was enhanced by member checking, and the use of a field journal. A field journal was used reflexively to allow for critical reflection on events and to document thoughts, ideas, assumptions or reactions that may have influenced the interpretation of the data (Ulin et al 2005). To further enhance reflexivity, any biases thoughts and feelings on the research process were discussed during supervision. Pseudonyms have been used throughout in all logs, field journals, transcriptions and documentation.

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Findings:

Inductive, thematic analysis identified themes or groups of data from interview transcripts. Three main themes emerged: the role of OT's and pre-school teachers facilitating the transition to school; the importance of social and emotional competencies and the experience of mainstreaming children with disabilities.

Theme 1: Starting school as a period of transition

This theme reflected the perceived role that OT's and pre-school teachers play in assisting children with the challenges of transitioning to school. This involved role adjustment (to that of student) and adapting to a new environment with new demands and constraints. Participants identified helping children develop skills such as independence and social skills:

“Managing their belongings, interacting with the group...even being able to transition from home into school and being able to detach from Mum and Dad, to be their own little person” (OT1) “Open their own bag, open their own lunch box” (Pre-school Teacher 1) “Knowing how to sit in a circle and put up their hand and to ask a question; that is the basics” (Preschool Teacher 2).

Academic skill development was addressed as part of both therapy intervention and early education curriculum but was not prioritised as the most important aspect of readiness for school:

“Can he listen, can he sit, can he take turns, does he know when the bell rings what he needs to do, can he tidy his books” (OT2). “We do Maths and the Geography and History...we do do that every day but we wouldn't put emphasis on them; it's all about the independence” (Preschool Teacher 2)

Participants also described communicating effectively with parents as an important part of preparing a child to transition to school:

“The aim is we have overall observations of the group and strategies for Mum and Dad to try at home and to be implemented in school” (OT 1).

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“You have to become comfortable in your own skin before you can feel comfortable as a professional and I think parents need to feel that for them to really feel like they can engage with you; that’s their child so that’s the challenge really and I think that’s the therapy” (OT 2).

Theme 2: The importance of social and emotional development for school readiness

All participants described the emphasis placed on skills such as interacting with peers and making friends, regulating their emotions and managing the behavioural expectations of school:

“We’re trying to provide opportunity for social interaction (in reference to multi-disciplinary school readiness groups)...you can see the social part of it for the children who don’t know what to do in that situation, how do you be a friend?” (OT 1)

“For a child to accomplish developmental goals, to become secure in their own identity and their own sense of mastery, they need to feel secure in their belief in the relationships around them” (OT 2).

“The sociability is the main thing. If they don’t go into school with social skills, they’re going in with nothing” (Preschool teacher 1)

“Once they can come into school, hang up their coat, sit down at their table, interact with their friends and just get about their day” (Preschool teacher 2).

Starting school at five rather than four was also mentioned as a factor that influenced the school readiness of a child. Although the law says that every child must receive an education from the age of six, most children in Ireland begin school at four or five (DOES⁵). This concurs with evidence suggesting that teachers consider age an important factor for school readiness (McBryde et al 2004).

Theme 3: The experience of mainstreaming children with disabilities

Participants reported their experiences of working with children with disabilities and the strategies employed in order to integrate them into mainstream classes, and assist transition to school. Support in pre-school classes included assisting children with physical disabilities come to terms with their differences:

⁵ Department of Education and Skills

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“The one with cerebral palsy, we mix them around with everybody. He talks to them and makes friends with them. He finds it a little frustrating that he can’t sit on the floor and play as well as they can...but that’s part and parcel of it and you have to talk to him and deal with it” (Preschool teacher 1).

Support in the preschool classes also included providing a child with sensory processing difficulties with one to one attention and assisting him with regulating himself in the preschool classroom:

“I’ve prepared him, he doesn’t like noise and things...and just explaining to him that it ok when people make noise, that’s ok that’s how they talk that’s how they play” (Preschool teacher 2).

The OT’s described strategies employed such as trialling specialised seating and move and sit cushions in order to facilitate a child regulate themselves. A family systems approach was noted by one of the OT’s, i.e. focusing on the relationship a child has with their parents, and the relationship parents have separately as a couple. Helping a child with developmental difficulties identify what they are good at and *“to acquire that sense of ownership”* of a skill was also mentioned as part of an intervention with assisting children with mainstreaming.

