

Youth Voice in Creative Schools: Reflections on Practice



Scoileanna
Ildánacha



Creative
Schools

Introduction

Youth Voice is a short phrase which means a huge amount to the Creative Schools community. It is how we express our commitment to listen carefully and respond with integrity to the voices of all children and young people.

From the very beginning, the Creative Schools programme has aspired to hold youth voice at the centre. Back in 2017 and 2018 when the programme was being conceived and designed at the Arts Council the National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making was an important touchstone. The Arts Council was already embodying a commitment to participation in decision making in many of its programme like the Young Ensembles Scheme and Creative Schools offered another route to centre children and young peoples' opinions.

Once the programme was established and the first 150 schools began working with their Creative Associates, we benefited hugely from support and guidance from Hub na nÓg to embed this way of working. As the programme has grown, we have witnessed the growth in confidence, experience and curiosity about youth voice among our community.

Since 2018, the landscape around Creative Schools has changed. There is now increased understanding and very welcome higher expectations of how children and young people will be listened to. New national policies for children and young people are clear in how young people have been consulted and there have been greater than ever efforts to ensure all children and young people are included in participation.

This publication is an attempt to capture, celebrate and share ways of working, reflections, ideas, and challenges that have been part of the journey of many Creative Schools. The articles provide a snapshot of the hundreds of projects and programmes which have creatively raised children's voices. Of course, consultation with children and young people has been a feature of arts in schools and arts in other places for a long time but the scale and reach of Creative schools since 2018 has given us this opportunity to bring together some examples of recent practice, which we offer to anyone with an interest in this area.

As part of the ongoing development of Creative Schools , a large scale evaluation carried out by Dr Regina Murphy and Dr Eemer Eivers concluded,

"The Creative Schools initiative has transformed a very broad range of Irish schools, more than any other initiative heretofore by placing learners in every county at the heart of the process, valuing and validating their perspectives and experiences. Creative Schools has been collaborating meaningfully with learners and educators to shift the focus of arts education from child-centred to child-led creative participatory practice".

This collection aims to bring this conclusion to life, to show what valuing and validating looks like, and to celebrate what true collaboration and what a child-led approach can make possible.

Thank you to all the featured Creative Associates and schools for generously sharing their stories with us. Thank you to Dungarvan College Art Club, Kathleen Dobbyn and Órla Bates for illuminating it with such a great design. Thank you to Creative Schools Manager Grace Boon and Creative Schools Youth Voice Advisor Anne O'Gorman for enabling us to throw light on the vital and innovative areas of practice.

We will continue to hold youth voice at the centre of Creative Schools as it moves into its next phase of development and we'll take forward the very good advice from the children of Coomhola National School in Bantry, 'you must leave space in the idea for us, don't take all the jobs'.

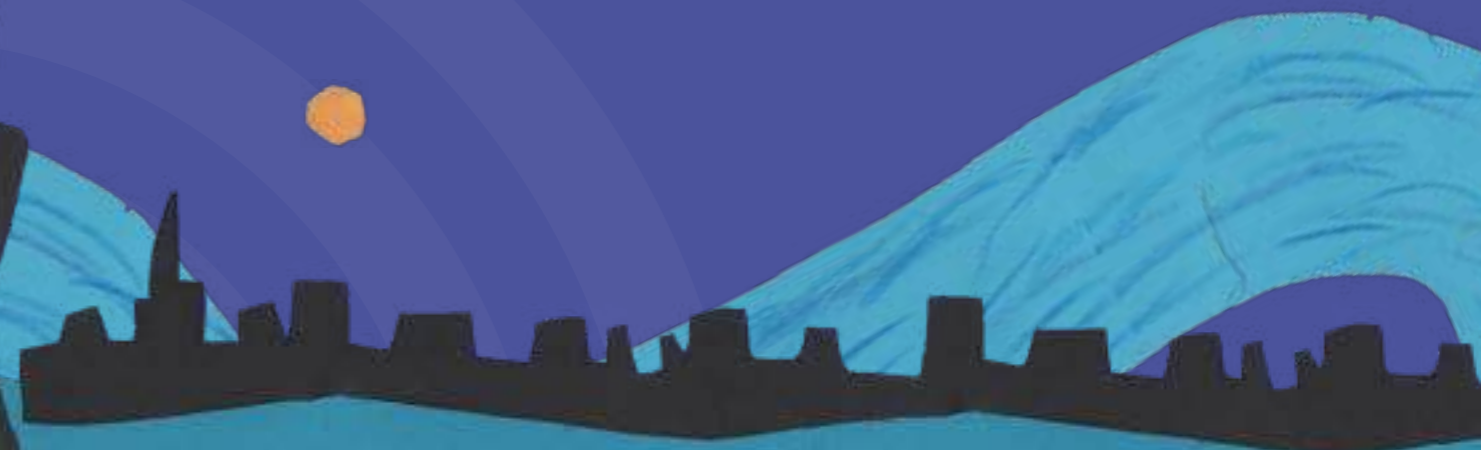
Mags Walsh, Creative Schools Programme Director





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Foreword and Acknowledgements

Creative Schools supports primary and post-primary schools and Youthreach centres across Ireland to put arts and creativity at the heart of children's and young people's lives. Schools and Youthreach centres take part in a two-year guided journey to develop a Creative Schools plan unique to their own school, and to put it into action. Children and young people's involvement in planning, decision-making and reflection is central to the journey. Each participating schools works with a skilled Creative Associate who guides and supports them throughout. Established in 2018, Creative Schools is led by the Arts Council of Ireland in partnership with the Department of Education. Creative Schools is a flagship initiative of the Creative Ireland Programme to enable the creative potential of every child. "

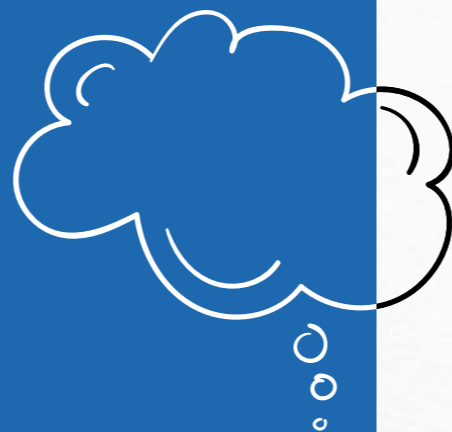
Thank you to our partners in the Department of Education and Creative Ireland who have worked closely with us to deliver Creative Schools in every county in Ireland.



Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

Scoileanna Ildánacha Creative Schools

Clár Éire Ildánach
Creative Ireland
Programme
2017-2022



Youth Voice Journal design workshops

The artwork for the Youth Voice Reflections was created by students in The Art Club in Dungarvan College. In a series of collaborative creative workshops, students brought to life themes and ideas from the Youth Voice articles, through their creative expression.

VISUAL
Thinking

COLLAGE
CREATION

The final part of the workshops students got stuck into creating collages which were based on their brainstormed sketch notes. Together they created a wonderful collection of imagery which has been used throughout the journal and that reflect the diversity of perspectives and interpretations.

Students then explored different ways to tell a visual story and represent ideas with some fun visual thinking exercises. Students creatively translated their ideas and words into sketches and discovered there are many ways of illustrating the same thing.

IDEAS

We introduced the articles written by Creative Associates to students, which served as starting points, sparking inspiration and ideas among the students. Working together in groups students read and reflected on the articles and highlighted themes and messages that resonated with them.

Many, many thanks to the students in Dungarvan College Art Club, and their teacher Kathleen Dobbyn for their participation, creativity and contribution to the Youth Voice Reflections

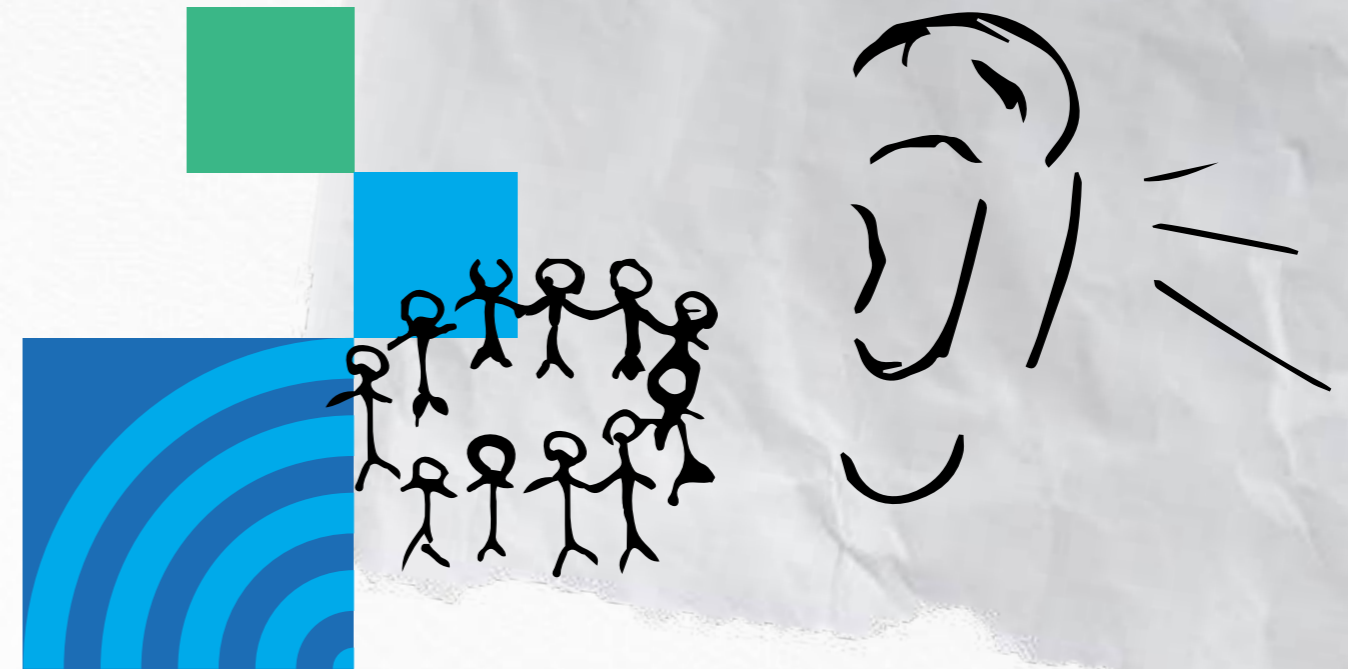
Learning to Listen

by Declan Gorman, Creative Associate in Louth and Monaghan

Declan Gorman reflects on the important tough questions about youth voice in this article about facilitating children's views in a County Monaghan school with the additional challenge of Covid 19. If you also wonder 'how can we trust a child with...the complex challenge of designing a school creative programme? And how do we distil the information gathered across creative formats? You will enjoy this article and Declan and his young associates' creative solutions.

Prior to 2018, other than general principles of inclusivity and respect which I had learned over years in participatory arts work, I had limited conscious understanding of the "Child's Voice" as it is intended in the Creative Schools lexicon.

Initially nervous (and to a degree misreading the intention) I raised questions at early training sessions about how we can entrust to a child with limited experience or terminology, the management of a complex challenge such as designing a school creative programme. Of course, one workshop with a group of primary school children provided all the answers. Those answers came in the same form and by the same method I had learned to apply to collaborative arts work in any adult or youth context: just put a question; a thought; a spark out there and wait! (And help it along with a little methodology).



At my first ever meeting with a Creative School Student Committee, made up of children from third to sixth class at Sandpit National School in County Louth, a long roll of unruly lining wallpaper was rolled out on the assembly room floor. It insisted on rolling itself back up again until a couple of children used their collective initiative to restrain it and tape it down. Already we were having fun and using creativity to solve a problem! A line of students then knelt along each side of the paper, sketching with coloured markers their image of what "Being Creative" means. This 20-minute exercise yielded almost everything it took a government fifty years to include in an Arts Act: dancing, writing stories, quilting, building houses and kennels as well as gardening; village mapping; baking and more besides. Everything, oddly, except music instruction at which their school excelled and were hoping to advance under the Creative School programme.

A creative compromise was reached. The school approached a wonderful composer, Zoe Conway, who came and charmed the whole school community with her music and laughter on our first Creative School Day. The children asked if there was a way that music and visual arts could somehow be combined. The proficient fourth class set about composing a school anthem with visiting musicians Zoe and her partner John McIntyre. The original lyrics by the children celebrated the school within the context of local community and landscape, a tranquil village at a coastal location. All the other classes then took a verse or line from the anthem as a prompt, and went out and about sketching, modelling, and painting landmarks. The process was recorded by a volunteer parent with video skills. The tune was recorded; a music video was created, and a rich exhibition of child-art was mounted for Creative School Day in Year 2.

During Covid, when children could not mix across classrooms, and representative committees were ruled out, I visited St. Michael's National School in Annyalla, County Monaghan over three sunny days during one of the periods when travel was permitted. I was the first non-staff person other than the football coach allowed on the campus that year; and the strict guideline was that all activity must take place out of doors. Class by class, I worked with every child in the school, handing them previously unused chinks (from sanitised boxes) until, over three days, they covered the entire yard with images of "Me Being Creative" (junior classes) to "Creative Things our School could do" (seniors). Every image and word were filmed on a mobile device, as was a running series of interviews with the child artists. The videos were intended only as aide memoire for me and the team of teachers who would be charged with reverting to the students with viable project ideas based on their sketches. This kind of mass data collection brings challenges. How do we gather ideas? How do we distil information collected in this amorphous visual format? Often, we resort to dry, written-up lists; often reductive lists of "activities we could do" based on percentage preferences. I had used such conventional approaches in previous situations, but somehow mourned the loss of the human spark; the emotional and intellectual gift that each child's idea and offering represents.

When I went to edit the videos, adding titles, incidental music, and the odd special effect to hold viewers' interest in the volume of material, I realised that we had inadvertently created a wonderful document that captures perfectly what we mean by "The Voice of the Child". The video interviews intercut with stills and moving images of the children's yard art brought to life the very process itself. We had also created an unexpected historical insight into the imaginative capacity and resilience of children in a rural location, displaced and disrupted by Covid.

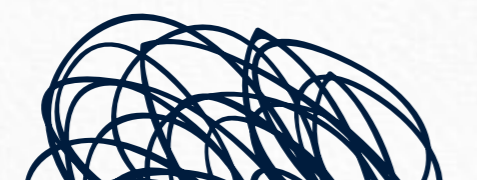
With each class, an age-appropriate variation of the listening methods was introduced. Upon completing their tarmac sketches, First Class students gradually formed a train and chugged around listening, one after another, to each of their fellow students as they described their idea before joining the procession's tail. Some of the older classes used chalk more sparingly. Instead, we sat in a hastily rigged outdoor classroom of boxes and crates and borrowed classroom chairs, and wrote or drew on cards, leaning on sanitised clipboards.



From this massive exercise, forced upon us by circumstance, every single child in a 300-pupil school had a small say, and our adult role as active listeners took on a fresh wonder. Consensus was reached – and yes, ultimately a list was made, a bank of creative possibilities: but it was a report founded on meaning, accompanied by a filmed capture of the process: a balance between ideas that arose many times and occasional flashes of pure genius (e.g., a giant artwork to be painted on the school roof, visible to helicopters).

