



An Roinn Oideachais
Department of Education

Unlocking Creativity

Insights into effective practice in early learning and care settings and schools



Department of Education Inspectorate
www.gov.ie/DEInspectorate

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1. Background

This report presents insights into the effective support and promotion of creativity in early learning and care (ELC) settings and schools. The insights are derived from the range of inspections conducted by the Department of Education Inspectorate in ELC settings, primary schools, and post-primary schools during the period January to June 2023. The report showcases a selection of the creative practices observed and highlights examples of creative teaching and learning.

The publication of this report is among the commitments of the Inspectorate to support the implementation of the *Creative Youth Plan 2023-2027*.

The importance of creativity

Transversal competencies associated with creativity, such as critical thinking, creative writing, design thinking, curiosity, persistence, resilience, imagination, agency and collaboration, are essential for living, both in the ‘here-and-now’ and in tomorrow’s world. Critical and creative thinking (CCT) competencies are an important element of learning for all children and young people.

As reflected in reports from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), fostering creativity is an essential feature of high-quality education. The OECD recognises that creativity and critical thinking are key skills for navigating the globalised and complex economies and societies of the 21st century. In its *PISA 2022 Results (Volume III)* publication, the OECD defined creativity as:

‘The competence to engage productively in the generation, evaluation and improvement of ideas that can result in original and effective solutions, advances in knowledge and impactful expressions of imagination.’

(OECD, 2022, page 7)

Further to this, the Educational Research Centre’s publication ‘*Cultivating Creativity: What the PISA 2022 results say about creative thinking in Ireland*’ (2024) provides information ‘on students’ attitudes and beliefs about creativity, their experience of home and school environments that support creativity and creative thinking, and their engagement in creative activities both inside and outside of school’ (page iii) in the Irish context.

There is growing consensus that education systems and their associated institutions should cultivate these skills in their young people. Over the last decade, in particular, creativity has been promoted explicitly in Ireland’s national policies and curriculum frameworks.

Policy developments

Creative Ireland was established in 2017, reflecting the vision that every person in Ireland should have the opportunity to realise their full creative potential. Creative Ireland is an all-of-government culture and wellbeing programme with the ambition to inspire and transform people, places and communities through creativity. One of the

programme's key initiatives is Creative Youth, which aims to enable the innate creativity of children and young people to flourish in both formal education and out-of-school settings.

Projects such as BLAST (Bringing Live Arts to Students and Teachers), Creative Clusters, the School of Excellence in Creativity Award, Teacher-Artist Partnership+ and Creative Schools are school based. These initiatives aim to enable children and young people to experience creativity as an integral part of their education by placing the Arts and creativity at the centre of school life.

Building on the success of the first Creative Youth Plan 2017-2022, the current Creative Youth Plan 2023-2027 aims to provide all children and young people, from birth to twenty-four years, with more opportunities for creative engagement in every aspect of their lives.

Two of its strategic objectives relate specifically to ELC settings and schools. Strategic Objective 3 recognises that creative work is central to Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework. The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) is committed to the development of key principles underpinning young children's high-quality engagement with the arts and creativity in ELC

settings. Strategic Objective 4 relates to promoting the value of creativity across the education system and supporting curriculum frameworks in schools. Associated actions include the commitment of the Department of Education Inspectorate to promoting creativity and critical thinking in all educational settings within its remit.



In line with the national priority, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) works to ensure that creativity and critical thinking are reflected in the development of curriculum frameworks. The Literature Review to Support the Updating of Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA 2022) recognises that:

'The conceptualisation of creativity and related characteristics such as flexibility, self-curiosity, and spirituality are beneficial for promoting originality and deepening children's thinking and social and emotional well-being.'

(NCCA, 2022, page 96)

Being Creative is one of the seven key competencies that underpin The Primary Curriculum Framework (NCCA 2023). This competency recognises the importance of nurturing children's innate creativity and providing them with opportunities for meaningful creative experiences. The associated principles of learning, teaching and assessment advocate that curriculum experiences provide both teachers and learners with opportunities for creativity.

Defining creativity

Creativity, in this report, is informed by the work of the *Centre for Real-World Learning, University of Winchester* and its model of creativity¹. This model identifies five core habits of mind relating to creativity include: Being Imaginative, Inquisitive, Persistent, Collaborative and Disciplined.