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Discussion:

Social and Emotional Development

The purpose of this pilot study was to explore what participants felt were important skills and behaviours for children starting school. Findings reveal that attention, concentration, interaction with peers and independence were deemed important pre-requisites for starting school. Less stress was placed upon academic skill acquisition. Promoting self-efficacy was deemed important: *“they need that bit of independence because they go to school and if they’re too fussed around or things are done for them then they go to school and feel absolutely lost”* (Pre-school teacher 2). These findings correlate with evidence that underscores the significance of social and emotional development and how OT’s and other professionals should incorporate these factors into the clinical reasoning process when assisting children transitioning to school (McBryde et al 2004; Hemmeter et al 2006). This corresponds with literature reviewed and Irish early education policy framework placing emphasis on a child’s social and emotional development (ECCA 2009; Bierman et al 2008). It also gestures towards Irish research, exploring the views of pre-school teachers and primary school teachers in relation to transitioning to school, concluding that children most likely to experience a difficult transition are children with low self-esteem, those with difficulty concentrating, sitting still and listening, and those with behavioural problems (Kane and Hayes 2006). Social and emotional development during early childhood have been subject to research during the last decade and recognised as crucial for both concurrent and later well-being and mental health, as well as academic achievement (Huffman, Mehlinger, and Kerivan, 2000; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). A holistic understanding of school readiness is necessary and an ecological approach for therapists may be particularly useful when understanding the factors affecting children and families during the transition to school.

This area warrants further research, particularly from an Irish OT perspective in order to further explore the complex interaction between families, professionals and environment and the consequent impact on school readiness. The collaboration between various early childhood professionals is an area for future research as the disparity in the configuration of early intervention teams across Ireland results in incongruity in service provision and also with regard to the level of communication between stakeholders. This could be extended to further research exploring collaboration involving allied health professionals such as speech and language therapists and physiotherapists. As OT’s do not work in isolation, investigating whether all professionals

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involved with the care, education and therapy provision for young children provide services that are holistic and family-centred, is pertinent. As OT is particularly well-equipped to consider the impact of community, this underscores why the area of school readiness requires further research as the dynamic interaction between the developing child the communities which they live is of concern to the profession (Rodger and Ziviani 2006).

Play as a primary context for children's development

Play emerged as a primary context for children's learning and social development and as a therapeutic modality:

"You have to try and work with the senses to find the opportunity for that playful engagement" (OT2) *"Play is a very big part of it now...we have set play times. And free play. And you know inside and outside play"* (Preschool teacher 1) *"Play is really important to our school day. A child learns how to communicate with peers...and the social norms and rules that go along with that"*. (Preschool teacher 2)

In OT, the benefits of play to children are understood to be extensive. Play is believed to facilitate integration, survival and an understanding of a culture (Vandenberg and Kielhofner 1982). These findings suggest the importance of play for children's development, which aligns with policy guiding early childhood education in Ireland: play is viewed as "central to the well-being, development and learning of the young child" (NCCA 2009). Aistear proposes that the goals of childhood, named as "wellbeing, identify and belonging, communication, exploring and thinking are to be achieved through the contexts of play and caring relationships with adults" (2009).

Collaboration with parents and impact of home environment

Effective collaboration and communication between participants and parents emerged as a sub-theme during data analysis. This reflects current research trends as much has been written about best practice when working with children and families (Rodger and Ziviani 2006). It also highlights the importance of building collaborative relationships between OT's and pre-school teachers in order to best serve the child and their family (Prigg 2002). Therapists must remain cognisant that families social and cultural backgrounds and

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religious beliefs impact significantly on their values and expectations about family life (Stagnitti 2005), children's behaviour, activities, management and discipline (Rodger and Ziviani 2006). The *Early Start pre-school project* first set up in 1994 now caters for 1,650 children. It offers one year of pre-school to children in disadvantaged areas and is part of the action plan *Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools* set up by the DOES⁶. It espouses to counteract the effects of social disadvantage and cites that parental involvement is a core element of the programme (Citizens Information 2012). This suggests that school readiness, particularly in disadvantaged areas in Ireland is an issue of political and institutional concern. As occupational science espouses to facilitate occupational participation and challenge occupational deprivation, conceptualized as “a state in which a person or group of people are unable to do what is necessary and meaningful in their lives due to external restrictions” (Whiteford 2000 p. 200) the profession must endeavour to work with communities and families to enable their occupational potential to flourish in meaningful, sustainable ways.

