

I can run free

Exploring the process and impact of the 'We Can Play' project, a collaborative arts project with young children and their families in County Waterford.

By Leah Russell



Introduction

In 2022 Kids' Own Publishing Partnership was granted funding from RTÉ Toy Show Appeal and the Community Foundation for Ireland to lead an arts-based project specifically designed to meet the needs of parents from the Traveller community and their very young children. The aim of this project was to create a unique art experience grounded in a process-led engagement with a professional artist.

Kids' Own Publishing Partnership is Ireland's only dedicated publisher of books by children. Through a range of local, national, and international projects, Kids' Own Publishing Partnership connects children with professional artists and publishes the work that they create. The organisation works in defence of children's right to culture and believes passionately that children should have a space to express themselves through the arts. The aim is to give visibility and status to children's artwork and writing within mainstream culture. An ethos of social justice underpins Kids' Own Publishing's work, and the majority of projects involve children and families from diverse cultures, such as Traveller culture, migrant, intercultural and multilingual populations, and children who are experiencing homelessness, social exclusion, or part of a minority group.

Kids' Own Publishing Partnership, in conjunction with partner agencies Coiste Cúram Leanaí Phort Láirge and Waterford Traveller Interagency Group, identified Dungarvan and Waterford City as possible areas of focus for the project.

Coiste Cúram Leanaí Phort Láirge (CCLPL) also known as the Waterford County Childcare Committee is funded by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration & Youth. The main purpose is to develop, support, and enhance a wide range of high-quality, integrated, accessible, and affordable Early Learning and Care services responsive to the rights and needs of children, their parents/guardians, and of communities in Ireland. Rose Murphy, Manager of CCLPL, emphasised the critical need for projects that support young children's sense of identity and belonging in Waterford, and particularly in Dungarvan. She underscored the importance of initiatives that help the youngest members of the community build connections with their heritage, fostering a strong sense of personal and cultural identity. Rose highlighted that such projects are essential for children to feel valued and rooted in their local environment.

Waterford Traveller Interagency Group consists of members who are drawn from relevant voluntary and statutory bodies and the local Traveller organisation and aims to improve Traveller access to services by providing more integrated service delivery.

As a result of continued cross-organisational consultation, Dungarvan Traveller Community Health Project (DTCHP) was identified as the location for the project. DTCHP Co-Ordinator Dolores Corcoran explained that Dungarvan is generally lacking in funding and support, with a significant community of young Travellers who are particularly excluded from investment and planning efforts. The DTCHP Coordinator also highlighted the presence of two highly motivated and well-respected project workers who would identify interested members of their community and drive the project forward. (Thank you, Mary, and Teresa, for your unwavering commitment and support).

Kids' Own Associate Artists Francesca Hutchinson and Maree Hensey collaborated and facilitated the creative process from start to finish.

Francesca Hutchinson is an Offaly-based multidisciplinary artist, born in 1999. She is currently studying at Limerick School of Art and Design and takes inspiration from her family's heritage coming from the Traveller Community, her artwork also deals with issues such as depicting an invisible illness and the cycle of life.

Maree Hensey is a visual artist based in Clonmore Co. Carlow. Her practice encompasses drawing, sculpture, and installation. Maree has collaborated with Kids Own on previous projects such as the 'I Hope You Grow' book project with writer Mary Branley in partnership with Focus Ireland, working with children in temporary accommodation (2018). She also has experience working with young children through projects like the Lullaby Project Tour (2014) with Early Childhood Care & Education Centres in County Sligo and Being & Belonging (2013/14), a cross-border early years initiative.

The project focused on the outdoors and natural environment through creating ephemeral art during outings to Clonea Beach. It aimed to provide children and young people with a democratic space where they could comfortably explore their creativity and individual interests while having their voices heard.

Leah Russell, An Early Years Consultant was given the role of researcher on the project. She attended some of the creative sessions on Clonea Beach and also met with project workers, parents, children, and young people to discuss their experiences and create a narrative timeline of the project. Her role was to identify recommendations based on evidence and learning from the project with the hope of sharing learning that might influence similar projects in the future at a local or national level.

A book showcasing children's artwork and their experiences during the project would be designed and published by Kids' Own Publishing Partnership.



Literature Review

Diversity, Equality and Inclusion

The Diversity, Equality, and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines for Early Childhood Care and Education (DCYA, 2016) in Ireland, published in 2016, underscores the nation's commitment to fostering an inclusive environment where every child feels valued and respected, regardless of their background. This charter emphasises the importance of diversity, equality, and inclusion in children's development for nurturing their mental health and well-being. An inclusive environment helps children develop a keen sense of self-worth and belonging, foundational to their emotional and psychological health. By promoting understanding and acceptance of diverse cultures and perspectives, the Charter aims to equip children with the skills and resilience needed to thrive in a multicultural society. This holistic approach not only supports individual growth but also builds a more cohesive and empathetic community, benefiting children, their families, and wider society.

Early Childhood

Early childhood is a critical stage in human development that lays the foundation for a child's future well-being. This period, spanning from birth to around six years old, is characterised by rapid physical, cognitive, emotional, and social growth. In Ireland, we have two main documents that set out standards and structures for the education of young children. Aistear the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009) introduced in 2009, focuses on quality learning experiences in all settings for children aged from birth to six years. Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education, 2006) was developed to provide quality standards for early learning and care in Ireland. Both documents are informed by a set of principles which are based on national and international research, some of which overlap across both documents. These principles are centred around "how children think and learn, who and what is important to them, and how their own interests are the foundation for their inquiry and learning" (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2015). They emphasise the importance of children's rights and the role of the adult in supporting children's development. This literature review will delve into aspects of both of these early childhood frameworks highlighting the significance of art and creativity in shaping a child's development.

Children's Rights

The frameworks mentioned previously are based on the principles outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which recognises that every child has the right to reach their full potential.

Aistear emphasises the importance of play, relationships, and communication in a child's development. Síolta, on the other hand, recognises that children have the rights to be respected, listened to, and included in decision-making processes (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2015).

