



CHILD *Links*

Children and the Arts

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Children and the Arts

Editorial

This issue of ChildLinks looks at the impact of the arts on the lives of children. Arts experiences offer children the opportunity to immerse themselves in creative learning with complete freedom of expression, supporting cognitive, social emotional and physical development, communication skills, confidence, empathy, identity and belonging.

Arts experiences deepen children's understanding both of themselves and the world around them, and broaden and develop their creative capacities. Indeed, Objective 3 of *First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028* explicitly names arts and cultural activities as among the factors that will improve the quality of children's day-to-day lives, 'Every child has the right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreation activities appropriate to the age of the child, and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.'

A number of articles in this issue consider the role of the arts in early childhood education and care including an extract from a new publication from Barnardos and the National Childhood Network *Explore, Play and Learn through Arts in Pre-school Settings*, which looks at the benefits of the arts for young children. There is also an overview of two early years arts programme; the first looking at an arts project introduced into an ECEC setting in Co. Clare and the outcomes for the setting, and the second outlining ArtVentures, a four-week programme with a focus on the visual arts in Sure Start projects in Northern Ireland.

This issue also includes an overview of the Arts in Education Portal, a digital space led by the Department of Education and Skills where both artists and teachers can be supported and inspired. There are also articles looking at arts projects focused on a particular medium including Creative Dance Tales, designed to promote creative dance as part of the Physical Education Curriculum, to inform and encourage a cross curricular approach to learning, and contribute to developing varied pedagogical practices in dance. Another article outlines Kids' Own Publishing Partnership, which seeks to address the systematic dismissal of children's voices within our society, and offers a platform for children's lives and experiences to be valued and made visible through publishing and the arts.

Finally, Emer Smyth of the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) considers arts and cultural participation among children and young people, and questions whether disadvantage makes a difference.

Sinead Lanton

Explore, Play and Learn through the Arts in Pre-school Settings

Michele McDermott, Sinead Lawton,
Barnardos, and Denise McCormilla,
Linda Lafferty, Aisling McCormilla,
National Childhood Network





“When we talk of the arts in pre-school we mean any experiences that children take part in through their play that allows them to express their own ideas and share with others their delight in discovery.”

Introduction

The arts experience in a pre-school setting should be, first and foremost, pleasurable, joyful, spontaneous and creative. For some, the term ‘the arts’ may initially be off-putting. When the arts are mentioned, some people might think of opera and ballet, what they see as highbrow activities that are created and enjoyed by only a select few. But the arts are any expression or application of human creative skill and imagination, and encompass any opportunities to create and to enjoy creativity in yourself and others. This might be literature, including poetry and prose, performing arts such as dance, music and drama, or visual arts including drawing, painting, photography and sculpting. When we talk of the arts in pre-school we mean any experiences that children take part in through their play that allows them to express their own ideas and share with others their delight in discovery.

Arts Experiences in Pre-school Settings

For creativity to remain at the heart of the future it needs to be at the heart of education. But what does that look like for young children? The arts in pre-school settings encompass a range of creative processes that provide opportunities to play and to imagine such as painting, drama, junk art, play with malleable materials, storytelling, puppetry, dance, music and play with light. Children derive joy from investigating and developing their ideas, both indoors and outdoors. As Einstein said, ‘Imagination is more important than knowledge.’ Complete freedom when using materials and equipment opens up all sorts of possibilities in children’s minds. This, in turn, becomes an expression of what they feel and think. ‘Educators and artists recognise that it is important to study the ideas expressed in children’s words, drawings, and play’ (French, 2013a, p.38). Offering a variety of music to hear and play, for example, and engaging in different forms of movement and dance opens up a world of possibilities.

The best gift we can give to children is to provide them with the time, space, opportunities, materials, freedom and encouragement to engage and participate, and to allow their minds and bodies to develop freely. Provision of an arts-rich pre-school environment, therefore, begins with an understanding by early childhood educators of the value of arts-based play activities and the importance of the process of creativity, rather than the end product.

Siolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education in Ireland (DES, 2017), and Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009), support educators to consider how best to facilitate experiences for children that encourage their interests, stimulate their curiosity and build on the things that most appeal to them. These Frameworks put the child at the heart of everything and consider the importance of children’s loving relationships with all the adults in their lives, the quality of their play, and the type of curriculum that encourages them to feel active and competent in their own learning. The Frameworks will inspire and enable early childhood educators to think about experiences that soothe the soul, tap into children’s creativity and develop a love of the arts.

Children’s Right to the Arts

All young children have a need to enjoy the arts, to avail of the artistic processes that promote their overall development, nourish their emotional intelligence and help them to develop their sensibilities and competencies. Participation in cultural and artistic life is necessary to protect the unique and evolving nature of childhood and is fundamental to the quality of childhood, to children’s entitlement to optimum development, to the promotion of resilience and to the realisation of other rights.

Children’s need to enjoy arts experiences is supported by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989). Two articles of the UNCRC are of particular importance to the area of cultural activities and the arts in education. Article 29 states that the aims of education include the development of the child’s personality, talents and abilities to their fullest potential. Article 31 provides for the child’s right to participate in cultural and artistic life.

One of the key challenges to implementing children’s rights is to ensure that all children benefit. Most young children in Ireland are now receiving a pre-school experience of at least 10 months duration, with 96% of three-year-old children accessing the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) scheme (Government of Ireland, 2018). Many more children now have an even greater opportunity to benefit from arts experiences with the extension of the ECCE scheme to children of two years and eight months. Raising awareness of the fundamental value and benefits that playful arts



experiences offer in enhancing children's lives is central to ensuring equality of access to the arts for all children.

Benefits of Arts Experiences

'Early childhood arts can help develop intrinsic human qualities, such as creativity, expression, identity, culture and imagination' (Early Arts, 2013, p. 45). Arts experiences will enhance all facets of a child's development – well-being, exploring and thinking, identity and belonging, and communicating. Indeed, 'creative activities that encourage positive relationships have a direct bearing on... the formation of well-rounded personalities, good attachment, self-esteem and better mental health' (Zero to Three, 2018) while 'arts activities increase children's self-confidence, motivation and self expression' (Lonie, 2010, p.13).

Creativity and self expression

Play is a fundamental element of any sort of creativity. Even in corporate environments, adults are often encouraged to engage in playful thought processes and activities to facilitate creative thinking. In a pre-school environment, imaginative play (including role play) and freedom of choice in artistic play activities that encourage selection, intrinsic motivation and persistence are key to stimulate children's creativity (Mellou, 1994; Tegano, Moran & Sawyers, 1991; Prentice, 2000; Russ, 1996).

An arts curriculum based around children's interests broadens and develops their creative capacities. Creativity is not just about being good at art or arts, however. It is about tapping into who we are and how we express this, which will enhance our self-esteem. Learning should be a personal journey in which we discover and learn new and inspiring things that are meaningful to us, 'Creativity is about representing one's own image, not reproducing someone else's' (Duffy, 2006, p.10). Engaging in arts experiences helps children to understand that there is not just one way of doing something. For example, there are many ways to create a picture or model of a person, to move and dance, and to sing. Through the arts, children also learn a 'can do' disposition that will support them when solving problems and facing new situations.

Exploration

Arts in early childhood is all about exploration, 'a key component of exploration is the idea of agency, which is what drives us towards independence and making choices' (French, 2018, p.124). Open-ended materials give children opportunities to experiment and to try and try again with no right or wrong answers. Materials provided should be 'varied, manipulative, open-ended and have the touch of wonder: natural materials, wood;

stone and grass; sand, mud, clay; slimy, slippery, squishy, squeezy things; fragile things that require gentleness...' (French, 2013b, p.67). Similarly, provision of a myriad of open-ended experiences, balancing adult-guided activities with child-initiated experiences, supports children to learn that they do not need to conform to preconceived ideas. These open-ended approaches give children richer opportunities to think and reflect, to explore, challenge, fantasise, be creative and make meaning, to accommodate for different learning styles and, through that, to develop their understanding (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002).



Children are both curious and experimental. This curiosity and need to try things out and use materials in many different ways is a foundation for the development of imagination and thinking in new ways. The opportunities to explore found and open-ended materials such as sand, water, twigs and mud, especially outdoors, can inspire children to create and recreate ideas in differing forms. The model made from junk materials or natural materials found outdoors may be reframed through a Lego model or a large block model, continuing the idea of architecture and using differing mediums to create buildings or models.

By encouraging creativity and imagination, we can promote children's ability to explore and understand their world and increase their opportunities to make new connections (Duffy, 2006). This will increase a child's contentment, self-confidence and general sense of being at one with the world (Ellyat, 2010) as well as supporting their developing independence. There is, therefore, a therapeutic aspect to a child's involvement in creative processes that allows them to play out and explore what they see and understand of the world, and come to new understandings. Using found materials as costumes and props, for example, provides children with opportunities



to step into another world and live the experience of imagining what it might be like to be an animal or a character in a story or a doctor, librarian, ambulance driver, shopkeeper or rocket scientist. These arts experiences support children to discover what they are interested in and deepen their understanding of themselves, which is invaluable in supporting the development of joy and confidence in self-expression. Active engagement and exploration with exciting materials and loving, consistent, creative and supportive adults provide children with a framework 'through which they interpret and understand the world' (French, 2018, p.128).

Cognitive development

We know that early experiences have an impact on brain development so it is not surprising that several studies have uncovered significant long-term impacts of creative environments (David, Gooch, Powell & Abbott, 2003). Arts experiences in pre-school can impact on cognitive development by enhancing 'language development, numeracy, literacy, personal/social/emotional/physical/spiritual development and understanding of people and cultures' (Early Arts, 2013, p.45). Problem solving and numeracy, for example, including concepts of shape, size, line and area, are supported through visual arts; spatial concepts and sequencing events are enhanced through dance; while pattern-making, which supports an understanding of mathematics, can be developed through model-making using clay (Duffy, 2010). Skills in verbal composition and creative writing may emerge from activities such as song, nursery rhymes, drama and movement.

