

# Alana

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Heino Schonfeld

# Welcome...

...to this edition of the newsletter of the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education. Much has happened since the previous newsletter of December 2005. Budget 2006 presented us with some promising innovations in the way early childhood services are administered and significant public investment commitments.

A number of important reports as far back as the White Paper on Early Childhood Education *Ready to Learn* (1999) and as recently as the NESF report No. 31, *Early Childhood Care and Education*, recommended better integration of policy development in the area of early childhood services. The Government, in the wake of Budget 2006, established a new *Office of the Minister for Children* (OMC). The OMC is an integral part of the Department of Health and Children and will focus on harmonising policy issues that affect children in areas such as early childhood care and education. Staff working in the area of education for early years in the Department of Education and Science, will be co-located in the OMC, to provide a joined-up government approach to the development of policy and delivery of services. The concept of "co-location" is a novel one and will have to mean more than just proximity of offices to lead to effective co-operation at government level.

Also in response to recommendations in the aforementioned reports, the Department of Education and Science established an Early Years Education Policy Unit. Further details of the function and remit of this new unit are presented in this issue of the newsletter.

Arguably the most interesting and strategically most significant commitment in Budget 2006 is the proposed *Training Initiative* resulting in the training of 17,000 additional qualified childcare workers by the end of 2010. This initiative should begin to provide a human resource infrastructure to address the necessary improvement in the quality of early childhood care and education provision.

Another pillar of quality improvement is the development of effective practice frameworks such as our own *Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education*. Following its public launch on May 30th this important document is now available to all interested parties and we look forward to engage with you in a fruitful debate about *Síolta*.

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If you have any comments or suggestions for this newsletter, please contact the Information Officer at 01 8842113 or by email at [peadar.cassidy@spd.dcu.ie](mailto:peadar.cassidy@spd.dcu.ie).

Special thanks to Áine Nolan and DCULS for their work on the Irish translation of the Alana Newsletter.

Heino Schonfeld,  
Director



# Síolta Launched

For more information on *Síolta*, check out the website at [www.siolta.ie](http://www.siolta.ie)

The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education was launched on May 30th at the Mansion House in Dublin by the Minister for Children, Brian Lenihan TD. Entitled *Síolta*, the framework was devised and published by the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE).



early education experiences for children. CECDE was established by the Department of Education and Science in 2002, and developed *Síolta* in collaboration with a consultative committee of over 50 organisations representing the early childhood care and education sector in Ireland, including Barnardos, the Children's Rights Alliance, the National Children's Office and the National Parents Council.

Speaking at the launch, the director of the CECDE, Heino Schonfeld said, "For the first time in Ireland, *Síolta* provides a common set of quality standards across a diverse range of settings for children aged birth to six years, such as full day care, sessional services, childminding and the infant classes of primary schools. *Síolta* is designed to assist all those concerned with early education to provide the best possible quality of care and education to young children. The experiences of children in their formative years have a profound

influence on their lives; therefore quality of experience is very important. *Síolta* also reflects contemporary Ireland, recognising her cultural and linguistic heritage, but also economic and demographic change."

*Síolta* addresses a broad range of issues including the rights of the child, parental involvement, curriculum, professional practice, and the importance of play. The programme has been developed using extensive national and international research into the essential elements of quality





“Síolta’s publication is a very welcome development”

Minister for Children, Brian Lenihan TD

Speaking at the launch, Minister for Children Brian Lenihan TD said, “The development of *Síolta*, as a national quality framework for early childhood care and education, represents a significant realisation of the policy commitments made in the government White Paper on Early Childhood Education, *Ready to Learn*. *Síolta*’s publication is a very welcome development.”

The launch was attended by children who assisted in the research and production of the document as well as invited guests from the early education and care sector.

Special thanks to Averil Rafferty and the children of Ozanam House for helping make the day very memorable.