Fig. 1: Five creative habits of mind from the Centre for Real-World Learning

Creativity is...

*In education, creativity is the learners' use of their **imaginative capabilities** to transform their thinking and produce original and innovative ideas and solutions to problems. It involves learners **engaging with others** to investigate and hypothesise about existing knowledge, challenge assumptions, play with possibilities and take risks. The creative process results in **products and outcomes** in the form of original and innovative ideas, perspectives and artefacts that are of benefit to the learner themselves and to others in wider society. The creative process in education is **iterative** and involves the growth and acquisition of **competencies**, such as crafting, demonstrating, improving, and persisting. While creativity is centred on the generation of original and unique ideas, **innovation** is about implementing those ideas to create value or turn them into a viable solution.*

*While the Arts provide a unique platform within which artistic innovation and creativity can flourish, creativity can and should be **a feature of all disciplines**. Creativity should **permeate all domains of the curriculum**, at all levels from early years to higher education. There are opportunities for learners to develop their imaginative, creative, and innovative capacities in their play; in music, drama, visual arts, literature and dance; as they write and as they learn and acquire language; in mathematics and in the sciences; as they design and make; when they work with food or when they engage in innovative and entrepreneurial activities. **All learning provides opportunities for creativity to be nurtured and developed** ².*

¹ Lucas, B. (2016) 'A Five-Dimensional Model of Creativity and its Assessment in Schools' in *Applied Measurement in Education*, Vol. 29, No. 4, 278–290. Available at:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08957347.2016.1209206>; Also see Lucas B., Claxton, G. and Spencer, E. (2013) 'Progression in Student Creativity in School: First Steps Towards New Forms of Formative Assessments' in *OECD Education Working Papers*, No. 86. Available at: <https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/5k4dp59msdwk-en>

² The Inspectorate's understanding of creativity was published in the *Chief Inspector's Report 2016 – 2020*.

The early learning and care (ELC) context

The ELC sector is characterised by diversity in provision, practice and curricular approaches, including Montessori, Steiner, HighScope, Naíonraí (Irish-medium services) and a variety of play-based curriculums. The range of services includes preschool and full-day care. Most ELC services provide preschool under the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme funded by DCEDIY, catering for children from two years and eight months to five years and six months.

ELC services in receipt of public funding from DCEDIY must adhere to the principles of *Síolta*, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education, and *Aistear*, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework, which is currently being updated. These two frameworks highlight the importance of creativity for children's holistic development.



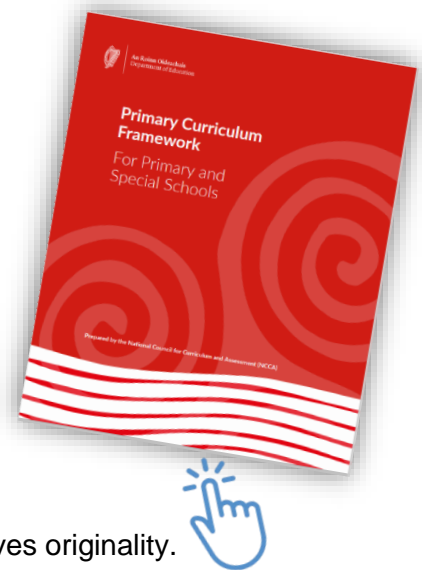
Creativity is explicitly promoted through a number of the standards in *Síolta*. In particular, Standard 2, *Environment*, requires that outdoor and internal environments provide a range of creative and enriching experiences for all children. Standard 6, *Play*, requires that children are provided with play opportunities to encourage them to explore, be creative and use their previous learning to make new meanings.

Aistear recognises that play, in all its forms, contributes to the development of children's creativity and imagination. It highlights the role of creative play in enabling children to explore and use their bodies and materials to make and do things, and to share their feelings, ideas and thoughts. Creativity is also promoted explicitly across the four interconnected themes of *Aistear*: *Well-being; Identity and Belonging; Communicating; and Exploring and Thinking*.

The primary school context

In the *Primary Curriculum Framework*, the key competency *Being Creative* makes explicit provision for creativity. It recognises children’s innate creativity and the need to provide opportunities for creative behaviour. It highlights the characteristics of creative behaviour, the creative process and the outcomes of creativity, stating that:

- The focus is on nurturing and promoting children’s interests and opportunities for meaningful creative experiences through exploring, clarifying and expressing ideas and feelings.
- Creativity is expressed in many ways and involves originality.
- Creative learners are curious, open-minded and imaginative.
- Through creative activity, children can produce works that are original and of value across the curriculum.
- Creative activity involves enjoyment, effort, risk-taking, critical thinking and reflection.