There is also a link between the arts and science. Leonardo da Vinci, for example, is most famous as an artist but he was also an engineer and scientist, developing these skills by exploring nature and observing and experiencing the world around him. He had no formal schooling but had a curiosity and a sense of wonder that stayed with him throughout his life. Nobel laureates in the sciences are 17 times more likely than the average scientist to be a painter, 12 times as likely to be a poet and four times as likely to be a musician (Independent, 2016). By encouraging all arts experiences, therefore, we nurture the active learning of each child to develop all sorts of interests that may well become lifelong passions or careers.

Children who have been exposed to the arts are far more likely to access opportunities in the arts in adult life, enriching the quality of their lives and also helping them develop their creative abilities including critical thinking, problem solving and communication skills.

(Jayatilaka, 2010, p.72)

Physical development

'Physical development is supported through sculpting, and play with materials for fine motor skills, and through music, dance and movement for gross motor skills' (Duffy, 2010, p.22). Skills such as fine motor as well as gross motor skills are important in the development of creativity. A child develops these skills through activities such as water play, sand play, singing and moving to nursery rhymes, all of which are precursors to skills and interests such as ballet, studying a musical instrument, singing and dancing.

Movement and dance also deepen a child's understanding of bodily awareness, strengthens their body and fine tunes their physical skills. Furthermore, children derive joy from being in control of and challenging their body.

Social development

Play through the arts support the development of self regulation (Kroll, 2017) and empathy. As children explore a variety of arts experiences, they come to understand and know themselves. They also come to understand others as they share with them and imagine through role play, music, movement and dance. In role play, for example, children will place themselves into the shoes of another, whether it is granny, baby sister, daddy or shopkeeper and, in doing so, take steps to develop empathy. Group arts experiences support children's ability to express and control feelings, help others, and negotiate and interact with the environment and others in it. They also provide many opportunities for children to see themselves as capable and competent as they develop secure relationships with the other children and the adults who work with them. Children who are secure in these relationships are generally happy to explore their environments extensively and develop interests that they can build on in the future.

Identity

Play through the arts also supports the development of children's self and group identity as they learn about themselves and others. Experiences that are particularly helpful in developing and solidifying children's identity include painting, music, dance, dress-up, dramatic play, storytelling, junk modelling, and making up songs and nursery rhymes. Evidence also shows that arts experiences in the general population can lead to breaking down the barriers of language, culture, fear of authority, prejudices or societal differences (Scottish Consultative Council on the Curriculum, 1999; National Children's Bureau, 2010).



Table 1 below shows how the arts can impact on children’s learning and development under the four themes of Aistear.

Arts experiences give children the opportunity to:	
Well-being	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ have enjoyable and fun experiences ◆ develop manipulative, fine motor skills and hand/eye coordination ◆ experience the sensory nature of the various materials ◆ develop social skills through sharing space and equipment and taking turns ◆ develop confidence and autonomy ◆ form attachments to others ◆ be aware of and express their emotions ◆ develop their imagination ◆ develop perseverance and concentration ◆ feel a sense of achievement
Identity & Belonging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ make and express their own choices ◆ discuss similarities and differences ◆ experience a wide range of materials ◆ work collaboratively with other children/adults ◆ learn how to share resources and equipment ◆ accept the concept of individuality and originality of thought ◆ develop a sense of self ◆ develop relationships through the security of group play ◆ have discussion about family structures, cultures, etc.
Communicating	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ express their thoughts and ideas creatively and imaginatively ◆ share their feelings, thoughts and ideas through storytelling, making art, moving to music, role-playing, problem-solving, and responding to these experiences ◆ express themselves through the visual arts using skills such as cutting, drawing, gluing, sticking, painting, building, printing, sculpting and sewing ◆ listen to and respond to a variety of types of music, sing songs and make music using instruments ◆ use language to imagine and recreate roles and experiences ◆ respond to and create literacy experiences through story, poetry, song and drama ◆ show confidence in trying out new things, taking risks and thinking creatively. ◆ develop vocabulary and descriptive language ◆ be involved in conversations ◆ listen to the ideas of others which helps to develop understanding and respect ◆ recognise the written word on labels, scrapbooks, magazines etc. ◆ develop pre-writing skills through manipulation of tools ◆ increase their vocabulary, for example, by naming the resources they use ◆ develop non-verbal communication skills
Exploring & Thinking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ enhance their sensory awareness develop concepts of volume, colour, shape, texture, size, number, mass, etc. ◆ develop concentration and focus ◆ develop their abstract thinking ◆ develop their imagination and artistic development ◆ stimulate their thinking skills and decision-making skills ◆ work out problems for themselves develop thought processes, as children sort, classify and group materials ◆ develop mathematical skills: matching, sorting, ordering ◆ develop the concept of recycling

Table 1: How the arts can impact on children’s learning and development under the four themes of Aistear



Principles to Underpin Arts Practices in Pre-school Settings

Early childhood educators can provide a wide range of arts-based experiences in the pre-school setting by reflecting on the following set of principles, which are underpinned by Aistear and Siolta.

- ◆ The opportunity to engage in arts-based experiences and to be creative is central to children's holistic development.
- ◆ Arts-based play experiences facilitate children's sensory development and enrich children's lives.
- ◆ Children's relationships and interactions with adults support the development of their creativity.
- ◆ Each art medium can enrich children's experiences.
- ◆ Both adult-initiated and child-initiated experiences are fundamental to developing enjoyment of the arts and having fun.
- ◆ Creativity is open, free and without boundaries. Self-expression, well-being, exploring and critical thinking develop from these opportunities to be creative.
- ◆ What children can do rather than not do is the starting point of their arts education.
- ◆ There must be a progression in the provision of experiences to meet the development needs of the child.
- ◆ The process of an activity or experience is paramount. The results of the experiences are not reflected in an end product.
- ◆ It is important to recognise and acknowledge children's efforts and not just the end product.
- ◆ Young children learn in an integrated way so arts-based experiences are best presented in an integrated, seamless way within the setting.
- ◆ Imagination and creativity emerge when the adult creates conditions and an environment that are favourable for this development.
- ◆ Children learn best when they are given appropriate responsibility, allowed to make errors, decisions and choices, and are respected as autonomous learners.

This article is adapted from *Explore, Play and Learn through the Arts in Preschool Settings* (Barnardos & National Childhood Network, 2019) www.barnardos.ie www.ncn.ie

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Dungannon and Coalisland Sure Start's Use of the Creative Arts in the Early Years

Siobhan Wallace, Sure Start Project Manager, Dungannon and Coalisland Sure Start & Nina Chapman, Artist-in-Residence





Dungannon and Coalisland Sure Start

As you enter through the doors of Dungannon Sure Start's main centre you will see emblazoned on the wall directly ahead, the teams' underlying manifesto:

We are committed to creating a space of possibilities where there is excellence, innovation and creativity and where every child and parent feels respected and valued.

Excellence, innovation, creativity and respect are the threads that run through everything that happens in our Sure Start Centre and the tapestry that results is dynamic, thought provoking and often very exciting.

Dungannon and Coalisland SureStart is one of 38 Sure Start Projects in Northern Ireland, funded through the Department of Education and, like all Sure Start Projects, it aims to give children from pre-birth to four years of age the best start in life. All 38 projects share the same outcomes and all Sure Start staff aspire, through a wide variety of programmes, activities and services, to ensure that children leaving Sure Start (at their 4th birthday) have achieved their full potential for good physical and emotional health, are motivated in their ability to learn and have experienced stable and nurturing relationships. At Dungannon and Coalisland Sure Start, we put a special focus on the use of the creative arts and the environment in order to deliver on these outcomes

Sure Start Programmes are multi-disciplinary in nature and, in our project, include a midwife, health visitors, speech and language therapists, play development workers, early years and family support workers. More recently, in line with the project's commitment to innovation and creativity, an artist-in-residence has joined the team, underlining the project's belief that art is a key mechanism which can help it achieve its objectives with very young children.

Sure Start catchment areas correlate with the top 25% of areas in Northern Ireland in terms of deprivation. The joy of working for what essentially can constitute a wraparound service for some of our most vulnerable families is the ability for each SureStart to naturally evolve appropriate ways of working within its own geographical and demographical context. Sure Start projects do this in ways that both meet regional targets and also the specific needs of the families and young children within local communities. Dungannon and Coalisland's unique demography consists of a high proportion of families from East Timor and a high number of families from the Travelling Community. Both of these factors, which enrich our community, can often be challenging in terms of communication but have proven key in propelling the

project forward to find new ways of doing new things to provide all our children with the highest quality learning experiences.

Unquestionably the project's most important driver is that it has at its helm Early Years – the organisation for young children as its lead body. This leading charity has been influential in driving forward quality early years provision in Northern Ireland's early years sector for the past 30 years and has provided ongoing inspiration for the Dungannon and Coalisland Sure Start team. Not only has Early Years provided the opportunity for key staff to visit Reggio Emilia in Italy but through its Reggio Learning Community it has helped staff in Dungannon and Coalisland Sure Start to translate this inspiring pedagogical approach into a format that works in this provincial town in County Tyrone. Ongoing meetings of the Reggio Learning Community facilitated by Early Years provide practitioners with the opportunity for dialogue, discussion and to dig that little bit deeper into the Reggio philosophy, thereby ensuring ongoing reflective practice.

The Reggio Emilia Approach

The Reggio Emilia approach, led by an educator named Loris Malaguzzi and a group of parents at the end of World War II, in a town of the same name, brought together a number of pedagogical thoughts from prominent early years theorists such as Dewey, Jean Piaget, and Lev Vygotsky. Central to the approach is how children are viewed. Children are not seen as empty containers to be filled with facts but as individuals to be valued and respected and as having great potential. Malaguzzi talks about 'the hundred languages of children' (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1998) and how art, with its many manifestations from painting, photography, sculpture, performance, music, light and shadow, are all languages that children can and do communicate in.