The final element of Child Voice practice, of course, is what the Lundy Model of Participation refers to as "Influence." It is all very well to listen, but how do we reassure children that their views and ideas are acted on, or at least given due consideration? It was agreed that two local artists, Louise, and Joanne Loughman, should come, respond to the videos and move around the classrooms, assisting each teacher and each child with differing crafts from paper-shaping to clay to hanging mobiles, translating their vision of creativity into a great exhibition which eventually was hung at the end of Year 2. Painting the roof and hiring helicopters was impractical but the genius of the idea was acknowledged and honoured in a moment in the video and there were paper modelling opportunities to imagine designs, Leonardo-like, for things that might come to pass in an unknown future.

And so, I learned that incorporating the child's voice makes absolute sense and – while it requires dexterity and creative footwork on the part of the Creative Associate and Coordinator (our job, after all) it is less of a conundrum or challenge than I had imagined. The "how" is an ongoing learning journey, but the "why" – the principle that every child should be enabled creatively to reflect, express and be heard, is key to the Creative School philosophy.



Youth Voice in Special Schools

by Phillida Eves, Creative Associate in Galway

Phillida Eves draws a vibrant picture of the creative approaches already embedded in many schools, particularly special schools, and how building on this basis provides a foundation for the Creative Schools process. She also makes an important point about self-expression and participation not needing to be verbal, and the importance of observing children's engagement with activities – if children want to respond through clay, let's be open to that!

I feel that it is critical to give the children and young people a voice, verbal or non-verbal, in the arts and school settings. In fact, in every setting.

I was a teacher, specialising in teaching children and young people with additional needs for 18 years, in Ireland and overseas. Ten years ago, I retrained in sensory theatre and the arts, and now I create Sensory Arts Experiences and sensory theatre with and for children and young people with additional needs in schools, venues, and public spaces. I am a Creative Associate with Creative Schools and am writing here about my fascinating time working with the staff and pupils in St Joseph's Special School in Galway. The pupils in St Joseph's Special School are described as having moderate general learning disabilities and pupils with autism within this range. I worked closely with their Creative Schools Coordinator, teacher Annette Roland, whose child centred approach, abundance of creativity and practical down-to-earth reality was key to the success of the project.

There has been huge development in understanding the importance of involving children in decision making in special schools. Children and young people are given more agency over their own preferences and decisions and their voice is being encouraged and given consideration. This takes a lot of time, trust, and patience. Schools are very busy places; bells ring, staff must take breaks at certain times, lunchtimes are carefully worked out and must be adhered to, so it can be difficult to give the children the time they need to express themselves fully.



Covid brought a lot more yard time, and it's great to see staff and children having more time to interact outside in a relaxed setting. When requesting that the school put together a children's committee to lead the decisions for Creative Schools, I found it very useful to stress that this is how Creative Schools works and how the importance of the child's voice is central to the project. It gave me an anchor on which to pin the whole way of working and moving forward.

Special schools are very creative environments, and the staff doesn't fully realise how creative they are being all day long. Children with movement challenges might need to learn a creative way of putting on their coat, children resistant to particular textures of food might be involved in a cookery class that encourages them to touch the food as they make a meal for their friends. The staff members are very skilled at finding ways that will empower the children and not create confrontation.

Covid was still a big concern when we started our Creative School journey. I met with 2 classes in the school, a senior and a junior class with 6 pupils in each. It was important to find creative ways of giving the pupils a voice, verbal and non-verbal, in choosing the projects and generally being central in the whole process. It is vital to meet each child where they are at and to give them agency in the way that they communicate their preferences, or not. We used pictures, words, sensory objects, household objects and play, and observed their levels of engagement, in workshop settings. For example, I brought in some clay and gave the children the opportunity to make a pinch pot, then passed around one I had fired in the kiln to show how it had been 'cooked' to make it go hard. We observed which children were happy to touch the clay and realised that even children who were resistant really enjoyed it when it was left out on the table later for them to explore with no pressure. One boy was very interested in the process and the science of how clay hardens when it's put into high temperatures. I tried to use the minimum of language when giving them items to explore so that I could see their interest without them feeling under pressure or wanting to please me. I let them come to me if they wanted to. This way the staff felt relaxed too and didn't try to push the children into giving a certain response.

Working with clay and puppetry were the disciplines that created the most interest, excitement, and anticipation among the pupils in those workshops. It was very important that the practitioners I chose were people who understood the importance of meeting each child or young people where they were at, were flexible in their way of working and open about the outcome while having the children and young people at the centre of the process. I spoke to several practitioners, and I knew from the way they described how they would approach the workshops if would be a good fit for the pupils. I wasn't concerned if they had experience of working with children with additional needs before but in how they visualised introducing their process. We needed artists with open minds, who were naturally flexible and responsive to what was happening in front of them.

Tatiana Dobos, Galway ceramicist, and Carmel Balfe, Little Gem Puppets, puppeteer from Mayo, came onboard and supported the pupils and staff in creating magical moments together.

Tatiana Dobos cut out 80 tiles in clay and each class visited her in a specially prepared room in the school. Tatiana worked with the children, being present to each child, and giving them the space, opportunity, and support in creating their own individual tile. She modelled imprinting leaves in the clay, and adding clay shapes onto the tiles, and created a safe, creative, open space for each child to engage with the clay as they choose to. This is not easy as some children are sensory defensive and she embraced, allowed, and acknowledged any discomfort and made a safe space for every child. The children felt, smelt, and interacted with the clay. One child loved the sensation of rubbing small balls of clay through his hair. As they fell out of his hair onto the tile, Tatiana showed him how to attach these little clay balls to his tile. The children were invited to add colour with ceramic paint and imprint their name on the tiles. Many members of staff made tiles too and for many, it was a shared first experience with clay for staff and pupils alike. Tatiana fired the tiles in her kiln, and they are now displayed at the front door of the school, where the children can see them and touch them. It was a truly rewarding time for everyone.

Carmel Balfe, Little Gem Puppets, met the senior class, and together they explored how puppets can come to life, sharing puppetry moments, and learning how to manipulate puppets. The pupils were very interested and engaged and started having fun with the puppets immediately. It was fascinating to see how quickly the pupils suspended belief and interacted with the puppets, using gestures, sounds, sign language and spoken language. It brought a sense of freedom and removed pressure and expectations about the use of language. It seemed to give children and young people permission to chat away in their own way, using their own sounds, without having to think about how to form each word or to make sense. It seemed to give them freedom to interact with gestures and unstructured ways because they had an innate understanding that the puppet would know what they meant.

Or maybe it simply didn't matter. The puppets had no expectations or demands. It was a time of richness for all with a tangible sense of freedom and playfulness.

The senior pupils decided to create a puppet show for the rest of the school using the school hall. Carmel facilitated the young people in their decision to create or choose a story for the puppet show. The pupils decided to model their show on *The Gruffalo*. Carmel supported them in creating their own simple puppets to be each of the characters.

The young people decided on roles, the speaking roles and made an arc of the storyline. They rehearsed with Carmel in the classroom for four sessions: adapting, augmenting and improvising their show.

The group of six senior pupils, (aged 15 to 18 years) then performed their show for the whole school in the school hall. They got an overwhelmingly positive response. It was incredibly important for the children and young people in the school to see themselves represented in the writing, creating, and performing of the show. The children were fascinated by the puppets and engaged with them in ways that had meaning for them. The language that was elicited by the performers through the puppets was amazing. This was really interesting learning, as sometimes this audience finds it difficult to interact with performers, but the puppets broke down that barrier.

These were the two of the main projects that the school engaged in for Creative Schools. They also had workshops with circus performers, physical theatre, a performance of Branar's show *Rothar*, and an outdoor live music gig with an ice cream van in attendance. We were determined to work within the Covid restrictions but not let them diminish the experience in any way, so we had to be creative all the time, in every way. In some ways this was freeing because it brought a creative vibe to everything we did. Special schools are very creative environments. Staff are using creative methods all through the day to find ways to support each individual child in ways that have meaning for that child. They often don't realise how creativity is at the core of everything they do. Empowering staff to realise that they have many creative bones in their bodies when they profess to have none is an exciting adventure! Staff go to great lengths to listen to and activate the student's participation and decision making. It is respect in action.



Creative Schools is a Journey - a Journey with Many Types of Hills

by Damien O' Reilly, Teacher Creative Associate in Galway

Damien O' Reilly engages with some more common challenges here, and his encouraging article outlines how 'the challenges ...enhance the journey'. He gives great practical advice about building children's capacity to engage in decision making to support the process, and having guiding principles we can refer back to if the results of consultation are a number of competing ideas, equally held.

Tierneevin National School, situated outside of Gort and surrounded by the Burren, Coole Park and Coole Lake. The school includes its environs and heritage as part of their curriculum. The staff make a conscious effort to bring arts education to the centre of learning for the children. Tierneevin were excited and hopeful for their Creative Schools project when we began our journey.

Ms. Aoife O'Connor was the Creative Schools Coordinator. Communications began in November 2021, and it was a pleasure to work with Aoife and her colleagues of Tierneevin NS. Problems and obstacles were overcome with conversations/meetings, held in a structured and professional manner.

Teachers and school communities can sometimes have pre-conceived ideas for a Creative School. It can be necessary to reorientate schools' ideas towards one of the main objectives of Creative Schools, the Voice of the Child. Children feel intrinsically motivated to engage with projects when they are a part of the decision-making process. Showing the Tierneevin school community successful implementation of child voice from other Creative Schools projects was very useful.

In early communications with the school, child voice was mentioned throughout. Time was spent on teaching the children about decision making. I delivered age-appropriate lessons on practices of good decision-making using examples from other schools etc., eliciting their own experiences when making decisions in their own lives (e.g., deciding on what instrument to play, deciding on what sport to play, down to deciding on the colours one would use for colouring). The children built on their vocabulary to support and empower themselves in further consultations.

Once the concept of the child's voice was outlined, the staff were hugely and unwittingly supportive. The children reflected on decisions made by them and the school in the past. These early stages used the framework from the Understand document. The children considered brilliantly on their in-school and outside-of-school experiences. The Lundy model of participation was a vital tool for me to operate with the children. Before each lesson, the children and teachers guaranteed safe space in which children could offer their opinion (via different media), that the space facilitates their voice being heard, their voice will be listened to by the audience, while also acknowledging that their opinion will have influence and be enacted upon. Further work was left with class teachers to afford opportunities for the children to practice their decision-making skills, under SPHE lessons.

Upon reflection of the Understand document, we put in place some broad plans to move the project forward. Results of the Understand document were given to the Creative Council and then to all students, sharing back the impact of the consultation process with them. Arts education participation was strong within the school. The children have a lot of opportunity to engage with arts curriculum in a meaningful and regular way. To this end, the children felt lucky to be afforded those opportunities. However, this posed a problem for the Creative Schools project and how to proceed. The staff and students wanted their Creative Schools Project to be memorable and meaningful, which lent itself to creating unique experiences for the children. Yet a depth of experiences within arts education already existed, a new path would have to be created.

At this point, Aoife and I felt it important to establish some principles for the Creative Schools Plan. A broad set of ideas which would guide the journey.



The children were then asked for their voice. Using the Understand document findings, the children would formulate these principles. One principle which the school wanted was whatever content the Creative Schools plan was, the children would be planning for a new experience which they hadn't had before. A secondary principle which the children wanted was to establish a relationship with a local facilitator to engage in future projects. These were broad principles, but they would provide some guidance for decisions made. Using these principles to guide us and accompanying the Lundy Model of participation, we had a structure in place which would keep us moving between the various hills of the journey.

Creative lessons were provided to the school. These allowed the children to see what the journey forward may look like. Collaborative lessons were really engaging. The children learned that opinions from their peers are worth listening to, and that their own ideas may not be the future step taken. Teachers were amazingly helpful in teaching creative lessons throughout their schemes of work.

The children were then asked what area of the creative spectrum they would proceed with. They came up with the idea of having a vote. Each pupil having their say. Children worked on their own, pairs, or as a group, depending on what each child wanted. We used this early strategy of pupil voice to show how their voice works within a larger group. A wide set of creative ideas came from the students. A meeting of the Creative Council was convened, bringing ideas from their respective classrooms.

The council suggested we group these creative activities into common areas. Each class worked out common areas to group together to represent a creative practice. The Tierneevin students developed 9 broad themes: baking, new music, new dance, creating new games particularly in the yard, animation and cartoons, new movie, large scale painting, creating a play, performance-based drama.

This posed another problem as there were too many practices to engage with meaningfully throughout the project. A further ballot was administered but this was only narrowed down to 6 themes.

The students developed their decision-making skills very well over the lifetime of the project, but the school community was not sure what to do next. The decision facing them was to engage with the 6 voted themes and spend their budget on workshop type experiences or focus on one or maybe two themes to gain a deeper experience.



One of the characteristics of Creative Schools is that it is a journey. A journey has lots of bumps and hills. We progressed our journey along by adhering to the guiding principles decided by the school children. The very first one was, "an experience the children hadn't had before". This gave us direction. Once the children kept this in mind, they conducted another vote and decided on a large-scale painting.

The project received great direction from the teachers and students. The children wanted to represent the school to the outside world, visually. Students wanted to tell a story of the school, what was important to them, experiences of their school life, their heritage and stunning environment, the many activities that they were able to take part in at Tierneevin NS. Using the same processes as above the children selected themes (Nature centred around the Burren, flags to represent their diverse student enrolment, school crest, traditional musical instruments, books, GAA with sports). Both the staff and students were eager to improve the visual aspect of the school grounds. The children selected areas for which they would like their themes and artwork to be.

Aoife and I were working on the Creative Schools Plan continuously in the background, treating it as a living document. Using the school's second guiding principle the facilitator had to be a local artist to carry out the work. There were 3 candidates and the children selected Marcus O'Connor from Sufek West after the children read through briefs/specs from 3 facilitators, who met the criteria originally – mentioned earlier (written in age appropriate and child friendly language). Marcus brought valuable experience to the project, kept in touch with the children during the design and input their ideas. He was given short briefs, but he was able to weave the themes together to create beautiful murals around the school. The school used 11 window areas and a smooth surfaced wall which was part of a gable end of the school.

Over three days with Marcus, the children worked with him to paint the murals in the midst of their selected themes to create a stunning set of visuals.

This Creative Schools project was most rewarding throughout. When the whole school community is clear, the ability for people to work together is very rewarding. The challenges mentioned enhanced the journey as it augmented the communication levels and the creativity levels to work over those hills/challenges. I found communicating with the school continuously hugely beneficial, referring to the four Lundy principles, making decisions around whether children had their say and establishing a set of principles which right for the school to guide the decision making. These reference points kept the Creative Schools Plan progressing.

Using Drama as a Way of Supporting and Encouraging Youth Voice in the Creative Schools Process

by Catherine Sheridan, Creative Associate in Galway

Catherine Sheridan makes an impassioned argument in this article for the importance of play and fun in the spaces where children and young people are making decisions. She also provides us with examples of using drama not only in consultation, but in supporting students to advocate for their own ideas by role playing situations where they have the ear of audiences with the power to make decisions.

