



# Children & Climate Action

Carns National School,  
Moneygold, Co. Sligo  
2021





## Foreword

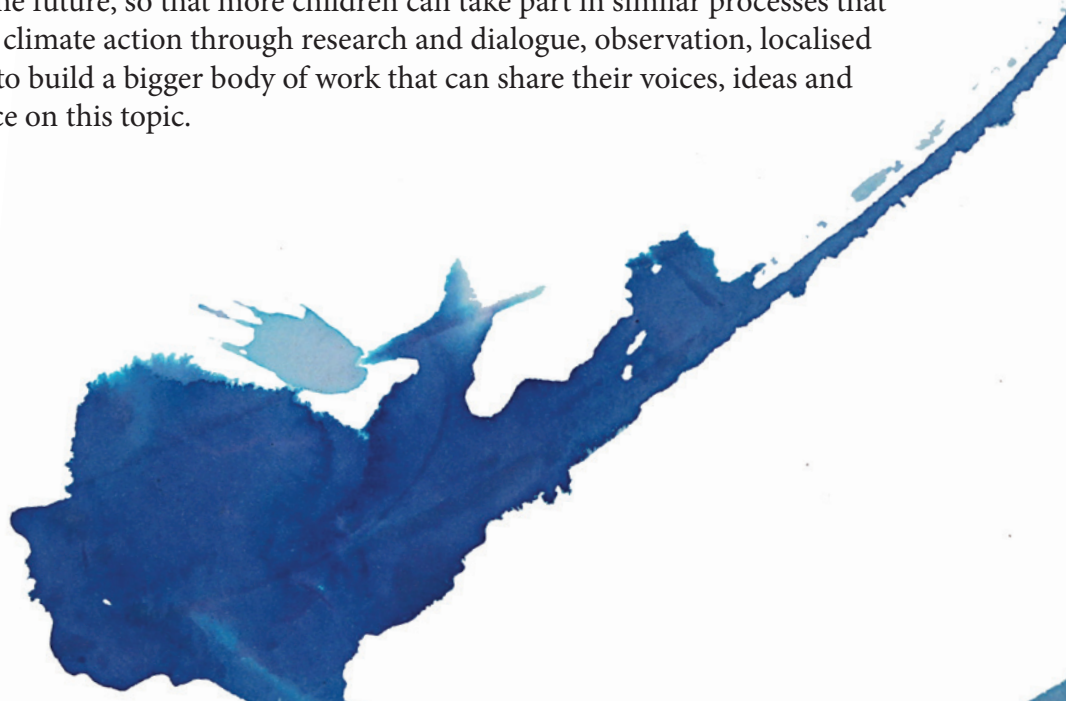
In 2021, Kids' Own was delighted to receive funds from Creative Ireland, Sligo, to embark on a new local initiative, exploring themes of climate action with 2nd–6th Class children at Carns NS, Moneygold, Co. Sligo, with support from Sligo Environmental Network.

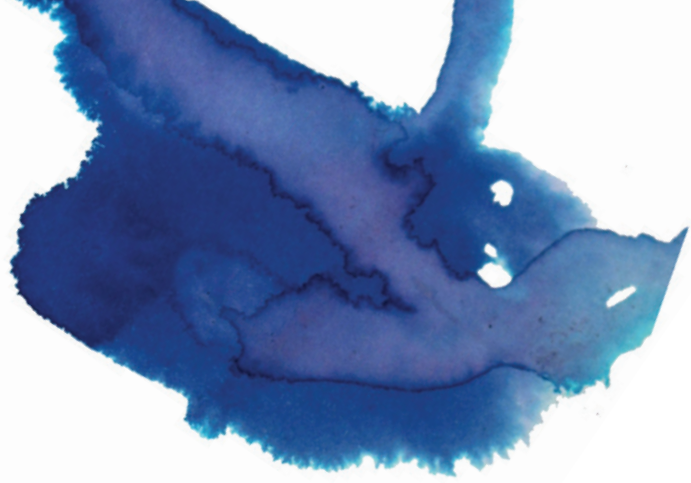
Creative Director Jo Holmwood, and visual artist Vanya Lambrecht Ward worked with the children through dialogue and creative activity. Their particular focus was on water as a central element representing the interconnectedness of global and climate change issues. Over two sessions, the group engaged in lots of discussion about water and identified questions that they would like to investigate through individual research. They also took a walk to nearby Milk Harbour, and created beautiful artworks using inks with ice; and inks with salt and water.