Occupational Transition

All participants described their role in facilitating children transitioning to primary school. Approaches ranged from encouraging social skills and peer interaction, therapists advising teachers regarding movement breaks and where a child sits in class to promoting independence and self-help skills. When comparing data from pre-school teachers and OT's, it emerged that commonalities existed in the importance placed on functional skills, rather than academic knowledge, which was expected. The current reduction in resources within the HSE⁷ proved a significant issue for OT's rather than impacting directly on pre-school teachers. Both preschool teachers experienced varying levels of contact with OT's ranging from limited input regarding seating to frequent pre-school visits where the therapist developed a school programme for children with sensory processing difficulties. These findings cannot be generalised as a small sample size was used, however as early intervention teams are configured differently across the country, collaboration between all relevant professionals is an area of practice that merits additional research.

⁶ Department of Education and Skills

⁷ Health Service Executive

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Mainstreaming

The findings of this study reflect participant's experiences of facilitating children with special needs attend mainstream pre-school and primary school. For young children with special needs and their families, entering these new environments may be particularly challenging because of the complexity of the transition process (Myers 2008; Hanson et al 2000). Greater expectations result from this transition such as greater emphasis on academics and "mastered social skills" (Myers 2008 pp: 213). Harbin et al (2007) discuss how an ecological approach depicting transitions for young children with disabilities are influenced by the "complex interactions of child and family characteristics as well as the multiple systems at community and state level in which children and families are embedded" (p. 2). OT's knowledge of activity analysis and environmental adaptation make them valuable team members who have the skills to anticipate possible problems in the next environment and "work in partnership with families and other professionals to identify solutions before the transition" (Myers et al 2011). Although this study explores participant's experiences of mainstreaming, which included adopting various approaches (biomechanical, compensatory, psycho-dynamic), further research from an Irish perspective employing a larger sample size could expand on these findings and investigate challenges to mainstreaming and the processes involved between all stakeholders planning this transition. Exploring frames of reference employed by therapists when assisting a child with mainstreaming also warrants further study.

Implications for practice

OT's are recommended to adopt a broader frame of reference, rather than a child-based approach when assisting parents and teachers make decisions regarding school readiness (McBryde et al 2004). Perhaps clinicians need to question the approach they take when preparing a child for transition; a child-based approach, or a more ecological approach encompassing the importance of the connections between various setting and communities in the life of a child (Rodger and Ziviani 2006). Thus, acknowledging the factors that influence a child's performance are variable and influenced by the culture and context in which a child functions (Meisels, 1999, as cited in Rodger and Ziviani 2006 pp: 227). Rodger and Ziviani (2006) warn that basing educational or therapeutic services around a framework of school readiness where school transition is the child's responsibility is "fraught with danger" (p: 229). It is also imperative that schools adopt an

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approach that accommodates individual differences, rather than “expecting children to enter school with homogenous skills” (McBryde et al 2004).

Play has been conceptualized as a child’s main occupation (Rodger and Ziviani 2006). It is also recognized as a universal right for every child in the *United Nations convention on the rights of the child* (www.un.org). For therapists the context in which play occurs and how to facilitate meaningful and purposeful occupation through play should be considered. Implications for practice include the use of play as a therapeutic modality and the form, function and meaning of play within Irish modern society. The physical, cultural, and social environments in which children are growing up has changed and this influences play practices. Within modern society, children often have physically less play space at home and social issues currently facing children such as the impact of changing family structure and delayed parenting all impact children engaging in their primary occupation: play (Rodger and Ziviani 2006). This has repercussions for the utilisation of play within intervention and whether it is socially and culturally meaningful to families and children.