## Early Years Provision for Children from Birth to Six Years with Special Needs in Two Geographical Areas in Ireland

Special Education Department  
St Patrick’s College  
Drumcondra  
Dublin 9

### Research Commissioned and Funded by the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education

The key questions addressed in this study concerned the nature of the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) provision available in Ireland to children aged between birth and six years. The study focused particularly on provision available to children with special needs and the extent to which this matched factors identified in the literature as characterising effective early intervention for these children. In the study, children with special needs are defined as those who have disabilities and/or those who are at risk for reasons of socio-economic disadvantage. This definition is drawn from the Report of the Special Education Review Committee (SERC, 1993) which includes in a definition of special needs, all those whose disabilities and/or circumstances prevent or hinder them from benefiting adequately from the education which is normally provided for children of the same age.

This research study is concerned with examining the nature, extent and quality of provision for children with disabilities, and for children who are at risk for reasons of socio-economic disadvantage, in the Irish context. The study consists of a review of the national and international literature on early intervention and an in-depth survey of provision in two geographical regions of the country. The specific objectives of the study are:

- (i) To review the literature with a view to identifying the factors which contribute to effective early intervention for children with disabilities and for children who are at risk for reasons of socio-economic disadvantage.
- (ii) To document provision in two geographical areas of Ireland and to provide insights in relation to the nature and quality of that provision in the context of the factors for effective practice identified in the literature review.
- (iii) To make recommendations in relation to future policy, research and practice in early years provision for this population of children.

The full report is now available on the CECDE website at [www.cecde.ie](http://www.cecde.ie)

The executive summaries of this report and those of our other research projects will be published in due course.

# Parental Involvement in the Early Education of Traveller Children

By Anne Boyle



This research investigates the concept of parental involvement in education in order to establish what type of involvement can best meet the needs of preschool Traveller children and their parents.

It is argued that the rights of parents are acknowledged and the effectiveness of school is enhanced when parents and schools work together in a partnership based on equality and dialogue.

Children learn the social norms and cultural practices of their community within the home before they move into the education system, and the family is confirmed as the natural and primary educator of the child in Bunreacht na hÉireann (1937). Hence, parental involvement in school would seem to be a natural continuation of the parents' constitutional rights.

As well as being a right, it is argued that parental involvement improves the effectiveness of schools. Various studies, including meta-analyses by Jeynes (2004, 2005), confirm the gains that parental involvement can provide. The importance of involving parents in their children's education is emphasised in policy documents going back over a decade (e.g. DES 1995, 1998, 2003) and parental involvement has been central to initiatives such as the Home-School-Community-Liaison Scheme and the Early Start Preschool Programme.

Of particular interest for this study is the gap that can exist between home and school. Parents are not a homogeneous group and their engagement with education is "raced, classed and gendered", as noted by Vincent and Martin (2005). Some parents do not possess the kind of cultural capital (Bourdieu) required for school success. This can be seen with Traveller children,

whose culture is not reflected in the school and who do not benefit from education to the same extent as their non-Traveller peers. Increased parental involvement can lead to improved cultural recognition for Travellers and so to improved outcomes.

The effectiveness of school is enhanced when parents and schools work together in a partnership based on equality and dialogue.

Involvement can take many forms. Drawing on concepts from Arnstein (1969) and Edwards and Knight (1997), a two dimensional map has been developed on which different approaches to parental involvement can be situated. The vertical axis ranges from minimal to maximal levels of activity while the horizontal axis ranges between serving a school agenda or serving a parent agenda.

Where there is a low level of activity, involvement is merely token. Parents may be given the illusion of involvement, but are really excluded. Where there is a reasonable level of activity, it is necessary to establish who is in control, the school or the parent. Neither extreme seems appropriate. If parents are coopted to the school's agenda, there may be gains for the child but at the cost of parents losing autonomy. If parents set the agenda, teacher expertise and pedagogic knowledge is set aside and education is treated as a commodity.

It is argued that the desired approach is where parents are equal partners with the school, engaged in non-coercive dialogue (Habermas, 1984) where all can contribute as equals.