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989), ratified by Ireland in 1992, outlines the fundamental rights of every child. It asserts that children have the right to education, play, participation, and protection from harm. Both Aistear and Síolta are underpinned by the UNCRC principles of non-discrimination, best interests of the child, participation, survival, development, and protection. They aim to ensure that every child is given equal opportunities for growth and development. These principles have informed the development of the Dungarvan Early Years Project.

Creativity

Research suggests that young children’s holistic development is enhanced through their engagement in creativity and the arts (The Arts Council of Ireland, 2022) (Malaguzzi, 1996) (Hayes, 2013) (Wright, 2012) (Rogers, French, & Early Arts, 2013). Very young children interact with the world around them primarily through their senses; they are making meaning through their physical experiences, as such the process of making and creating art builds not only their physical bodies but their cognitive understandings of who they are and how they fit in their environment (O’Sullivan, et al., 2018). French highlights the need for art experiences that provide children with opportunities to engage with their environment in a meaningful and authentic way. The author explains how these types of experiences nurture children’s independence and critical thinking skills which are valuable not only in the arts but also in academic subjects such as math and science, as well as in real-life situations. (Rogers, French, & Early Arts, 2013).

Reggio Emilia founder Loris Malaguzzi through his poetry introduced the idea of the “100 languages of children” which refers to the notion that children possess a variety of languages through which they communicate their thoughts, emotions, and experiences (Malaguzzi, 1996). These languages include not only verbal communication but also visual arts, music, movement, and even silence. Each child has their own unique way of expressing themselves, and adults must recognise and value these different languages. Malaguzzi believed passionately that all children are competent and capable thinkers and learners as well as creative communicators and conversationalists. When adults acknowledge children’s diverse languages, we can better understand their individual strengths and interests (Malaguzzi, 1996).

Unlike verbal or written communication, art provides a medium through which children can convey their thoughts, feelings, and experiences without the limitations of the spoken word. Whether it be through painting, drawing, dancing, or role-playing, children can explore their creativity and communicate their inner ideas. This process of self-expression not only boosts their self-esteem and confidence but also helps them develop a sense of identity and self-awareness (Wright, 2012).

In addition to self-expression, engagement in various art forms aids in the development of both fine and gross motor skills. Activities like painting and sculpting help children refine their hand-eye coordination, manual dexterity, and muscle control. Experiences that require children to use large body movements like dancing, running, and jumping, on the other hand, promote the development of gross motor skills and physical coordination. By engaging in these activities, children not only enhance their physical abilities but also pave the way for better academic performance and future success in sports and creative fields (Nilson, Fetherston, McMurray, & Fetherston, 2013).

Play

Play is a powerful and important element in children’s physical health, development, and mental well-being (Play Scotland, 2020). As adults, we can often underestimate the power of play, especially as childhood seems to be shorter and children are becoming increasingly likely to spend time on electronic devices. Furthermore, spending time playing in the outdoor environment is now known to reduce children’s and young people’s anxiety while increasing their mental well-being. Being surrounded by nature has a calming effect on children and young people’s minds. It allows them to escape from the pressures of schoolwork or other responsibilities they may have at home.

Play can look different for the older child or young person; therefore, it is important to note that play should be “freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated” (National Playing Fields Association, 2000), or “what children and young people do when they follow their own ideas and interests in their own way and for their own reasons” (Play Scotland, 2020).

Research recognises play as a fundamental aspect of a child's development, fostering imagination, creativity, and problem-solving skills. Incorporating play-based learning opportunities into programme planning ensures that children are actively engaged in their education and promoting their rights to participation (Waters, 2022). Children's well-being is promoted when they are provided with a safe, nurturing, and healthy environment in which to play. Inclusive practices that embrace all children's identities and cultures, fostering a sense of belonging, promote the child's right to participate and be valued for their unique qualities (Graham, 2017).

Open-ended play fosters curiosity and a sense of wonder in children and young people. It encourages them to ask questions, explore possibilities, and seek answers independently (Waters, 2022). This type of play promotes a love for learning and helps children develop a lifelong passion for discovery. Open-ended play refers to play that has no predetermined outcome or rules, allowing children to explore their imagination and creativity freely. This type of play encourages problem-solving skills, critical thinking, and the ability to think creatively. When children engage in open-ended play, they are given the opportunity to create their own narratives, use materials in unconventional ways, and experiment with different ideas (Play Scotland, 2020). This freedom allows them to express themselves, explore, and develop unique perspectives on the world around them (Rogers, French, & Early Arts, 2013) (Play Scotland, 2020) (Walsh, Dadwell, & Bungay, 2023) (Wilson, 2018) (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2015).



Identity and Belonging

Aistear (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009) and Síolta (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education, 2006) encourage the involvement of parents and families in a child's education. This collaboration recognises the rights to be nurtured within their family environment and ensures that families are actively engaged in their child's learning journey. Involving parents as partners enables parents to exercise their rights and responsibilities as parents, while making informed choices regarding their child, thus safeguarding their child's rights (Graham, 2017).

As young children's brains develop, they are beginning to understand who they are and where they fit in the world. Identity and belonging are a fundamental need as a human being and shapes our understanding of ourselves and our place in the world (Bohlander, Lerner, & Thompson, 2018). Identity refers to the unique characteristics, values, and beliefs that define an individual while belonging refers to the sense of connection and acceptance within a particular group or community (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2016). A child's identity is shaped by numerous factors such as culture, family background, personal experiences, and societal expectations (Murray & Urban, 2012). It is a complex interplay between nature and nurture. Our identity gives us a sense of self-worth and helps us navigate through life's challenges. Belonging, on the other hand, is about finding our place in society. It provides us with a support system, shared values, and a sense of purpose while fostering a sense of security and acceptance which are crucial for our self-esteem. For children from ethnic minority groups, it is incredibly important that they have opportunities to see themselves, their peers, and their families as valued members of society. Children develop a sense of belonging to their peer group through activities such as collaborative play, group discussions, and shared (Murray & Urban, Diversity & Equality in Early Childhood, 2012). By promoting a sense of belonging among young children through collaborative activities and shared experiences, adults create an inclusive learning environment where social skills are nurtured and active engagement is encouraged (Graham, 2017).