I have been working in the field of drama & theatre, arts education, youth drama and creativity for almost three decades. My work encompasses facilitation, consultancy, devising, directing, producing, managing and lots more across all age brackets. One big element of my practice is my engagement and interaction with children and young people. My work is very diverse, empowering and quite often spontaneous. I believe in giving each person in the room an opportunity to play, to explore, to challenge themselves, to take risks, to make mistakes and to be brave. I believe in discovery by doing. Allowing yourself to play in space breaks down barriers, removes layers of self-consciousness, builds confidence and improves self-esteem and these conditions are essential to children and young people having the space to participate in decision making.

This is not an easy task, as to take the first step you need to trust in yourself, to accept and acknowledge who you are, and understand "what it means to be me." Having belief in yourself is not something you can pick from the shelf and put in your basket but trusting yourself, your judgment, and your mind can lead to greater feelings of wellbeing & self-worth and so children and young people must be continually supported and have ongoing opportunities to develop their voices. Trusting in your own ability, skills, experience and ideas can help to build positive relationships, and empower you to not just find your creative voice, but to use your creative voice to assert your ideas and inspirations in decision making.

With that in mind I want to talk about the power of play through drama. Play is a way to break down barriers, build relationships, explore, step into shoes and roles of characters and places from your real lives and/or imagined worlds.



Drama provides the tools to connect and often confront and embody ideas, topics and issues from boundless sites and perspectives. Drama provides a culture and context to give young people autonomy, and a voice in decision making. Whether that's making a decision if Jack should climb the Beanstalk or if a family should leave their home never to return due to their home country finding themselves at war; drama has the power for children, young people and indeed adults to imagine themselves in that role and make decisions for the characters they embody in a safe space.

In the context of Creative Schools capturing the Voice of the Child is central to the process. This can be a very arduous task for some as it requires you to put your faith in the children and young people to come up with ideas for how they want to make their school more creative. For some schools this can be a very daunting process, as you need to let go, and for others it can be so liberating. The process of how the Voice of the Child is captured can lead to the most surprising and unimagined outcomes for all stakeholders.

The key to the success of so many Creative Schools is the relationships built with Creative Schools Coordinators and Creative Associates.

This leads to the development and building of relationships with children and young people alongside their Creative Associate. These are all relationships that take time.

I have worked with numerous Creative Schools since its inception and there have been so many diverse projects realised due to the relationships with School Coordinator and also the Voice of the Child being really captured during the process. I just completed a Creative Schools Project with Trinity Primary School Tuam and built a wonderful relationship with School Coordinator Alma Devane. Our vision was to plan and implement sustainable arts and creative activities across the school, to further links between the school and the local community and provide access to creative opportunities for all children. This allowed all 777 children the freedom to create and participate in a whole-school parade themed Under the Sea.

We provided creative clubs for the children and promoted creative thinking across all curricular areas. We afforded the children opportunities to work with artists and musicians. We encouraged the children to problem-solve and take risks. We listened to the students and encouraged their creativity. We gave them opportunities to be imaginative and innovative. Owing to this the school now considers student voice in all decision-making.

We set up an Arts Squad and ran consultation sessions with the children. We developed surveys for the whole school community, feeding back the survey results through staff meetings and assembly. We ensured the children's voice was always at the forefront during the project with children presenting 'Creative Assemblies' (videos for social media to feedback our progress.)

The School Coordinator presented to staff on the logistics of the parade and the staff team led class streams, this ensured everyone had a link person if any issues arose. Progress was reported to the Board of Management by the Principal via the Coordinator. Staff were given the opportunity to provide feedback at every stage of the project. This feedback was discussed at the staff team meetings.

The project grew and grew to the extent that Galway Bay FM interviewed us, the school principal and some children in the lead up to the event. RTÉ News2Day came to the school on the day of the parade and featured our project on their news programme, along with local newspapers The Tuam Herald and the Connacht Tribune.

In my experience as a Creative Associate, using drama activities helped build these relationships and elicit the Voice of the Child. A few of the ways I approach this are outlined below. The session is child centred with opportunities for participants to play, to consider, imagine, get creative and use their voice -all with a mindful approach.

A fun, open and inclusive method is paramount. By introducing the element of play participants become more relaxed and receptive to sharing their thoughts and ideas. I always like to work in a clear open space, if possible, with access to good natural light, chairs, blu tac, paper and markers. I like to be working on my feet in a circle as it's low focused and inclusive of everyone. Beginning by just standing in the space and breathing enables participants to become present in a room. With participants bringing attention to themselves and their surroundings using a mindful approach, this will boost their creative thinking.

The group then do a fun theatre-based activity that encourages spontaneity, quick thinking, impulsivity, innovation, and creativity. I like to ask the group to walk the space and introduce a number of elements to the activity. Examples include Freeze (Stop), Go, Forwards, Backwards, Slo-Mo, Super-fast and then lead into getting into groups of different sizes. In the groups of different sizes participants have 1 Minute to create Group Sculptures using only their bodies to create an image that represents their interpretation of what creativity is.

We then look at these one by one discussing what we see, which takes us to a more thought-provoking discussion on ways participants are creative and what other creative practices they might like to explore.



We note all the ideas down on separate pieces of paper, categorise them, label them and stick them on the wall around the room. Aim for 5-10 categories.

The group then walks the space again and I ask them to:

1. Notice five things they can see around them that they may not have noticed about the environment before
2. Notice four things they can feel, such as surfaces in the space and the texture of their clothing on their skin
3. Notice three things they can hear – that could be inside the space, in other areas outside where the workshop is taking place, or indeed outdoors
4. Notice two things they can smell whether pleasant or unpleasant
5. Notice the taste in their mouth

These activities will engage the senses and make participants feel relaxed in a fun and safe atmosphere.

They then continue to walk through the space, and I ask them to imagine themselves making their school more creative inspired by the earlier discussion. I side coach the students as to how their ideas could become a reality. Is it feasible? What would it take? What benefit would it make to them? etc.

Following on from this, I ask each student to go to one of the categories on the wall that connects in some way to how they would like their school to be more creative. Then in small groups (ensure there are at least two students in each category) I invite the children to create a role play where they are approaching the school principal to make their idea a reality. For example, setting up a circus school in the school. I give them time to work, checking in and supporting each group while they work and then we present the work to one another. The task involves role play, critical thinking, problem solving, debate, discussion and decision making. I would then make notes on the session and present ideas and findings to the students and other stakeholders at the next meeting to move plans forward.

For me, the session provides participants with a variety of tools and activities to focus their minds and sets the tone for a fun interactive engaging inclusive workshop. The activities engage the senses and make participants feel relaxed in a fun and safe atmosphere. The practical based consultation style activity uses a methodology which sees participants use their voice. It is a way for participants to consider how they engage and respond with arts and creativity and where there are barriers to engagement for them in arts and creativity. The showing and follow up discussion activity, based on the ideas that arose, also addresses the collective shared knowledge and interests of the participants.

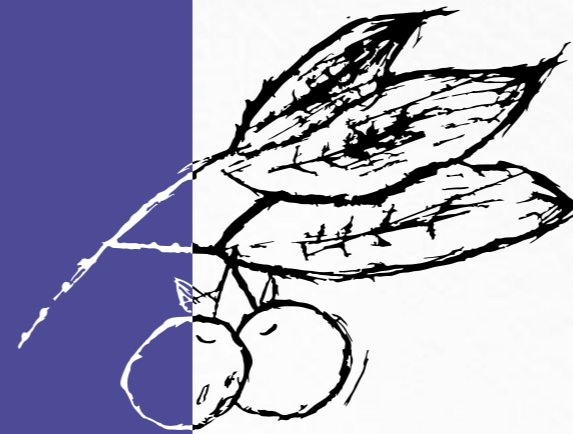
The objective is for participants to walk away empowered with fresh ideas and tools they can take use to encourage open dialogue, conversation with the Voice of the child at the centre using a fun inclusive approach.

Creating a Space for Youth Voice Through Place-Based Nature Practices

by Eliya Lavine, Creative Associate in Westmeath

Most of us would agree that in consultations with students (and children and young people generally) their concern and care for nature and the environment is a common theme. Along with our increased focus on working in groups outdoors since Covid 19, Eliya Levine shares timely and practical consultation ideas with us that are grounded in outside in nature.

In the ever-evolving landscape shaped by recent events and insightful research, there's a growing realisation of the profound impact of nature on the mental health and well-being of young people. As we emerge from the constraints of the post-COVID era, the call for spending more time outdoors has become increasingly urgent. [Research](#) consistently demonstrates an unequivocal link between nature connection and overall well-being, and the sooner we establish this connection with the outdoor environment, the more likely we are to care for and protect it. During the COVID-19 global pandemic, the essentiality of being together outside became more apparent than ever before. Yet, when [surveys](#) of over 1,000 parents in Ireland indicate that only one in three of their children have ever climbed a tree, and the glaring lack of accessible greenspace in schools, cities, and townlands, we're faced with the daunting task of bridging these gaps and place based nature practices can provide us with opportunities and ways to do this. We must seize this opportunity to foster creative connections between young people and the natural world of which we are a part, using place-based nature practices as a powerful conduit for transformative experiences.



The new 2023 primary school curriculum, starting to reacknowledge outdoor learning and nature-based experiences, signals a step in the right direction. These inclusions, aligned with the UN Sustainable Development Goals, provide an encouraging foundation. However, we have much further ground to cover to ensure that meaningful, consistent, all-season engagement with nature becomes an integral part of our educational ecology. The push for systemic change isn't just recognized by adults; young individuals themselves are acutely aware of this need.

The rise of [youth-led climate action movements](#) like Fridays for Future, coupled with increased participation in programs like Forest School and community gardening, is a clear indication of young people's deep care and concern for the damaged planet. Environmental engagement and climate action are top priorities for them. While it is tempting to feel hopeful in response to how much young people worry about the environment, it seriously saddens me. I wish for young people to have the time and space to enjoy and establish relationships with their natural environments, not to be immediately directed into rescue efforts for it. It's a poignant reminder of what place-based education expert [David Sobel](#) wisely states, "If we want children to flourish, to become truly empowered, then let us allow them to love the earth before we ask them to save it."

With a background as a primary school teacher in California and Dublin, and nearly a decade of experience designing and implementing immersive nature-based programs for young people through Forest School and biodiversity-oriented garden pathways, I've had the privilege of observing the transformational power of a relationship with nature. My recent experience facilitating the Creative Habits of Mind training for Creative Associates, from which this piece was born, further solidified my belief in the efficacy of these practices.

The training was rooted in the Creative Habits of Mind —collaborative, inquisitive, persistent, imaginative, and disciplined. This shared language and working definition provide a framework for exploring what true creativity means. Nature-based practices were layered in from there, which seek to nourish wellbeing and create a sense of community through shared experiences that encourage expression and promote the emergence of collaborative reflection and actionable projects alike.

The [sensory impact](#) of the setting of the natural landscape helps regulate and calm the nervous system, while integrating place-based activities ensures that the content that surfaces is genuinely sourced from the young individuals themselves, their relationships, and their immediate environment. Nature-based approaches provide fertile soil for trust-building, authenticity, creating a safe space for sharing fears, hopes, and dreams for creative futures.

Of course, challenges can arise when working with groups in general and certainly outdoors which must be considered:

- Due diligence of risk assessments, responsive and inclusive facilitation, and pacing appropriate for the group is essential.
- Conversations with teachers in advance to understand the range of needs and preferences of the young participants are crucial.
- Ongoing attunement to the young people's concerns, validation of diverse identities and experiences must be central to the process.
- Clearly communicating the need for all-weather gear to ensure participants' comfort is a must.
- Additionally, not all school grounds are equally suited for immersive nature experiences. In such cases, working with the School Coordinator to identify nearby parks or other feasible settings that align with health and safety policies is essential.

Several core principles guide our approach. While we come prepared with a set of activities and topics to cover, we prioritise following the interests of the participants as the guiding light of our time together. Demonstrating from the outset that the relationship with the individuals in the group is of the utmost importance, that we value their opinions and ideas, and that our goal is to be led by their voices, is fundamental. Establishing youth-led community guidelines at the start of a set of sessions, such as "mind yourself, mind each other, mind nature," can provide an essential backbone.

Below I share an activity that I frequently use with Creative Schools student committees and ones that I hope can become part of your nature-oriented toolkit for supporting youth voice. It is highly adaptable and can serve various themes or prompts that help young people share their insights and perspectives.

'Nature Mandala'

Resources: Outdoor space, people, imagination

Instructions:

- Clear a circular area of space on the forest floor. This is your canvas.
- Explain what a mandala is - Mandala is Sanskrit for circle. It is usually created by forming concentric circles. Many mandala shapes can be found in nature. Try to find some!
- Working in pairs or individually, create your own mandala using a collection of natural objects, such as leaves, twigs, petals, moss, etc.
- Learn from, respect and practice the Indigenous tradition of reciprocity and giving thanks, the '[Honourable Harvest](#)' - only choose what there is plenty of and take only what you need - with gratitude.
- Allow time for each group to create their mandala.
- Choose a name that represents your mandala.
- As a group, visit all the mandalas, and hear what they are called and why.
- Show each mandala appreciation with a simple gesture, called 'flower fingers,' by holding the hands out and wiggling fingers in the direction of the artwork (you can hum or make sounds to accompany this).

Purpose: This activity is an ancient practice that supports slowing down, observing, finding and shaping patterns, reflecting, and meaning making. It is especially impactful during potent transition times or as a conclusion to a series of workshops, instilling a sense of mindfulness and connection.



Filmmaking As A Medium For Youth Voice

by Helen Flanagan, Creative Associate in Louth

Helen Flanagan thoughtfully outlines for us how filmmaking can be a powerful tool in facilitating youth voice, particularly at second level, and, crucially, why – with its potential for students to flip power dynamics, explore other points of view and access spaces in new ways. She shares some of her experiences of working in busy second level settings with young people impacted by the pandemic, and how filmmaking helped find a way through some of these challenges.

In post primary, filmmaking can be a powerful tool for giving young people space to flex some agency, express their voice, push back against perceived injustices within their environment, giving them a sense of control and agency.

Over two school years, from 2021-2023 I facilitated a Transition Year (TY) film making programme with St. Mary's College Dundalk. The project originated via Creative Schools through Creative Associate Aoibhinn McCaul. Aoibhinn researched with the students who ultimately expressed an interest in exploring filmmaking. The school itself was interested in programming a more academic film studies module as part of the transition year programme, which would fit into the school's overall transition year schedule. As a practitioner I steered the school towards a process-guided filmmaking programme in which the students explored film through making; ultimately ideating, developing, planning and producing their own short film. Post primary schools can often prioritise academic forms of learning which, when it comes to the arts and media, often don't give young people a realistic experience of a practice or provide them with the knowledge and skills they might need when they move on from school. The act of working through a process is more challenging to find time and space for within the busy schedules of post primary schools, but provides a more holistic, equitable and engaging form of learning which emboldens young people with creative, collaborative, thinking and reasoning skills they will need as they navigate life, work and the obstacles they will encounter in their lives. There were four TY classes in each year and each of the classes' modules lasted seven weeks.

We practically explored genre, tone, narrative and practical aspects of production and I utilised collaborative strategies - the students worked in small manageable groups, were given space and an opportunity to contribute ideas (often anonymously to sidestep any shyness or fear to them presenting ideas), decision making was done through a democratic voting process and each small group had their ideas incorporated in some way and were given ownership over a part of each project.