As part of the Reggio Emilia philosophy, children play a critical role in deciding which activities they will focus on and the sessions are spontaneous, creative and collaborative in nature. These principles have been adopted by our staff here in Dungannon and Coalisland Sure Start and greatly influence the way that we now plan, run and document our activities. Another key Reggio philosophy that has changed our practice is how the physical environment is regarded as the third teacher (Strong-Wilson & Ellis, 2009). Here in Dungannon and Coalisland SureStart our physical environment is calming, respectful and visually appealing, always aiming to strike the perfect balance in terms of sensory stimulation. Integrated into all staff practice is the spirit of respect, intentionality, attention to detail and the desire to provide attractive, quality play provocations.



In the same way that the Atelierista in Reggio Emilia supports early years practitioners, our artist-in-residence has been invaluable in supporting staff to build their confidence in using art to enrich their practice (Vecchi, 2017). As in Reggio Emilia, where practitioners emphasise the importance of learning from children, our work continues to evolve and progress as we learn from the children and families participating in our activities. To provide you with a better flavour of some of this work we have outlined brief snapshots of work which we feel clearly reflects the importance of the creative arts in our settings.

Snapshot 1 Nature

ArtVentures is a four-week programme with a focus on the visual arts which incorporates a number of 'languages' from watercolour paintings to creating imaginary worlds. During the course of the four weeks the children, some as young as 18 months, immerse themselves in the arts in ways that we could never have previously imagined. Natural resources and bringing the art studio outdoors is a fundamental aspect of these sessions. Engaging with nature seems to connect us with our primal roots and, when given the opportunity, children seem to have the natural ability to find this connection. As John Muir, environmentalist, naturalist and philosopher, writes, 'One touch of Nature makes the whole world kin.'

In one particular session of the ArtVentures Programme, a provocation was set up which included different varieties of ferns, mirrors and magnifying glasses and a varied tonal range of paints to choose from.

We encouraged the children to look at the shape and structure of the ferns while talking to the children about the lines, repeating words such as "line" several times. The children were also encouraged to pass them around to get a fuller sense of the fern.

Carla was particularly inspired by this activity. She initially painted onto the fern, creating a print. She then progressed to representing the ferns and picked the green felt tip pen from a selection of media. The sharp lines of the pen helped her capture the structure of the leaf. She started with a curved line, similar to the central line of the fern. She added zig zag lines to represent the leaves, followed by a straight line down the centre of the zig zag.

This led on to two larger scale paintings based on the same theme. For us what was so impressive about Carla's work was her progression from print to drawing to larger scale painting, eventually using mixed media for her final piece. This underlined to us that by taking the time to explore the fern in finer detail with Carla and giving her the space, time and tools to create she exceeded our expectations and moved away from her previous abstract style to a more representational art form.



Carla's line drawing and large scale painting



As the Reggio Emilia approach advocates, practitioners should endeavour to ‘expect the unexpected’ from the children they work with.

Carla found being around ferns and nature to be inspirational but other children such as Finnbar found that being in nature had a calming effect. Finnbar who was having a tantrum on the way over to the forest, suddenly forgot his tears and turned into a confident child on a mission, marching his sticks all the way over to the den, without the help of an adult. He even took time to make friends.



Finnbar calmly and confidently carrying the large sticks

We find that being around nature and natural items helps both staff, parents and children feel a sense of calm.

Snapshot 2 Materials

In every prehistoric, ancient and contemporary culture there is evidence of creativity and art.

The first mark making materials included charcoal, berries and natural dyes and, here in Sure Start, as well as our use of good quality art materials we have explored many of these primitive techniques with the children.

We made up our own Stone Age paint using oil and crushed charcoal and gave the children the opportunity to paint with this. On one occasion we placed a variety of Palaeolithic cave art symbols around the room as provocations. We hypothesised whether the children would copy these. Interestingly, after the session we noticed the children had recreated some of the symbols.

One of the children had drawn a similar symbol onto the watercolour paper and Theo decided to think outside the box and drew a “dinosaur foot” onto a rock with white chalk. This looked remarkably similar to one of the Palaeolithic symbols displayed in our provocation.



Theo pointing to his 'dinosaur foot'

We have learnt from watching the children use watercolours and proper watercolour brushes and paper that the children work in a more respectful way. The children take time to fully engage in their work, taking time to layer colour. It is amazing how we can see the individual styles and techniques that the children possess at this young age. Some of the children are minimalists at heart while others are predisposed to using certain colours, their painting language often expressing the differences in their personalities. Saoirse, as you can see from the photo below, attentively immersed herself in using her watercolours.



Saoirse immersed in her watercolour painting



She then progressed to capturing the pansies, choosing the same colours from her pallet.



Sairse's painting beside the pansies

Snapshot 3 Equipment

A photographer must possess and retain the receptive faculties of a child who watches the world for the first time.

Bill Brandt

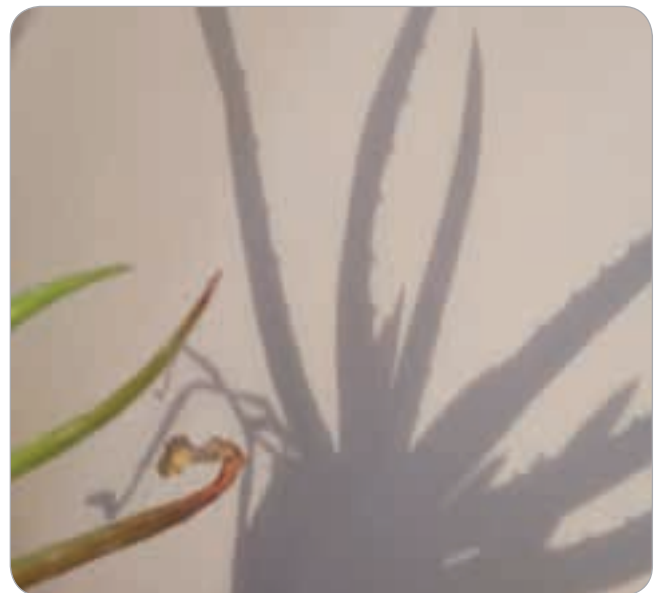
In Reggio Emilia we were surprised by their regular use of real equipment. On return we decided to let go of the fear of equipment being damaged and gave the children the responsibility of real cameras so we could see the world through their eyes. The children went above and beyond what we could have imagined and the camera is a learning tool that we wouldn't now be without.

Unsurprisingly at first children were a little apprehensive as most 1–3 year olds have only ever seen adults using real cameras. There was a moment where the children paused as if to say 'are we really allowed to use this?' By deeming the child as responsible and capable of working the camera the children also view themselves as responsible and capable. A bond of trust has been created.

The camera was set up in a light and shadow area with real plants, flowers and lights. The camera allowed the children to view the subjects from an entirely different perspective. The beautiful photos produced by the children had an ethereal quality that surprised both staff and parents.



Scarlett using the camera



Scarlett's photograph of the aloe vera plant

Snapshot 4 Light and Shadow

Ever since the first visit to Reggio Emilia, light, reflection and shadow have been used extensively as a language to provoke curiosity, investigation and discovery. Light and shadow undoubtedly fascinate and intrigue children. Staff have also explored this as a medium for performance to help inspire parents and children. To date we have brought to life the classic Oliver Jeffers story *How to Catch a Star* and an in-house production *Daisy Grows a Flower*. Both performances captivated the children and helped us show parents what could be achieved with a cardboard box, tracing paper, a lamp and a little imagination. Light and shadow work is now fundamental to everything we do here in Sure Start from the crèche to our PlayTime sessions to our developmental programme for 2–3 year olds.



Still image from our performance of How to Catch a Star

Snapshot 5 Young Babies Experiencing Art

Art is something we can participate in but it is also something that we can experience through the senses. This is how we work with our very young children 0–18 months in Dungannon and Coalbilsand Sure Start. We recently put on an event which brought a museum type experience to the families and used the visual arts to awaken the senses. This event we called ‘Tots Modern’ used smell, touch, sound and vision and created two- and three- dimensional installations for the children and parents to explore in their own time. The children were able to venture into a 3D flower meadow which used a combination of moving image, paper sculpted flowers and real plant life along with lavender essential oils and a fan to create the feel and movement of a gentle breeze. Among other things there was a monochrome area, botanical area, a giant rainmaker and real textured canvases of art that the children could view and touch.



Child and mother in our 3D flower meadow



One of our babies exploring the ice using vision and touch

Conclusion

These are just a few snapshots of some of the art activities that have been delivered here in our project and there are many more tales we could tell that illustrate the impact of how the arts can enrich early learning experiences. Every day proves to be a new adventure and we are constantly in awe of what our children can achieve, and the way that all children, even very young babies engage with art.

We have learnt that by taking the time and care to provide stimulating and attractive provocations, quality materials and real equipment that, in return, the children work with great respect, sensitivity and creativity. We will continue to be inspired and embed ideas that we have learnt in Reggio Emilia and we are looking forward to where our journey will bring us over the next few years.

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Creative Dance Tales

Photos by Dervla Baker

Bridget Webster, CoisCéim Dance Theatre

Assistant Head Teacher Martina Mulhall (Timahoe National School) stated that the principal and herself couldn't tear themselves away from watching, despite their workload! They found it quite emotional to see some very quiet children come out of their shells and express themselves!

Michelle De Forge – Artistic Director, Dunamais Arts Centre, Portlaoise

Introduction

Broadreach is the access and engagement arm of CoisCéim Dance Theatre. Established in 2006, it aims to increase participation in and awareness of the contemporary arts. Firmly founded on the principle that dance is a performing art, its activities are pioneering, targeting all sections of the population in an exciting and innovative manner to create a genuine curiosity in dance. CoisCéim Broadreach enables people of all ages to experience dance as creators, performers, educators and observers through a varied programme of projects and initiatives that draw on the company's reputation of producing ground-breaking, distinctive contemporary dance theatre. It does this by working in partnership with different cultural, social and educational organisations and communities at local and national levels.