Although this research did not interview parents in relation to their perceptions of school readiness, their perceptions have potentially the biggest influence on decision making regarding sending a child to school (McBryde et al 2004). This deserves further research exploring parent’s expectations and perceptions regarding school readiness. Families and children have more positive transition experiences and likely achieve better outcomes in the pre-school environment when professionals involved work in partnership with families throughout the process (Harbin et al 2007). Significantly, a lack of social support for parents is associated with an adverse impact on children’s cognitive and socio-emotional and behavioural functioning (Sameroff et al 1997). Consequently, the implications for OT practice include how and if family-centred practice is delivered, is it being done effectively with collaboration between all stakeholders, whilst respecting the uniqueness of each family unit accordingly? OT has a responsibility to promote social justice (Townsend 1993) therefore the profession can advocate on behalf of clients and their families to promote awareness of the various factors impacting a child’s transition to school and encourage a holistic approach to facilitating occupational participation.

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Limitations of study

These findings must be interpreted tentatively and cautiously as this was a small scale pilot study. If the study was conducted with a larger sample size, more in-depth conclusions may have been drawn. On reflection, a more experienced interviewer may have gained greater depth of information. Participants were interviewed on only one occasion possibly limiting the depth of the data obtained. For future studies of this nature, additional interviews with participants may provide greater opportunity to further explore issues arising from data as they are analysed. The findings of this study were not intended to be generalised as it was a pilot study. The themes and sub-themes identified can be used to develop larger research projects with similar aims to validate and expand on these findings. As mentioned previously, a study exploring the role of other professionals such as physiotherapists and speech and language therapists as well as OT's could yield more far-reaching data, leading to implications for all professionals involved. Perhaps a mixed methods methodology may yield more comprehensive and richer data that could be generalised further.

Conclusion:

The purpose of this pilot study was to explore perceptions of school readiness, from OT's and pre-school teacher perspectives. When describing their perceptions of school readiness and their role in preparing children for school, participants described the emphasis placed upon social and emotional development rather than academic knowledge. Various approaches were taken to encourage peer interaction and promotion of children's self-efficacy by encouraging independence in their daily occupations. Other areas implicated in preparing children for school were fine and gross motor skills and employing compensatory and adaptive strategies for children with specific disabilities. Mainstreaming emerged as a process that all participants were involved in. This warrants further research as the configuration of services in Ireland are incongruous, and more comprehensive research can inform policy formation around this issue.

Play emerged as a primary context for children's development, and as a therapeutic modality in accordance with Irish early education policy and research regarding young children's development (NCCA 2009; Shonkoff and Phillips 2000). The utilisation of play within OT warrants further research as it is often used within interventions but there is scope for further research exploring in-depth how OT's use play. An ecological perspective is advised when conceptualizing school readiness and OT's unique focus on the

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dynamic between person occupation and environment places the profession in a valuable position when assisting children and families transitioning to school.

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Appendix: (i) *Volunteer Information Sheet*



To whom it may concern

My name is Michelle Kennedy and I am currently studying for an MSc in OT at the University of Limerick. I am hoping to carry out a research project in the area of school readiness and hope to look at what pre-school teachers and paediatric OT's perceive as social readiness, in order to begin school.

For the purposes of my research I am hoping to recruit a preschool teacher to conduct a private interview that will last approximately 30-60 minutes on various areas of school readiness such as cognitive/intellectual development, physical development, personal-social development, emotional development, temperament and behaviour. The interview can take place wherever the volunteer is comfortable with. A quiet location would be preferable just to ensure that tape recording quality will not be disrupted.

The interview will be tape recorded. A week after the interview a short summary of the interview will be sent to you to check through, if you wish.

There are no risks associated with taking part in this study. All of the information you provide as part of the research study will be kept confidential at all times. Your name or identifying information about you will not be reported in any publications arising from this research. There is no compensation or payment for taking part in the study.

Taking part in this study is completely voluntary and everyone is completely free to refuse to participate

Participants can withdraw or stop the study at any time without any consequences. You can simply contact (insert name of supervisor) via email or phone and say you don't want to continue with the research study. No questions will be asked.