Spiritualism

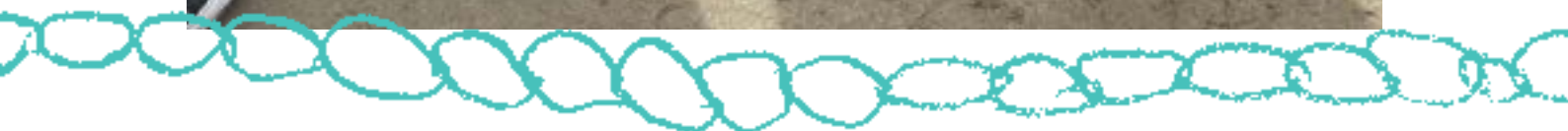
Spiritualism introduces children and young people to the idea that there is more to life than what meets the eye by exploring the wonders of the unseen and the beauty within the world. It is often likened to a journey where children and young people can learn about kindness, love, and the joy of connecting with others and the world around (Baskin, 2016). Spiritualism teaches children and young people to listen to their inner selves and follow their instincts. Significant aspects of spiritualism include the importance of being a kind, caring, and understanding person. By embracing these values, children and young people can embark on their own spiritual journey, guided by the gentle voice within them (Greenfield, 2018). Spiritualism however is not just about the person's inner journey, it is about creating a better world and positively impacting the world around them (Baskin, 2016) (Lin, 2014).

"[t]o be human is to be spiritual, and to be in touch with one's spirituality involves cultivating an openness of mind; a willingness to know; the courage to live with the mystery and the intention to embrace life fully. To be spiritual is to be inclusive it is about stillness, practice and being, yet it is also about action in the world, about learning and sharing." (Bloemhard, as cited in Stoyles, Stanford, Caputi, Keating, & Hyde, 2012)



Citizenship

Citizenship is a concept that introduces children to the idea of belonging to a community, whether it's their family, school, or the larger society. It's like being a member of a big team where everyone plays a part in making the community a better place (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2015). Members work together to achieve a common goal, citizens contribute to their community by following rules, showing kindness, and helping others. Citizenship teaches children about their rights and responsibilities, emphasising the importance of fairness and equality. It's not just about where people live, but also about being a good friend, neighbour, and global citizen. Through citizenship, children learn the values of respect, empathy, and cooperation, fostering a sense of belonging and connection to the world around them. Central to the argument regarding the definition of citizenship for young children lies the conflict between the anticipation that citizens possess rights and are capable of taking on responsibilities to contribute to society, and the perception of childhood as a phase marked by immaturity, dependence, and vulnerability (Meylemans, De Wilde, & Bradt, 2023). Educational programmes for young children prioritise aspects of personal, social, and emotional development as vital components for their well-being, aiming to cultivate positive citizenship and interpersonal connections. The significance of children's rights becomes evident in enhancing their lives and reshaping their societal role from passive dependents to engaged and active citizens (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2015) (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009).



The Irish Traveller Community

“For Travellers, belonging to a distinct ethnic minority means that they have a common ancestry, share fundamental cultural values and traditions, have a language and cultural heritage of their own and are seen by themselves and others as distinct and different.” (Murray, Persistent neglect of young Traveller children’s rights in Ireland, 2019)


The Irish Traveller community is an Indigenous ethnic minority in Ireland, with a distinct language, customs, and traditions that have been passed down through generations. One of the defining characteristics of the Traveller community is their nomadic lifestyle. Traditionally, Travellers lived in trailers moving around Ireland and earning a living through various trades such as horse trading or seasonal work. This nomadic lifestyle allowed them to maintain strong extended familial ties and traditions. More recently, however, due to political decisions in the 1980s and 1990s, members of the Traveller community have become less nomadic and established communities of settled Travellers. The recognition of Traveller’s ethnicity in 2017 was an important milestone in acknowledging their distinct culture and providing legal protections against discrimination. However, many Irish Travellers are still experiencing significant challenges like adequate housing, access to healthcare, education, and employment opportunities (Murray, 2019). Despite facing discrimination and marginalisation, the Traveller community has managed to preserve their identity and support a strong sense of pride in their heritage. Arts and creativity have played a significant role in Traveller traditions for example the rich customs of storytelling, singing, dancing, and playing musical instruments (O’Sullivan, et al., 2018).

Family and extended family are of huge importance within Traveller culture, strong emphasis is placed on loyalty, kinship, and shared traditions within the community. (NCCA, 2019). In Irish Traveller culture, kinship holds significant importance as it plays a vital role in shaping social structures, identity, and support systems. Key aspects include Family Structure: Irish Traveller communities often have close-knit family structures where extended families are crucial. The concept of family extends beyond the nuclear unit to include a broader network of relatives (NCCA, 2019). Kinship is fundamental to the social identity of Irish Travellers, reinforcing members’ positions within the community and contributing to a sense of belonging and shared heritage (NCCA, 2019). Strong familial relationships provide a robust support system, offering assistance in times of need. This can include financial support, childcare, and emotional backing, fostering a sense of solidarity within the community. Kinship is integral to the transmission of cultural values, traditions, and knowledge within the Irish Traveller community. It plays a role in maintaining cultural continuity across generations (NCCA, 2019).

“Being a Traveller is the feeling of belonging to a group of people. Knowing through thick or thin they are there for you having the support of family systems. Having an identity.” Michael McDonagh (cited in Murray, 2019)

Ephemeral Art

Ephemeral art, sometimes referred to as temporary or transitory art, is considered a deliberate departure from the permanence associated with conventional art forms such as painting and sculpture. By its very nature, ephemeral art is characterised by its transient existence, deliberately chosen by artists to embrace the passage of time (Reynolds, 2023). Often utilising alternative mediums such as ice, sand, or even light, this form of expression resists the traditional boundaries of artistic longevity. Its ethereal nature provokes engagement on a different level - one that fosters being present in the moment and appreciating the impermanence of life. In this sense, ephemeral art often catalyses reflection and a reminder of the ephemerality of human existence itself (Reynolds, 2023).



Having limited or no access to tools, the children and young people had to rely on inventive and creative thinking.