The CREATIVE DANCE TALES Digital Resource celebrates the work of children, students, teachers, teacher educators and dance professionals that aims to

act as a stimulant for creative thinking in the classroom and beyond. It was born in response to demand from teachers and is a legacy of CoisCéim Dance Theatre's three year Arts Council funded residency based in St. Patrick's College before the establishment of the School of Arts Education (School AEM) and Movement, Institute of Education DCU. The resource is available free of charge through the Arts in Education Portal in Ireland and coisceim.com.

The Digital Resource builds on CREATIVE DANCE TALES, a unique participatory learning experience led by Philippa Donnellan that began in 2015 and took place in primary schools around Ireland in parallel with CoisCéim Dance Theatre's stage production THE WOLF AND PETER by David Bolger.

Dance is one of six strands in the Physical Education Curriculum (NCCA, 1999) that contributes to the holistic development of children. It is acknowledged for its



aesthetic, cultural, social, emotional and artistic benefits as well as its contribution to physical activity. CREATIVE DANCE TALES was consequently designed to link with the Primary School Physical Education (Creative Dance) and the Visual Arts Curriculum through 'looking at and responding to art', with the aim of encouraging 'additional ways of learning for children and enabling them to record real or imagined ideas and feelings' (Arts Curriculum, NCCA; 1999). As part of the project, teachers were invited to tie in other aspects of the curriculum such as Maths (thinking about shapes), English (developing a story) and so on.

The series introduced children to the importance of the arts in society in multiple ways and encouraged individual lateral thinking and problem solving – using physicality as a valuable mode of expression to inspire confidence and empower them in their daily lives.

CREATIVE DANCE TALES brought together educators with professional artists in an innovative, pedagogical initiative and the idea for the digital resource evolved as a way to enable teachers to continue the programme and give the project sustainability – a demand summed up well by PC World:

Students are being introduced to the STEAM way of learning at primary and secondary learning years, allowing them to grow and develop these essential skills at a much faster rate... they are also taught to openly ask questions, how to experiment with new ideas and how to channel their creativity into something productive... The question remains, how can schools and governments get students, especially children, more involved in STEAM courses that will result in a more rounded, well-educated and empowered workforce in the future?

PC World Magazine (27 Jun 2017)

Funded by the Arts Council of Ireland, CoisCéim Broadreach and the DCU Institute of Education worked closely together to create, test, revise and refine the Digital Resource, which was published in 2017. It has since been featured at the Arts in Education National Day in 2017 and at the 2019 Irish Primary Physical Education Association (IPPEA) conference at Kilkenny facilitated by Susan Marron DCU where considerable interest was shown by teachers at the workshops in using the resource to enhance their teaching of dance in primary school. It was also used in Australia to deliver a series of CREATIVE DANCE TALES with primary school children in Sydney in parallel with CoisCéim's performances of THE WOLF AND PETER at the Opera House in 2017.

There is also a strong and growing body of evidence that the reach of the Digital Resource is broadening. It is

being used by student primary teachers in the Institute of Education, DCU on their placements in primary schools following on from their own exploration of the resource within physical education seminars facilitated by the primary teacher educators. Furthermore, the resource has been introduced to students at postgraduate level undertaking study of literacy in their professional practice, e.g. a DCU student is researching her use of the resource with an infant class and its role in promoting learning in and through dance.

Great value both for school and the children [who] learned to work together creatively and the co-operation within the whole group was obvious. The children responded very positively to the dance material and it was a great learning experience for the range of abilities. Positive social interaction was fostered and the pupils had numerous opportunities to show their creativity when putting together the group work.

The children themselves said that it was FUN and showed them how to work together as a team. Some of the children had had experience of dance before but it gave the majority of the participants their first experience of working with a dance teacher – particularly the boys.

Head Teacher Harriet Pritchard –
Bandonbridge National School, Bandon,
West Cork on CREATIVE DANCE TALES

Educational Context

As Susan Marron, lecturer at the Institute of Education, DCU, describes, the resource was designed to promote creative dance as part of the Physical Education Curriculum, to inform and encourage a cross curricular approach to learning, and contribute to developing varied pedagogical practices in dance. Content and ideas for four lessons plans drew from the musical score and the choreographic and dramatic material from THE WOLF AND PETER by David Bolger, the Artistic Director of CoisCéim Dance Theatre. The plans provide detailed and easy to follow guidance on the creative activities inspired by Peter's dance, the dance of the Hunters and of course the Wolf dance. Teachers don't need dance experience to begin to teach the creative dance lessons. It is easy for both teachers and children to become absorbed in the characters as they explore together:

- ◆ How Peter dances in the meadow
- ◆ How Peter reacts to meeting the wolf
- ◆ How the hunters trap the wolf

The lessons evolved through working with children in different primary school settings nationwide, and



through working with the Physical Education Unit and undergraduate student teachers from School of Arts Education and Movement at the Institute of Education DCU.

Workshops were delivered to over 300 children in eight primary schools around Ireland, giving children an imaginative, kinaesthetic learning experience in dance. As part of the initiative, two specialist workshops for teachers were held – one being for the Irish Primary Physical Education Association teacher members funded by Dublin West Education Centre. This workshop coincided with a viewing by children, students and teachers of the preview of THE WOLF AND PETER at the St. Patrick's Campus auditorium in October 2015. In part CREATIVE DANCE TALES emerged from requests made by teachers in primary schools and this resource is designed to meet the requests of these teachers and all who wish to prompt children to learn in and through dance.

I think CREATIVE DANCE TALES builds children's confidence to perform, gives them opportunities to respond to music and express themselves through movement. It also challenges gender stereotypes e.g. dancing is for girls.

The children are still talking about how much they loved the workshop and we are still practising the dance during P.E lessons.

We really enjoyed having Philippa in school bringing dance and theatre experiences to our children who may not always get these opportunities! Thank you!

Class Teacher Dervla Dunne – Our Lady's Meadow School, Durrow, Co.Laois

The CoisCéim Residency

There were three strands to the three-year CoisCéim Residency: (i) Seeing and Talking Dance (ii) Creative Dance Club and (iii) Dance Education workshops. The dance workshops supported the core Physical Education seminars both in and out of class time. The out of class workshops were undertaken by 450 student teachers. The dance education and seeing dance elements are in line with good PRACTICE proposed in the Arts in Education Charter (Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht & Department of Education and Skills, 2012).

CoisCéim worked with one cohort of the BEd fourth year within class time related to themes from THE WOLF AND PETER. This group of 25 student teachers were studying Physical Education as a major specialism within the BEd programme.¹

Philippa Donnellan (Director, CoisCéim Broadreach) led the work building on the students' previous practice of creative dance as part of their Physical Education modules. This work informed the development of the CREATIVE DANCE TALES Digital Resource. The students were supported teaching dance using the CREATIVE DANCE TALES lesson plans to local primary school children. This teaching and learning experience has been documented as a research project focussing on mentoring by their peers, the Physical Education lecturer and Philippa, the dance professional.



Outcomes of the CoisCéim Residency

There were a number of outcomes of the CoisCéim Residency in addition to the Digital Resource. These included the partnership developed between CoisCéim and The Physical Education Unit. A community of practice emerged where shared learning occurred related to work in initial teacher education, dance education and physical education. There was keen demand for the CoisCéim Broadreach out of class workshops and students reported that the workshops supported their Physical Education dance work. The teaching of local children by the student teachers was truly uplifting as they built their confidence to teach dance using a story. The Residency created a dance-enriched environment and created an increased awareness of CoisCéim as a national dance company who embrace the challenge to support beginning teachers on their dance journey. This CREATIVE DANCE TALES Digital Resource can inspire the primary teacher to connect the child's experience of dance in Physical Education with their Arts Education.

1 https://issuu.com/educationmattersie/docs/irelands_yearbook_of_education_2018_3d4de465beaa2a/38?e=36219384/66948941



The children thoroughly enjoyed all aspects of the workshop. The music choices were excellent, it was nice balance of traditional and more modern adaptations. The children responded well to the flow and pace of the lesson, warm up activities were engaging, the teacher led dance was fabulous and there were opportunities for children to create their own movements.

Class Teacher Marie-Therese Brankin –
Holy Family Primary School, Belfast

What Next For Creative Dance Tales?

A second series of CREATIVE DANCE TALES will be back this autumn in tandem with CoisCéim’s new work for children and their families. The series aims to build

on the first and address a key takeaway from first series, namely the diversity of need and importance of flexibility in workshop planning for each individual school. It is envisaged that the accompanying digital resource will be available from late 2020 / 2021.

‘THANK YOU so much for the dance workshops over the past 2 weeks. I just spoke to both teachers (Timahoe National School and Our Lady’s Meadow School, Durrow) who waxed lyrical about their experience!’

‘They had the most wonderful time...amazing, extraordinary what they could do after only 2 sessions... 1st and Second Classes were a perfect age...’

Michelle De Forge – Artistic Director,
Dunamais Arts Centre, Portlaoise

BACKGROUND INFORMATION | About CoisCéim Dance Theatre

CoisCéim Dance Theatre is one of Ireland’s leading dance companies. Led by David Bolger, for over 20 years the company has presented highly original work world-wide to audiences large and small, onstage and on film. In parallel with the performance programme the company conducts an integrated artform awareness and participation initiative through CoisCéim Broadreach. CoisCéim is proud to be funded by the Arts Council of Ireland and supported by Dublin City Council and Culture Ireland. **Find out more at www.coisceim.com.**

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Arts and Cultural Participation Among Children and Young People: Does Disadvantage Make a Difference?

Emer Smyth, Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI), Dublin

Introduction

Arts and cultural participation among children and young people has been receiving increasing policy attention in recent years through *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures*, the *Arts in Education Charter* and the *Creative Ireland* programme. However, until recently, relatively little has been known about how children and young people engage in arts and cultural activities within and outside school. The Growing Up in Ireland (GUI) study provides rich information on arts and cultural participation in the early years (3 to 5 years of age) as well as middle childhood and adolescence (9 and 13 years of age). This article draws on a more detailed study funded by the Arts Council. The study took a broad view of cultural participation, reflecting the age and stage of children and young people. For younger children, the study looked at their involvement in creative play (such as painting, drawing and playing make-believe games) as well as the more traditional cultural pursuits of reading and attending educational or cultural events with their parents. For those in middle childhood and adolescence, the study explored engagement in popular culture, including television viewing and digital engagement, as well as involvement in music, dance and drama lessons and in reading for pleasure. This article summarises the main findings of the study, highlighting in particular the way in which children's access to, and involvement in, the arts reflects the socio-economic circumstances of their families.