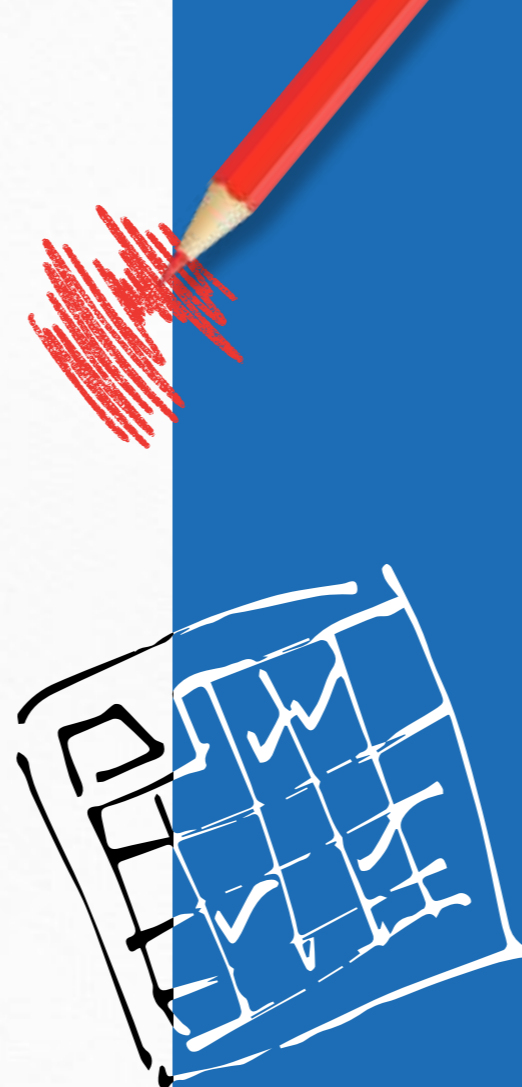
In short, all the students had input, space to share their opinions and ideas and co-create their project together. The outcomes of the process overall were eight short films which we celebrated at two end of year exhibitions in An Táin theatre in Dundalk.

The genres we explored were broad but clear themes emerge in the work connecting each of the films across the two years - identity, belonging, social isolation and ostracisation, boredom in the repetition of routine, repression and the frustration of being trapped. Our first year was immediately post COVID and the impact of the pandemic was most certainly played into the content of the narratives the stories we explored for sure, but these themes will be familiar ground to anyone used to working with young people in a post primary school setting. The most important outcome for me (in the context of my wider practice) was how the two year process revealed the power of filmmaking as a container space for students to explore their agency, share their criticisms (perceived and real) with each other and their teachers, to explore the power dynamics and boundaries that shape their lives in school, and, give them a realistic platform in which these ideas can be realised through democratic processes and ultimately shared widely within the school community. In this project there were a number of ways in which this emerged:

- Role reversal: Students played teachers and occupied roles they would not normally get to within the context of school environment. In one of the films produced in year two a student played a young teacher who is taking up their first teaching job after graduating. The narrative explores the challenges faced by the young teacher (peer bullying and exclusion by other teachers as well as unruly disrespectful students) and draws a parallel between the experience of young people, and the people who teach them. Ultimately the new teacher overcomes the challenges they face and leaves the story a more confident character who has earned respect through perseverance, patience and hard work.



- Transformation of school power dynamics: Students can through narrative, world building, and playing with genre codes and conventions toy with notions of power, upend the status quo, push back against perceived injustices and restrictions and transgress against the often-opaque rules and structures that govern their day-to-day experiences. In one of the films a naive teacher is victim to an elaborate long con by a student. Ultimately the teacher loses their job, while the student emerges triumphant. The central tragedy in the story is that the teacher who is fired is as much a victim to an overbearing school principal as the students. While both the student and the teacher engage in transgressions against the school management, the teacher ultimately pays the price. Another story featured two friends selling sweets (which were banned on school grounds) and another showed a student utilising a science lab to grow a dinosaur which they used against teachers and other students who wronged them.
- Students can redefine, often through humour, their relationship with the physical school environment itself. In one of the stories a disrespectful, unruly student finds themselves locked in school over Christmas. When the school is broken into by a pair of vandals, they find themselves in the new position of protecting the school from being flooded, "nobody vandalises my school except me." In another film a group of students find themselves trapped in a time loop horror story while on detention.
- Access to unusual spaces: We utilised spaces normally out of bounds - the staff room, the canteen kitchen, the principal's office, a park next door to the school.
- The opportunity to work alongside teachers in a creative capacity. Some of the teachers played roles in the stories themselves and this visibly created goodwill from the students at the teachers' willingness to get involved.
- Students through filmmaking get to present themselves as more complex beings, as more than the archetypes (the bold student, the quiet shy student) they might present as in school. In another film a student struggles with their perceived identity as they are pursued around the school by a doppelgänger and the film ends with the message, "what you see in the mirror, doesn't always reflect the truth."

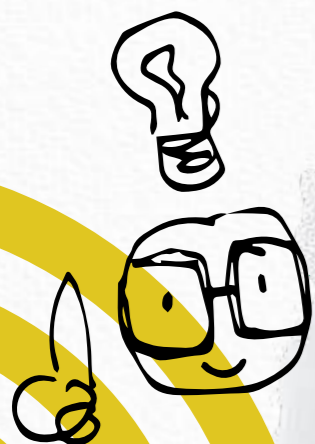


The work was strongly located within the school environment, and I leaned on the idea of working within the reality of the space we are physically in. Film has the potential to bring us into different worlds and introduce us to alternative perspectives, however, when we locate film work in our real environment, we are invited to imagine our world in a different way, to respond to the situations (fictional and real) within our environment, and, it offers rich ground for discussion, debate and discourse about the challenges, conflicts, triumphs and relationships that occur in our everyday lives. It also opens up the possibility to introduce the unreal into reality and turn the mundanity of the everyday on its head.

The challenges of working within a post primary setting were exacerbated in the post pandemic context; attention spans were short, social skills and social relations were uncertain and everyone was a little more, on edge. To put it bluntly, I found the students were difficult to manage and getting everyone working respectfully, cohesively and keeping them engaged was difficult. Working in small groups, keeping each group active and working with them in a hands-on way was really the only way to manage this, and additional teacher supervision was a necessity. Supervision can be a challenge in post-primary in particular due to the way things are timetabled but the school were supportive and made this work. Remarkably from their (the students) point of view it was huge success and they identified it as their favourite part of Transition Year, so, we decided to run the programme for a second year this time with a teacher taking over the initial stages of the programme to develop an idea and narrative, and myself working with the students to create the film.

This collaboration presented a series of challenges but ultimately the programme was most successful with a teacher involved. Working with a teacher, we could bridge the gap between myself, the students and the powerful agents within the school environment (teachers and other staff and management). It meant accessing new spaces, being able to involve other teachers and staff members in the process and being more deftly able to navigate the tensions of an institutional environment and the peculiarities of a school's unique culture.

The value in a school understanding and supporting a programme like this; one which emphasizes voice and democracy, the holistic over the academic, one which offers a little flexibility and space to the students to vent - can create new opportunities for dialogue between students and teachers, posit new ways of relating to each other and our world, challenge the status quo and ultimately embolden young people with the skills they will need to navigate their future lives, careers and critically, the challenges they will encounter as they move through life.



Designing for Youth Voice

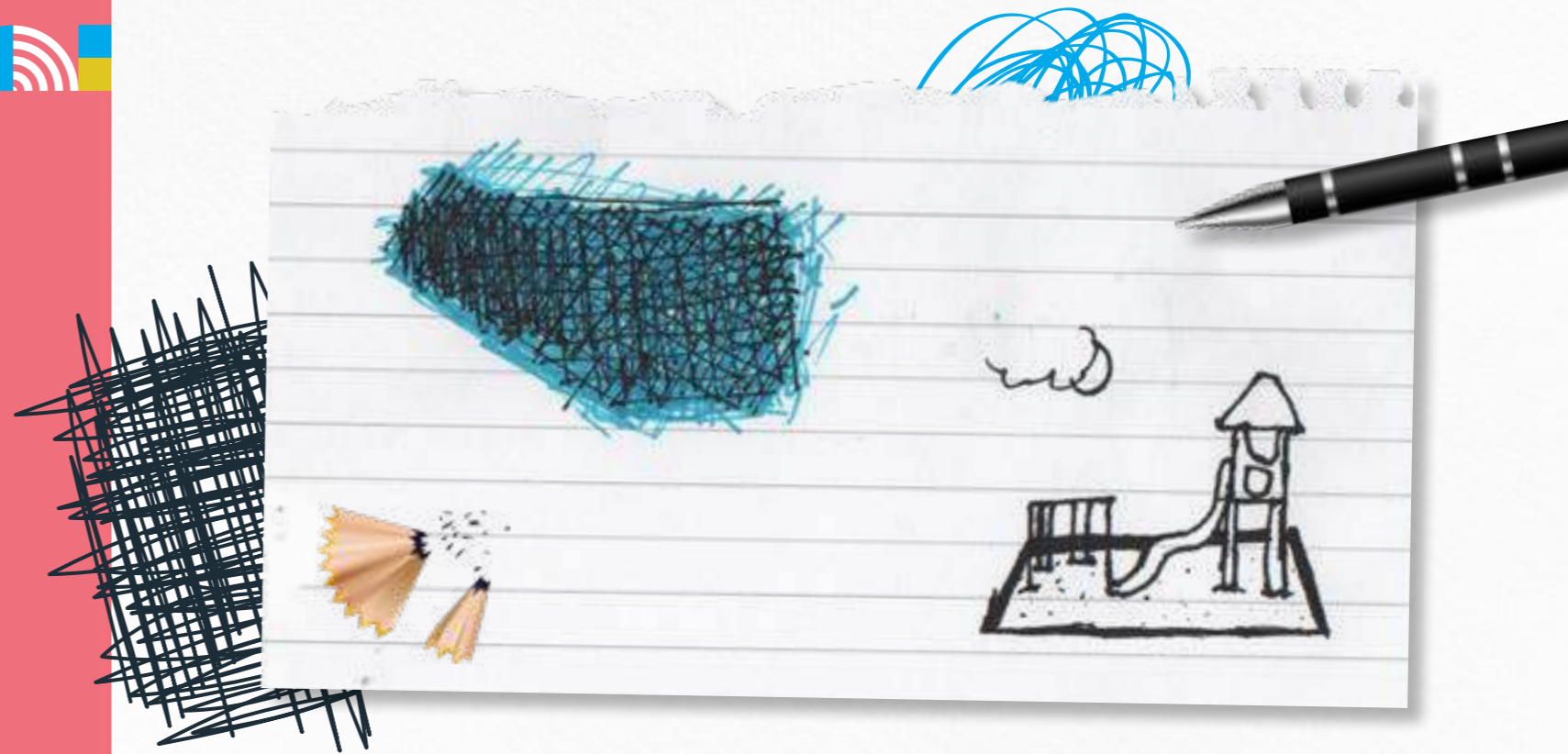
by Aideen McHugh, Creative Associate in Kildare

Aideen McHugh takes us through some of the considerations and capacity building needed to support artists coming into a school where students are leading the process. She also provides insight into the significant work Creative Associates undertake even when they're not on-site!

This article explores the journey of one Creative School, Scoil Bhríde, Lackagh in Co. Kildare through project planning, interaction design, action research, collaboration, student voice and young people centered design, while navigating creativity in a global pandemic, and working to a limited budget.

Scoil Bhríde, Lackagh, collaborated with Creative Associate (CA) Aideen McHugh from mid-December 2020 – June 2022, incorporating many of the Covid-19 regulations and lockdowns. In January 2021, with the world still in the grip of Covid-19 pandemic, it brought much uncertainty, with vast and varied restrictions being imposed, sometimes at short notice. Schools did not escape the impact of this changing world. Every day brought new obstacles and challenges. Creative Schools continued to offer services through these unusual times, with CAs adapting and responding to the new terrain, aiming to support the young people and educators, through creative process. Scoil Bhríde was one such school.

In the first year of their Creative Schools programme Scoil Bhríde moved from the much anticipated 'in-house delivery' of the understand phase to a blended approach, through a series of 'digitally delivered' skill sharing and action research workshops, which were facilitated over zoom, despite the challenges of unreliable internet and new technology.



Being unable to meet the children in person, Creative Associate and School Coordinators (SC) dived into an exploratory blended approach, relying heavily on technology, trust, and communication. These creative workshops were co-designed, co-created, and co-facilitated by school principal Niamh McLoughlin (SC), Special Education Teacher Mary Heffernan (SC), and Aideen (CA). Many hours of preparation and planning were undertaken online outside school time, often in the evenings or weekends. Such teamwork was extensive, building a relationship which formed deeply through conversation, discussion, and planning / completing action research tasks together, including ideas such as a SWOT analysis of their school, and mapping creativity in the school, etc.

Although the exploratory blended approach is not the focus of this article and was a response to circumstances, it could be adapted or developed for a long-term and far-reaching engagement method – for example, where children and young people find certain barriers to accessing creativity or education, such as long term stays in hospital, etc. and could support where people are unable to meet the children or young people in person.

Throughout the ongoing action research phase of Creative Schools in year 1 of the programme, and while the adults were seeking to understand the needs of the young people, the children were given much opportunity to creatively explore, question, voice opinion, and raise topics meaningful to them, while linking back into the curriculum, culminating in the creation of an outdoor learning space in their second year; this outdoor space was conceptualised and created by giving the children lead position on the decision making, and involvement at all times. 'The Lundy Model of Participation' and 'The 5 Creative Habits of Mind' were central to all planning, from day one; making sure that each workshop and interaction challenged the children to explore what it means to collaborate, explore, persist, be inquisitive and imaginative, while always giving the young people Space, Voice, Audience and Influence on all decisions, whether menial or informative tasks. The children, from junior infants through to sixth class inclusive, fully engaged in this project, including during Covid-19 lock-downs, and beyond, while the world slowly and carefully started to re-open.

In May 2021, CA was able to visit the school for the first time while adhering to government and school guidelines, which included not coming into direct contact with students or staff.

A brief visit was organised, for a 'reverse exhibition of work', where students could showcase their quarantined work to date in their classrooms, while Aideen walked around the perimeter of the school, viewing the classroom exhibitions through the windows. This approach was a success, and brought great excitement for everyone involved.

At the end of their first year the students of Scoil Bhríde held their first ever election for a student council, as part of Creative Schools. The children ran an election campaign and created a voting booth for the full electoral experience. A committee was formed, and these students became the main point of contact for the SC, as the project moved into year two.

These young people and staff engaged far beyond what was asked or expected for the initiative. They worked intensely with their CA, putting trust in this stranger to guide them through creative exploration and research. Together they identified needs and preferences for what the children in this school might enjoy and benefit from. The children got to vote and select their preferred options, and the final project for year two; the year two project was to centre around outdoor learning and play in nature, responding to sensory and physical needs, using a space where they could all come together outdoors. This was a clear response from the young people, in a time where being together inside was deemed unsafe. The objective moving into year two was to help them deliver this project, in the way that the young people visualised it.