Methodology

The Dungarvan Early Years Project adopted a participatory research design. This type of research design involves working collaboratively with community organisations and participants in a partnership approach to project development. Kids' Own and the project artists encouraged active involvement and collaboration between project partners and participants throughout the duration of the project (O'Sullivan, et al., 2018).

Participatory research by design aims to establish a more democratic and inclusive approach to research, empowering participants to contribute their insights, perspectives, and lived experiences. Through the meaningful engagement of participants, researchers can ensure diverse perspectives are considered, leading to more comprehensive and nuanced findings.

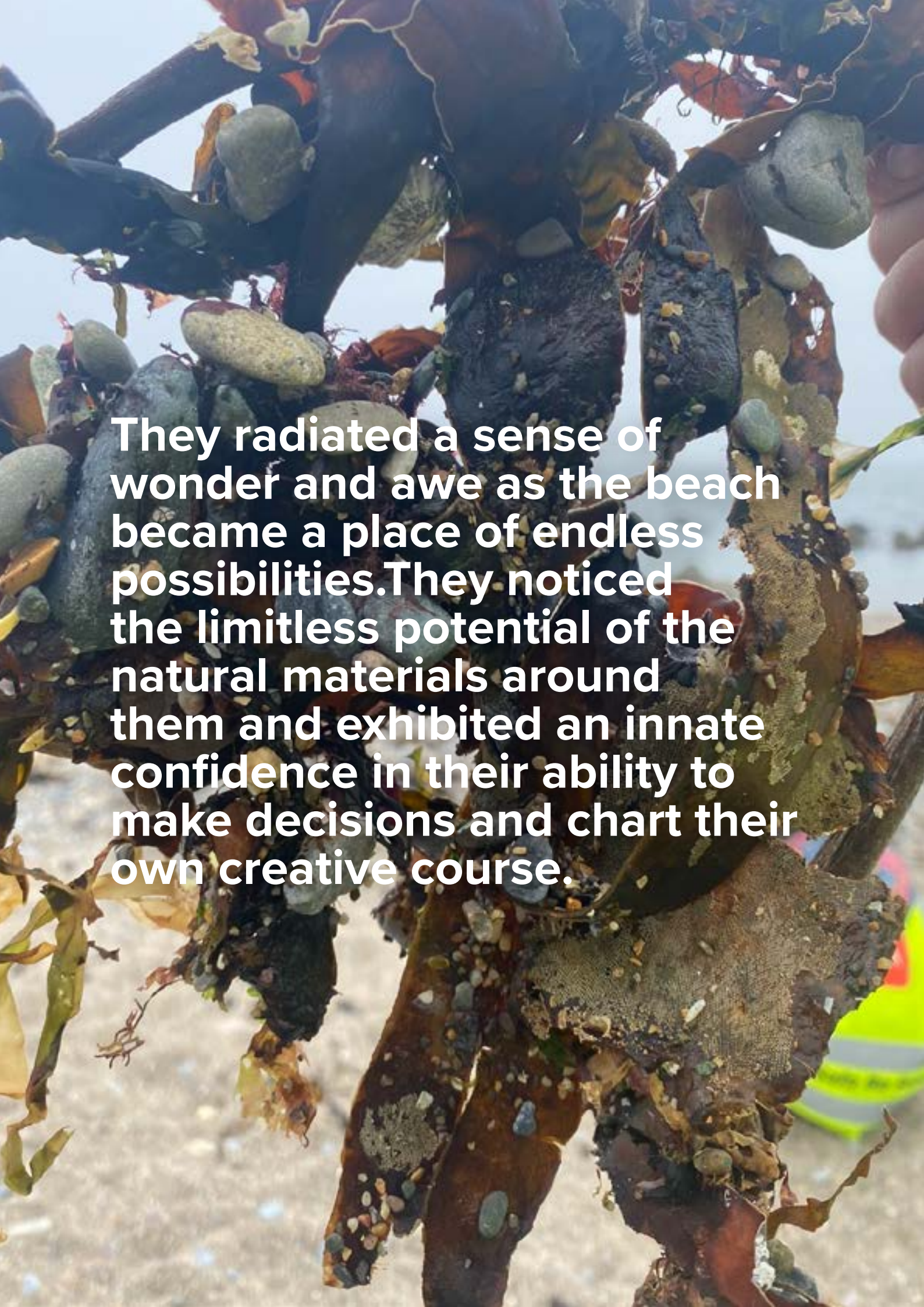
Participatory research design upholds ethical principles by recognising the rights of the parents, children, and young people taking part in the project. Involving participants in the decision-making process ensures that their voices are heard and respected, avoiding “researcher-centric” biases. This approach fosters a sense of ownership, empowerment, and reciprocity among participants, ensuring they are partners rather than mere subjects. By actively engaging participants, consent is obtained not just at the beginning of the study but throughout its progression, ensuring ongoing ethical considerations (Duea, Zimmerman, Vaughn, Dias, & Harris, 2022).

By engaging in meaningful collaboration, participants are given a platform to express their concerns, propose solutions, and engage in decision-making processes. This approach enables project facilitators to adapt and evolve their plans to suit the needs of the participants. Implementing a flexible approach to project planning also means that participants are at the centre of planning. An approach like this is usually adopted in the social sciences and involves “meeting people where they are at”. This means understanding and empathising with the participants' version of reality and recognising that they may have other priorities at any moment or time that are not in agreement with those of the project facilitators. This approach also requires researchers and facilitators to adopt an empathetic non-judgemental approach that is dynamic and adaptable to change whenever necessary (Turner, 2011).

Data collection and analysis

During the period that the project ran, the researcher attended some of the sessions and met the artists, parents, children, young people, and project workers who participated. The researcher observed workshops, taking note of participants' practices and responses to their creative experiences.

Follow-up interviews and focus groups were held which gave the children and young people opportunities to discuss their experiences and capture their voices for this report. Qualitative data was analysed to identify themes that emerged from these discussions. The researcher recommended that the names of children and young people should be changed to maintain confidentiality. However, after receiving feedback during follow-up sessions, it was decided that the names should remain in the report. This decision was made because parents expressed their pride in the fact that the children and young people had participated in the project.