The *Primary Curriculum Framework* also advises that the ability to think critically, to apply learning and to develop flexibility and creativity are linked inextricably across all competencies, including *Being well*, *Being a digital learner*, *Being mathematical*, *Being a communicator and using language*, *Being creative*, *Being an active learner* and *Being an active citizen*.



Fig. 2: Key competencies, *Primary Curriculum Framework*

Creativity is promoted across the various curriculum areas. For example, the *Primary Language Curriculum* advises that children be enabled ‘to use language imaginatively and creatively’ (page 72) and highlights the importance of exploring ‘playful and creative use of language’ (page 34). Similarly, the *Primary Mathematics Curriculum* promotes the development of the key competency ‘*Being Creative*’. The key attributes of creativity developed through learning in Mathematics include:

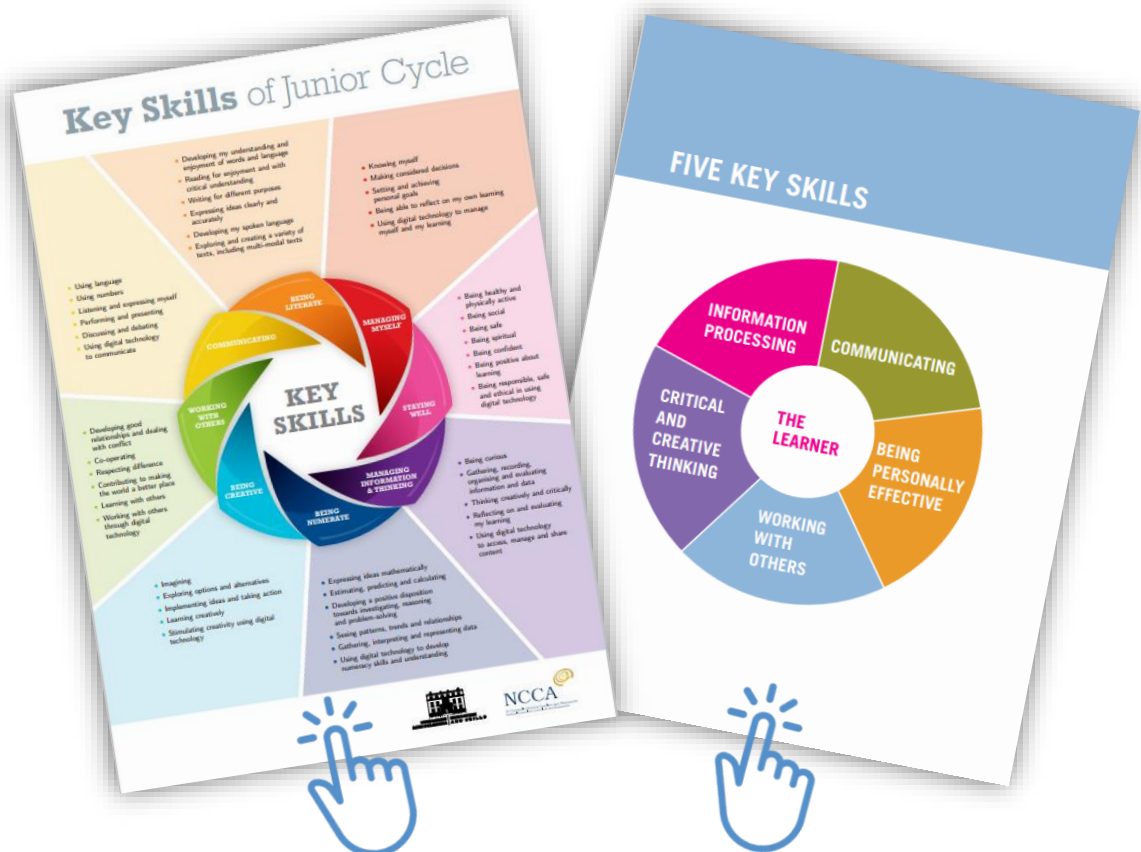
- exploring Mathematics with curiosity, open-mindedness, and imagination, and
- investigating, using, and sharing diverse mathematical ideas and solution paths

It is notable that one of the aims of the *Draft Science, Technology, and Engineering Education Specification* for primary and special schools is that imagination and creativity will be used to generate ideas, make discoveries and explore possible solutions to real-life and imagined problems in Science, Technology and Engineering.