Arts in the Early Years

Three-year-olds frequently engage in a range of cultural activities with their families: on an everyday basis, over half are read to, half of families sing and recite rhymes and poems with their children and almost half of children paint or draw. The majority – over two thirds – have access to more than 30 children's books at home. Half of three-year-olds watch television for two hours or more a day. Even at this early age, gender and social background differences are apparent in children's exposure to cultural activities. Figure 1 shows the proportion of three-year-olds who are read to every day, breaking the figures down by the social class of the family and the gender of the child. Children from more advantaged families, that is, those with parents in professional/managerial occupations, have more exposure to reading, while the lowest levels of frequent reading are found among the non-employed group, a group that are so removed from the labour market that they cannot be classified into a social class group on the basis of their previous occupation. A similar gap in reading is found if we consider mother's education or household income, with more frequent reading among highly educated and higher income families. Even at this early stage, girls are slightly more likely to be read to frequently than boys, except in the non-employed group. Gender differences are also apparent in singing and painting or drawing, with girls more likely to take part in these activities than boys.

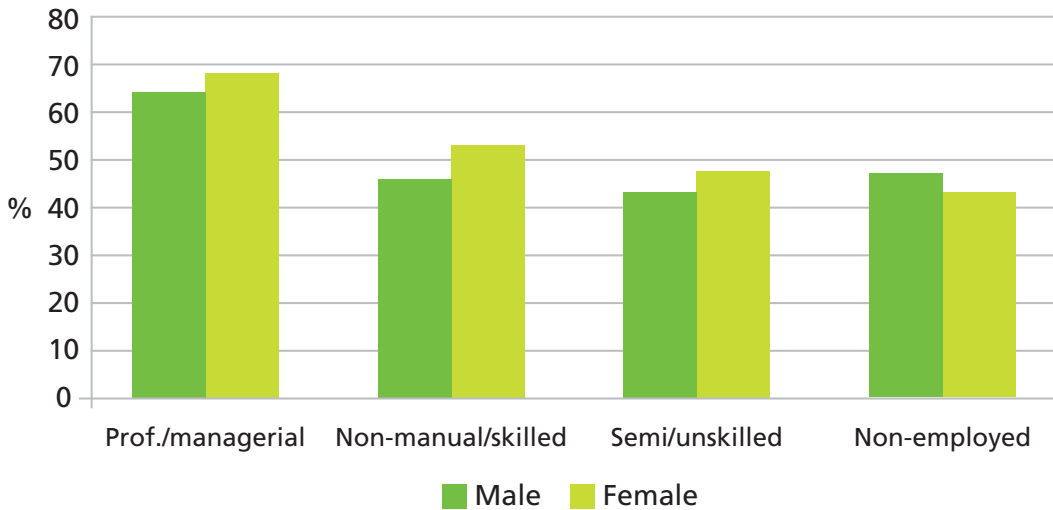


Figure 1: The percentage of children who are read to every day, by the child’s gender and the social class of the family

For these activities, gender is a much more important influence than socio-economic background. Children from highly educated or middle-class families watch much less television than their peers, but there are few gender differences in TV watching at the age of three.

Reading continues to be a very frequent activity at the age of five with two-thirds of parents reading to their children every day. The majority of five-year-olds paint or draw, enjoy dance or music and play make-believe games every day. Visits to the library are regular or at least occasional for about half of families while most children are taken on occasional educational visits by their parents. Over the month prior to the study, six in 10 children had been to a concert, play, museum, art gallery, community or school event while half had been to the cinema. Over half of five-year-olds play with an electronic device at least once a week, with total screen time (including television as well as electronic devices) typically being 1-2 hours a day.

Five year olds from more advantaged families (in terms of education, income and social class) are more involved in many cultural activities, including reading, painting/drawing, cultural outings (with the exception of cinema) and educational visits. This group of children have less screen time than their peers. Girls are much more likely than boys to engage in painting/drawing and make-believe games, and somewhat more likely to be read to frequently and go on educational visits.

The GUI study provides new information on two groups of children generally underrepresented in existing national studies: those from migrant backgrounds and those with disabilities or special educational needs (SEN). At both three and five years of age, children from migrant families spend more time using screens and less time being read to or going on cultural outings than their Irish peers. Children with disabilities tend to watch more television than their peers but have families who were more highly engaged in reading and singing with them (when they

were three) and taking them on educational visits or to the library (when they were five) than might be expected given their socio-economic profile. Thus, it appears that the parents of children with SEN purposefully engage in more stimulating activities in order to enhance their child’s development.

Arts in Middle Childhood and Adolescence

As children grow older, their own interests and preferences are likely to assume a greater role in shaping the activities in which they engage. At this stage, they start to become involved in more structured cultural activities like attending music or dance lessons or joining a drama club. Just under half of nine-year-olds and a third of 13-year-olds take part in a structured cultural class or club outside school time. There is a clear social gradient in involvement (see Figure 2 overleaf), with children from professional/managerial, highly educated and higher income families more likely to take part. As the majority of such activities are paid for, income acts as a barrier to participation with higher levels of involvement among those in the top two income quintiles (fifths). Girls from more advantaged families have the highest level of involvement. Children from migrant backgrounds are less likely to be involved in such structured activities though the gap narrows somewhat between the ages of nine and 13. At nine years of age, children with special educational needs are less likely to participate though again this gap narrows slightly by the age of 13.

Involvement in less structured cultural activities continues into middle childhood and adolescence, with high levels of reading for pleasure. There are marked differences by social background in the frequency of reading but the pattern is different for girls and boys; working-class girls spend as much or even more time reading than middle-class boys. Among both girls and boys, those with more



highly educated mothers spend more time reading and less on screen time than other groups. Girls spend much less time on computer games than boys but levels of time on television are roughly similar for both genders. Young people with SEN tend to spend more time playing computer games than their peers. As with younger children, those from migrant backgrounds watch more television but the gap in terms of reading is narrower than in the early years.

Schools and Cultural Participation

All children encounter visual arts, music and drama as part of the primary school curriculum, though the amount of time spent on these subjects varies across schools and classes. The transition into second-level education involves a choice of subjects, with only four in ten 13- year-old students taking Art and two in ten taking Music. Girls are much more likely to take these subjects than boys. Significant differences are also found between schools in the number and type of cultural activities offered on an extracurricular basis. In particular, smaller schools are less likely to provide extra-curricular activities and, at primary level, are less satisfied with their arts and music facilities.

The nature of arts participation varies by the profile of students in the school. Nine-year-old children in the most disadvantaged schools, urban band 1 DEIS schools, are less involved in structured cultural activities and read less often while they tend to watch TV more often than other children, even taking account of their more disadvantaged profile. This pattern is still evident four years later, with young people in DEIS second-level schools spending more time watching TV and playing computer games and less time reading than their peers in non-DEIS schools. The study findings show that school provision of cultural

activities makes a difference. Children and young people attending schools with a stronger emphasis on cultural activities are more involved in such activities outside school, being more likely to take part in music, dance or drama lessons and reading for pleasure more frequently.

Cultural Participation and Outcomes

The longitudinal nature of the GUI study means that we can look at whether arts and cultural participation makes a difference to two sets of child outcomes: cognitive development (that is, their performance in standardised academic tests) and their wellbeing (that is, the prevalence of socio-emotional difficulties). Among young children, being read to frequently and having more access to books contributes to improved vocabulary between three and five years of age, all else being equal. Watching more television is related to improved vocabulary but is also associated with greater socio-emotional difficulties. In contrast, painting/ drawing more often is related to having fewer socio-emotional difficulties. The gap in reading, access to books and screen time found by social background is therefore likely to reinforce socio-economic inequalities in children’s cognitive and socio-emotional development in the period leading up to school start.

Among older children, self-directed reading and taking part in structural cultural activities outside school time contribute to cognitive development (in terms of both verbal and numeric skills) as well as to academic self-confidence, that is, how confident young people feel in engaging with their schoolwork. As in the early years, watching a lot of television promotes verbal skills but at the expense of greater socio-emotional difficulties. It is evident therefore that children’s access to, and exposure to, the arts outside school acts as a key driver



Figure 2: The proportion of nine-year-olds taking part in structured cultural activities by their family’s social class and the gender of the child



“ Children and young people with special educational needs are less involved in structured cultural activities than their peers, highlighting the importance of ensuring that provision is accessible to all. ”

of educational inequalities. Children and young people from advantaged families are more likely to experience the kinds of stimulating cultural activities which enhance their school-based learning and overall wellbeing.

Implications for Policy

The study findings point to significant socio-economic and gender differences in the types of cultural activities engaged in by children and young people. Those from more advantaged families, particularly girls, are much more likely to engage in the kinds of activities, such as reading and attending music or drama classes, which enhance their within-school learning, thus contributing to social inequalities in educational achievement. The study findings point to a number of potential ways for achieving more equitable access to the arts.

Patterns of cultural engagement are established from an early age, highlighting the importance of early intervention. The Aistear early years curriculum, which covers those from birth to six years of age, emphasises the importance of children expressing themselves creatively and imaginatively. However, we know very little so far about the kinds of arts and cultural activities offered in preschool settings. It is important that early years staff are supported through professional development and activities are presented in such a way as to challenge stereotyping on the basis of gender or other background factors. Levels of library use among families with young children are found to be relatively high, suggesting that they provide important sites to promote cultural engagement among young children.