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Project Planning

Consultation began with the Dungarvan Traveller Community Health Project (DTCHP) team in November 2022. Project workers facilitated an introduction session with mothers of young children living in the community where the artists discussed their ideas for the project.

Artist Francesca shared her experience of growing up with a Traveller Heritage. As a child, she spent a lot of time outdoors and believed that being outside provided children with a sense of freedom. The artists also believed that this was a crucial aspect they wanted to incorporate into the project.

“My Grandmother talked about being constrained all the time inside four walls so it’s just so important to be outside because you can talk more freely and there’s just so many layers to it... we discussed this with Teresa and Mary, and they really got it... they agreed! They took that idea to the women and then we met the women, and it was so funny, they just... they got it... it was like they were listening in to our conversations...” (Francesca, Artist Interview, 26th May 2023)

The decision was made that the project would involve taking children and young people to a beach in the area, where children and young people would be given the opportunity to explore the natural environment in a creative and child-led way. “The mothers were here; everybody was very enthusiastic about it because there has never been anything here for children really!” (Teresa, Project Worker Interview, 25th, May 2023) “[They’ve] never done something like that here.” (Mary, Project Worker Interview, 25th, May 2023).

The artists wanted to prioritise providing children and young people with the chance to independently explore their own ideas during the sessions. While the artists offered guidance and inspiration related to the beach activities, they intentionally refrained from assuming the role of instructors or teachers. Instead, they encouraged the children and young people to make choices based on the provided guidance, fostering an environment of self-discovery and creative autonomy. The artists aimed to avoid a didactic approach, emphasising the importance of allowing young minds to shape their experiences without imposing predefined structures. This approach aimed to empower children and young people, giving them the freedom to express themselves authentically and contribute to the artistic process in a way that felt personally meaningful. “We would say... we are going to make this spiral but you can interpret that whatever way you want... that was so important because everything about this project was new to the children including the freedom to be able to choose freely... the themes we were looking at... the type of art, ephemeral art... there was so much freedom with it...it’s so empowering to be able to give a child that experience... it’s completely different to anything they have had before...” (Francesca, Artist Interview, 26th May 2023).

The concept of utilising found materials on the beach was a significant part of the project planning for artists Maree and Francesca. This action infused the art sessions with a sense of environmental consciousness and creative resourcefulness. Embracing the inherent beauty and uniqueness of the coastal environment, participants were encouraged to scour the shoreline for natural and discarded materials that could serve as the raw materials for their artistic expressions. “It was great not to bring anything, because it seemed much more organic” (Maree, Artist Interview, 26th May 2023)

The use of found materials not only fostered a deep connection between the participants and their surroundings but also highlighted the potential for repurposing and recycling in the creative process. Driftwood, seashells, and other beachcombing treasures became integral elements in the artworks, offering a sustainable and visually captivating dimension to the projects. This approach not only inspired a sense of environmental stewardship but also sparked innovative thinking as

the children and young people transformed seemingly ordinary items into extraordinary pieces of art, bridging the gap between nature and artistic expression. “It meant that it wasn’t prescriptive, we could just respond to what the children were doing and there was such beauty in that... just not having a set rule book to follow... it really gives you the chance to listen to the child and then just respond” (Francesca, Artist Interview, 26th May 2023).

Furthermore, having limited or no access to tools, the children and young people had to rely on inventive and creative thinking, figuring out ways to transport the items they found to the location where they were constructing their pieces. The artists believed that this provided the children with a chance to be innovative and practice problem-solving skills. Simultaneously, it allowed them to connect with their ancestral heritage by utilising the natural materials present in their surroundings. “The children had to be inventors... they had to find a way of gathering sand... collecting...that is so important because our ancestors used what they had around them, they were self-sufficient and in a way the children were like that too...” (Francesca, Artist Interview, 26th May 2023).

The project was initially introduced as an early years initiative aimed at young children and their mothers. However, during its development, it became clear that older siblings should also be included. The mothers emphasised that it was necessary to involve all siblings in the project, as highlighted in the literature review, kinship and familial connections are an important aspect of Irish Traveller culture, and the mothers did not want to have to leave some of their children out of this experience. They expressed that childcare was a practical concern, but they also highlighted that there were limited opportunities for children and young people to engage in group activities. With this in mind, the project was adapted to include older siblings as well. By ensuring that the project is accessible to all, the artists would create a meaningful and impactful experience for children and their families.

Creative Workshops

The workshops took place over the months of February, March, April, May, and June. DTCHP project workers were vital during these times as they reminded parents and children of times and arranged pick-ups and collections. Mary and Teresa’s contributions as project workers and direct links to the participants were paramount to the project’s success. As respected members of the Traveller Community, Mary and Teresa brought a unique and invaluable perspective to the project. Their intrinsic rapport, combined with the fact that the project’s participants were part of their extended family, facilitated trust and communication, both of which were crucial to the project’s success. Their unwavering commitment and dedication in driving the project forward resulted in enthusiastic participation from all involved. Moreover, their recognition of the project’s value to the children, young people and their families helped to overcome potential obstacles and ensure its smooth execution. The commitment of the project workers went beyond the practical aspects of the sessions; as they became more comfortable in exploring their own creativity, they became a source of inspiration, instilling a deep appreciation for the project’s values among the participants. Their involvement served as a cornerstone for building a community that recognised and celebrated the unique contributions of each participant, ultimately enhancing the overall impact and success of the project.

During sessions, the artists sparked the group’s curiosity and interest by facilitating a discussion to introduce ideas and plans for the workshop. This usually happened at the beginning of the session on the site where the project was based. The researcher had the opportunity to attend several workshops and observe and gather data for the final report. Upon arriving the researcher observed the children and young people were eagerly awaiting the artists to initiate the conversations, displaying a real sense of interest towards them. It was clear that they had never had the opportunity

to engage with professional artists however, they were unsure how to refer to Francesca and Maree, often slipping into “school mode” by calling them ‘Teacher’. Francesca and Maree took the time to discuss this with the children, clarifying that they were not teachers but artists who were there to nurture their creativity and enjoyment.