The post-primary school context

In post-primary education, junior cycle covers the first three years and senior cycle covers the next two or three years of young people's education. The vision for junior-cycle education, as articulated in the *Framework for Junior Cycle*, places young people at the centre of the educational experience, enabling them to actively participate in their communities and society while being resourceful and confident in their learning. The vision for senior-cycle education, as articulated in the *Senior Cycle Key Skills Framework*, builds on the junior-cycle experience with a balance between knowledge and skill development. Essential to both cycles is the development of students' key skills; *Being Creative* is one of the eight junior-cycle key skills, while in senior cycle, *Creative and Critical Thinking* is one of the five key skills.

In the *Framework for Junior Cycle*, the key skill of *Being Creative* includes imagining, exploring options and alternatives, implementing ideas and taking action, learning creatively and stimulating creativity using digital technology. In the *Senior Cycle Key Skills Framework*, the key skill *Critical and Creative Thinking* is intended to assist young people in being aware of different forms and patterns of thinking, so that they become more adept in higher-order reasoning and problem-solving. In engaging with this key skill, young people reflect critically on the forms of thinking and values that shape their own perceptions, opinions and knowledge.



2. Insights into effective practice in ELC settings and schools

In this section of the report, insights into how creativity can be supported and promoted effectively in education settings place a spotlight on a number of enabling factors:



Spotlights on practice reflecting each of these enabling factors are presented through a series of examples from ELC settings, primary and post-primary schools.

Learning environments



ELC setting spotlight: Creativity in the outdoor learning environment

In this setting, early years educators designed and organised an outdoor learning environment that was structured to develop children's curiosity, creativity and imagination. The children had daily access to this natural outdoor area, which offered a variety of resources and spaces for them to explore. The children were able to drive pedal cars and ride-on equipment along pathways and use cones, hoops, balls, football goal posts and slides to construct traffic routes.

The children explored technical aspects of their learning equipment such as the width of a plumbing pipe when constructing a water run and the volume and velocity of the water. Following their exploration, the children constructed their own water run, assisted by the educator. The activity enabled them to engage with foundational mathematical concepts and to express themselves using relevant language.

This example demonstrates how ELC settings can create opportunities for children to explore complex concepts through hands-on, enquiry-based activities. By actively engaging with children and facilitating their reflections, the educators can scaffold the children's understanding and support the development of their critical and creative thinking skills.

Primary school spotlight: Creativity and a nurturing environment

In this school, there was a particular focus on nurture and children were engaged in a variety of arts projects. Arts-based activities were valued by teachers, not only for their inherent aesthetic value but also for their strong link to supporting the children's overall wellbeing.

The school's environment was intentionally designed with the children's learning experiences in mind. Importantly, they were actively involved in planning and designing that environment. Their sense of ownership and agency was evident in how they attended to caring for the school's hens and turtle.

The school identified the arts-focused projects, the child-centred design and the hands-on care of animals as contributing to the creative process in a safe and nurturing environment.

Post-primary school spotlight: Creativity in Transition Year and Leaving Certificate Applied programmes

The young people undertaking Transition Year took the initiative to create murals on the walls of an old school hall. They designed the artwork and organised all the necessary materials and resources for the project. By empowering the young people to design and execute their own mural project, the school fostered a sense of ownership and pride in their work. They transformed a neglected space into a vibrant, artistic canvas through collaborative efforts and creative vision.

Young people undertaking the Leaving Certificate Applied programme also demonstrated their creativity and entrepreneurial skills. They created digital content based on a number of themes related to school life using a range of digital devices and platforms. The enthusiasm and interest generated by student-led initiatives have had a positive impact on the school community.

These examples highlight how projects and activities led by young people can have a ripple effect on the entire school community. By providing opportunities for the young people to take a leadership role in creative endeavours, the school cultivates an environment that nurtures innovation, collaboration and a love for learning.