Preschool, as the child's first contact with education outside the home, is an ideal site for such involvement. Traveller preschools are community-based and culturally sensitive settings which do not possess the formality or complexity of larger schools. There is significant scope to bring teachers and parents together in partnership to deliberate and work together for the benefit of the child.

Field research for this study is mainly qualitative, involving dialogue with parents, teachers and others in an attempt to uncover beliefs, hopes and fears concerning current and prospective practices. A qualitative, interactive and reflexive approach to research is particularly appropriate when a researcher from the majority community conducts research with members of an ethnic minority, "to create space for dialogue across difference" (Smith, in Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). This study assesses the nature and extent of parental involvement currently within the Traveller preschools. Further, by analysing current practice in the light of the literature, it aims to develop recommendations for best practice. Initial exploratory focus group and interview research with parents and teachers has confirmed their openness to increased levels of parental involvement.



Carmel Brennan

# Partners in Play: How Children Develop and Support Participation in Sociodramatic and Fantasy Play

By Carmel Brennan

The research focuses on how children both negotiate and support participation in socio-dramatic and fantasy play and proposes that (1) participation in social activity is both the medium and outcome of learning (Vygotsky 1978; Rogoff 1990; Lave and Wenger 1991), and (2) that socio-dramatic and fantasy play provide a rich context for children to negotiate and develop participation in multiple roles and contexts.

Play, because of its symbolic nature (Piaget 1965/32; Vygotsky 1967/1976) offers a window for the study and analysis of children's understanding of the world and as James et al (1998/2001) argue *'to glimpse the ways in which processes of cultural reproduction are taking place'*. The interpretive analysis seeks to explicate how children jointly reconstruct social structures and identities towards and through participation in pretend play.

## Methodology

The approach is ethnographic, providing rich thick description (Geertz 1973) of the experiences of a specific group and conducted through (1) participant observation (with video) and consultation with children and (2) detailed analysis of everyday interactions and interpretations within play (Atkinson and Hammersley 1994). The empirical data consists of play episodes, collected mainly in the first term of the playgroup year, involving 20 children from 2-5 years.

## Theoretical Position

The research is located within a sociocultural perspective and consequently a starting point in the thesis is to regard children as social actors with an innate drive to learn a culture, to share thinking with others (Stern 1977; Trevarthen 1998). Human

learning is situated in the social and cultural context in which individuals live and is mediated through the institutional and symbolic system of that society (Vygotsky 1978; Wertsch 1985). Children's play life, like all their experiences, exists in a responsive, reciprocal relationship with micro-interactive factors, such as children's interpersonal relationships, and macro-interactive factors, such as the economic, political and cultural structures and ethnic beliefs (Bronfenbrenner 1979; Buchbinder, Longhofer et al. 2006). Children are both appropriators of and constructors of these factors (Rogoff 1990). The analysis focuses on how children develop shared participation in play through the use of interpersonal skills and the collective reconstruction of social identities, roles, rules and routines.

## Findings and discussion

Participation in play is complex. In the early stages of group formation, participation depends largely on the disposition and skill to self register oneself in role and to connect with other potential partners by, for example, naming initiatives, using cooperative tones and projecting good feeling (Aarts 2000). Even with these skills, it can be difficult to penetrate long established partnerships where intersubjectivity is well developed.

In particular, children must participate in the collective reconstruction (Corsaro 1985) of how boys and girls, newcomers and oldtimers, the powerful and subordinates, and specific cliques play within this playgroup. Consequently, participation involves the competence to attune to and contribute to play themes and discourses that originate in the wider culture. This is both the challenge and the learning involved in and through participation in play. It is a critical and sometimes difficult journey as evidenced by the data. Sharing the journey has major implications for both pedagogy and parenting.

Play, because of its symbolic nature offers a window for the study and analysis of children's understanding of the world.

# Harnessing Images of the Possible to Inform Practice

By Mary Irving



Mary Irving

Ann Louise Gilligan (2005) has suggested that images of the possible could inform school practice as an alternative to the “jaded language” of educational disadvantage. My research involves such practice.