This small-scale initiative was an exploration into ways of supporting children to engage with climate change and have their voices heard on this important issue. Kids' Own will develop a poster or manifesto to present some of the ideas and thinking that the children developed through this process.

Through the project, Dr. Connie Nell from Sligo Environmental Network developed some initial research and observations on children's role as climate activists, the impact of supporting children's voices to be heard on this issue, and the value of creative approaches in supporting children's engagement with climate change and climate action. The report below outlines Dr Nell's observations from her discussions with the children through this project.

We hope to build on this in the future, so that more children can take part in similar processes that support them to engage with climate action through research and dialogue, observation, localised actions and creative activity, to build a bigger body of work that can share their voices, ideas and artwork with a wider audience on this topic.





## **Water and how “funner ways” of dealing with the climate crisis are more effective**

Connie Nell

### **Introduction**

In June I joined Jo and Vanya during their second visit of Carns National School in Moneygold, Co. Sligo. This was the second workshop day around the topics of water and climate action, a beautiful warm and sunny summer day. The children, 8- to 12-year-old national school students, had engaged with the topics at one previous workshop, in class and at home.

During the second half of the day I took groups of three or four aside and asked them a few questions about their participation during the two workshop days. During this time they were also engaging in another art activity and in designing posters, rotating from station to station. Earlier that morning we had gone for a walk to the nearby Milk Harbour and engaged in activities there and along the way which stressed the importance of attention to detail and the interconnectedness of all components in our ecosystem in creative ways.

This writing is a snapshot of what the students told me in 7- to 8-minute speedy focus groups of three to four children each. The exploratory nature of the two workshop days, the small group size and the limited time to answer questions do not allow for generalisations and claims about the positive impacts of art workshops. The following themes, however, were revealed by all children within that cohort:



## Knowledge

The children have very good knowledge around climate change and the biodiversity crisis. In our conversations they told me that “Polar bears are gonna be extinct.... We learnt about that...”, that littering is a bad habit, that “you should put your rubbish in the right bin. Like if you put general waste like a wrapper that still has food in it, none of that gets recycled. And that can be really bad for the Earth because recycling is a part of our life. And it helps us.” Some comments were facts learned in their education. There was also, however, great evidence of them making connections between those facts and seeing the bigger picture. Some of them also made the link to water bodies: “Like if you throw like plastic or glass into the sea or nets like a turtle or some animal could get caught in it or could get very sick and die.”

Although they could see the serious consequences of environmental pollution, the students did not come across as anxious. In fact, when I asked some of them, they confirmed that they were not depressed but rather hopeful. They found the strong need to be educated around these issues and to educate others. They were considering their posters as one opportunity to spread knowledge. “You could show them what it’s doing to the planet. And that what would happen if we kept doing this. Our planet would be completely destroyed.” Some of the young people seemed to have reflected on the role of humans in climate change a lot and to acknowledge the destructive nature of our habits and lifestyles. “But even if the world is recovering, it’d actually be a better place without humans ‘cause the animals wouldn’t be doing anything really if they’re just trying to do what they survive, the circle of life where they eat and then they ...” “We need Mother Nature, but she doesn’t need us”.

## Young People and Awareness

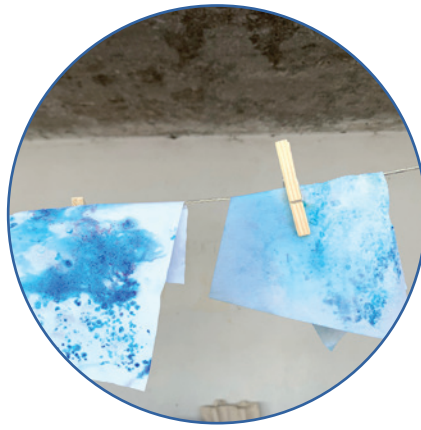
I specifically asked the students whether they thought it was important for children of their age (8 to 12) to know a lot of facts around climate change and why they thought so. All of them agreed that it was important. The reasons were varied. Some thought it might be convenient later if a career choice included science aspects: “to be a scientist we need to know these things.” Another pragmatic reason was that it might come up in a school test in a year or two. At the same time they acknowledged that everybody should know more about climate change “So you don’t do mistakes and don’t do things that could harm it.” And although they are aware of the prospect of the planet being destroyed, knowledge in their eyes also prevents unjustified fear: “So, well, you can understand things, ya, so like you don’t get like scared. And so like you understand it, so you don’t get scared and stuff like that.”