To restart the project at the beginning of year two, CA revisited the school, discussing the outdoor learning space, and asked the young people to draw and physically make models, to represent how they might visualise their outdoors space. These models were created by using recyclable materials. The next step was to engage a suitable creative practitioner.

When seeking creative practitioners for the project many obstacles were encountered, and in turn engaging the artist(s) took months longer than expected, creating some anguish for CA. The resolution came after reaching out through many networks of contacts, eventually finding two artists based in Wexford who were suitably experienced installation land art artists, willing to work outdoors adhering to school and government guidelines of the time, and respectful of the brief focusing on engaging the students while giving the young people the space to lead the decision making. These artists had extensive experience working with young people and children, and were receptive to youth voice as lead position.

The artists engaged for this project were Deirdre Travers and Sonya Weston.

They delivered four in person workshops with the young people at the school, before building the final, agreed, and Board of Management approved, installation in situ. The first of these workshops was co-facilitated by the school CA, the artists were introduced, land art was explained, relevant links were discussed with the children while looking back over what was covered in the understanding phase, and outlining how this would now be moving forward with Deirdre and Sonya.

Despite of the challenges created by the costs of outdoor installations versus the small fixed budget, this project was successfully executed in a meaningful and student-centred way, delivered by two artists who worked closely with the school, respected the voice of the young people, and created an outdoor space for sensory interactions and physical engagement, while embracing the local history and in line with the timing of the 1500 years celebrations of the Irish Matron Saint, St. Brigid; which was in keeping with the school ethos where the community are very passionate about their local heritage.

The final piece 'The student-centred, physically interactive, outdoor learning space' was developed and officially opened, celebrated, and introduced as part of the school's annual sports and family day, June 2022 and is now embedded into every day and part of Scoil Bhríde Lackagh living school culture.



One of My Favourite Memories from Consultation

by Brian Cregan, Creative Associate in Dublin

Brian's article is a lively example of what can happen if the school community and Creative Associate can take a leap of faith together. From a sketched outline, a day of taster activities and celebration took place in this special school, allowing participants express themselves and their ideas, and gathering information on what they'd like to do more of as Creative Schools took shape. Hidden in this article is another really important point – you're not in this alone, use your community of practice for support and ideas.

At the music station, one of the pupils, James, picked up his guitar and started to play. It was a very spontaneous and pure moment of expression as he started to sing the words of 'Country Roads'. A small group gathered around him as he picked up momentum. Looking around, other pupils were dancing, dressing up and performing as well as doing things like coding and learning construction skills from other pupils.

It reminded me of the Lundy model that can be used within the context of participation and decision making for young people, especially the idea of giving young people the space and audience where they can express themselves and their views.

It can be about an issue that has meaning for them that they would like to share or perhaps they can share how they feel through music!

The work began with a conversation between the School Coordinator Deirdre Farnan at St Michael's Holy Angels Special School and myself during one of my early visits to the school. We wanted to reach out to every pupil in the school regardless of their needs and abilities. A meeting with my fellow Creative Associates in a regional meeting dedicated to working in Special Educational Needs (SEN) was highly informative and helped inspire and inform some of our ideas. At home I quickly made a sketch of how things might work. It consisted of a series of creative stations in the school gym where pupils could try different activities and later vote on their favourite ones. It had been an idea that I had hoped to put into practice for a long time but was challenging due to the logistics and the amount of time it would take to plan and implement. At a meeting with some of the staff it was embraced, and a plan was set in motion. A key part of it would be that all classes would create individual words for the stations through doing lettering workshops. This was a way to generate interest and create a buzz around the school in the buildup to the consultation.

As things progressed, I checked in with Deirdre periodically about how things were coming along and then we set dates for the whole school consultation that would take place over three days with me attending two of them. During our chats, we discussed how recycled materials from Recreate could be really helpful in the lead-up to and during the lettering workshops. I met up with some of the Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) who had the school minibus and we loaded up with materials. This engagement was so successful that we decided to engage Recreate to do a workshop with Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) in the school at a later date. This was facilitated by artist Jo May and was really successful.

When I arrived on Friday to help set up the stations, I was blown away by the work that had been done already. Some of the stations had been put up in advance and the lettering laid out on the floor. The individual letters created by the pupils were artworks in themselves. Deirdre and the team had put in so much work and it struck me how the different skill sets of everyone involved were reflected in the work. In many ways it was a leap of faith, but we had built up enough trust together to go with it and make it work.

The pupils were supported by teachers and Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) took charge of the stations and facilitated short workshops with other pupils. They answered questions and guided discussions with pupils. They took so much pride in their work and showed great leadership and good example to their fellow pupils.





When developing the original idea, I had envisaged using coloured sticky dots for each class to vote at each station. Deirdre came up with the idea of using Google Jamboard and images of the activities so the pupils could reflect with their teachers back in the classroom. This worked much better as it gave pupils the time and space to talk and think about the stations, they had liked the most. They got their chance to have a say in the creative activities they liked the most and what they would like to try in the future. Deirdre collated all the ideas from each class and created a table that we are going to use in September.

There was so much joy expressed amongst staff and students during the days of the consultation. We captured this through taking photos, making short video clips and recording interviews with staff and pupils. It was important to capture these wonderful moments to help us plan exciting new creative opportunities for the school during the year ahead.

"...and for some of the children that may be nonverbal, or who have difficulties expressing themselves. This was a way of them expressing their creativity today in the drama zone and the music. So, the construction zone is horticulture. moviemaking, yep. And the one word that everybody had gotten away from today was that was fun." - School Coordinator

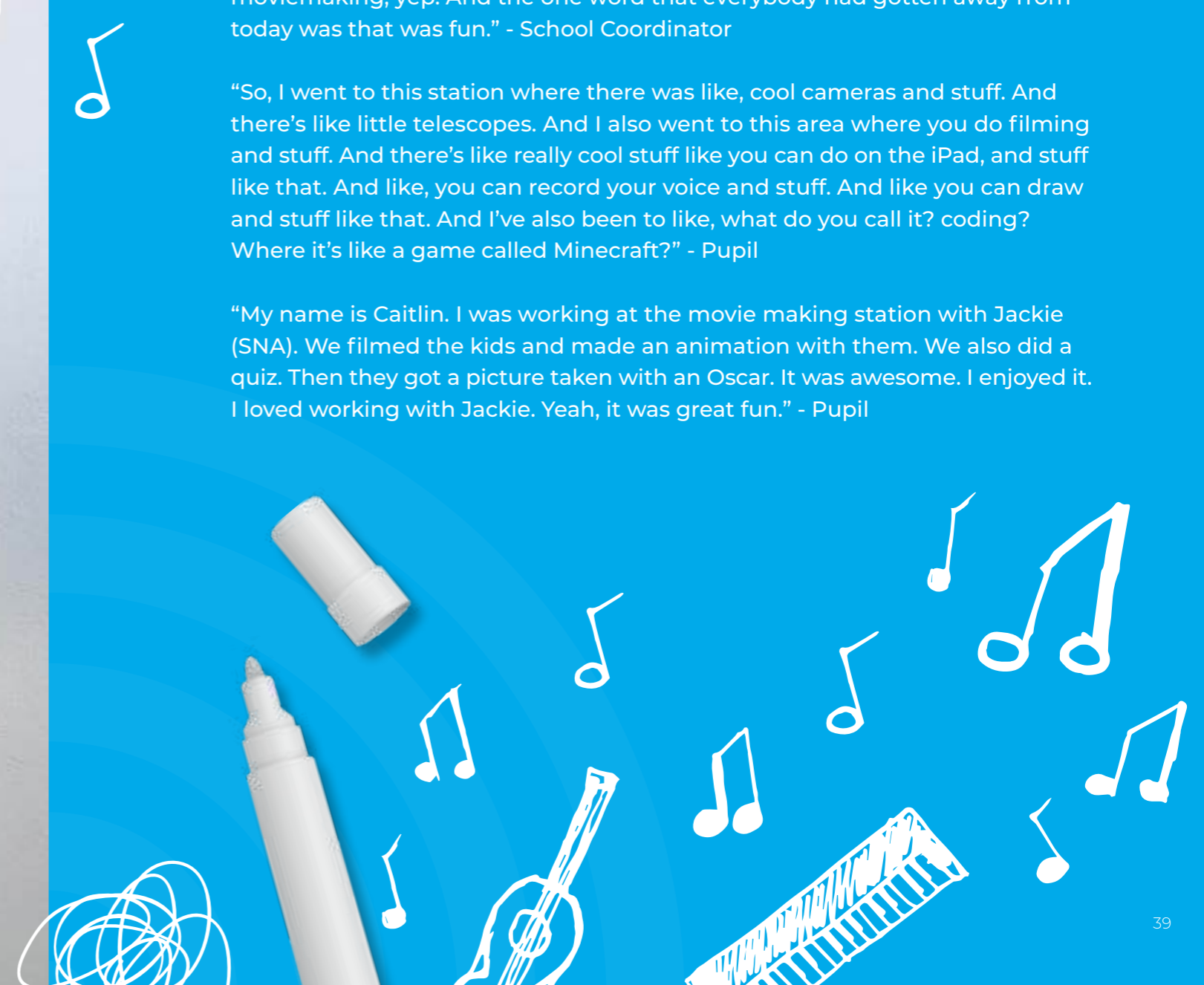
"So, I went to this station where there was like, cool cameras and stuff. And there's like little telescopes. And I also went to this area where you do filming and stuff. And there's like really cool stuff like you can do on the iPad, and stuff like that. And like, you can record your voice and stuff. And like you can draw and stuff like that. And I've also been to like, what do you call it? coding? Where it's like a game called Minecraft?" - Pupil

"My name is Caitlin. I was working at the movie making station with Jackie (SNA). We filmed the kids and made an animation with them. We also did a quiz. Then they got a picture taken with an Oscar. It was awesome. I enjoyed it. I loved working with Jackie. Yeah, it was great fun." - Pupil

WE ARE A

CREATIVE

SCHOOL



Creative Souls Assemble!

by Juliette Saumande, Creative Associate in Dublin

In sharing the story of how Creative Soul of the Month became a regular award at Stanhope St Primary School, Juliette Saumande also makes an important point about holding space for and not being afraid of the less positive things that students want to share. She tracks this project all the way through from consultation session, to embedded award at the school and the ways in which the students drove this.

Stanhope Street Primary School in Dublin is the kind of place that is bursting at the seams with creativity. You see and feel it everywhere, from the massive Chris Judge mosaic in the foyer to the felted scenes hanging in the stairs window. You hear it in the corridors during rehearsals for a song written in house, and soon you'll be able to smell and taste it when some lucky classes take part in pasta making workshops in the hall. But the best place to experience Stanhope's creativity is in the library, during a meeting of the Creative Council.

The members, boys and girls from Second to Sixth Class, are super proud to be on the council and with good reason. Their place was hard earned, to the point that the older classes even created their own manifestos to be in with a chance of a seat at the table. We have visual artists, designers, cooks, jewellery makers, comedians... above all we have thinkers, who love to problem-solve; communicators, who will happily share their ideas far and wide; and kind hearts, who are always thinking about their schoolmates.

In Stanhope's first year on the Creative Schools programme, the council, the School Coordinator (teacher Emma McDonnell) and myself as Creative Associate talked a lot about what creativity is, what it feels like and who is creative. Right from the off, the council had a broad view on creativity: everyone can be creative, they argued, and anything can be done creatively (not just the visual arts). To them, creativity is a good thing and it's active.

But when we dug a bit deeper into the feelings of creativity, things got a bit less positive. While doing something creative can make you feel happy ('I don't want it to stop') and free ('I can do what I want'), it can also come with the crush of perfectionism and frustration. As one council member put it: 'When things go wrong with my art, I'm upset and hopeless, I feel I've let someone down'. And at the same time, the council was adamant: creativity isn't just about 'being good at' art. Reconciling this knowledge, and this lived experience was going to take some work.

Meanwhile, the teachers were struggling with similar concerns, wondering about how to rebalance the attention we pay to product over process and looking for ways to widen the definition of what we consider an expression of creativity. How can we celebrate and encourage creativity beyond the visual arts, beyond 'good' art and beyond the arts in general?

When we floated the idea of an award that would help identify creativity and celebrate it, the council ran with it. To make it workable, the award needed to have objective criteria that

- Went beyond technical mastery ('being good at art'),
- Could apply to areas beyond art, and
- Be easily understood by everyone in the school, from the Infants to the Autism Class to the sixth class kids and the staff.

Emma and I felt the Creative Habits of Mind gave us a good framework to begin with, as it ticked the first two boxes. But for the third, we left it in the capable hands of the council. Together, we explored what each habit meant to them. What does 'being collaborative' mean? Can you think of somebody who is 'persistent'? When was the last time you were 'imaginative'? Can you think of other ways to say 'inquisitive'? 'disciplined'? Some words meant more to them than others; a thesaurus was produced; discussions ensued and lists were made, on which the council voted.

And here are the results of their efforts:

- 
- Creative people...
- ✓ Have great imagination
 - ✓ Enjoy Teamwork
 - ✓ Are Focused
 - ✓ Are Curious
 - ✓ Don't stop believing!

The name of the award came about in the same fashion: a list of suggestions was made, a vote was taken and the Creative Soul of the Month Award was born. Not bad for a 90-minute session! I gathered everything into a shiny PDF explaining the why and what of this new award, delving a bit deeper into each of the criteria for extra clarity, but still only using phrasing the council had come up with. For example:



During the session, some council members, already thinking ahead, asked to be in charge of designing the award logo. We were more than happy to oblige! A couple of weeks later, I was presented with some pretty stunning art, both for the award itself and for the certificates (a junior and senior version) the recipients would be taking home.



Armed with these visuals, the aforementioned PDF and their intimate knowledge of the topic, the council was dispatched in pairs to explain to every class what the award was about, while Emma liaised with staff and management.

In May and June 2023, the first ever Creative Soul of the Month awards in Stanhope Street Primary School were awarded for things such as 'having a fantastic imagination and ... having excellent ideas for games', showing 'great curiosity about the world', being 'very motivated and determined' or 'trying something new.' The young creatives' areas of expertise or exploration ranged from drama to Junk Kouture to dance, music, storytelling, comedy, paper engineering and more. The praise was specific and paid as much attention (and very often more) to process and mindset as to product.

Now a monthly event, the award is quickly becoming part of the school's make up and is helping every kid and teacher in Stanhope Street spot more signs of creativity, beat back the perfectionist monster and nurture their creative soul.



A manifesto to be picked as council member:

Another manifesto ('I have a cookie jar of ideas')!



Getting started: Developing a Culture of Youth Voice from Scratch

by Muireann Nic Cába, Creative Associate in Waterford

In this article, Muireann Nic Cába shares some gentle, low pressure but thoughtful and organised ways to initiate conversations with staff and students in a busy second level school that help lay the groundwork for Creative Schools. We love her analogy that we 'don't run a race or play a match without first warming up. Same too, for the Creative Muscle'. She also shares a methodology for consultation that works well with second level students, and, as a link to an additional resource, some common challenges and how she has worked through them.