I was originally interested in assessing young children’s learning. It quickly became apparent that assessment, learning and teaching are inseparable processes. Teaching, however, is not just about enhancing learning, it is also about enhancing the motivation to learn (Tschannen-Moran et al 1998). My research focuses on the development of Junior Infants’ understanding of, and attitude to, mathematics.

The Revised Curriculum prescribes the content of the Junior Infant maths program. It also recommends a constructivist approach: optimal learning consists of children constructing new mathematical understandings based on current knowledge. Such an approach is not always easy to implement.

What is known, however, is that a traditional approach based on textbooks and workbooks is not helpful for pupils in so-called disadvantaged schools (Department of Education 2005). What is also acknowledged is that, for young children in particular, workbook competency cannot be taken to indicate mathematical competency (Hughes, 1986). Finally, the recent evaluation by the Department of Education notes a disjunction between teaching and learning. Specifically, optimal learning may not result from optimal teaching. Taken together such findings indicate that new approaches are needed to enhance young children’s mathematical competence.

Obviously, such new approaches should focus on factors within the schools’

control. Crucially, teacher can exert some control over factors outside direct control via perceptions. The importance of teacher perception lies in the manner in which it influences teacher behaviour, and hence pupil performance.

Teachers may infer from a pupil’s SES background that the pupil is of low ability. Such perceptions feed low expectations that are resistant to change and depress pupil achievement. Furthermore, teachers hold beliefs about the extent to which they can influence pupil learning. In this regard, Bandura (1997) argues that one the most powerful effects of low SES is an indirect effect: it leads to teachers feeling overwhelmed by negative factors beyond their control, decreasing their belief in the possible.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, teachers hold beliefs about the nature of ability itself. Ability may be viewed as an acquirable skill or as an innate ability. These different ways of conceptualising ability carry contrasting implications for classroom practice.

For example, if ability is seen as an acquired skill, then level of performance simply indicates current skill level, a level that will improve with practice. If, however, ability is seen as an innate capacity, then performance becomes diagnostic indicating one’s level of fixed ability. According to this pessimistic view, investment of effort is to be avoided since it is taken to reflect low fixed ability. In contrast, the acquirable skill approach sees effort as the engine that drives cognitive development.

One way to enhance mathematical understanding is to look beyond children’s performance to their underlying knowledge and strategies.

The current research involves six Junior Infant classes in so-called designated disadvantaged schools implementing two programs: Number Worlds and Big Maths for Little Kids. Both programs share a number of features: they are designed to motivate and challenge children, they are activity based, they emphasise language development and they are both specifically designed for four year-olds from so-called disadvantaged backgrounds. The programs will continue to be implemented until the end of the current school year 2005-2006.

Both pupils and teachers continue to be very positive about the project. It seems that one way to enhance mathematical understanding is to look beyond children’s performance to their underlying knowledge and strategies. While this task is time consuming, it can reveal impressive knowledge and strategies that may otherwise remain untapped.



Mary O'Kane

# Building Bridges: The Transition from Preschool to School for Children in Ireland

By Mary O'Kane

The term transition, in terms of education for children, means the process of movement from one setting into another. Transitions between educational settings can often mean a change in location, teacher, curriculum, and educational philosophy. This study investigates one of the most important transitions during the early education years, the transition from preschool to formal schooling.

Some children will adapt easily to this new educational environment, however for others moving from an environment in which they are familiar and secure to a new classroom environment can be a daunting task (Brostrom, 2000).

There is a wealth of international research on this transition from a range of perspectives (Pianta & Cox, 1999; Fabian and Dunlop, 2000; EECERA, 2003). Following on from such research, the issue of transition is emerging as an important new construct in ECCE, with a transition-to-school framework replacing the construct of school readiness. However to date there has been no comprehensive research looking at the

area of transition from preschool to school in Ireland (Walsh, 2003).