Schools provide an important arena for providing all children with at least some access to a variety of cultural activities through the formal curriculum and through after-school provision. There are challenges facing small schools in providing facilities for the arts, particularly after-school activities, highlighting the importance of linking school and community initiatives centred on the arts. While it is crucial that schools provide activities to engage their students, it is vital that assumptions are not made about which after-school classes are deemed suitable for different

groups of students, and that both boys and girls are provided with access to a range of activities.

The study findings highlight the need for cultural provision to be inclusive in a broad sense. Participation levels in many cultural activities are lower among children from migrant families, especially at early years and primary stages. Language emerges as a significant barrier, with particularly low levels of involvement for families who have difficulties reading English language material, highlighting the importance of providing information on arts activities in a variety of languages and of using schools as an arena to promote participation across all groups. Children and young people with special educational needs are less involved in structured cultural activities than their peers, highlighting the importance of ensuring that provision is accessible to all.

DEIS schools appear to be using School Completion Programme funding to provide cultural activities to promote student engagement. However, cuts in funding to the School Completion Programme over the recession have curtailed after-school and holiday provision. There is a case for additional resources for the most disadvantaged schools to enhance their provision of after-school and summertime cultural activities.

Most of the structured cultural activities in which children engage outside school require payment, resulting in lower participation among lower income families. The *Arts in Education Charter* recommends the introduction of subsidies for more disadvantaged families to attend arts venues and performances. Given that not all disadvantaged young people attend DEIS schools and not all cultural provision is provided through schools, this is a crucial avenue for ensuring more inclusive arts engagement.

Children and young people are found to engage in a variety of structured and unstructured cultural activities in their daily lives, embracing reading and after-school music/drama classes as well as popular and digital culture. It is important therefore that arts policy recognises the various ways in which children and young people express themselves and interact with the world of culture and ensures that their access to rich cultural experiences is not constrained by their family circumstances.

Acknowledgements

This article draws on *Arts and Cultural Participation among Children and Young People* by Emer Smyth, published by the Arts Council and the ESRI in 2016. The data for this study come from the Growing Up in Ireland Survey (GUI). GUI has been funded by the Government of Ireland through the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) in association with the Central Statistics Office (CSO) and the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP). These data have been collected in accordance with the Statistics Act, 1993. The DCYA, CSO and DEASP take no responsibility for the views expressed or the outputs generated from the research undertaken on the GUI data.

Arts in Education Portal

Dr Katie Sweeney, National Director for the Integration of the Arts in Education, Department of Education and Skills

The Arts in Education Portal (www.artsineducation.ie) was launched in May 2015. Since its launch, the portal has been developing as a new space where both artists and teachers can be supported and inspired. The launch of the Arts in Education Portal marked a very significant step in terms of having one space where practice with artists, children and teachers in schools is profiled. This marked a beginning point from which to build the community and to support artists and teachers to build their skills in reflecting and documenting their practice. As a window for the Arts in Education Charter, the portal also represents an opportunity to reflect on key developments within the sector. Analytics show that the Arts in Education Portal is widely used by all stakeholders both nationally and internationally. The analytics show that the news section on the Portal has proved to be the most popular content closely followed by projects and partnerships. The news feature is an important aspect of the site as it is the key space for the cultural institutions, arts organisations and the education sector to inform each other about opportunities for training and events.

The constant flow of news on the portal has kept the site dynamic and up to date. Ongoing communication with the sector is key in developing the portal as the key national digital resource of arts in education and creative practice in Ireland. This happens through daily social media feeds and also through a monthly newsletter. As we continue to develop this space, we are becoming more aware of the needs of the sector and the kinds of supports that are needed to continue developing practice and supporting a strong ethos of arts in education practice across the sector. Our commissioning plan each year includes new projects and partnerships; critical essays, online talks; resource videos, events, as well as the development of the Directory of local/ national activity and the Reading Room.

The Arts in Education Portal continues to provide a platform through which good collaboration practice in arts-in-education and arts education will be supported, developed and enhanced. The portal hosts a range of content determined broadly by the Arts in Education

Portal Editorial Committee – which now includes a representative from the Creative Ireland Programme. To date it has been led by the Department of Education and Skills with 2018 funding also coming from also from the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht under the Creative Ireland Programme. The Editorial Committee will continue to work with partners to build the audience for the Portal and ensure quality content.

2015 – 2016	Critical Essays, Artists Video Series, National Arts in Education Day
2016 – 2017	Critical Essays, Artist Video Series, Online Training Course, Guest Bloggers
2017 – 2018	Regional Days, Documentation Award, Critical Essays, Guest Bloggers, Promotional Video and Promotional Merchandise, Digital Advertising
2018 – 2019	Regional Days, Documentation Award, Critical Essays, Guest Bloggers, Promotional Poster/Foldout, Dissemination, Digital Advertising

Table 1 Summary of Portal Commissioning Plans

A key aspect of the portal has been to build the practical skills of teachers and artists in terms of documenting and reflecting on practice and supporting both artist and teachers in submitting their work to the portal. The portal delivers a series of online events with a focus on photography, video, reflection and dissemination. The outcomes from this training have been developed into an online guide for teachers and artists.

A National Portal Day has been established which aims to bring together members of the arts in education and creative community from all across Ireland, to share, learn, talk, network, get inspired, and continue interrogating best practice in the field. The next Portal Day is planned for Galway on 9th November 2019, which will connect with the Creative Cluster and Creative Schools Programme.

The Arts in Education Portal is managed by Content Managers KidsOwn Publishing Ltd and can be accessed at www.artsineducation.ie

Children and the Arts in an Early Childhood Education and Care Setting

Denise Sheridan,
Úlla Beag, Co.Clare

Introduction

Úlla Beag is a green school² set up in 2010 in Ogonnelloe, Co Clare. We focus on providing holistic learning environments based on a learning through play curriculum with an emphasis on child-led learning. Úlla Beag received formal Síolta Quality Framework³ accreditation in May 2018.

In November 2014, we approached local artist Lynn Kenny with a view to developing an art class for early childhood education and care in Úlla Beag. Through collaboration and active engagement between Lynn, the children and staff, we developed a more holistic teaching approach to supporting the development of children's pre-reading, pre-writing and pre-maths skills through a variety of art disciplines including painting, printing, working with three-dimensional form and craft skills. The project ran from 2015 to 2017 and since then key learnings and takeaways have been incorporated into our curriculum and daily activities at Ulla Beag. The primary result of the project has been that, as educators, we have moved

away from providing a reactive environment towards a more proactive, child-led learning environment. This has enabled us to proactively plan an environment with the children which supports all types of learners – visual, auditory and kinesthetic. We found that visual and kinesthetic learners were really struggling to grasp pre-reading skills such as rhyming and phonetical learning, and pre-maths skills of combination and processing through repetition so we worked together with the children to create a more visual understanding of letters, numbers, combinations etc., incorporating touch and smell experiences.

As an early years educator you discover through experience that children learn in many different ways. One of the critical aspects of being an educator is to acknowledge this and find a new way of teaching or supporting each child to achieve their learning potential. At Úlla Beag we place a large emphasis on free play and child-led decision making.

2 A green school focuses on being mindful and respectful of our environment as well as the children in our care. We take a holistic approach to all we do and teach sustainable living skills, such as organic gardening, conserving water and waste management, as part of our learning through play programme

3 Síolta is the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education in Ireland, developed by the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education on behalf of the Department of Education and Skills



Through observation we determined that children learn through a variety of methods such as mimicking, rhyming, repetition, visualisation and by using other senses such as touch, all at their own pace. We wanted a holistic approach to learning which we could develop and grow organically with the children that would allow children to develop at their own pace over their two-year stay with us.

Teaching through art creates a learning environment which supports children’s innate curiosity to explore open-ended, hands-on experiences and provides the raw sensory material from which children build concepts, test ideas and find out. As a teaching medium, art allows children to try something new, to initiate activities, to seek challenges, to develop a ‘can do’ mentality, to be willing to take a risk in new experiences, and to develop an understanding of the importance of the process as a learning experience rather than there being an emphasis on a ‘perfect’ end product. The use of visual and print media as a teaching method to develop pre-reading, writing and maths skills has moved learning to a quality holistic approach at Úlla Beag.

The Story of the Project: What We Did Together

We started off with a basic introduction to colours, both primary and secondary colours and colour combinations. From there we developed different techniques through large floor projects. As a group, the children worked on large pieces – printing, painting and collaging – physically manoeuvring themselves around the piece, rather than sitting down at a table and just using their upper body when painting.



Creating phonics land – large floor activity. Children created a landscape adding “c” cars and “h” houses and “t” trees with “a” apples on them



The completed alphabet land

All of the activities gave children opportunities to strengthen their fine motor skills. They also learned to work together as a group, which built up peer relationships and a joint ownership of the work they produced.



Outdoor group painting with cotton buds

Other projects included clay modelling, making pinch pots and papier mâché bowls, which focused on form-making, with children using their hands in a different way. We also mono-printed onto old baby wipes which was quick, effective and explorative: some worked well, some didn’t. These were then combined into a print quilt using sewing techniques.



Developing fine motor skills through stitching

We incorporated story making and phonetical expression into the art activities in a very organic way. For example, when speaking about our group summer print, which was created through a mix of apple prints, “a” for apple was repeated, “b” for bee etc. Not only were we emphasising the sounds but also developing a process where children could feel and imagine what those sounds are visually: A... apple... apple printed to see the form...”a” what else could start with “a”? This was a very organic development of child-led learning, stimulated by the children’s exploration of the materials – they could feel what an “a” feels like, they could even smell an apple thus incorporating another sense allowing for whole-body learning to support pre-reading.

We talked about the attempts that weren’t so successful and why this happened – too much paint, too little paint, mixing problems, all live combination activities which are crucial to develop processing and pre-maths skills. If it failed we tried again.

The Flow of Our Arts Days

As well as the preparation of the room and materials, arts days began with a group discussion with the children, remembering the previous session and reviewing the work completed. We found this reflection crucial both for continuity and information processing for children of this age. We then got ready, putting aprons on and discussing with the children the art lesson taking place that day. After learning techniques from Lynn, the children started to experiment and create, with assistance where needed. Some children finished earlier than others so they moved on to create their next adventure while the other children were given time or guidance to finish their work. Closing discussions with the children reinforced the lessons learned, exploring what the children liked or would change for the next time. These discussions were again very important in supporting communication skills and information processing with children at a preschool level. This was followed by forward planning – including the children in a discussion of what would take place the following week. At the end of the sessions, everyone tidied up together.