The project I'm sharing is working with young people from Dungarvan College, a densely populated school in a southern coastal town. The students are energetic and enthused about Creative Schools. This is a look at the mechanisms involved in developing trust and relationships to begin our collaborative journey, with conversations, knowledge share, and exchange of ideas.

In general access to post-primary can be very limiting due to school term constraints, time pressure, and preparing for exams. I was fortunate, the School Coordinator invited me to the Art Club every couple of weeks for 60-90 mins, which occasionally went into the 30 mins of class time (at which stage exam-year students returned to class).

We tried to ensure that young people from a diverse range of demographics, multinational cross section of the school community, and Traveller community were represented. Demonstrating a safe place for everyone to feel at ease. I also ensured that there were elements of fun incorporated to incentivise future sessions. Art Club had already established interest from each year group. I vocally encouraged participants to attend again and to let their peers know about Creative Schools. I always start with fun warm-up games and exercises. These are always welcome. Second level students crave fun. Give choice to participants for the last 5 mins about what cool-down game they might like to do? This helps keep us on track timewise and empowers the group.

I generally try to begin by chatting briefly with the School Coordinator and set up an initial face to face informal chat. I also prepare a visual timeline so that everyone can see scheduled dates and the different phases of the programme. This is a collaborative space where we can upload and share images and documents. I set up a shared folder to summarize the different sessions and share creative tools and resources with the school coordinator.

Before I engage with participants I send a poster, a short video to introduce myself and I give the pupils a creative challenge. In my piece-to-camera I ask participants to consider; What does creativity mean to you? I invite them to either write a list, draw, sketch, or take photos of what is meaningful to them.

This activity challenge aims to give them a flavour of the Creative Schools journey and can be shared with the participants before I visit.

With the video I self-shoot and edit the content using some licensed stock footage, catchy sound effects and music to engage the audience. Often when I meet a group first, they ask me what beach I am walking on which can break the ice.

After meeting with both the School Coordinator and the principal in the school, I recommend that I meet all staff first, as an induction to give teachers and staff an understanding of the Creative Schools programme. This time together is very important for establishing our partnership and building shared excitement about the work to come.

I introduce a number of tools & techniques which I also introduce to the young people as part of the Understand phase.

Meeting All Staff session in Dungarvan College was very insightful. With some of the warm-up activities the giggles and laughter levels made the space deafening. Staff returned to their youth for a few minutes. I use the analogy of sport - we don't run a race or play a match without first warming up. Same too, for the Creative Muscle. A lot of the schools I work with are very sport orientated & this metaphor resonates.

We used Menti to explore what they remembered most from their youth in school. They were open to sharing their fun, creative memories & also shared their current concerns:

- Resources limited audio visual equipment
- Space not enough room to move around the classroom
- Kids slow to present or express themselves

I listened to the staff's concerns. I explained Creative Schools might not be able to solve the resources or the lack of space but could help with the challenge of getting young people to express themselves.

Coller



Before my workshops, the questions I had for myself in preparation was 'How can I facilitate opportunities for young people to express themselves (multimodal approaches), encouraging listening and speaking?'

I discussed with the School Coordinator that as part of my interactions with the young people I will incorporate more opportunities for participants to speak, express through art and voice.

How to hold the space for youth consultation?

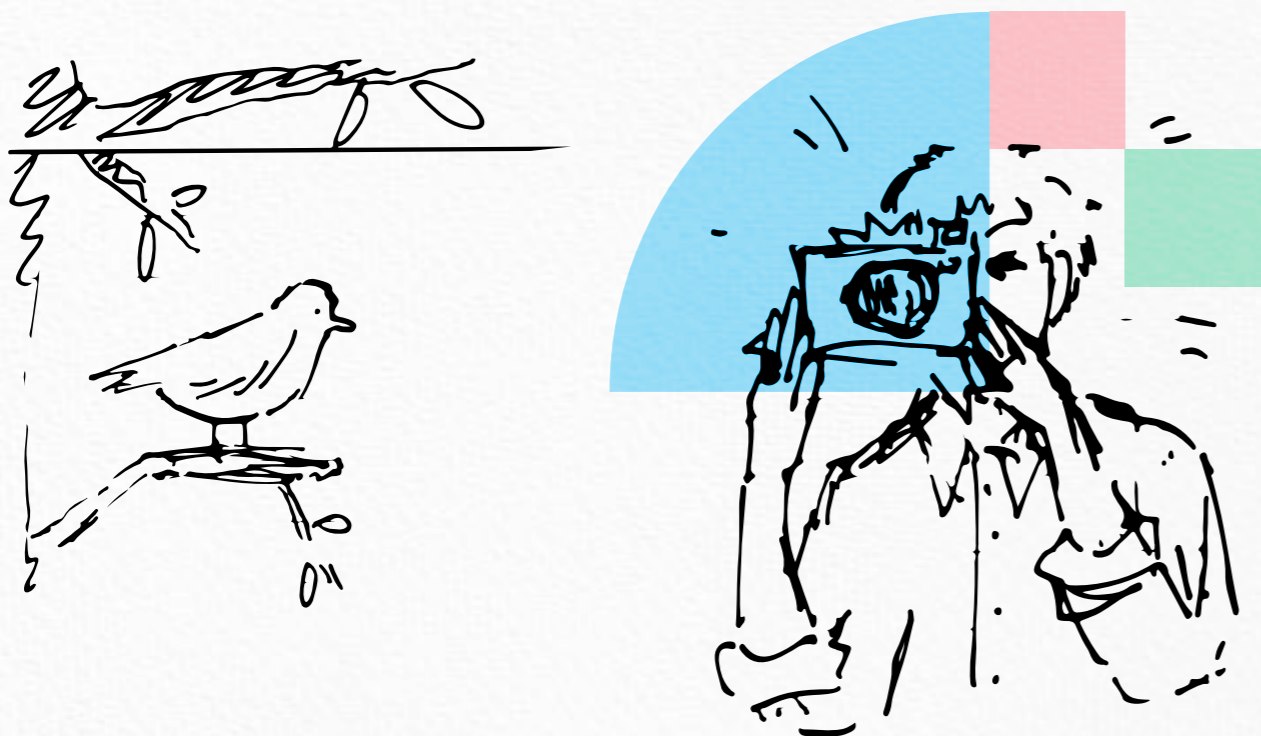
I always aim to begin with an icebreaker to get people laughing & to relax the group. This encourages everyone to be present for the session.

I make a point of creating a safe space for participants to feel at ease. This is a supportive compassionate setting where we can share our thoughts and ideas openly and honestly.

I always state and repeat several times at each session, that there are no right or wrong answers. I build rapport by demonstrating or giving an example when I give an activity or warm-up exercise.

I have a hands-on practical approach. Utilising the Five Creative Habits of Mind some of the tools I use include:

- Hybrid Animal Game (imaginative & Design Thinking)
- Blind Drawing Exercise (drawing observation, tolerating uncertainty, sticking with difficulty, daring to be different)
- Menti online too (safe non-judgmental way to share)
- World Cafe (collaborative, co-operating appropriately, giving & receiving feedback)
- Edward De Bono's Six Thinking Hats (inquisitive, wondering & questioning, Imaginative, playing with possibilities challenging assumptions)
- Exploring with Podcasting (collaborative, exploring & investigating, daring to be different, giving & receiving feedback)



Most of the methods are self-explanatory. I will elaborate on the process of introducing podcasting & the benefits. This is both auditory & kinesthetic. I hand out microphones & foam covers (participants can select their preferred colour), headphones & splitter cables. I demonstrate how to connect equipment using any device (laptop, tablet & or smartphones). Participants are connecting the equipment to their personal or school devices. I make the introduction accessible, keeping the process simple, explaining input and output and sharing troubleshooting techniques.

I talk about vox pops and how might we ask questions. I ask for a volunteer and purposefully ask a 'closed' question, which usually gives a 'yes' or 'no' answer (unless we have an aspiring 'politician' in our midst!). I get participants to think about 'open' & 'closed' questions. What is an open versus what is a closed question? We placed the open questions as visual prompts on the wall.

Teamwork & collaboration is involved in this approach with podcasting. Working together on a topic the participants begin to plan their podcast.

I provide a template & encourage the students to select a topic that they are passionate about, if stuck for an idea they can refer to their Menti topics list. Starting off with a simple magazine style approach with an introduction, body & outro. I supply an example of prompts & encourage participants to use their own language.



Our Creative Schools Idea Farm – A Practice for a Whole School Consultation with Children

by Órla Bates, Creative Associate in Wexford

Gathering, not to mind including the voices of every child in a school can be a daunting prospect! In this article, Órla Bates shares a clear and implementable process for gathering, sorting, and storing the ideas in a whole school evaluation – the idea of every precious idea being stored, even if it's not its time to grow yet, is a lovely way of demonstrating that all the information shared is precious and treated as such.

The following is an example of an approach to a whole school consultation I developed and conducted in a primary school to gather children's ideas for their schools Creative Schools Plan.

In my role as a Creative Associate, I was working with four schools, all in their first year of the Creative Schools programme. I was exploring methods for carrying out whole school consultations with children to gather their ideas for their schools Creative Schools Plan. Scoil Mhuire Horeswood is a rural primary school in Co. Wexford. It was wonderful to find a strong and well-established value on student voice existed in the school. The school wanted to engage as many children as possible in consultations to develop their Creative Schools plan. The whole school approach to the consultations would involve a collaboration by everyone in the school community and cultivate a collective ownership of the project from the outset. Working with the Coordinator and principal we explored ways to carry out consultation workshops with eight classes, involving 195 students from junior infants to sixth class.

Creating an Idea Farm

In my own practice as a visual artist, I had been looking into systems for creativity and organising ideas. I was curious about how artists keep track of ideas and store them? I came across methods like Zettelkasten (notebox method), Digital Garden, and Idea Farm. It was Springtime, and all these things came together and triggered the idea to use a seed analogy for our consultation method. We would grow a collective idea farm in school for the Creative School Plan!

The creation of an Idea Farm in school seemed to me a wonderful way to explain to children the process of the consultations and the magical process of gathering, storing, and planting their creative ideas. It would show children what happens to their ideas and how their ideas would be used. It would also explain more about how Creativity works and the creative process.

Ideas

The creative process is a series of stages started by ideas. Ideas are like seeds! In the beginning we collect potential starting points that we can nurture to grow into something wonderful. We should gather without judgement and remain open to all seed's potential. This stage of gathering idea seeds is best approached with openness and curiosity.

HOW?

Preparation

In preparation for the consultation workshop, I facilitated a series of workshops with all classes on understanding creativity and the creative process.

I developed a worksheet titled Our Creative Schools Idea Farm, which we would use to collect all children's ideas about what they would like in the school plan.

The method involved inviting all children to respond to the question What creative things would you like to do, make, or see in school?



Working with the School Coordinator we chose to use three headings, Do, See and Make to help children think more openly and imagine the possibilities, the different ways their idea could happen. It could be something they would like to make, and it could also be something they would like to see.

The consultation workshops were facilitated by the class teachers in their classroom. I prepared a PowerPoint for teachers to use for facilitating the consultation. It introduced the Idea Farm and included facilitation guidelines for teachers. Copies of the worksheet were distributed to every class beforehand. In the consultation workshop children were invited to create three idea seeds on their own worksheet.

Collecting

The worksheets were gathered from all classes and the children's ideas seeds were collected. Sorting of the seeds was done together by the student advisory group, Coordinator and me. The first step was cutting out each individual idea seed and making three groups, as named on the worksheet - Do, See and Make seeds. We then created subcategories of seeds that go together, within the three main groups. These were named by the advisory group.

Planting

The categories which accumulated the most idea seeds, in each group, formed a collection of eight seeds for a whole school vote. The voting weeded out the top three seeds which have been planted into Scoil Muire's Creative Schools plan.

The three sown seeds are:



We are now at the next stage and beginning year 2 fuelled by the excitement of the potential growth of each seed. There are so many possibilities as we set about developing our starting points. It's too early to tell where our seeds will lead us and what will take root and grow... but this is the fun and magical part. In creating the Creative Schools idea farm the school continues to cultivate and nurture the voice of the child.

See

outdoor play = 14
 general sport = 9
 colour = 56
 animals/pets = 16
 dance = 2
 drama = 0
 food = 4
 gardening = 3

do

clothing design = 2
 science + engineering = 2
 Book/comic making = 3
 languages = 1
 Building = 1
 gardening = 5
 farming = 6
 Baking = 16
 outdoor games = 12
 gaming = 6
 drama/puppet show = 5
 dancing/gymnastics = 6
 music = 4
 outdoor art/Mural = 8
 Art classes = 11
 general sport = 32

Make

Film making = 0
 Games = 3
 Music = 2 = 4
 Gardening = 4
 Building things = 24
 Playground = 21
 Baking = 15
 Fashion designing =
 art = 14
 illustration = 8
 colorful = 22

Encouraging Quieter Voices

by Zoë Uí Fhaoláin Green, Creative Associate in Kerry

It's hard to imagine that so many creative good things came out of Covid 19, but here is another article demonstrating a consultation approach which responded to those challenges, and, which shares a methodology for collecting, sorting, reflecting back and making meaning from visual material - an especially nice method for quieter voices, who, quite literally found those voices as the project went on.

Building relationships

Scoil Chaitlín Naofa is situated in the Corca Dhuibhne Gaeltacht. I was their Creative Associate from 2020 to 2022 when there were 15 children enrolled. The two class school is nestled below Mount Eagle with a view towards Ventry beach from the yard.

I worked closely with principal Máiréad Ní Dhubhghaill Bric, the School Coordinator. The children and teachers enjoyed a range of activities throughout their Creative Schools journey. When we began working together, the Covid 19 pandemic meant that the children were learning from home, and so my first meetings with them were via screens. I set a number of tasks and led creative workshops from my home to theirs, with their teachers supporting the process on Zoom. We tried hard to meet the challenges that these restrictions threw up in creative and positive ways.

I noticed early on that the children were quietly spoken and most needed much encouragement to speak up. Even as I got to know them better, this remained the case throughout my two years working with them, so I needed a variety of ways to gather their opinions and allow their voices to be heard. This is really important to me in my work with children and is such a central part of the Creative Schools approach, that I was determined to facilitate as many varied opportunities as possible to hear all the children.

Exploring

One of the first creative tasks that the children completed at home was to make a collage responding to the question: What is creativity?

This followed our online explorations of different art forms and creative pursuits. I explained what collages could be and sent an explanatory sheet to the teachers who shared it with parents so they could support their child/ren with the activity. I liked this as a first task because it could be done at home without specialist equipment, I hoped it would be fun, and open to many different interpretations.

The collages were a way to encourage the children to think freely about what creativity meant to them. They gave me invaluable insight into their individual interests, experiences, and skills – both because of the subject matter they focussed on, and due to the collage methods used.

Gathering

My interpretation of these works was an exciting process, but it also challenged me to translate these extremely creative expressions into data that I could feed back to the whole school and synthesise into a plan of practical action.

I was aware that I had a great responsibility to remain true to each child's voice, and of my advocacy role. I was also conscious that this artwork captured just one moment in the child's life: their interests and desires could rapidly change. It was important to bear in mind that because the task was completed at home each household would have different materials available for the children to use.

I made a series of lists that I hoped reflected each child's interests according to their collages. I tried to be quite free with my interpretations, as we wanted to keep things open at this stage. I made note of all the crossovers and the areas that seemed most popular so far.