Phase I of this study involved conducting a questionnaire on the transition from preschool to formal schooling in Ireland. This was completed by a nationwide sample of preschool teachers and primary school teachers. The findings have implications for ECCE policy and practice in Ireland as they provide the first Irish data on this important transition.

Phase II of the study is a more in-depth small-scale investigation into the process of transition. Seven case study children were followed from the summer prior to school start in 2005, through

to the end of their junior infants year (June 2006). The methodology included child interviews, parent interviews, teacher interviews, classroom/playground observations, child drawings, and class discussion groups. This phase sought to provide an insight into the lives of these children during this period of time.

It is expected that the final report from the study will be available in 2007.

These articles, and their references, can be found on our website at [www.cecde.ie](http://www.cecde.ie)

September/  
October 2006



## CECDE Autumn Seminars

Targeted Projects Addressing the Needs of Children who are Educationally Disadvantaged and of Children with Special Needs

### DUBLIN

Thursday, 28th September 2006, 6.30 pm  
The Clock Tower, Marlborough Street, Dublin 1

### GALWAY

Thursday, 5th October 2006, 6.30 pm  
Ardilaun Hotel, Galway

### CORK

Thursday, 12th October 2006, 6.30 pm  
Silver Springs Hotel, Cork

For more details see: [www.cecde.ie](http://www.cecde.ie)

# Our New Development Officer, Maria O'Dwyer



Maria O'Dwyer

In September last year I found myself in the fortuitous position of accepting the post of Development Officer with the CECDE.

For three years prior to this I had worked with Traveller women on a health education initiative and so became actively involved in community development. My experience with Limerick Travellers Development Group, in particular from the vista of educational disadvantage and social exclusion, led me to undertake a Ph.D in Peace and Development Studies; my research focused primarily on diversity in the context of the first level education system, and its potential as a tool in conflict prevention and resolution.

The issue of diversity presents itself as one of the current major challenges to educationalists, both in terms of policy and practice.

I am delighted to be able to report that my position within the CECDE represents a great mutuality as far as my previous experience and research is concerned – I feel that I can bring that knowledge and experience to the position, as well as learning from the enormous amount of research and

consultation, already undertaken and currently being developed, by the CECDE. The position offers a great opportunity to explore two particular areas of personal interest – diversity and parental involvement – within the remit of the CECDE's work plan.

Research demonstrates that children as young as three years of age are capable of holding and expressing prejudicial attitudes. The issue of diversity, therefore, presents itself as one of the current major challenges to educationalists, both in terms of policy and practice. The rapidly changing social fabric of Ireland, coupled with the limitations on the pace at which any relevant curricular changes can be implemented, means that those engaged in the care and education of young children are at an ambiguous juncture in terms of dealing with diversity; should the concept of difference be addressed with young children; if so, how can it be taught and evaluated; what supports are available, and so forth. It is my hope that the CECDE will develop a position paper on diversity, as a point of reference for practitioners and parents, in terms of definition, clarification, workable models and support suggestions for teaching young

children about participating in a multicultural society.

Recognising the centrality of parents as the primary educators of their children and translating this into a workable home-care / home-school relationship will form another pivotal strand of the CECDE's work. Again, the starting point of this work is a position paper that explores the various definitions and models of parental involvement, and will progress to consultations with parents, in order to further inform and enhance the research, and determine a specialised research piece.

The fact that the research and work on diversity will intertwine at various stages with that of parental involvement highlights the interconnected and inter-dependent nature of much of the issues within the early childhood care and education (ECCE) sector, and further accentuates the importance of the coordinating function of the CECDE.

I look forward to continuing my work with the CECDE, and within the broader ECCE sector, and welcome any comments, queries or suggestions that you may have.

