Evaluation of Creative Schools Scoileanna Ildánacha Executive Summary

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EVALUATION OF
CREATIVE SCHOOLS
SCOILEANNA ILDÁNACHA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Executive Summary

Creative Schools is a flagship initiative of the Creative Youth strand within the Creative Ireland Programme that seeks to enable the creative potential of every child. Creative Schools is led by the Arts Council in partnership with the Department of Education and the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media. The initiative is also informed by the Arts Council's ten-year strategy (2016–25): *Making Great Art Work: Leading the Development of the Arts in Ireland*. Creative Schools supports schools and centres in putting the arts and creativity at the heart of children's and young people's lives.

Creative Schools was introduced in a selection of Irish primary and post-primary schools in 2018 with a view to supporting creativity in education. This report presents an evaluation of the first four years (2018-2022) of the initiative and provides information on a range of experiences, processes and outcomes that have been observed over time.

Creativity in Education

The importance of creativity features increasingly in education policies that encompass a wide range of facets of learning such as problem-solving, critical thinking and innovation. While creativity is often associated with the arts, creativity and creative thinking is also emphasised in subjects such as science, mathematics, social and environmental studies, language studies and other areas of learning. Although the capacity for developing creativity is seen to exist in various curricula, the arts is often the domain where it is believed that creativity can be most easily expressed and developed. The focus on creativity in education is seen as timely, as recent developments in curriculum policy at primary and post-primary levels in Ireland include an express focus on creativity. Additionally, related policies in relation to digital learning and wellbeing in Irish schools also point to more holistic and integrated approaches for thinking about creativity in multiple ways.

Advances in research on creativity in school settings focus on broader conceptualisations of creativity as an educational, sociocultural and developmental construct that goes beyond traditional, individualistic ideas of 'genius'. Consequently, schools are encouraged to focus on creating contexts for creativity for the many, not just for the select few, and to do so through the various learning materials, spaces, processes and structures that impact the lives of children and young people in their everyday learning environments. To these ends, consulting children and young people on their views is integral to the generation of authentic, creative experiences and to fostering ownership of both processes and outcomes.

Evaluation Methodology

The approach to the evaluation was designed as a formative one and conducted primarily for the purposes of programme improvement. The original plan of the research team was to gather real-time data early in the process and provide feedback to the Creative Schools team in the Arts Council. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and school closures, the formative phase had

to be adjusted. The evaluation therefore focused on desk-based work initially that could inform selection processes for inclusion from a representative and equitable perspective, as well as understandings of the actual initiatives that schools intended to undertake. Feedback on the analysis was provided to the Creative Schools team, together with proposals on ways to streamline the application process and recruit schools that were less likely to apply, and the necessary adjustments were put in place.

Evaluation of Training

A key component of the evaluation was the training provided to Creative Associates (CAs) and Creative School Coordinators (CSCs), both in person and online. The overall goal of the training was to support CAs and CSCs in enhancing creativity in participating schools and in developing the key skills, knowledge and dispositions to support the programme effectively. The training included opportunities for social interaction among participants as emergent Creative Schools. It also focused on the meaning and significance of creativity, its place in education, and models of creative practices in schools. Guidance was provided on how CAs could support CSCs in consulting with children and young people in seeking their views, developing their ideas, writing the Creative Schools plan, and imagining possibilities for a range of activities. Follow-up training sessions focused on sharing experiences of creative activity and encouraging the sustainability of new practices. Networking was an important feature for CAs in building a sense of community through shared learning experiences and understanding of the administrative requirements. For CSCs, mobilising support, involving other colleagues, understanding the key stages of the process, as well as the guidelines on how the Arts Council Creative Schools grant money might be expended, were all important elements of the training.

Desk-based Research

A review of schools' creative practices was conducted through desk-based analysis of an anonymised sample of school websites and social media accounts from participating Creative Schools. This dimension of the study revealed that visual art, music and drama or theatre comprised the arts forms most commonly drawn upon to exemplify creativity in both primary and post-primary schools, and therefore creativity was predominantly portrayed as "creative expression" in the schools within that sample.

Views and Experiences of Creative Associates

Creative Associates (CAs) completed surveys about their experiences with Creative Schools. CAs indicated that they joined the initiative with a view to advocating for the arts in schools and putting children at the centre of the creative process. A majority of CAs were female and visual arts was the most common area of arts practice, followed by drama or theatre, and craft. CAs were positive about the programme, but less positive about initial understandings among school coordinators and management about the initiative. There were some understandable differences in satisfaction levels among different cohorts of CAs, potentially due to COVID-19 disruptions, but CAs were generally satisfied with their training and communication from the Creative Schools team. Issues that were raised were subsequently resolved for the next intake of CAs as part of

the formative evaluation process. To this end, regional coordinators appointed in 2021 were well-received. Most CAs felt they were able to meet schools' needs. They also experienced personal benefits, such as building connections for wider work opportunities through the sharing of information. Ultimately, almost all CAs indicated that they would recommend becoming a CA, with females being more positive than males.