Children and young people's agency in the learning process



ELC setting spotlight: Promoting creativity through facilitating choice and a rights-based approach

The owner of the ELC setting promoted a strong rights-based approach to early learning and care. This approach advocated that each child had a 'voice and choice' in their learning experiences, was treated with respect and dignity and had their unique personality, culture and language of choice valued. By upholding these principles, the ELC setting created conditions conducive to promoting the children's creativity.

The children were encouraged to think about their culture and heritage. For example, they were given the opportunity to paint and decorate family-focused treasure boxes made from junk art materials. One child proudly chose to paint a symbol from her religion for this activity, using an extensive range of natural and sensory materials.

By prioritising children's rights, valuing their diverse backgrounds and providing ample time for unstructured, self-directed play, the ELC setting fostered an environment that empowered children to explore, express and develop their creativity. This holistic, child-centred approach supported the children to thrive and reach their potential.

Primary school spotlight: Creativity in multi-class settings

In this multi-class school, children were allowed to work both collaboratively and independently on project-type challenges in a nurturing environment. Children were given choice about how to present their work or the solutions to problems.

Many of their assignments were open ended. While the arts curriculum was often central to the creative experiences provided to the children, the teachers used arts approaches in other learning areas such as teacher-in-role, song-singing and draw-your-answer. The integration of such arts-based approaches enabled children to engage with content in more imaginative and expressive ways across the curriculum.

The multi-age grouping fostered opportunities for children to learn from one another, and to share ideas and perspectives as they worked collaboratively on the project-based challenges. At the same time, the open-ended nature of the assignments allowed them to work independently, exercising their own creativity and problem-solving skills.

Post-primary school spotlight: Developing young people's dispositions for creativity and critical thinking

This school wanted to enhance opportunities for all young people to share their views and ideas about the school in addition to their student council. Therefore, it focused on enabling young people to have a greater voice during lessons.

Teachers engaged in peer observation to identify opportunities to augment young people's participation and voice during lessons. These observations were followed by reflective discussion between the teachers and young people. Based on the discussion, the teachers adapted their teaching practices to elicit greater participation from young people and, thereafter, participated in further peer observations as means to ascertain progress.

Teachers aimed to promote the dispositions needed by young people to engage in critical and creative thinking. They empowered and encouraged the young people to take an active role in their learning, fostering the skills necessary for deeper engagement with the subject matter.

Curriculum developments and creativity



ELC setting spotlight: Emergent play supporting creativity

In this setting, early years educators viewed emergent play as central to children's learning and development. They ensured that a wide range of freely available resources was made accessible to the children.

In this play-based environment, the children used materials in creative ways. For example, they used blankets to make dens and they mixed water and mud to create 'potions' and 'cakes'. Later, the children role-played as ice-cream sellers. They chose to

draw pictures of these self-directed play experiences and the environments they had created.

By recognising the value of emergent play and providing a well-resourced, open-ended learning environment, the educators empowered the children to make sense of the world around them and develop their creativity through hands-on, self-directed learning experiences.

Primary school spotlight: Creativity across the curriculum

In one class, children demonstrated the application of various skills, including researching, hypothesising, analysing, testing and reporting across a range of subjects such as Science, Mathematics, English and Geography. In another class, children were engaged in creative projects that spanned the curricular, co-curricular, and extra-curricular domains. Examples of these projects included games designed to initiate conversation in Irish, creating an outdoor classroom and building a mud den and a bug hotel.

By providing opportunities for children to apply their skills and knowledge in diverse, self-directed projects, the school fostered a learning environment that encouraged creativity, collaboration and interdisciplinary connections. The children could take ownership of their learning and explore their interests and ideas in innovative ways.

Post-primary school spotlight: Young people leading creative approaches to learning

In a Leaving Certificate chemistry class, the young people had the opportunity to design open investigations, reflect on chosen methodologies, and discuss and implement possible improvements. Difficult concepts were explained through links with young people's everyday lives and interests. Through the open-ended investigations, they applied their problem-solving abilities to real-world scenarios, connecting their learning about complex problems and processes to their lives and interests.

The young people co-created success criteria with their teachers and identified options for completing home-work assignments.

Leadership for creativity



ELC setting spotlight: Sharing of skills, knowledge and training amongst early years educators

The leaders in this ELC setting demonstrated an openness to reflection and to taking on board others' ideas. Their willingness to consider different perspectives and approaches helped to create an environment conducive to growth and innovation. The educators were encouraged to try new ways of doing things to improve learning experiences. For example, they trialled the use of open-ended questions and sustained-shared conversations with the children to promote their creativity, imagination and thinking skills.