Delving

Together we looked at their work and discussed the collages further. This helped the children to think about the questions:

What creative things do I like to do? What creative things would I like to try?

On a sunny day, I met the children outside in the school yard. They all looked closely at their unique collages which helped them to think of answers, which they prepared and practiced saying with help from the teachers. Many of them spoke about ambitions and hopes for the future. I brought sound recording equipment and each child spoke into the microphone in turn. This was a huge achievement for a particularly quiet group, and the teachers and I could see the fun the children had. This led to them interviewing each other and helping with the recording. It was beautiful to see the joy they took from this. It was a new creative experience and I hope it helped instil the idea that creativity can be part of everything, and to welcome the unexpected.

After these individual responses to the questions, we recorded the whole school playing music together. This was a lovely way to acknowledge and celebrate the school's strong traditional music culture. The children finished the recording by calling out words that expressed how they felt when doing something creative that they enjoy.



Celebrating

As Creative Schools week approached, we decided to use the beautiful collages to make a video with a background soundtrack of their words and music.

The children were enormously proud and really enjoyed seeing their work 'on TV' as part of the Creative Schools Week programmes – they felt a deep sense of achievement in their hard work and wonderful artworks. It was a huge accomplishment in the face of the pandemic and the challenges of the restrictions in place. It was especially important that the school's work was included as one of only a few Irish-language contributions, putting this small rural school centre stage alongside its peers.

Next Steps

This whole project was a great springboard for choosing activities and projects for the rest of the Creative Schools experience. The sound recording and further creative tasks had helped to narrow down the lists of interests. I made colourful pie charts of the results and shared these with the school. We then organised taster sessions in the top choices.

There was still a lot of uncertainty at this time, but we were able to meet the creative desires of all the children in a number of exciting ways.



Legacy

The success of this project lay in its diverse elements meaning the children could express themselves freely and communicate their thoughts and feelings in a variety of ways, which allowed me and their teachers insight into their imaginations.

As I finished working with the school and was speaking to Máiréad, she told me that one of the children had been looking back and remembered the collages. The child suggested that they each do one again. 'It would be really interesting to see where we are now' she said. This for me was the icing on the cake of this project. I was delighted that a child would reflect in this way and make this great suggestion to her teacher who in turn took on the idea of the collages being a regular means of hearing each child's voice, self-assessing and exploring creativity in the school.

Guthanna Níos Ciúine a Spreagadh

le Zoë Uí Fhaoláin Green, Comhlach Cruthaitheach i Réigiún 7

Tá sé deacair a shamhlú gur tháinig an oiread dea-rudaí cruthaitheacha as Covid-19, ach seo alt eile ina léirítear cur chuige comhairliúcháin a d'fhreagair do na dúshláin sin, agus a roinneann modheolaíocht chun ábhar amhairc a bhailiú, a shórtáil, machnamh a dhéanamh orthu agus brí a bhaint astu – bealach an-deas do ghuthanna níos ciúine, a d'aimsigh na nguthanna sin i ndáiríre de réir mar a chuaigh an tionscadal ar aghaidh.

Caidrimh a fhorbairt

Tá Scoil Chaitlín Naofa suite i nGaeltacht Chorca Dhuibhne. Bhí mé mar Chomhlach Cruthaitheach ann ó 2020 go 2022 nuair a bhí 15 leanbh ar an rolla acu. Tá an scoil dhá ranga neadaithe faoi Shliabh an Iolair le radharc i dtreo thrá Cheann Trá ón gclós.

D'oibrigh mé go dlúth leis an bpríomhoide Mairéad Ní Dhubhghaill Bric, Comhordaitheoir na Scoile. Bhain na leanaí agus na múinteoirí taitneamh as réimse gníomhaíochtaí le linn a n-aistir le Scoileanna Ildánacha. Nuair a thosaíomar ag obair le chéile, mar gheall ar phaindéim Covid-19 bhí na leanaí ag obair ón mbaile, agus dá bharr sin bhí mo chéad chruinnithe leo trí scáileáin. Leag mé amach roinnt tascanna agus threoraigh mé ceardlanna ó mo bhaile féin chuig a mbailte siúd, agus a múinteoirí ag tacú leis an bpróiseas ar Zoom. Rinneamar iarracht na dúshláin a bhain leis na srianta seo a shárú ar bhealaí cruthaitheacha agus dearfacha.

Thug mé faoi deara go luath gur labhair na leanaí go réidh agus gur theastaigh spreagadh óna bhformhór le labhairt amach. Fiú nuair a chuir mé aithne níos fearr orthu, b'amhlaidh an cás le linn mo dhá bhliain ag obair leo, mar sin theastaigh réimse bealaí uaim chun a dtuairimí a bhailiú, agus le go gcloisfí a nguthanna. Tá sé sin an-tábhachtach dom i mo chuid oibre le leanaí agus tá sé mar chuid chomh lárnach sin de chur chuige na Scoileanna Ildánacha go raibh mé diongbháilte an oiread deiseanna éagsúla agus ab fhéidir a éascú ionas go gcloisfí na leanaí uile.

Fiosrú

Ar cheann de na chéad tascanna a chuir na leanaí i gcrích bhí colláis a dhéanamh ag freagairt don cheist: céard is cruthaitheacht ann?

Tháinig sé sin tar éis ár bhfiosruithe ar líne ar fhoirmeacha ealaíne agus caithimh aimsire chruthaitheacha éagsúla. Mhínigh mé céard a d'fhéadfadh a bheith sna colláisí agus sheol mé bileog mhíniúcháin chuig na múinteoirí a roinn leis na tuismitheoirí í ionas go bhféadfaidís tacú lena leanbh/leanaí leis an ngníomhaíocht. Thaitin sé liom mar chéad tasc mar go bhféadfaí é a dhéanamh sa bhaile gan trealamh speisialta, bhí súil agam go mbeadh sé spráúil, agus oscailte do go leor léirmhínte.

Bealach a bhí sna colláisí leis na leanaí a spreagadh chun smaoineamh go saor faoin mbrí a bhain siad féin as cruthaitheacht. Thug siad léargas luachmhar dom ar a spéiseanna, eispéiris, agus scileanna ar leith – mar gheall ar an ábhar ar dhírigh siad air, agus de bharr na modhanna colláise a úsáideadh.

Bailiú

Próiseas spleodrach a bhí i mo léirmhíniú ar na saothair sin, ach thug sé dúshlán dom freisin na léirmhínte an-chruthaitheach seo a aistriú chuig sonraí a raibh mé in ann a chur ar ais sa scoil uile agus a chomhtháthú i bplean gníomhaíochta praiticiúla.

Thuig mé go raibh freagracht mhór orm fanacht dílis do ghuth gach linbh, agus mo ról tacaíochta. Bhí mé ar an eolas freisin nár ghabh an saothar ealaíne seo ach nóiméad amháin i saol an linbh: d'fhéadfadh a spéiseanna agus mianta athrú go tapa. Bhí sé tábhachtach cuimhneamh mar gheall go ndearnadh an tasc sa bhaile go mbeadh ábhair dhifriúla ar fáil sa bhaile do na leanaí.

Rinne mé sraith liostaí a raibh súil agam a léirigh spéiseanna gach linbh de réir a gcolláisí. Rinne mé iarracht a bheith saor le mo léirmhínte, mar gur theastaigh uainn rudaí a choinneáil oscailte ag an gcéim seo. Rinne mé nóta de na meascáin agus na réimsí uile a raibh an tóir ba mhó orthu go dtí sin.



Scrúdú

Le chéile, bhreathnaíomar ar a gcuid oibre agus phléamar na colláisí a thuilleadh. Chuidigh sé sin leis na leanaí smaoineamh ar na ceisteanna:

Cé na rudaí cruthaitheacha is maith liom a dhéanamh? Cé na rudaí cruthaitheacha ba mhaith liom a thriail?

Ar lá grianmhar, bhuail mé leis na leanaí taobh amuigh i gclós na scoile. Bhreathnaigh siad ar fad go géar ar a gcolláisí uathúla a chuidigh leo smaoineamh ar fhreagraí, a d'ullmhaigh siad agus a chleacht siad le cúnamh ó na múinteoirí. Labhair go leor díobh faoi uailmhianta agus mianta don todhchaí. Thug mé liom roinnt trealamh taifeadta fuaime agus labhair gach leanbh isteach sa mhicreafón ar a seal. Éacht mór a bhí anseo do ghrúpa a bhí chomh ciúin, agus chonaic na múinteoirí agus mé féin an spraoi a bhain na leanaí as. As sin, chuir siad agallaimh ar a chéile agus chuidigh siad leis an taifeadadh. Bhí sé go hálainn an ríméad a bhí orthu agus iad ina bhun a fheiceáil. Eispéreas cruthaitheach nua a bhí ann agus tá súil agam gur chuidigh sé chun an smaoineamh gur féidir leis an gcruthaitheacht a bheith mar pháirt de gach rud, agus fáiltiú roimh nithe gan choinne, a dhaingniú.

Tar éis na bhfreagraí aonair sin ar cheisteanna, thaifeadamar an scoil uile ag seinm ceoil le chéile. Bealach álainn a bhí ansin chun cultúr láidir na scoile sa cheol traidisiúnta a aithint agus a cheiliúradh. Chríochnaigh na leanaí an taifeadadh trí na focail a chuir in iúl an chaoi a mothaíonn siad nuair a dhéanann siad rud cruthaitheach a thaitníonn leo a screadadh.



Ceiliúradh

Agus seachtain na Scoileanna Ildánacha ag teannadh linn, chinneamar na colláisí áille a úsáid chun físeán a dhéanamh lena bhfocail agus a gceol mar fhuaimrian cúlra.

Bhí na leanaí an-bhródúil agus thaitin sé go mór leo a gcuid saothair a fheiceáil 'ar an teilifís' mar chuid de chlár na Scoileanna Ildánacha – mhothaigh siad braistint éachta ina gcuid oibre crua agus saothair ealaíne iontacha. Éacht mór a bhí ann i bhfianaise na paindéime agus na dúshláin a bhain leis na srianta a bhí i bhfeidhm. Bhí sé tábhachtach go háirithe gur áiríodh saothar na scoile mar cheann den bheagán ionchur Gaeilge, rud a chuir an scoil bheag tuaithe seo i lár an aonaigh lena piaraí.

Na Chéad Chéimeanna Eile

Bhí an tionscadal seo ar fad ina thús maith chun gníomhaíochtaí agus tionscadail a roghnú don chuid eile d'eispéreas na Scoileanna Ildánacha. Chuidigh an taifeadadh fuaime agus na tascanna cruthaitheacha breise chun an liosta spéiseanna a chúngú. Rinne mé píchairteacha ildaite de na torthaí agus roinn mé leis an scoil iad. Ansin, d'eagraíomar seisiúin blaiste sna roghanna is coitianta.

Bhí go leor éiginnteachta ann an tráth sin fós, ach bhíomar in ann mianta cruthaitheacha na leanaí ar fad a shásamh ar roinnt bealaí iontacha.



Leagáid

Bhain rath an tionscadail seo lena ghnéithe éagsúla agus dá bhrí sin bhí na leanaí in ann iad féin a chur in iúl gan bhac, agus a smaointe agus mothúcháin a chur i láthair ar bhealaí éagsúla, a chheadaigh domsa agus dá múinteoirí léargas a fháil ar a samhlaíocht.

Nuair a bhí mé ag críochnú sa scoil bhí mé ag labhairt le Mairéad, agus dúirt sí liom go raibh duine de na leanaí ag féachaint siar agus gur chuimhnigh sí ar na colláisí. Mhol an leanbh go ndéanfaidís ceann eile an duine. 'Bheadh sé an-suimiúil a fheiceáil cá bhfuil muid anois,' a dúirt sí. Domsa, ba e sin dlaoi mhullaigh an tionscadail. Bhí áthas orm go ndéanadh leanbh machnamh ar an gcaoi seo agus an moladh iontach seo a dhéanamh lena múinteoir agus gur ghlac an múinteoir leis an smaoineamh chun na colláisí a úsáid go rialta mar bhealach chun guth gach linbh a chloisteáil, féinmheasúnú a dhéanamh agus cruthaitheacht sa scoil a fhiosrú.

Puppeteers Unplugged: A Giggle Filled Journey of Empowerment

by Mieke Vanmechelen, Creative Associate in Region West Cork

Mieke Vanmechelen makes us feel like we're in a classroom in the hills outside Bantry in her description of Coomhola's Creative Schools journey. She shares some clear and wise points that we can adapt to other settings. All the points made are valuable, but two to especially reflect on are building on existing strengths, and involving the wider community. It's also lovely to see how puppets grew in importance throughout the project – from consultation method to performance focus!

Coomhola National School, perched on a hillside, nestled within a picturesque rural farming community in Bantry, West Cork, is more than just a place of learning; it is a buzzing haven where creativity thrives. An open-minded approach allowed students to explore and discover their artistic potential without the pressure of standing out or reaching specific targets. Through puppetry, music and a sense of wonder and under the nurturing guidance of Tom Farley, their 5th and 6th class teacher, and with unwavering support from the entire school community the students found their voices, learned to collaborate, and overcame challenges with imagination and resilience. Their giggle-filled approach was a privilege to behold and they embarked on a remarkable journey, it was a period of self-discovery, where each child's unique artistic voice found resonance in what the school physically represented and emotionally symbolised for them. Some of the ingredients by which the school supported the children's voices to participate are explored below:

Leading by Example:

The school's approach to embracing creativity and learning set a compelling model for the whole school community, including the children. Teachers demonstrated that they, too, were participants in the exploration and showed a genuine commitment to creativity and learning alongside the children. This helped create an atmosphere of openness, where students felt comfortable sharing their thoughts, ideas and observations, and encouraged students to view mistakes not as failures but as stepping stones towards greater creativity and self-discovery.

Building through the curriculum

As participation among students was encouraged, group projects and peer support became an integral part of the creative process, enhancing the overall learning experience. Cross-disciplinary collaboration between teachers and staff members allowed for a holistic approach to creativity in the school. Together they integrated creative ideas into various subject areas, making learning more interactive and immersive. This approach demonstrated to students that creativity is not limited to art classes but can enhance every aspect of education. On a trip to the local beach, Snámh, the children explored the beach habitat scientifically, searching for different life and plant forms in the different tidal zones.

On completion, the children used all the materials they had gathered to make mer-people on the beach. Stones, pebbles, sand, seaweed and flotsam and jetsam were used to sculpt and create the most beautiful and creative creatures, which were left on the beach on departure for all to enjoy. Other activities involved interventions in the school yard, inviting guest speakers, working with The Glucksman gallery and museum in Cork, miniature set building workshops with artist Bénédicte Coleman, drawing sessions, nature and river walks as well as a boat trip in Bantry Harbour.

Involve the whole school community

The school community, including parents, actively supported the students' creative pursuits. Parents were invited to participate in events, offer their expertise, and provide encouragement, making the creative journey a joint effort.



Interest and support from the wider community gave the students a sense of pride and recognition for their efforts. Digital records such as music videos and photographic documentation played a big role in this process and were made accessible via the school YouTube channel, website and social media.

