

## **The Pre-school Curriculum in Northern Ireland: where have we come from?**

Pre-school education in Northern Ireland began in 1928. Past pupils from Richmond Lodge Grammar School campaigned to open Arellian Nursery School. The name of the nursery came from the initials of Richmond Lodge: 'RL-ian'. It was an attempt to introduce a model similar to that which the McMillan sisters had already begun in Deptford and Peckham in London. McArthur Nursery School opened in 1936, as the result of philanthropic efforts of past pupils from Methodist College, Belfast. Northern Ireland's third nursery school, Edenderry, opened in 1937 and then the initiative stopped. After the Second World War, further development largely followed the pattern of the rest of the UK, with slow growth in the number of settings opening. In the 1960s, the pre-school playgroup movement began as community-based, parent-led groups started to provide for their children, recognising the importance of developing children's social skills and opportunities to play.

Each of these contexts operated largely without the support of a recognised, overarching curriculum structure. There was an attempt to foster good practice in the 1970s, when the Department of Education (DE) published circulars dedicated to nursery education. These circulars led to DE publishing a handbook and supporting video for nursery practitioners: *Well Begun, Theory into Practice in a Nursery School, 1977*. In the 1980s, the primary school sector in Northern Ireland began to develop a range of curriculum support materials. This was the impetus for the pre-school sector to produce *Northern Ireland Nursery Guidelines* [1989]. These guidelines drew together nursery sector principals and teachers' expertise, creating best practice guidance in the areas of *The Curriculum, Policy and Planning, The Learning Environment, and Administration and Organisation*.

As nursery provision expanded during the late 1980s and 1990s, and in preparation for the arrival of the *Pre-school Expansion Programme [PEEP]* in 1998, CCEA published the first version of the *Pre-school Curriculum Guidance (1997)* document. This guidance document met the needs of the pre-school sector as statutory and voluntary settings moved forward to meet the increased demand for pre-school provision. Settings used this curriculum guidance to ensure that the dedicated professionals working in these settings optimised opportunities to create high quality learning experiences for children. In 2006, CCEA revised the guidance, to take account of the sector's increasing knowledge of how young children best learn and develop. The revised guidance prepared the pre-school sector to support children in the new Foundation Stage of the revised Northern Ireland Curriculum (2007), ensuring a seamless transition to 'big school'.

CCEA has produced a refreshed version of the guidance to embrace contemporary thinking on children's development and learning and to meet demands. This new guidance embeds high quality professional practice in all our pre-school settings as they continue to meet our youngest learners' needs.

**Sheelagh Carville**

**Principal Lecturer**

**Head of Department, Early Childhood Studies**