It was amazing to see the children develop into a strong unit that were as happy with their group projects as they were with their individual work, which really allowed them to feel a sense of identity and belonging within the group. Another result of art days was that the children were more inquisitive about everything around them – both in and out of school they were talking about colours and sounds as well as the skills they developed and making new things from old things.

The main challenge for us was keeping the projects age-appropriate so that children were not over-dependent on us to intervene and help, and really only needed to call on us in real emergencies – such as the glue sticking their fingers together!



Our gallery exhibition of large group pieces



The children create puppets following on from learning stitching of the wipes quilt.

The Story of Our Project from the Children

Through this project we experienced so many examples of children's feedback:

- ♦ *'I like this way of making letters.'* (Mike) This was Mike's feedback on creating cars from "c"s; trees from "t"s and houses from "h"s. Mike found learning and retaining letters difficult until we started creating associations with everyday items in picture format. As an educator, you know that children learn in different ways and while mainstream teaching of phonics through song and rhyme may work for most children, it does not work for all. One of the critical areas as an educator is to acknowledge this and find a new method of teaching to enable each child to realise their potential.
- ♦ *'I don't like the way the glue makes my fingers sticky but I want to make my bowl so I will get sticky fingers and then I will have a bowl.'* Mary's feedback on papier mâché technique.
- ♦ *'I don't mind if I stick the needle on my finger. I want to sew a cross and I am getting better at seeing where the needle comes out so I don't catch my finger!'* (Imogen)
- ♦ *'I like using this as sometimes I drop my paintbrush'* Oscar (aged 2 1/2) discussing his preference for using cotton buds when painting a picture.
- ♦ *'I am really good at making robots.'* (Charlie)
- ♦ *'I made a hole in my picture and had to start again. I put too much water on.'* (Amelia)
- ♦ *'I feel calm when I paint.'* (Thaidhg)
- ♦ *'I mix red and blue for purple. Sometimes I remember how to make orange too, that's yellow and red, but sometimes I forget so I have to mix different colours together.'* (Eibhe)
- ♦ *'I like printing with toothbrushes its cool. They are old toothbrushes though, not new ones.'* (Saoirse)



Changes and New Developments from the Project

A number of insights came from the project that we have used to form our approach:

- ◆ Even at an early years level, group art projects promote leadership within the group and foster team work and empathy among the children.
- ◆ Art as a teaching process facilitates a safe environment to allow children to fail and start again – a valuable life lesson. The children had to figure out with us why things did not always work out, for example not enough paint applied, not leaning hard enough to print, yellow will not print out on the recycled wipes etc.
- ◆ Learning to fail and recover / find new solutions is very important to instilling creativity and resilience in children.
- ◆ With print media, the children very quickly saw what worked and did not work and the results were immediate.
- ◆ Art is a fantastic medium to foster child-led learning and child-led planning as it is such a creative process. The children were completely open and could be masters of their own destiny!
- ◆ As a result of this collaboration through art with the children we can display, discuss and review each other's work together as part of arts experiences. This allows children to learn more from each other, praise each other, get praise from each other, empathise with each other when something does not work, and help each other out more. This is very important in relation to wellbeing, identity and belonging, and developing empathy and communication skills with peers, teachers and parents.

The project has resulted in the expansion of the group to include children below pre-school age and art practice has been integrated within daily lessons at Úlla Beag. There is now stronger and higher quality integration of art-based work into our daily activities and project work with the children. More time is allowed for creativity – previously we would have included a lot of art work with our children but now we have introduced an element of child-led choice and a lot more focus on junk art and creation time. We have collaborated on Easter and summer camp art days and these are a great hit with the afterschool groups who come to Úlla Beag.



Integration of child-led planning and experimentation with the 2–3 year old group in outdoor painting

Kids' Own Publishing Partnership



Ciara Gallagher, Jo Holmwood, Orla Kenny and Alice Lyons, Kids' Own

We play football in the park and basketball. The park was near where we lived but we had to move. The guys was selling the house so we all had to move. It was like a piece of glass shattering.

Amir and Abdi, children in temporary accommodation, from *I Hope You Grow* (Kids' Own, 2018)

Why should any society listen to children? How can we as adults support children's individuality and their creative expression? How can we make space for children as active cultural agents within their communities and on a global level? As Ireland's only dedicated publisher of work made by children, Kids' Own seeks to address the systematic dismissal of children's voices within our society, and offer a platform for children's lives and experiences to be valued and made visible through publishing and the arts.

What does the child's voice contribute to our literature and culture? Currently the field of children's literature in Ireland is dominated by an adult view of childhood and an adult worldview in general. Kids' Own works to address

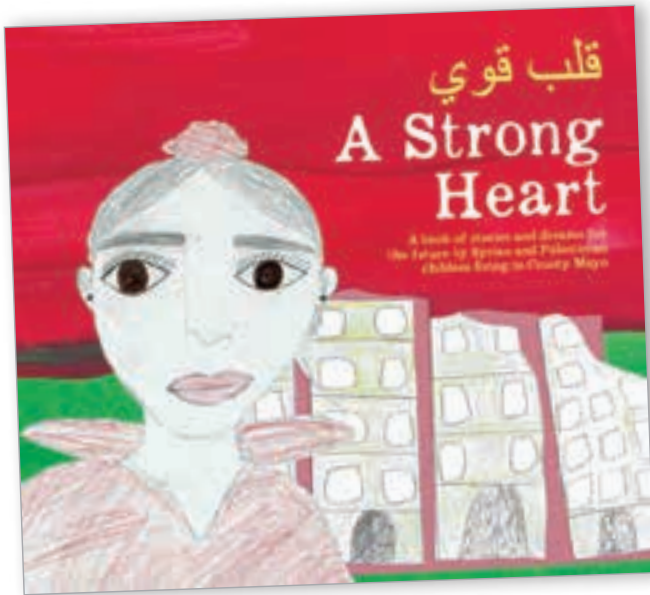
what it perceives as a significant gap in the visibility and representation of children's voices in literature and the public sphere in general. Our work seeks to give children's real thoughts a public platform, thereby giving status to children as equal and active citizens.

Children's thoughts and creative expressions are deserving of recognition in their own right. Through the publication of children's visual and verbal expressions, Kids' Own works to counter the perception that publishing is the reserve of an elite few and to present childhood in an egalitarian context. The insights that can be gathered from children through a creative and meaningful process can be tender, poetic, shocking, humorous, or sad.



“ *The need for the inclusion and the voice of the child across Irish society is rooted in a rights-based approach.* ”

In *A Strong Heart: a book of stories and dreams for the future by Syrian and Palestinian children living in County Mayo* (Kids' Own, 2018), Amal writes, 'I would like to help poor people who get hurt to get better. When you are a doctor, you need a strong heart.'



A Strong Heart: a book of stories and dreams for the future by Syrian and Palestinian children living in County Mayo (Kids' Own, 2018)

In *I Can Taste the Rain* (Kids' Own, 2015), Aaron observes, 'The tide was out. The moon drinks the tide and spits it out.'

In *Bouncing Away* (Kids' Own, 2016), Tony says, 'When I feel angry I stop smiling and become very quiet. Sometimes I feel angry and sad at the same time.'

In *Starting School* (Kids' Own, 2015) we read, 'I was afraid of all the friends that I didn't know.'

These statements and observations are not comparable with the stories and ideas that are presented in the mainstream children's literature, written by adult authors. They offer an alternative in terms of how we can share childhood experiences with other children and give value to what is real in children's lives. These pieces of writing offer an alternative lens to the world in which adults interpret the experience of children.

The need for the inclusion and the voice of the child across Irish society is rooted in a rights-based approach. The Department of Children and Youth Affairs' (2014) national policy framework for children and young people, 2014-2020, entitled 'Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures', states that:

Arts and culture are essential to the health and well-being of all children and young people and promote the development of creativity, imagination, self-confidence and self-efficiency as well as physical, social cognitive, emotional strength and skills. Through their involvement in play, recreation and the arts, children and young people learn by doing; they explore and experience the world around them; they experiment with new ideas and experiences and in so doing, learn to understand and construct their social position within the world.

In an essay entitled 'Children's Right to Culture: A Paradigm Shift', Maria Corbett (former Legal and Policy Director with the Children's Rights Alliance and current Chair of Kids' Own Board of Directors) (2016), says:

Traditionally children were viewed as the property of their parents, empty vessels to be filled with knowledge or economics family units, and children's play and artistic activities were dismissed as futile, time-wasting. However, our concept of children and childhood has been radically altered over the past thirty years, in particular by the adoption of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989.

Kids' Own seeks to promote and support this view. Since 1997, Kids' Own has published over 100 titles made by children across a range of culture-specific contexts, including refugee and newly-arrived migrant children; Traveller children; children living in temporary accommodation.

Kids' Own seeks to provide a democratic space where all children can engage, carrying out engagements in a variety of settings including libraries, early childhood settings, schools, community centres, galleries and festivals. The collaborative book-making projects represent a journey, a sharing of children's experiences and a shared experience in the book-making process, while working alongside a professional artist and writer. The end product is not known at the outset, but the publishing of the work at the end gives credence and validity to the children's efforts.

At the heart of the process underpinning all these publications and engagements is a meaningful dialogue between children and professional writers and artists, giving rise to an authentic arts experience in which the work is rooted in the children's actual lives. Non-fiction is a core tenet of Kids' Own work; the aim is to offer a



body of literature that gives truth to children’s lives and presents a true reflection of childhood from the child’s own perspective. Kids’ Own works to bring the current realities, hopes, dreams and struggles of children and young people to the fore; a closer look at two projects from 2018 provides deeper insight on the Kids’ Own ethos and its process of engagement.