The most common reason the children named was that awareness prevents people from doing further harm and helps them change their behaviour. “Because if we don’t do something, it’s gonna be too late and...” “People need to be aware of how important our world is.” They also called themselves the future, the next generation, the one that might be able to fix things. This entailed a tone of hope and empowerment, rather than despair, as the children recommended “fun”. Everyone should be aware of climate change but “it should be a fun thing to do and a fun thing to learn about.” “It shouldn’t be something you’re afraid of to talk about.” Some stressed that everybody has an important role to play and nobody can escape their individual responsibility. “We can’t just like... let other people do it. [...] The world. Everybody. We have to unite and think of something together.”

While a fun and engaging way of communicating climate action is important to the students, the sense of urgency is omni-present: “We’ve already damaged the earth so much and we have to prepare.” “It’s important to save our planet because we only have one.” Raising awareness, inspiring others, sending a message were all mentioned as ways of communicating the crisis and involving everybody. This will lead to more people protecting nature. The students want to learn things early “so that you can save the planet more faster and it’ll be easier. And then you can teach others how to take care of the planet.” This perceived multiplier effect shows that these young people see themselves as having a great sense of agency. Another reason they want to acquire knowledge is that they distance themselves from their parents: “our parents and stuff are older, they wouldn’t have known about all of it, they wouldn’t, they might not have cared about it as much as we will when we are older.” Knowledge leads to action and behaviour change. American researcher Carlie D. Trott (2021) confirms in her work throughout the last few years that “young people’s experiences with action can begin to challenge internalized messages – ubiquitous in the dominant culture – of their inability as children to be competent knowledge-holders and capable change-makers in society” (Carlie D. Trott 2021: 304). The young people in this group certainly conveyed to me that they have knowledge and that this knowledge gives them power and agency.

While a fun way of learning about climate change was recommended by the children, most of them also agreed that an effective way of getting people to change their behaviour was to show them the cruelty of the environmental crisis. “If you show them the cruelty that’s happening to turtles, it’ll make them want to protect them and nature.” Most of the children had decided to depict things that are going wrong on their posters to call for change rather than beauty that needs to be protected.





## Art

When the children were asked what they had enjoyed most about the workshops, one of them remembered formulating their own questions as the highlight and demonstrated what he had learned from the research that followed those questions. All the other children enjoyed either one of the two art activities best. In the first art workshop they had experimented with ink and ice cubes and connected the waterways that had developed on paper. The second art activity had used ink and salt on paper.

When asked why they enjoyed the art activities, they gave different answers. Few gave pragmatic reasons and said that it was more fun than sitting in the classroom and doing Maths. More children said it was fun because “it was something that I’d never done before” detailing that they had never used ink and they had not used salt in art.

Many of the children linked the fact that they enjoyed these activities to the learnings that they took from them. The ice cube activity was really popular because “it was cool to watch the water and the ice going just doing itself. The water and the ice made something and never mind you or the Earth, we need to take more, we need to take care of it a bit more than we do.” “It’s just that water does its own thing sometimes, like flooding or earthquakes...”

Flower Staples et al. (2021) state that “artistic immersion in nature reinforces humans’ inherent biophilia and enhances creativity [...] Art has a universal appeal that makes experiences more personal, exciting, and memorable” (Flower Staples et. al. 2019: 209) The children’s connection to nature was tangible and their love especially of animals. They live close to the beautiful Milk Harbour and often go out to explore their surroundings which fosters this connection through experience in nature. Being asked to pay attention to detail in the harbour and blind-drawing the landscape was mentioned by them again when we were back at the school and one boy in particular chose to draw the harbour in all detail as his poster. His appreciation of life in and around the water was evident as he explained to me what he had drawn.

