

## A Bioecological Perspective on Educational Transition: Experiences of Children, Parents and Teachers

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### Abstract

*This paper explores the potential of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model of human development [1] as a framework for theory and research in education. It draws on other well-known conceptual approaches, particularly the sociological theories of Pierre Bourdieu, investigating points of theoretical enhancement and synthesis. This culminates in the development of eight propositions for a bioecological framework which are then tested using data from a qualitative examination of two key educational transitions, pre-school to primary and primary to secondary school. Using qualitative methodologies, this research explores perspectives of children, teachers and parents in a case-study primary school in Ireland, the three pre-schools that feed into it, and the two secondary schools into which it feeds. The data yield the key finding that relationships are crucial to positive transitions, perhaps even more important than the contexts in which they take place. Other findings emphasise the impact of diversity (cultural, socio-economic, etc), specific skills for traversing new settings, the importance of time, both personal and socio-historical, and the vital nature of supports for transition, locally and at policy-level. The propositions of the bioecological framework are supported by the data, indicating that it provides an appropriate conceptual basis for future work. The paper concludes with recommendations for policy, research and practice.*

### Bronfenbrenner and Beyond: A Bioecological Framework

Early studies of children tended to research the individual in isolation, paying little attention to the dynamic impact of contextual factors. This changed with the growth of ecological approaches, and more recent research has been framed within wider socio-cultural perspectives. Central to this has been the work of Urie Bronfenbrenner [1, 2]. This paper draws on a doctoral study [3] incorporating theoretical enhancements from a range of psychological, sociological and educational sources into Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model to create a 'bioecological framework' for use in future research and practice. Here we focus on synergisms between bioecological theory and the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu [7; 8]. Bronfenbrenner called for bioecological theory to be confronted with real-world data to test its predictions, and this paper applies a bioecological lens to research on educational transition. There is increasing international recognition of the importance of transitions [9; 10], and much of this work is framed within bioecological approaches. In fact, Brooker [10] refers to Bronfenbrenner as "the 'father' of transitions studies" (p. 5). This paper theorises the findings of research into educational transition using the enhanced bio-ecological framework, and tests its key propositions against the real-world data generated.

Originally, Bronfenbrenner [2] located the child within four contextual systems called *microsystem*, *mesosystem*, *exosystem* and *macrosystem*. Later, recognising the influence of time, he included a fifth system, the *chronosystem*. While the idea of nested systems provided a useful visual guide to development, Bronfenbrenner identified what he called "the failure of success": having argued that psychology failed to acknowledge contexts of development, he now found "a surfeit of studies on 'context without development'" [4, p. 288]. To foreground the agency of the child, he retitled his model the *bioecological model of human development* [5]. In his later work, Bronfenbrenner attempted to uncover mechanisms through which genetic codes (genotypes) are transformed into observable characteristics and behavior (phenotypes), making a critical distinction between concepts of 'environment' and 'process'. *Process* (P) encompasses particular forms of interaction between children and the people, objects and symbols in their environment, and is posited as the primary mechanism producing development. Its power varies as a function of *person* (P) characteristics, of environmental *contexts* (C) and *time* periods (T) in question. Thus, the dynamic Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) model provides a framework for understanding that human development is synergistic and interdependent, unfolding through a network of shared relationships, or 'linked lives'.

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Bronfenbrenner argues that children's characteristics prompt reactions from others, and those reactions impact on future development, in turn prompting further reactions. This dynamic interaction between children's traits and their experiences, and its influence on the people they become, is known as 'internalisation'. Bioecological perspectives have much in common with Bourdieu's sociological viewpoint; the individual acts in context and in turn *embodies* the micro and macro environment, so experiences and context become part of the person. This happens at individual level and at the level of broader culture, so that specific cultures develop individual ways "of standing, speaking, walking, and thereby of feeling and thinking" [7, p. 70].

Knowledge and skills are thus developed that influence children's functioning and Bronfenbrenner refers to these as *resource characteristics*. Some writers using bioecological approaches portray resource characteristics as applicable across contexts, but knowledge and skills needed in one setting may differ from those required in another [6]. A bioecological framework foregrounds diversity, and the futility of expecting all people to behave in the same way, regardless of individual experiences. Bronfenbrenner shows that internalisation may dictate the future choices made, but we argue that the theories of Bronfenbrenner and Bourdieu stem from a joint freedom-determinism base, seeing children as simultaneously in control of their behaviour, but also constrained by the circumstances in which they find themselves [6]. Even very talented children may not achieve without access to resources (in Bourdieu's [8] terms *capital*) like supportive relationships and positive environments.

This synthesis of theoretical perspectives has led us to develop eight propositions regarding children's development, and we suggest that they represent an appropriate framework for theorising future research, policy and practice:

1. Relationships (with people and with 'objects and symbols') are key to human development.
2. There is a bi-directional synergy between children and the contexts in which they develop, mediated by significant relationships experienced.
3. Diversity is a key feature of what it means to be human, so it is senseless to expect standardisation of outcomes for children.
4. The course of human development is neither completely free nor completely pre-determined. Human beings are active agents within a narrow range of choices.
5. Children's development is inextricably linked with the context in which it occurs.
6. Resilience is reliant on complex interactions of protective and risk factors in synergy with children's personal characteristics.
7. Impacts of relationships and contextual experience on development is strongly influenced by the time of life and socio-historical period during which they occur.
8. Policy based on 'zeitgeist' preoccupations and values can have significant impacts on children.