Giving Visibility and a Voice to Children Experiencing Homelessness



I Hope You Grow: Poetry, stories and artwork by children living in temporary accommodation in Dublin (Kids’ Own, 2018)

Recently, Kids’ Own partnered with Focus Ireland in Dublin in an effort to provide support and creative engagement with children who are directly affected by the current housing crisis and are living in temporary accommodation. The project began with the questions: How are children and young people affected by a society that is unable to provide adequate housing for its citizens? What are their coping strategies within their daily lives? And how should they be supported to develop as resilient individuals?

Article 27 of the UN convention on the Rights of the Child states that, ‘All children have a right to a standard of living that meets their needs.’⁴ As Focus Ireland’s statistics set out, there were 10,305 people homeless in the week of March 25 to 31, 2019 across Ireland. The number of families becoming homeless increased by over 268% since March 2015. In the last three years, there has been a rapid increase in the number of families becoming homeless, and in March 2019, there were 1,733 families accessing emergency accommodation. This includes 3,821 children.

The negative impact of homelessness on children has been widely reported and researched by agencies such as Focus Ireland, the Housing Authority and the Ombudsman for Children. In one commissioned report, *Finding A Home: Journeys Out of Homelessness*, it was found that, for children, a lack of certainty and routine, a lack of play space, boredom and reduced socialisation were key factors that affected their daily lives. One of the aims of Kids’ Owns was to provide some children in temporary accommodation with a safe place to play, explore and give credence to their actual experience.

I Hope You Grow was the collaborative book project that emerged from Kids’ Own engagement with children affected by homelessness. Over the course of a week in the summer of 2018, the children were engaged in an artistic process. Kids’ Own worked closely with the Child Support Workers from Focus Ireland and the children were identified and transported to a central Dublin location that had access to a beautiful garden. Kids’ Own associate artist and writer took the children’s lead, and created activities that allowed the children to respond creatively to the beauty of the garden including painting with ink and acrylic, using words like *nature* and *love* to write poems and stories, sharing stories and choosing flowers matched them. From this, a genuine creative process emerged, which was nurtured and documented over the course of the engagement. What resulted was the creation of a brand new publication representing the children’s own thoughts and ideas.



One of the young authors of the Kids’ Own book I Hope You Grow, reads his contribution in public, with facilitating writer Mary Branley (right) and facilitating artist Maree Hensey (left) at the book launch in Dublin’s Mansion House (November 2018).

4 <https://www.unicef.org/child-rights-convention/convention-text>



One of the themes that emerged, as the children themselves wrote in their introduction to *I Hope You Grow*, is that resilience, seeing the bright things amidst the challenges they are forced to face in their young lives, was very important to them:

We hope that you will learn about the difficult of moving, but also the joy we see, living beside a park, or being near our relatives. It's not always a disaster.

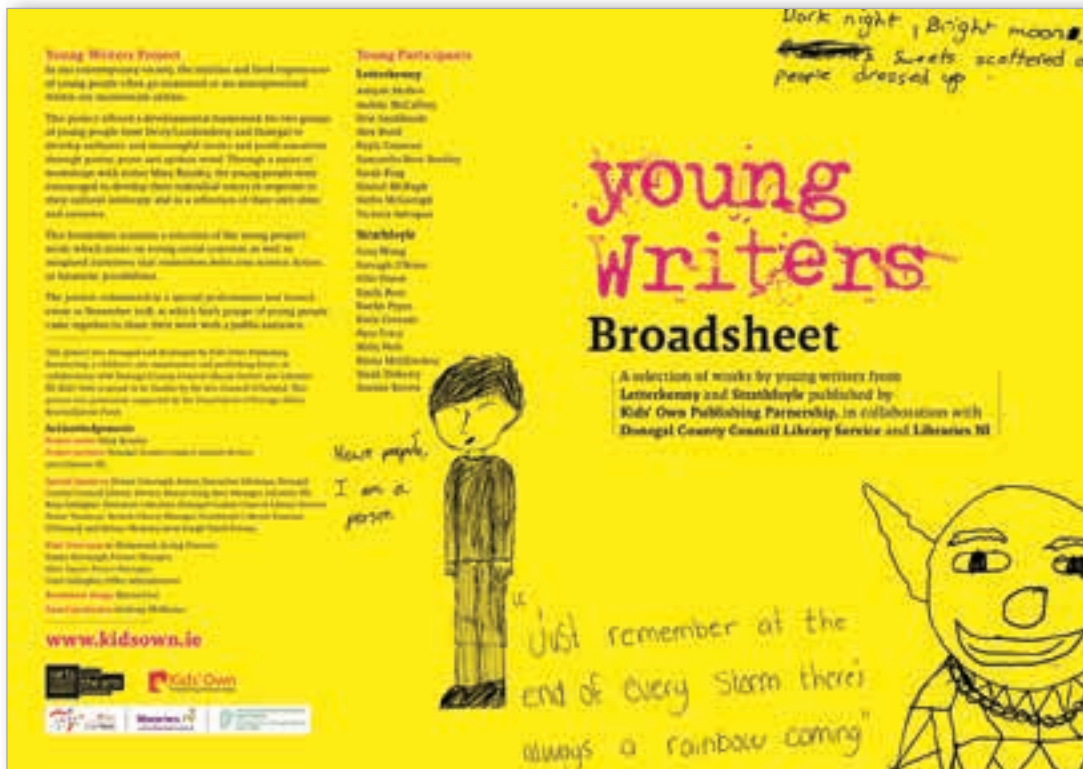
Addressing Adolescent Issues on the Border

Kids' Own has worked extensively across the Irish border region for the past twenty years and recognises that young people living in these areas face barriers and challenges to their mental, emotional and physical health that are a legacy of the historical conflict experienced in this region and which persist into the present moment. Attitudes and legacies of past conflict have continued to create and exacerbate prejudice in these communities and many young people are disempowered or disenfranchised as a result. Furthermore, social exclusion and economic disadvantage prevent young people from participating in cultural and self-expression. As we have worked with library services in Derry and Donegal over many years, we also recognised the crucial role that libraries play within and across these communities, fostering cultural and community participation and acting as a place

where people from all backgrounds and communities are welcome and can meet.

The Young Writers Project project sought to create groups of young people in Donegal and Derry/Londonderry who would engage in creative writing and cultural expression, and who would, through the creative process, also increase their civic engagement and participation within their own communities and across communities. In partnership with Donegal County Council Library Service and Libraries NI, Kids' Own and a Kids' Own associate writer worked with young people in Letterkenny and Strathfoyle over the course of eight sessions. This project offered a developmental framework for the groups to develop authentic and meaningful stories and youth narratives through poetry, prose and spoken word.

Through a series of workshops with writer Mary Branley, the young people were encouraged to develop their individual voices in response to their cultural landscape and as a reflection of their own ideas and interests. The group of writers in Strathfoyle were specifically interested in young people's experiences with mental health in their locality. In particular, they expressed a heightened awareness of local young people's experiences of anxiety, depression, and suicide. Their focus on these issues centred on a particular bridge in their local community that had become associated with death by suicide in recent years. The workshops allowed the group to raise and explore these issues through a creative process. The workshops also provided the young writers with an opportunity to raise their concerns about these



Young Writers Project and Broadsheet (Kids' Own, 2018)



issues through writing letters to local representatives. The group in Letterkenny were interested in a wide range of issues that affect the lives of young people, including identity and belonging. This group demonstrated a keen interest in exploring these issues across different forms and genres, and notably developed their confidence in writing and creative expression as the project progressed.

A key part of this project was the bringing together of the two groups of young writers. In October, the group of young writers from Letterkenny travelled by bus to Strathfoyle to meet the group of young writers at Strathfoyle library. This was an important opportunity for the groups to meet, exchange ideas, and to work together. In November, the two groups came together again for a performance of their work and the launch of the Young Writers Broadsheet (see photo), comprised of a selection of their writing produced during their workshops. This event was a great success and was well-attended by members of staff from Donegal County Council Library Service, Libraries NI, Enagh Youth Forum, representatives from local branches of organisations such as SIPTU, members of the public, and the friends and families of the young writers.

Kids' Own Book Brings a Syrian Child from Mayo's Voice to the United Nations

In July 2018, Minister for Children and Youth Affairs Katherine Zappone shared the children's stories from the Kids' Own book *A Strong Heart* at her UN Security Council address on 'Children in Armed Conflict'. Minister Zappone said:

As Minister I am particularly proud that half of the 1,883 persons accepted into Ireland under resettlement and relocation programmes are children fleeing war and conflict. In addition Ireland is providing care for 79 children who arrived alone at our ports and airports. All

of these children, from countries experiencing conflict such as Syria, Afghanistan and Eritrea, are making Ireland their home. They speak for themselves in a collection of stories and art created by Syrian and Palestinian children now living in Mayo in the West of Ireland. Through the book 'A Strong Heart' they tell of the beauty of their new home-towns, the local rivers, mountains and even the world famous salmon. They express their passion for Irish sport, their sense of fun and their hopes and dreams. 12-year old Khaled in Claremorris writes, "My dream for the future is to be a footballer first and play for Ireland. When I'm thirty-three I will be a teacher and go back to Syria to teach English." Khaled and his classmates, Irish, Syrian and Palestinian, are flourishing. They are our future.



Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Katherine Zappone TD

Some of the content for this article was written by the late Orla Kenny who was a driving force behind the organisation for many years both as a teaching artist and as Creative Director.

Please contact Alice Lyons alice@kidsown.ie with queries.

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New Publication

Explore, Play and Learn through the Arts in Pre-school Settings

Barnardos and the National Childhood Network have worked together to produce a new publication for early childhood educators, *Explore, Play and Learn through the Arts in Pre-school Settings*.

This book considers how children explore, play and learn through the arts in pre-school settings by offering guidance for early childhood educators on how to best to cultivate the creative process through a wide range of arts experiences, including play with malleable materials, junk art, music, movement, dance, drama, drawing, painting, storytelling, puppetry, play with light and nursery rhymes.



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