How to prioritise student interests

By prioritising student interests and passions, the school created an engaging and dynamic learning environment. Much of the students' creative work was showcased on the school website, for the whole school community to access and enjoy. A policy of collaborative art planning began to evolve, the children being consulted on the general direction they would like the art plan to take, especially at Christmas time. The 6th class pupils run a Christmas fair at the Bantry Market each year where art, produced by the entire school is sold for fundraising purposes. The children decide themselves on what to produce.

As a result of this collaborative planning process the children were consulted when purchasing art equipment. These types of showcases, performances, and exhibitions provided opportunities for students to celebrate their creative accomplishments. These events not only fostered a sense of achievement but also instilled a culture of appreciation for creativity within the school. At the same time, the emphasis on the creative process rather than solely focusing on outcomes encouraged students to embrace challenges and view failures as opportunities for learning and growth.

Build on existing strengths and practices

A unique aspect of life in Coomhola was a heart-warming and authentic tradition: the "open table" outside the front door of the school at lunchtime. Here, children gathered to freely share their stories, ideas, dreams and even complaints, while teachers wholeheartedly listened and engaged with genuine interest.

By giving students a safe and welcoming space the school showed that their students' thoughts and feelings were important and respected. Expanding on this tradition teachers allowed for regular class discussions where students were encouraged to share their perspectives on various topics such as class projects and school initiatives which further reinforced the idea that their opinions mattered.



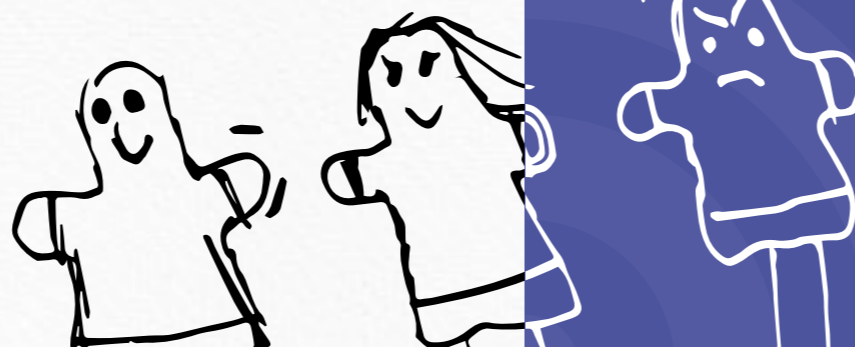
The Power of Puppets

As the transformative journey progressed into year two, the introduction of puppet making proved to be particularly impactful in empowering the students. Puppet making is a very tactile activity and it allowed the students to engage in the process of realising something tangible from their imagination. This approach encouraged active participation, problem-solving, and decision-making, which in turn boosted their confidence in their abilities. There was a real sense of excitement and anticipation each week as artist Stephanie Tenier came to work with the children. The puppets provided a unique form of expression, allowing the students to communicate through their work. It gave them the chance to express emotions and ideas in a non-threatening way, especially for those who found verbal expression challenging or intimidating. It opened a new channel of communication and self-expression and generated a sense of agency. Each puppet reflected the student's own personality and creative choices. By designing and making their puppets, students explored their individuality, preferences, and unique artistic voice. This process of personalisation helped them recognise and appreciate their own uniqueness while also forming an emotional connection with their creations. Teacher Emma Arthur was instrumental in bringing to puppet project to life. Emma integrated the puppets into the learning environment for junior and senior infants, creating a dynamic and enriching experience, helping to generate a love for learning that will have benefitted them in various aspects of their development.

Together, the students embarked on writing and developing a play, one that revolved around the enthralling tale of an evil wizard they called 'Girú' and his quest to take over a town, with the children's army standing united against adversity. The culmination of this project became the school's end-of-year performance which was also adapted into a film, with huge support from teacher Carla Collins.

You already have what you need:

Despite the lack of physical space, Coomhola National School demonstrated that the most significant factor in undertaking Creative Schools initiatives was not the size of the infrastructure, or material resources. Instead, it was the school's flexibility and immense generosity that paved the way for an inspiring artistic journey. Through passionate leadership, a supportive community, student-centredness, curiosity, valuing vulnerability, and celebrating achievements, Coomhola National School has created an environment where youth voice in creativity can flourish. By nurturing a culture that values student voices and fostering self-expression the school unlocked the boundless potential of its students and empowered them to explore their creativity fearlessly. The transformative power of the arts lies not in the material possessions or grandeur of buildings, but in the depths of human imagination and expression.



Consultation Can Take Many Shapes: As Many as the Shapes of Our Schools

by Ana Colomer, Creative Associate in Limerick

Ana Colomer reminds of something very important – there are many types of schools – so there will be many types of consultation. And as we've seen from other articles, sometimes a Creative Associate and School Coordinator will have to invent the method that will work best for them. Ana lays out some of her learning from working with Mungret Community College in Limerick in a series of clear and useful bullet points. These are all valuable, perhaps the last one 'embed youth voice to continue' being the most valuable of all!

Sometimes the word consultation can sound abstract and for a Creative Associate, it can take many shapes, as many as the shapes our schools have: big or small, rural or city, primary, secondary, special school. Therefore, I believe the main quality a Creative Associate must possess is adaptability. We all have different skills, and we rely on our skills to bring joy and get to know the school we are about to embark with on a journey of two years.

Work within the resources that are available, respectfully and with understanding:

When a new associate asks me what a school year of consultation looks like, I try to explain that, to me, it consists of getting to know the teachers and the young people so they can enjoy my presence, trust me, and allow me to listen to them. What aspirations do the teachers have for themselves and for the young people they work with? What would the pupils like to try but never had a chance, or what project cannot take off for them due to lack of funding? These are some of the questions to consider. As visitors, we have that detached view that is sometimes very valuable, neutral, free from internal politics and restrictions, but we also must be aware of the socio economic background of the school, its size, its needs and potential, and of course the feasibility of their ideas/projects. We do not have a magic wand to solve infrastructure or capacity issues. We must work within the resources that are available, respectfully and with understanding of other people's energy, enthusiasm, and availability.

Align the success factors:

Looking back at my experience working with Mungret Community College and the Creative Schools Programme, I can reflect on a success story thanks to the alignment of many factors, some of them already in place, for example, a manageable size, an ideal location within a historic building surrounded by green spaces, and a great staff-management relationship. Still, this great starting point doesn't take from the extraordinary achievement that is the Festival of Creativity, now a yearly event, conceived and developed as part of Creative Schools and brought to life thanks to the effort, blue sky thinking, and persistence of the wide school community and the School Coordinator Sineád Fraser. From the very beginning, Sineád showed great organisational skills. She was responsive to emails and phone calls, something we take for granted but doesn't always happen. She was able to track the progress, delegating and assigning tasks within the Creative Schools Committee, not only leaning on pupils who are natural leaders, but also listening to the quiet ones, celebrating all kind of abilities and skills.

It can be challenging for an associate to work in a post primary setting, there is a lot going on, with constant movement through different subjects and classrooms at a fast pace. Still, this wonderful coordinator managed to organize meetings with teachers and Creative Schools Committee, workshops with the different years and enabled a consultation process that included the whole school, teachers, parents, and management, using a mix of hands on and digital approaches (surveys, world cafes, moving debates and more), relying on the students to replicate a process through the different year groups after I showed them how to.

After deciding to run a festival and through brainstorming, the following activities were selected to be included in Mungret CC Festival of Creativity: Art exhibition, Origami workshops, Cultural Picnic, DJs, Puppetry, Crafts, Baked Goods stalls, Drama and Spoken Word Showcase, Music, Singing, Beatboxing, Dancing, all part of an evening show where parents and visitors would have been invited. There was such a wonderful festive atmosphere, a multiracial, multicultural celebration of diversity and friendship.



Create a level playing field:

Creativity already had a prominent place in Mungret Community College before they engaged with Creative Schools. They had engaged for years with the University of Limerick and the Creative Writing master's department, Fresh Film Festival, Junk Couture, Youth Theatre drama practitioner John Hogan, and several parallel music projects under the expertise of well know musician and tutor Michelle Mulcahy. One of the main assets of the school is their wonderful teachers who are passionate about their subjects, approachable and true role models, sharing their practice with their pupils. Among other works displayed in the visual art exhibition, curated, hung, and invigilated by the pupils during the Festival of Creativity, were the works of the art teacher, Ciara Wall, bringing the teacher-pupil relationship to a level playing field, a sign of humbleness and honesty that says out loud: It's okay to put yourself out there!

Give all students the space and resources to develop their full potential:

Sinead made sure the neurodivergent students had also the opportunity to engage and be a central part of the festival, through performances for those that excelled at music or other artistic disciplines; building, painting, and setting up stalls and structures, or creating a giant puppet, a project that they owned and were really proud of. She has a great sensibility to spot the pupil's abilities and to give them the space and resources to develop their full potential, and according to her, the festival had a life changing effect in some of the students who discovered a career path.



A Space and an Audience are Fundamental:

Providing a space and an audience are fundamental elements to bring the voice of the young person to the forefront. The audience in the Festival of Creativity in Mungret CC was made up of the students during the day and parents, friends, and the wider community in the evenings. Stages, lighting and PA systems were set up, but these as well as backstage production were managed by the students to deliver a high quality, professional show.

Documenting Is Crucial:

Documenting is crucial, especially when there is no physical product left behind but an ephemeral event. I tried to document as best as possible the process, to capture the different stakeholder's voices and the magic that happened during the festival. To this effect, a short movie was produced. The movie can be seen in Mungret CC website. Prior to publishing any of these videos/photos, it is important that GDPR and image consent are sought, aligning with child protection best practice. During the festival there were some students working as photographers and social media managers to keep their own visual records and their twitter feed updated.

Embed Youth Voice to Continue:

Ideally, after the two years the Creative Associate has been working with the school, and the funding used, some creative approaches or significant changes would remain. This embedding of the creativity in the education can take many shapes. Some schools might choose to do CPD and train the teachers, others might choose to invest in a technology programme that will become part of the curriculum.

In Mungret CC the Festival of Creativity will get the community working together to bring a unique experience every year, no doubt a rewarding opportunity to look forward to by the students, staff, teachers, and the wider community alike.





Biographies

Declan Gorman

Declan Gorman is a playwright, performer, educator and public artist. Originally from Monaghan he now lives in North County Dublin. His work foregrounds sense of place, community and social inclusion.

Phillida Eves

Phillida Eves creates inclusive, interactive, immersive sensory theatrical performances, using movement, sensory elements, live music and a loose narrative, collaboratively with and for children with additional needs.

Damien O' Reilly

Damien O' Reilly is a primary teacher whose creative practice is rooted in Traditional Irish Music. He is a commissioned composer, educator and sought after tutor within the traditional music circuit worldwide.

Catherine Sheridan

Catherine Sheridan works professionally in drama, theatre, and arts education, creating and implementing a range of programmes including CPD and private facilitation work. She is a theatre director, playwright and former lecturer in drama

Eliya Lavine

Eliya Lavine is a nature-based community educator & facilitator whose practice seeks to re-root young people and their networks with nature connection. Her work engages play and interactive meaning-making through which participants respond the natural environment.

Helen Flanagan

Helen Flanagan is an artist with a socially engaged practice who works with children and young people to make film, documentary and audio work. She is motivated by the perspective that all people, including children and young people, should be able to live comfortably and be supported to participate fully in society, access the arts and live in a world where nature can prosper.

Aideen McHugh

Aideen McHugh is a multimedia & interaction-design focused creative practitioner, who seeks to empower young people through creative exploration. Her work blends action research and youth voice through a variety of art forms.

Brian Cregan

Brian Cregan is an artist, photographer and educator who facilitates workshops where participants gain knowledge and skills in fun and exciting ways. He uses digital and analogue technologies to allow participants to explore nature and identity.

Juliette Saumande

Juliette Saumande is a children's writer and professional bookworm who loves using words, stories and books to help kids (re)discover and grow their creativity.

Muireann Nic Cába

Muireann Nic Cába is a creative, enthusiastic artist with extensive workshop facilitation experience & a passion for sound art, moving image, & visual arts. Her artistic process is rooted in both her interests of innovative technology & the crossover with more traditional mediums.

Órla Bates

Órla Bates is a visual artist and also an art educator and facilitator who enjoys creating and facilitating creative projects and workshops for young people, exploring connections between art, creativity and nature.

Zoë Uí Fhaoláin

Zoë Uí Fhaoláin Green is a visual artist with a collaborative and socially engaged practice; using natural materials, found objects, performance, film and sound recording to connect with place. She co-designs and facilitates creative environmental projects to encourage nature connection, empathy, and playful curiosity in both children and adults.

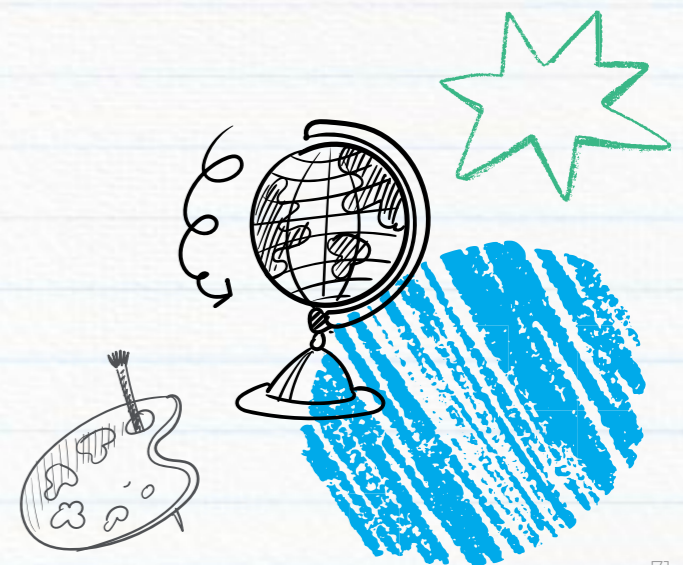
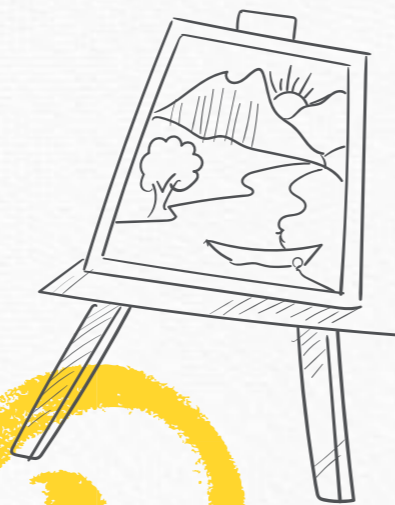
Mieke Vanmechelen

Mieke Vanmechelen is a filmmaker and visual artist, whose work explores themes of identity, territory, and belonging. Through process-based activities, young people are given the opportunity to learn, build, and discover, fostering their inquisitiveness and nurturing their unique qualities.

Ana Colomer

Ana Colomer is a visual artist and educator based in Ennis Co. Clare. Her creative practice includes puppetry, animation, film, and multimedia installations. Her passion has always been painting, creating work that is symbolic and thought provoking.

Big ideas start with little doodles...



Scoileanna
Ildánacha



Creative
Schools

the arts
council
an chomhairle
ealaíon