The educators talked to the children about their creations, such as buildings made from Lego® and their drawings of 'scary monsters'. The children gave detailed accounts of what they created and, in many instances, the drawings and imaginary play became stories that the children enacted. By engaging in these conversations, the educators were able to gain insights into the children's thought processes and to support their creative expression.

Primary school spotlight: Promoting creativity through whole-school initiatives

The school engaged in several national initiatives with creativity at their core. These included *Creative Clusters*, *Green Schools*, *Curious Minds*, *Engineers Week* and *Active Flag* initiatives. Engagement with the initiatives was supported by committees, involving school staff, children and school leaders. The inclusive committees played a central role in the organisational and operational aspects of these programmes.

A consistent focus across these initiatives was on promoting children's interests and providing opportunities for meaningful creative experiences. They had irregular opportunities to explore, clarify and express their ideas and feelings as they participated in various related activities.

By engaging with a diverse range of creativity-focused initiatives, the school demonstrated a commitment to nurturing the children's interests and supporting their holistic development. The active involvement of children on school committees was important in ensuring that the children had a voice in shaping these experiences.

Post-primary school spotlight: A creative approach to subject selection

This school had moved away from offering pre-formed subject bands for senior-cycle choice and, instead, provided open choice. This allowed young people to choose more creative combinations of subjects. Within the school, there was a strong emphasis on offering choice to young people in both the topic and in the approach to their classroom-based assessments (CBAs). Enhanced freedom of choice resulted in the achievement of some very creative, cross-curricular outcomes.

Flexibility in subject selection supported young people of all abilities to achieve success, as individual strengths and areas of interest were facilitated and nurtured. By transitioning from a pre-determined subject band system to an open-choice model, the school empowered the young people to craft personalised academic pathways that aligned with their interests and creative inclinations. This flexibility allowed them to

explore interdisciplinary connections and pursue subject combinations that supported their unique strengths and aspirations.

Furthermore, the emphasis on choice in CBAs demonstrates the school's commitment to fostering creativity and self-expression within the junior cycle curriculum. This approach enables young people to engage with assessments in ways that are meaningful and motivating to them, ultimately leading to more innovative and cross-disciplinary outcomes.

Digital technologies, STEM and the Arts



ELC setting spotlight: Exploring natural and sensory materials in both indoor and outdoor settings (STEM and the Arts)

Throughout the day in this ELC setting, children spent time exploring a variety of natural and sensory materials in both indoor and outdoor environments. Freely available resources related to STEM and the Arts, and access to a wide range of resources, supported the children's natural curiosity, eagerness to explore, experiment, problem-solving, imagination and creativity. A whole-setting approach to STEM and the Arts education had been adopted. One example of this approach involved the children using containers to transfer water between bottles.

The children also had access to crayons and pencils for drawing and writing, sponges, stencils and paints for artistic expression, bubbles for sensory exploration, ride-on equipment for physical play and soil for hands-on discovery. They explored a variety of natural and constructed elements regularly, such as the sandbox for digging and building, a mud-kitchen for sensory and imaginative play, tyres, wooden and metal tools for constructing, a music-wall for exploring sound and rhythm and a large wooden bus structure for imaginative play.

Primary school spotlight: Creativity in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) learning and digital learning

The school provided opportunities for open-ended play in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM). Children in the infant and junior classes played freely with various materials, such as building blocks and magnets; they had previously

engaged with the materials in a more structured way. Their prior learning allowed them to explore these materials confidently and they demonstrated a rich vocabulary when describing their experiences.

The development of digital literacy was also evident among senior children. The school's 'digital toolbox' allowed them to select and use a wide range of presentation media to demonstrate their learning. The tasks were well designed to allow for open-ended learning pathways and all children could access them, with support materials such as additional text, links, explanation videos or diagrams available for those who needed them.

By providing opportunities for open-ended STEM exploration, the school enabled the youngest children to build upon their prior knowledge and develop a rich vocabulary to express their experiences. For the senior children, an emphasis on digital literacy and open-ended tasks allowed them to take greater ownership of their learning and showcase their creativity through a variety of presentation methods. These approaches empowered children to engage in self-directed, creative problem-solving.