In terms of the impact of Creative Schools, according to data gathered at the beginning of their involvement, only a minority of CAs believed that their assigned schools valued creativity and diversity, but by the end, a significant proportion reported that schools listened to the student voice and valued these aspects. CAs had mixed views on the integration of creativity into teaching and learning practices at the beginning, but by the end, the majority agreed that teachers modelled creativity, that creativity was integrated across topics, and that schools used creativity to support learning. The initiative was considered suitable for all types of school settings, but small primary schools were found to be the most ideal due to the flexibility of the model. Nevertheless, CAs identified several effective aspects of the initiative across various school types, including its capacity to generate bespoke processes and experiences, the valuing of the voice of the child and young person, the empowerment of teachers, and the fostering of new opportunities for self-expression. CAs also offered suggestions on how to improve the CSC role, including having at least two coordinators sharing the school-based role, providing financial compensation or increased substitution cover, and creating a support group for coordinators. Other suggestions included allocating funding based on school size, encouraging follow-up ideas once the two-year term of the project had concluded, designing more intensive and prolonged initiatives, better dovetailing with school calendars, and more emphasis on the process rather than the product. CAs felt that more time and resources were needed for the programme to be successful, and that a slower and more developmental process might be more effective.

Views and Experiences of Creative Schools Coordinators (CSCs)

Analysis of data from CSCs indicated that the majority of CSCs were from primary schools, reflecting the higher proportion of primary school participation, and that school leaders such as the Principal or Deputy Principal frequently acted as the coordinator at primary level. In contrast, none of the post-primary coordinators also served as a principal, and relatively few were Deputy or Assistant Principals. Rather, at post-primary level, the coordinator was usually an Art teacher. Schools were mostly mixed-sex and located in a mixture of rural and urban or suburban areas. CSCs expressed considerable satisfaction with the application process, induction and training as well as the funding provided. CSCs were also satisfied with the support provided by the school's assigned CA, but disagreed with the model whereby CA time was evenly distributed between schools, irrespective of size. At primary level, visual arts was the most popular art form chosen as the main creative activity, followed by drama/theatre, music, and then dance. At post-primary level, the dominant art form was music, followed by visual arts, creative writing and then drama/theatre. Other arts and non-arts areas such as horticulture, science and coding also featured as expressions of creativity. Understandably, COVID-19 constrained and delayed what

was possible for most schools, typically leading to Creative Schools activity being conducted mainly outdoors during that time. In turn, this led to new ways of seeing, interpreting and maximising the school environment. Most primary schools involved all class levels in the decision-making and planning processes, while post-primary schools largely restricted activities to Junior Cycle and Transition Year students.

Surveys undertaken by the CSCs sought their views on the efficacy, strengths, and weaknesses of the Creative Schools initiative based on two questionnaires administered at the end of the 2020/21 (T1) and 2021/22 (T2) school years. Ratings on the value CSCs placed on diversity increased during the two time periods, while ratings for student wellbeing remained broadly similar. The latter is noteworthy, given the widely documented negative impact of COVID-19 on student wellbeing in general. There was little change in the ratings of academic achievement and attitudes to school. Ratings on engagement in class and lessons improved slightly, whereas ratings on attendance decreased slightly, possibly due to the impact of COVID-19. The percentage of CSCs who felt that most or all of their teaching colleagues valued diversity, creativity, and the role of the arts in education, increased. CSCs were reasonably positive about how many of their colleagues listened to the student voice, and this increased between T1 and T2. The percentage of CSCs who felt that their colleagues incorporated creativity into their work and classrooms also increased in the same time period. Three-quarters of CSCs said that they would definitely recommend Creative Schools to other schools, with almost all others indicating that they would probably do so. Responses were very positive, irrespective of school type, geographic location, and language of instruction. Those in DEIS schools and small schools were most positive where four-fifths reported that they would definitely recommend participating in the initiative.

At both timepoints when CSCs were surveyed, large percentages of respondents reported that most of their students valued creativity and saw the importance of arts in education. For primary CSCs, 70% believed that most of their enrolment valued creativity—a figure that rose to 94% at T2, as did 52% of post-primary CSCs, with the figure rising to 71% at T2.

In terms of participation in the arts *inside* school, at T1, just over one quarter (28%) of all CSCs felt that "all or almost all" students in the schools where they worked engaged with the arts *inside* school. At T2, this figure had more than doubled (58%). Although CSCs' perceptions of the engagement of their students in the arts *outside* of school also increased, the difference was slight.