[maria.odwyer@spd.dcu.ie](mailto:maria.odwyer@spd.dcu.ie)

8th - 10th  
February 2007



## Second CECDE International Conference

It may seem a long way away but 2007 is just around the corner! We are happy to announce that the Second CECDE International Conference will take place from the 8th to the 10th of February 2007 in Dublin Castle. The title of the conference is "Vision into Practice: making quality a reality in the lives of young children". We will be sending out the first announcement and calling for papers very shortly and if you would like to be included on our mailing list, please email the Centre at [early.childhood@spd.dcu.ie](mailto:early.childhood@spd.dcu.ie)

# Audit of Research Update

By Kate Delaney

As part of my college course in Early Childhood Studies in Carlow I.T., I was offered a placement with the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education. As part of third year all students doing the course get the opportunity to work in both a policy context and in a childcare setting.

This ensures that all students get the chance to experience practice and policy while on training placement. The balance between both gives a broad view of early childhood care and education and provides a good preparation for subsequent careers, within the sector.

For a period of four weeks, I collected and collated resources to update the *Audit of Research on Early Childhood Care and Education in Ireland*. The Audit is a collection of all research produced in the area of early childhood care and education (ECCE) from 1990 to 2003. Not only did the Audit seek to gather all research in this area, it also thematically categorised this research. This has been particularly useful to the CECDE in terms of identifying gaps in research. The Audit contains books, reports, conference papers and journal articles, amongst others, while both government and non-government publications are included. It is important to emphasise that the Audit focuses solely on research concerning ECCE in Ireland.

The first edition of the Audit was published in 2003 and proved to be

a valuable source of information for those working in the area of ECCE. It was felt that the Audit should be updated to reflect recent research and retain its currency. There is a related database on the CECDE website which has been maintained in the meantime and this can be searched at [www.cecde.ie/english/databases.php](http://www.cecde.ie/english/databases.php).

A similar methodology has been adapted in updating the Audit as was used in researching the first edition. I began by compiling papers from conferences such as OMEP and the CECDE International Conference amongst others. In doing this, I also took time to check the references from each paper as well. Government departments, various practice organisations and researchers were contacted for any relevant research that should be included in the second edition. The CECDE would also like to use this opportunity to include any omissions from the first edition. To this end, if you or your organisation have conducted or published any research that should be included in the Audit please contact Thomas Walsh at [Thomas.Walsh@spd.dcu.ie](mailto:Thomas.Walsh@spd.dcu.ie) at the Centre or telephone 01-8842164.



## Introduction to the Early Years Education Policy Unit

A new Early Years Education Policy Unit has been established within the Department of Education and Science. The new unit will co-locate with the Office of the Minister for Children, supporting its mandate in bringing greater coherence to policy making for children. This initiative will serve to harmonise policy issues in early childhood care and education with those in the areas of youth justice, childcare, child protection, children and young people's participation and research on children and young people.

The need for such a unit had previously been highlighted in a range of reports on early years education, including the White Paper on Early Childhood Education, *"Ready to Learn"* (1999), the OECD Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care Policy

(2004) and the NESF Report on Early Childhood Care and Education (2005). The Early Years Education Policy Unit (EYEPU) will assume responsibility for a range of major policy development issues, including further development and co-ordination of the national quality framework with the CECDE, the framework for early learning with the NCCA and the national childcare training strategy within the OMC. The EYEPU will also have responsibility for the preparation of plans for phased implementation of the early years education dimension of DEIS, the Department's new action plan for educational inclusion.

It is envisaged that a range of existing early years initiatives supported by the Department, such as Early Start and Traveller Pre-schools, will also come within the remit of the new unit. In

addition, it will take over responsibility for oversight of the CECDE from the Central Policy Unit and will liaise closely with other sections of the Department on policy issues relating to provision for 0-6 year olds.

The Early Years Education Policy Unit will be headed up by Brian Power, Principal Officer, who has previously served in a number of areas of the Department, including the Office of the Secretary General, North/South Co-operation, International and Youth Affairs. He also has experience across a number of other Government Departments, including the Departments of Finance, Social Welfare, Justice and Foreign Affairs and has just returned from assignment in Brussels with the Diplomatic Service as Education Attaché and Counsellor in the Irish Permanent Representation to the European Union.