## Methodology

This research used qualitative methods, specifically interviews, focus-groups, observation and text analysis, to examine educational transition from the perspectives of children, parents and teachers in a case-study primary school in Ireland, its three 'feeder' preschools and the two secondary schools into which it feeds. All participants (n=163) were involved in transition, from preschool to primary school, or from primary to secondary school.

## Findings: Testing the Framework

Our data support a bioecological conceptualisation of development, characterised by complexity, synergisms and multi-directional influences, negotiated by active children with individual needs and strengths. Examination of relevant factors in isolation may yield limited understanding. For example, particular difficulties were identified for Traveller<sup>3</sup> boys in transitioning to secondary school, illustrating interaction between gender and culture. Relationships were also highlighted in fostering resilience for children and their families at challenging times like transition [10; 11]. This was illustrated by progress on behavioural difficulties through caring relationships between children and teachers, and mutually supportive relationships between teachers and parents. Also relevant was the valuable input of friends and siblings during transition. Proactive relationship-building with families by schools and preschools was identified as crucial in preventing difficulties.

Overall, participants described mutual respect between home and school, supporting positive experiences of transition; a vibrant real-world illustration of process in the meso-system. The power of

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<sup>3</sup> Travellers are a minority ethnic group in Ireland. For further information see [www.paveepoint.ie](http://www.paveepoint.ie).



the meso-system was demonstrated by 'linkages' created by extracurricular activities, easing transition from one micro-system to another. Disjuncture within the meso-system was evident in differences between educational levels, with new systems and climates noted. The importance of contextual supports was also identified, with extensive provision made by schools and preschools for transition and parental involvement. The strong relationships established may not have been so effective without the contexts within which they could flourish.

Participants indicated that a good quality preschool could influence whether a child was perceived as competent and 'school-ready' or not; these characteristics were not seen solely as internal to children, but rather as a function of interaction between person factors and experiences of education to date. Teachers noted how academic experiences could be incorporated into children's self-efficacy beliefs and so predict future behaviour, and the majority of children reported strong self-efficacy beliefs that had survived transition. The bioecological framework would explain this by noting the extensive supports and nurturing relationships available to children in this cohort, and how the resultant positive experiences had been internalised, forming the basis of self-efficacy beliefs. Conversely, the internalisation of negative experience was shown in parents' low self-efficacy beliefs regarding education. Individual choices and behaviours, such as parents' decisions on whether to become involved with children's schooling, were dependent on the contexts in question and the relationships developed within them. In many cases, participants were quite clear that without the supports available, they would not have had the confidence to get involved. The transformative effects of this were movingly underlined by parents' increased confidence in supporting their children's educational potential, and by parents who went on to achieve qualifications themselves. These benefits to parents are a good example of a key tenet of the exo-system – children are not just influenced by the world, but rather this influence is bi-directional. The data yield a picture of participants as active agents within a narrow range of choices, defined by complex interactions between personal characteristics and the environments and relationships in which they find themselves.

The data also supported the concept of the chrono-system. School-starting age was seen as predictive of how well children managed primary school, with concerns raised about how well four-year-olds could cope. This is a good example of bioecological synergisms, since school-starting age was seen as interactive with gender – participants felt that four-year-old girls might cope but four-year-old boys would struggle. Equally, adult participants noted how different education is now as compared to their childhood experiences. The increasing involvement of grandparents was a point of note, as were changing demographics and increased diversity in Irish society. Potential problems related to recession were also highlighted, with financial worries for parents when children start in a new school, and limited funding available for support services for children and families during transition.

The current policy focus on transition in Ireland appears to be effective, albeit with ongoing concerns around curriculum discontinuity. Participants were negative in their evaluation of Irish early childhood education policy, with preschool teachers describing the sector as over-regulated and under-supported. Particularly, participants felt that quality initiatives in Ireland emphasise context, whereas this cohort supported a bioecological perspective in foregrounding process and the centrality of relationships.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

This research has supported the eight propositions of the bioecological framework, notably the idea that relationships (with objects and symbols but more importantly with other people) are key to children's development. The impact of diversity was also confirmed. The power of process to overcome potential barriers imposed by person and context was highlighted, supporting bioecological ideas on internalisation of experience, and contextual influences on resilience. Understanding of development as inextricably linked to the context in which it occurs was illustrated by the value placed on supports for both parental involvement and educational transition. Participants also located experiences of educational transition within the chrono-system, regarding both time in the life-course and socio-historically, and illustrating the impact of contemporary policy on children and families. Thus, we propose that the bioecological framework provides an appropriate conceptual basis for future work. Particularly, we recommend that research, policy and practice take account of diversity, since unicultural approaches may exacerbate pre-existing inequalities. Equally, we must recognise and respond to the understanding that positive relationships can change lives. As Bronfenbrenner [2, p. 53] tells us, "no society can long sustain itself unless its members have learned the sensitivities, motivations and skills involved in assisting and caring for other human beings".



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