Please contact (insert name of supervisor) if you have any questions about this study

OT Department, University of Limerick, 061 *****

If you have any other concerns about this study please contact Chairman Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee University of Limerick Tel (061) *****

Kind Regards

Michelle Kennedy

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Appendix (ii) *Interview Question Guide*



Q1-6 adapted from McBryde et al (2004)

Q1: In terms of cognitive/ intellectual development, how do you determine whether a child is academically ready for school? E.g. knowing letters, numbers and colours. How important do you feel this aspect of development is in preparing a child for school?

Q2: In relation to gross motor skills e.g. balancing, hopping, skipping, running, ball skills etc, what do you feel is “school-ready”? How important do you feel this aspect of development is in preparing a child for school?

Q3: In the area of personal-social development, e.g. social skills with peers (playing, cooperating, taking turns) what do you feel is school ready? How important do you feel this aspect of development is in preparing a child for school?

Q4: In terms of emotional development, (emotional maturity, e.g. ability to separate from parents, confident, independent) how relevant is this aspect of development in relation to school readiness?

Q5: Do you feel temperament (i.e. ability to persist with tasks) effects whether a child is ready for school?

Q6: How important do you feel behaviour is (i.e. ability to concentrate, pay attention, sit still) when assessing whether a child is ready to start school?

Q7: Is there any one aspect or factor that you feel is most important for preparing a child for school, within the preschool environment?

Q8: Do you feel there is an academic stress on early childhood education?

Q9: What role do you feel play has in a child’s social development? Do you feel the Early Childhood Care and Education scheme has effected the provision of childcare and subsequent school readiness of pre-schoolers?

Q10: What role do you feel OT plays (or could play) in the process of assessing whether a child is school ready?

Reference: McBryde, C. Ziviani, J. Cuskelly, M. (2004) 'School readiness and factors that influence decision making', *OT International*, 11(4), 193-208.

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Appendix (iii): *Data analysis*

Data analysis of theme one: *Starting school as a period of transition*

Sub-theme	Coded Categories
Preparing the child for school	Identifying strategies for home and school Fine motor development Gross motor development Trialling assistive/adaptive equipment Assist with social and emotional skill development Attention and regulation Development of each child individual Change of roles and expectations
Collaboration with parents	Therapeutic rapport with parents Establishing their trust Respecting the dynamic of the family Parental expectations of school readiness

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Data analysis of theme two: *The importance of social and emotional development for school readiness*

Sub-theme	Coded Categories
Social and emotional skills	<p>Ability to make friends</p> <p>Ability to detach from parents</p> <p>Building confidence and sense of self</p> <p>Learning social norms and role expectations</p> <p>Being able to manage their belongings</p> <p>Assessing management techniques for child's needs</p> <p>Psychotherapeutic approach</p> <p>Following direction</p>
Play as a primary context for child development	<p>Promoting engagement through play</p> <p>Play as a therapeutic modality</p> <p>Implications of modern environments on play practices</p> <p>Engage through fun</p> <p>Developing social skills through play</p> <p>School readiness skills matching first play skills</p>

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	<p>Gender identity forming through play</p> <p>Facilitating language development</p> <p>Learning social norms</p> <p>Learning communication skills through play</p>
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Data analysis of Theme 3: *The experience of mainstreaming children with disabilities*

Sub-theme	Coded Category
Physical disabilities	<p>Realization of difference</p> <p>Trialling equipment</p> <p>Acceptance with peers</p>
Sensory and developmental disabilities	<p>Assisting with regulation skills</p> <p>Negotiating varying sensory environments</p> <p>Dyspraxic children appearing socially awkward</p> <p>Play as a modality for engaging the senses</p> <p>Enabling parent-child relationship through play</p> <p><i>Floortime</i> DIR approach as frame of reference</p>

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	<p>with this client group</p> <p>Expectations of school readiness different for these children</p> <p>Grading</p>
Impact of political, institutional and economic environment	<p>Cut in resource hours and SNA hours</p> <p>Inconsistency and inequity of service provision</p> <p>Assessment of need process</p> <p>Parental anxieties</p> <p>Models of engagement btw parents and professionals</p> <p>Free childcare places</p>