When we spoke about how art can help convey the climate crisis to other people, the children acknowledged that “it might make it easier for people to understand it.” One girl reminded us that “there’s a phrase that a picture is a million words” and another one added that “seeing is believing”. “You can really see it. And without seeing it, you don’t make the connection, I think.” So visualising things helps people make connections and learn. But also it can help spreading hope according to one of the girls: “I think you should also like paint a picture in people’s heads because it is annoying



when you go around and someone says on the news ‘we’re killing the planet’ like it’s not gonna make me hope for anything. If you make me feel bad, I want to ignore it so...” Visualising things can motivate and creates hope.

The young people also acknowledged that there may be different messages that can get conveyed through art. “Different people take, different people might take it in in different ways. They might see it as maybe the sea and the salt, the lumps of salt as trash or something. Or polar caps that are melting and stuff.” In the children’s eyes no one interpretation is the only true one. And thus both creating art and interpreting it involve creativity and active involvement. The children had great awareness of their own involvement in the art and of how it may be perceived, what it can achieve in an audience in terms of raising awareness. While there were some contradictions in wanting to convey the cruelty of the environmental crisis and wanting to create hope, all children expressed that art could enable a meaningful engagement with nature and its struggles.

## Connectedness

The children made hints to their overall understanding of the interconnectedness of living beings throughout the conversations. When asked explicitly what they had learned from the two workshops, this understanding was evident, too. “Everything is connected... Like the birds are connected to the insects. The birds. And the birds, yeah.” “Everything is connected. It all has its own place in the world and it’s connection.” When I asked them for examples from their everyday lives, one girl told me that she would go home after school and there everything would be connected, too: “You see a connection because you, erm, open the door. And the door equals to home. And then the home equals to people. So kind of like connection there. [...] And if you have a wooden door like that was probably made from a tree. ... Like this bench was probably made from a tree.” Like this girl, many of the children showed the ability to explain logical chains of connection in the natural world as well as broader connectivity and more metaphorical interrelations.

Other learnings taken from the art activities specifically were around water. “Well, water goes, water, wherever water is and it can be hold as a barrier so. [...] If you get like a little puddle, here, when we put the ink on it, it, the water didn’t go on to the dry, the ink didn’t go on to the dry, it stayed in the water and the water stayed in its little puddle.” The art had reminded them of previous knowledge that they had learned and allowed them to make links. “Water is a living thing, there is loads of, like even corral is a living thing, the sea sponge is a living thing even though it doesn’t even have a face, an eye or a mouth, well it may have a mouth, but...” One boy summed up what he had learned through the activities and linking them up to his more scientific knowledge: “Don’t take water, or anything that you need to survive, for granted.”

Observing the water during the art activities was part of creating this understanding, making the process of the creation a crucial part of the learning experience. “It was cool to watch the water and the ice going just doing itself.” The visual aspect of what could be seen while creating the art was described as aesthetic, as “cool” and as enjoyable. “When we got to do the river bits where you drew the ice cube along. When we connected them together, it looked really cool ‘cause they were all kind of going everywhere like a river.” “Ah they look like a galaxy.” “Like salt water. Like it’s [...] these crystals in the water.”





The novelty of the activities and the room for creativity they offered were appreciated and enjoyed by the children. They also allowed them to connect to nature around them in Milk Harbour. Trott calls “for alternative, action-based engagement models, especially participatory and arts-based methods, that empower children’s climate change awareness, agency, and action as they are invited to envision and enact a sustainable future. (Carlie D. Trott 2021: 300). The focus on detail and appreciation of water and related organisms was reflected in the children’s answers and conversations afterwards. “Art-based strategies can help people —particularly children— connect with the environment and ecological systems in new ways, forging strong bonds to the natural world and inspiring a desire to protect it” (Flower Staples et. al. 2019: 209). During the two days at Carns NS the children were given opportunities to express themselves and to connect to nature in new, creative ways. The desire to protect the planet was evident in the conversations we had. This cannot be attributed to the two-day workshop only. But the activities during the workshop engaged the young people in new ways. There is huge potential for art-based programmes inside and outside the school system to foster these engagements, reconnection and appreciation further.







## References

Carlie D. Trott (2021) 'What difference does it make? Exploring the transformative potential of everyday climate crisis activism by children and youth', *Children's Geographies*, 19:3, 300-308.

Ami Flowers Staples, Lincoln R. Larson, Ti'Era Worsley, Gary T. Green and John P. Carroll (2019) 'Effects of an art-based environmental education camp program on the environmental attitudes and awareness of diverse youth', *The Journal of Environmental Education*, 50:3, 208-222.



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