Post-primary school spotlight: Creativity using digital technologies

In a post-primary school, there were innovative practices in the use of digital technology (DT) to stimulate creativity. DT was integrated into classroom practice as a communicative tool, with the young people composing text messages and emails as personal responses to the literary texts being studied.

The history and digital media and literacy subject departments collaborated to create a three-dimensional digital model of a medieval castle. This interactive, visual resource supported learning in both History and Digital Media in an engaging way. The integration of DT enabled the main academic learning to be expressed and explored into lessons via multimedia conversations and exchanges between young people. Moreover, the use of DT offered opportunities for open dialogue between groups of young people, promoting purposeful interclass communication, collaboration and the development of literacy and digital literacy skills.

By incorporating DT into the curriculum, the school was able to enhance young peoples' creative expression and engagement with the subject matter. The collaborative efforts demonstrated how cross-disciplinary partnerships can lead to innovative, technology-driven learning experiences. This highlights the versatility of DT as a medium for stimulating creativity, communication and collaboration across academic disciplines.

Whole-setting and whole-school approaches



ELC setting spotlight: Fostering creativity through engaging with parents and the wider community

The ELC setting had developed well-established links with parents and community representatives. These strong partnerships facilitated increased parental involvement in children's learning and development, deeper understanding among educators about the children and families in their settings and more enjoyable learning experiences for children as their home life became 'visible' in the setting.

For example, each morning, the children self-registered on arrival using an interactive visual resource outside each room. Family walls were designed to include photographs of the children with their parents and siblings, as well as the children's own artistic interpretations of their families. On a fortnightly basis, children brought Ziggy, a soft toy, home to visit their families. Parents and children recorded Ziggy's Adventures in pictures, drawings and words, and shared these with the group in a book format. This activity fostered family engagement and allowed children to share their home experiences with their peers. In addition to these ongoing initiatives, the setting had invited a musician from the local music school to play music with the children using a variety of improvised musical instruments. This collaboration with the community provided the children with new and enriching creative experiences.

In another setting, as part of its whole-setting 'Under the Sea' theme, educators planned a wide variety of engaging, hands-on activities for the children. They enabled children to engage in themed art projects, such as creating colourful ocean-inspired paintings. They also enjoyed socio-dramatic play activities, dressing up as sea creatures and acting out underwater adventures. To immerse children in the 'Under the Sea' theme, educators adapted the learning environment, both indoors and outdoors. For example, in one outdoor space, they fashioned a sandpit to resemble a small beach. Educators reported that the children spent valuable time playing in this area, digging, building sandcastles and acting out seaside scenarios.

Primary school spotlight: Whole-school focus on creativity in STEM

A primary school prioritised initiatives that supported problem-solving and skills-based learning. The school decided to focus on improving practice in very specific areas, with a particular emphasis on STEM. In the infant and junior classes, children used robots, coding and animation to explore these subjects. The middle and senior classes participated in national STEM initiatives including Science Blast and Engineers' Week. These activities promoted the children's enjoyment, effort, risk-taking, critical thinking and reflection.

Across all classes, the school adopted a consistent, whole-school approach to developing and evaluating scientific skills. Each classroom had a dedicated display area that prompted discussions among the children and between the children and their teachers about their skill-based learning. As part of a focused approach, the school implemented opportunities for outdoor, skills-based learning during break times, including the establishment of chessboard tournaments, a tree classroom and climbing walls.

By prioritising creative initiatives in specific curricular areas, the school created a cohesive, skill-focused learning environment. This allowed the children to engage deeply with Science, developing critical thinking and problem-solving abilities through hands-on, creative activities both inside and outside the classroom. The dedicated display areas and whole-school involvement further reinforced the value placed on these skill-based learning experiences, fostering rich discussions and a shared understanding among the school community.

Post-primary school spotlight: Infusing creativity across all subject areas

In this post-primary school, a shared vision for creativity was evident among leaders and teachers, supporting the infusion of creative processes across all subject areas. The school implemented STEM initiatives at a whole-school level, with an instructional leader for STEM overseeing the implementation. All teachers were encouraged to support the development of young people's creative and critical thinking skills within their classroom practice. This approach, woven throughout the various subject specifications, aimed to promote a deeper understanding of the subject areas while also cultivating transferable critical and creative thinking skills.