When the group discussion concluded, a bus would arrive to take the group to Clonea Strand. The bus trips provided a wonderful opportunity for children and young people to bond and socialise with each other. During the drive, they would discuss their ideas and plans for the day, and this helped to foster a sense of community among them. The journey to Clonea Strand was always filled with anticipation and excitement, marking a transition from the indoor planning session to the practical and creative part of the day. The children and young people would often engage in conversations with the bus driver, asking him about his own experiences and travels. They sang songs and chatted with each other, and on a couple of occasions, one of the buses had disco lights and music playing, which thrilled the children and young people. They eagerly requested the driver to play different songs and musical artists so they could all sing along together.

The group would then have approximately one hour to 90 minutes on the beach to engage in their creative processes, during which time the artists made their way around the group listening to children and young people’s ideas and discussing their artwork. During the outdoor experiences on the beach, the children and young people were observed engrossed and immersed in their creative processes. They radiated a sense of wonder and awe as the beach became a place of endless possibilities. They noticed the limitless potential of the natural materials around them and exhibited an innate confidence in their ability to make decisions and chart their own creative course. In this setting, the combination of nature’s wonders and the children’s burgeoning confidence formed a beautiful blend, reflecting uninhibited imagination and the joy of self-directed exploration.

The artists, keenly attuned to the children and young people’s unfolding creativity on the beach, skilfully engaged them in thoughtful conversations about their work, seamlessly integrating the materials they found into their dialogue. With genuine curiosity, the artists asked probing questions, encouraging the children and young people to articulate the stories behind their masterpieces which included spirals and sculptures, representing the themes of ‘Connection’ and ‘Protection’. Affirmation flowed freely as the artists celebrated the uniqueness of each child’s vision, emphasising the beauty in their ideas and the significance of their creative choices. Through these conversations, the artists not only acknowledged the value of the materials found on the beach but also instilled a sense of pride and ownership in the children, nurturing their creative processes. The discussion of ideas became a dynamic exchange, where the artists acted as facilitators, coaxing out the richness of the children’s imaginations and empowering them to express their thoughts with confidence, fostering an environment where the beach became not just a playground but a shared canvas for collaborative storytelling and individual exploration.

Finally, the bus would return to collect everyone and then return to the base to have follow-up discussions with children and lunch. The bus trip, again acting as a transition and an opportunity for the children to bond and discuss their experiences and ideas while making requests for the bus driver to play songs that were relevant to their social group.

While the children had their lunch, Francesca and Maree would take a brief break away from the group, where they would exchange thoughts on their individual experiences during the beach session. It was a moment of reflection and brainstorming as they planned for the next part of the session.

After the children had eaten, both Francesca and Maree would engage the children in conversations about their experiences on the beach that day, sometimes making links with previous sessions, deepening their understanding of themselves and their surroundings. Again, the artists would make their way around the group, asking probing questions and encouraging the children and young people to express their ideas, using creative language and rhetoric. On some occasions, during the follow-up sessions, the children made pieces of art in response to the experience they had just had on the beach or discussed ideas they would like to explore in the future.

The indoor sessions at both the beginning and end of each art experience acted as poignant bookends, framing the dynamic and transformative outdoor art sessions on the beach. On each occasion, the indoor sessions provided a structured and nurturing space, laying the groundwork for creative exploration. The indoor sessions served as a canvas for the children and young people to familiarise themselves with artistic concepts and build a sense of camaraderie. As these progressed, the concluding indoor sessions served a reflective purpose, allowing the children and young people to consolidate their experiences and share insights gained from their experiences at the beach sessions. This reflective atmosphere facilitated meaningful discussions, providing a space for the children and young people to articulate the ideas and connections forged during their artistic journey. Having indoor sessions to start and end each workshop formed a cohesive narrative arc that offered the children and young people a holistic and transformative artistic experience that seamlessly integrated the controlled environment of indoor spaces with the boundless inspiration of the beach setting.



Change of Location

The goal of returning to the same location was to provide children and young people with the chance to recognise the value in everyday surroundings, observe changes in the landscape, and connect these observations to ephemeral art using found materials. Additionally, this experience aimed to nurture their problem-solving skills and creativity. However, the parents, children and young people had asked on a number of occasions if it would be possible to visit other locations, they felt that they had spent enough time on Clonea Strand and would like the opportunity to explore a different location. In response to this request, the artists decided to take the children and young people to an alternative location on Ballinacourty Strand, also in Dungarvan. The artists believed that opting for a different venue would provide children and young people with a chance to apply their newfound creativity and inventiveness in an alternative setting. This approach aimed to cultivate an understanding that these newly acquired skills were not confined to a specific space or time but could be extended to various areas in their lives. “They’ve built skills now and they can take them skills anywhere... that was what me and Maree were hoping... and that was the purpose of bringing them to this new beach... it was that the children could understand that these aren’t just skills specific to Clonea Strand, they could bring them anywhere and use them as tools in their own life freely... in a way it’s a form of healing and therapy” (Francesca, Artist Interviews, 26th May 2023).



Ritual of Closure

The artists expressed a heartfelt desire to orchestrate a ritual of closure, underscoring the emotional aspects tied to the conclusion of the project. Envisioning a poignant gathering, the plan was for the children to bring back the shells and other found items to the beach, fostering a sense of emotional completeness. This ritual aimed not only to mark the end of the artistic venture but also to avoid leaving the children in a state of uncertainty regarding the project. By returning the collected treasures to the beach, it would create a symbolic circle of appreciation and gratitude, acknowledging the significance of the journey and ensuring a respectful conclusion. This emotional closure sought to instil in the children and young people a sense of accomplishment and connection, recognising the transformative impact of their collective creativity on both the artistic endeavour and their personal growth. “I feel the learning through the artistic practice... there’s a sense of letting them down now that the thing is over... we are going to do a ritual closure, we are going to bring the shells back to the beach, we are going to carry them in beautiful bowls and bring them back to the beach... so there will be a ceremony of closure... for them to know it’s [the project] closing...” (Maree, Artist Interview, 26th May 2023)

Emerging Interests and Workshop Themes

The artists initiated the first workshop with a focus on actions such as *collecting, gathering, and assembling*.