In terms of the most effective part of Creative Schools, the appointment of a Creative Associate to a school was the most highly rated dimension by just over one-third of the respondents, followed by the importance placed on the 'voice of the child' as well the emphasis on creativity itself. Access to funding, and exposure to different art forms and artists, were also highlighted as important elements. Areas identified for change included the need for more funding, greater engagement with parents and the community, and more support and training for teachers. Respondents also raised concerns about how to address organisational issues during COVID-19

and its impact on the implementation of Creative Schools, but this concern lessened once schools emerged from lockdowns. Several areas were identified that require change, i.e., the timing and eligibility of training for teachers and the inclusion of more than one staff member. Workload was also identified as a concern for some respondents, noting that the amount of work required was much more than expected.

Views and Experiences of Primary School Pupils

In the 2020-21 school year, primary school pupils participating in Creative Schools completed a detailed survey about their experiences of the arts and creativity in school, their involvement in various extracurricular activities, their attitudes towards school, and their academic aspirations. The survey was repeated in the 2022-23 school year to ascertain changes over time.

The results revealed that the most popular extracurricular activity among pupils were sports, followed by reading and participation in various clubs and activities such as music, art, dance, drama and youth clubs. However, engagement in other cultural activities such as concerts, of any kind, and exhibitions was limited.

While there was relatively little change in pupils' views between the two surveys, from a general wellbeing perspective, the majority of pupils indicated that they felt safe in school, felt that they belonged in school and liked their classmates. However, pupils in DEIS schools were marginally less likely to agree that school was a place where they felt safe and slightly less likely to feel good at many things in school. Outside of school, it should be noted that at both timepoints for the survey, large majorities of pupils had not engaged in any cultural activities, such as exhibitions, concerts and other artistic performances. Moreover, a sizeable minority (26%) indicated that they did not engage with any sport or cultural related activities outside of school. In terms of school subjects, art and PE were listed as the favourites by both boys and girls, with girls more likely to favour art above PE, and boys the other way around.

Pupils from both DEIS and non-DEIS schools had overwhelmingly positive views of their teachers, considering them approachable and fair. In both surveys, over 90% of pupils believed that their teachers listened to them and treated them fairly, while 85% felt comfortable talking to their teachers about problems. In order to ascertain interest in the arts and in creativity more broadly, pupils were asked to indicate the types of activities they would like their ideal job or work to involve. From a list of seven different types, work involving creativity was the most popular choice in the two surveys. Moreover, half of the pupils expressed a definite desire to pursue careers that involved creativity.

Views and Experiences of Post-Primary Students

At post-primary level, surveys were also issued on two occasions. Post-primary students generally had positive attitudes towards school and their classmates. Students expressed high educational aspirations and expectations, and positive classroom interactions were reported by many students. A standardised measure of self-esteem was also undertaken as part of the survey. Compared to a national sample of adolescents who were surveyed pre-COVID-19 (Dooley et al., 2019), levels of self-esteem were higher over two time periods for the students in post-primary

Creative Schools than for their counterparts in the previous study. Regarding differences by gender, the scores of Creative Schools' students at both time periods somewhat reflect the differences found in the earlier survey although the gender gap was slightly smaller in Creative Schools. Additionally, from a wellbeing perspective, most students reported that they had 'never' or 'seldom' experienced being bullied, with little difference in incidence between the two survey time points.

In terms of creativity, at post-primary level, music was the art form with which students engaged most frequently, followed by visual arts, and drama/theatre. In terms of the activity students would like their ideal job or work to involve, work involving creativity was the most popular type indicated.

Case studies

Finally, four case studies from contrasting schools, situate the experience of Creative Schools within unique contexts. Each one focuses on a dimension of creativity in practice in different school settings, i.e., in a rural primary school, a rural post-primary school, an urban primary school and a school for students with special educational needs.

Among a range of perspectives, illuminations of practice reveal the many ways in which "little c" creativity (Kaufman & Beghetto, 2009) can be developed as well as how various dimensions of creative expression, creative thinking and creative problem solving are expressed—all of which are features of creativity in education (OECD, 2019). Taken together, the examples engender a belief that Creative Schools has the capacity and flexibility to strengthen school engagement and build self-confidence in learners across a range of school types and settings, including special education contexts.

Summary

Overall, the Creative Schools initiative has been successful in promoting and infusing creativity in participating schools and in drawing attention to the importance of creativity in educational contexts. In addition, Creative Schools has enabled children and young people to engage in dialogue about creativity, to be listened to, to be taken seriously and to have their ideas acted upon, resulting in the origination of a plethora of artistic and creative processes and products within participating schools. Surveys have found that young people of all ages showed a high level of interest in creative work through expressing a definite desire to pursue careers that involve creativity. Moreover, the garnering of children and young people's views on creativity in its myriad forms, and the translation of such views into an enacted capacity to influence creative processes and practices in the participating schools, is one of the outstanding successes of the initiative. Several recommendations are offered for improving the Creative Schools initiative, but overall, its continuation is strongly endorsed.

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