Recognising the value of a comprehensive, school-wide focus on creativity, the school aspired to further broaden its approach. It proceeded to establish links with surrounding schools, with the goal of sharing and collaborating on these innovative approaches. By establishing a clear, school-wide vision for creativity, the school created an environment that empowered teachers to integrate creative and critical thinking across the curriculum. The dedicated STEM leadership and the expectation for all teachers to nurture these skills helped to ensure a cohesive, whole-school approach to developing young peoples' creativity.

Moreover, the school's ambition to forge connections with neighbouring schools demonstrated a commitment to sharing best practices and expanding the reach of their innovative, creativity-focused initiatives. This collaborative mindset reflects the school's understanding of the importance of creativity in preparing young people for success both within and beyond the classroom.

3. Conclusion

The national frameworks of *Síolta*, *Aistear* and primary and post-primary curriculum frameworks all emphasise the centrality of creativity to high-quality education. Creativity is not confined to the Arts, but should permeate all areas of learning, from Mathematics and Science to language and digital skills.

Fostering creativity requires intentional efforts to provide enriching environments, encourage curiosity and exploration, and give children and young people opportunities for imaginative expression, risk-taking and problem-solving. Educators play a crucial role in nurturing the creative habits of mind such as being imaginative, inquisitive, persistent, collaborative and disciplined. The spotlights in this report, gathered through inspections of ELC settings and schools, give a flavour of the practical ways in which this can be achieved. They are summarised below.

Learning environments

Learning environments can provide rich opportunities for children to engage in pretend play and to explore the natural environment.

Play-based, multi-sensory and interactive learning, and opportunities to experiment and explore in creative ways are important enablers of creativity. Both outdoor and indoor environments can be utilised very effectively to tap into children's creativity. For example, a creative approach to the use of outdoor spaces, sensory corridors and classrooms can support wellbeing promotion and inclusive practices.

Children and young people's agency in the learning process

Where children and young people are encouraged, supported, and engaged in authentic opportunities to be confident and independent in their learning, creativity flourishes.

This often involves encouraging the young person to take risks and to learn from their experiences. In ELC settings, play-based learning opportunities, which include a range of sensory, creative, physical, and risky play activities, support children's agency through exploration, problem solving, testing new ideas and developing innovative solutions. In schools, opportunities for young people to develop their sense of ownership of their learning involves investigating, taking risks, exploring options, thinking critically, collaborating to generate ideas and solve problems, expressing ideas in multiple ways, persevering and reflecting.

Curriculum developments and creativity

Creativity and creative thinking are reflected and articulated as key skills in curriculum frameworks for ELC settings and schools.

In ELC settings, emergent play-based curriculums, informed by *Aistear*, support the development of children's creative and imaginative expression. In schools, innovation,

imagination and creativity across the curriculum are fostered through thematic, collaborative and exploratory approaches that are integrated across subject areas. The focus on developing transferable skills, rather than just content knowledge, allows children and young people to apply their learning in creative, cross-curricular ways.

Leadership for creativity

Leadership for creativity requires an authentic awareness and understanding of creativity and how to facilitate its development.

It is a type of leadership that is open to new ideas and approaches and encourages and supports others to try new things. Early years educators' responsiveness to children's emergent interests, skills, strengths and needs fosters children's creativity and promotes their participation. In schools, teachers interest and willingness to promoting creativity in teaching and learning can be best achieved through an awareness and understanding of creativity that is aligned to curriculum frameworks.

Digital technologies, STEM and the Arts

Digital technologies can facilitate children and young people's engagement with creative processes, providing them with opportunities to innovate and develop creative skills and dispositions.

The development of digital technology skills offers useful opportunities to introduce, reinforce and embed creative practices. For example, in post-primary schools the development of technical and creative skills when using digital devices lays a foundation that supports innovative approaches to classroom-based assessments (CBAs). The use of digital technologies in STEM and the Arts can enhance the development of creative thinking skills such as exploration, inventiveness, focus, experimentation, risk-taking, persistence and curiosity. Additionally, these activities support the development of young people's natural curiosity and their eagerness to explore and experiment.

Whole-setting and whole-school approaches

Whole-setting and whole-school approaches to creativity are essential to enabling creative learning experiences.

In ELC settings and schools, where a strong awareness and understanding of creativity exists, learning extends beyond initiatives and programmes that are targeted specifically at creativity and is aligned seamlessly to skill development.