Protection

Maree described how the theme of “Protection” presented itself to them when they began to spend a little time with the children. She described the heartwarming display of older children taking on the role of caretakers for their younger counterparts. The older children exhibited a strong sense of responsibility, ensuring the safety and well-being of the younger ones in their company. This nurturing dynamic was evident in various activities that took place during the sessions. The interactions were characterised by patience, empathy, and a genuine desire to create a protective and supportive environment. It was inspiring to see how the older children naturally assumed roles as mentors and guardians, fostering a sense of unity and camaraderie within the group. This observation reinforced the significance of sibling relationships within the Traveller Community that had been observed by Francesca growing up. “We were presented with protection anyway... mothers wanting the older children to come and the role of the children in the protection and minding of the younger ones, it was almost laid to us on a plate” (Maree Artist Interview, 26th May 2023)

During the artist’s interviews, Francesca explained how the theme of “Protection” developed and deepened her knowledge and experience of Traveller Culture. Protection, both physical and emotional, is a crucial aspect of Irish Traveller culture. The community places great emphasis on safeguarding its members from external challenges and threats. This protective instinct extends to preserving cultural traditions, language, and a way of life that has been passed down through generations. The concept of protection is integral to maintaining the resilience and continuity of Irish Traveller culture in the face of various societal dynamics.

Francesca also emphasised the idea of protection in terms of the beautiful surroundings in which the project took place. By embracing a leave-no-trace philosophy, the group would ensure that the pebble beach remained as they found it, fostering not only an appreciation for the natural beauty surrounding the children but also a sense of responsibility and commitment to the sustainability of the environment.

Connection

Francesca again discussed how the theme of “Connection” emerged from her knowledge and experience relating to her heritage in the Traveller Community. Connection holds a profound and multifaceted role in Irish Traveller culture, serving as a cornerstone for the community’s identity and resilience. At its core, connection is deeply rooted in familial ties, with a strong emphasis on extended family bonds and a shared sense of belonging. This interconnectedness extends beyond blood relations, encompassing the broader Traveller community. Social connections are forged through a rich oral tradition, where stories, folklore, and shared experiences strengthen the ties that bind individuals together. The role of connection is also evident in the collective approach to challenges, as the community rallies together in times of need, fostering a support system that transcends individual boundaries. “All of the families were so connected... it’s very unique... so rather than just coming up with themes we were looking at the community and allowing those themes to describe...self-portrait almost!”, “...at a deep level... the children were making art about themselves ...” (Maree, Artist Interview, 26th May 2023)

Artists' Processes

During interviews the artists described their process, they described the reflective conversations that took place after each workshop in order to identify emerging themes for future workshops. The artists spent time planning in between sessions to ensure they responded to children and young people's ideas and followed their lead. During these debrief sessions the artists discussed their experiences and the conversations they had with the children and young people. They used this time to reflect and frame the sessions while planning follow-up experiences for the children and young people. "Each week we were kind of assessing... considering areas of improvement... what came up? How can we build on this? To get the children to explore it deeper and that was vital..." (Francesca, Artist Interview, 26th May 2023)



Reflection: one year later

One year after the completion of the Dungarvan Early Years Arts Project, the artists and researcher had the opportunity to reconnect with the children, young people, and parents involved. This follow-up initiative included a workshop where the artists revisited the original themes of the project, allowing a space for participants to reflect on their experiences and the project's lasting impact. During these sessions, the artists facilitated discussions that encouraged the sharing of thoughts and feelings, providing valuable insights into how the project influenced their perceptions and creative development over the past year. This revisit fostered a deeper understanding of the project's effectiveness and provided an opportunity to discuss the follow-up publication.

Supported by DTHP project workers Mary and Teresa, the parents participated in an informal discussion with the artists, where they reviewed a potential mock-up of the final publication. This setting also allowed parents to share their insights on how the project had positively impacted their children over the past twelve months. The researcher attended this meeting and recorded the feedback given during the session. The researcher noted that the informality of the session created a safe space where parents felt much more comfortable opening up and discussing their feelings about how the project went. This atmosphere proved invaluable and led to a much richer discussion than had previously taken place with the researcher. In hindsight, the researcher realised that this informal approach would have been better when initially gathering parents' perspectives, as the safe and comfortable environment allowed for more open and meaningful discussions, providing deeper insights into how the project impacted their children.

Artists Maree and Francesca then facilitated an exploration of the themes with the children, with parents also invited to participate. The children had the opportunity to review photographic images of their creations during the project and create follow-up pieces in response to the images. They also discussed the potential publication and what they would like the title to be. During these sessions, the older children took on the role of organising the younger children's responses and writing them down.

The researcher has taken the responses recorded from the children and collated them with those of the parents to illustrate the transformative effects the project had on the children and young people.

Additionally, some of the children and young people suggested drafting a letter to potential funders to demonstrate how important the project had been to them and to express their desire for it to potentially continue in the long term.



Findings

Playing; Space and Time just to be!

The children and young people described how they felt when they were on the beach. They talked about having the opportunity to just be in the moment and not think or worry about anything else in their lives. Eileen said, “It clears your mind.” Mary Teresa explained, “When I’m here I’m not worrying about anything you’re just relaxed... you’re just away.” Teresa Kate shared, “It feels so nice and good.”

In interviews, artist Francesca echoed comparable sentiments, emphasising the significance of establishing an environment for children and young individuals that fosters a sense of “stillness” while providing them with “freedom of choice” through the intentional removal of any “layer of authority.” Francesca articulated that the project aimed to counter the accustomed experience of children and young people who are typically directed in school, intending to eliminate the traditional structures of authority. She underscored the project’s overarching goal as creating a space where the children and young people could experience a departure from conventional directives and embrace a more liberated and self-directed creative process. “The minute a child is born... authority... there’s always that figure of authority in their lives telling them what to do so it was lovely to remove that layer of authority and give children the freedom to do what they want” (Francesca, Artist Interview, 26th May 2023).

During observation children and young people were engrossed in creative experience. Mary Teresa spent an entire session creating a sculpture of her name using large rocks. When the group left the beach, she watched from afar as strangers admired her work. Mary Teresa was asked how that felt and replied “Proud.”

The calmness and stillness of the children and young people was apparent, as they were thoroughly engaged in their creative processes, they remained focused on their artwork and kept close to the group. Teresa Kate said “It makes me feel like nature I like looking at the beach and having fresh air I feel free and just so nice”

The children were encouraged to engage in actions such as gathering, collecting and the researcher observed the children and young people foraging for items to create their pieces, Maree encouraged the children and young people saying, “We just have to find a little space, look closely, and look closer again!” The children and young people took time to notice the small things among the sand, shells, and rocks. One of the older children called to her friend telling them “Guys, if you look real [SIC]close, you’ll find small shiny ones!” Another saying “That’s where I’ll find all these nice things”

During artist interviews, Francesca described her experiences in Traveller culture and the idea that family life is busy, and there are always things to be done. She made the comparison with modern life in general. She described the notion of “always being on the go”. The fast-paced nature of contemporary life has implications for individuals’ mental and physical well-being. The pressure to keep up with the speed of information, and balance multiple responsibilities can contribute to stress and burnout. The constant stimuli from digital devices and the rapid pace of change can also impact attention spans and the ability to focus on long-term goals. She described how the notion of slowing down was equated with getting old within the context of Irish Traveller culture which

When the group left the beach, she watched from afar as strangers admired her work. Mary Teresa was asked how that felt and replied...

“Proud.”



reveals a cultural perspective that intertwines the pace of life with vitality and youthfulness. This cultural perspective on slowing down may be rooted in the idea that staying active is a testament to resilience and adaptability—qualities that are highly valued in a community that has often faced social, economic, and cultural challenges. It's not just about physical movement; it could also symbolise an ongoing engagement with life, a refusal to succumb to stagnation, and a commitment to embracing new experiences. "It's not something that would be in the culture or within my family anyway...there's kind of this misconception around stillness and slowing down and everything being slow... that's kind of related to getting older... you only slow down if you're old... you always have things to do and you always have places to be, cleaning to do, children to mind and you know that's just the way it is in our family" (Francesca, Artist Interview, 26th May 2023).

The artists both agreed that allowing children the opportunity to slow down, relish the tranquillity of the beach, and provide them with space and time was akin to introducing a form of mindfulness into their experience. "Offering a space of stillness, slowing down... looking, looking again and looking again in contrast to the business of the families and modern life" (Maree, Artist Interview, 26th May 2023).

There was one moment that was particularly poignant for both the artists and the researcher as an observer. On one of the later sessions in May, the children were on site at Ballinacourty Strand. The weather was good so the artists decided to facilitate the entire session on site instead of returning to the DTCHP base to continue with discussion and session closure. The artists had brought along some charcoal and different artistic media for the children to engage with and draw their surroundings. The entire group sat quietly, immersed in the experience of making their art. This collective quietude spoke to the depth of concentration and the mutual respect for the creative space, as everyone contributed to their artistic processes with a quiet diligence, forging a shared experience through the language of art. "That moment on the slope...where they gravitated, they are leaning into each other and making these drawings and the two of us said we could actually go and we didn't give any instructions... they just got into it" Maree, Artist Interview, 26 May 2023.

Appreciation of Nature

The children and young people developed an appreciation for the items they found on the beach. Many found items that they wanted to keep and take home to show everyone. They used creative and descriptive language as they shared their thoughts about the treasures they had found. Teresa Kate beamed "It's different to everything... I called it majestic because it's one of a kind...this rock is nearly my favourite colour and has stripes of white gone through" Eileen told me "I found this rock it looks like a star". Peter explained "I found a rock and you can see through it"

Barbara made connections between the artwork they created and the items they found "The shells are like... they're all shiny they have a circle thing what we were making... a spiral". Preschooler Eileanna was proud to show off the rock she had found. "It's a star," she said.

Creativity

Maree described how amazing it was for them as artists to watch the children and young people explore and create using the items, they were finding on the beach. "There is such beauty in listening to the child... observing what they are doing... and responding to that." Francesca described the need to challenge children and young people's "understanding" of what art is as they are often provided with experiences that are "prescriptive" whereas this project gave children and young people space to use "found materials" and "be inventors" she related this to their ancestors who would have "used those same skills."



This collective quietude spoke to the depth of concentration and the mutual respect for the creative space.

As the sessions progressed, the children and young people began to build on their own ideas and create more complicated sculptures. Peter created a small, shed-type structure using only large rocks. This was his representation of a religious grotto. When it was complete, he decorated the area around it standing back to admire his work with pride. The researcher noted how he persevered and problem-solved until his vision came to life. He knew what he wanted to make, and his sense of achievement beamed as he reached his goal.

The children and young people were extremely proud of their creations and were eager to discuss their experiences “We made a circle and some lines she collected stones, and I was collecting the big ones...then we got shells and put them around the big circle we got a massive rock... it made me feel happy and good,” said Barbara.

When asked how it felt to be creative and make their own choices with their artwork. “It felt like we could do what we wanted... if we made a mistake, it would be okay” shared Eilean.

Connection

Connection became a major theme of the project. The notion of connection was evident from the start of the project. Francesca and Maree described the connection they felt when they initially met to discuss the project. As discussed earlier in the report, the theme emerged in different ways throughout the duration of the project. Francesca described the connections between the children and young people in the group, they were all members of the Traveller community and some of the children and young people knew each other or were related.

The children and young people were asked to think about the word connection, how are we connected? What does connection mean?

“People holding hands”, “We are all friends working together”, “family”, “Electricity connecting when you plug it in”.

They created different forms of spirals and connecting symbols to illustrate their ideas of connection.

Peter described his understanding of connection as “being joined together.” During this conversation, he made a daisy chain to illustrate connection. He later said, “It feels like someone has your back when you need them” and “When you need them the most they’ll be there”.

During follow up sessions in 2024 Anna described the connection the children and young people had with artists Francesca and Maree. “...You got to know them and they got to know yee [SIC] and they trusted you...” This was reiterated by Christina, Teresa and Philomena during their discussions, they said the children learned to “...trust other adults... to look after each other... [and] be together...”

As discussed in the literature review, the bonds forged within families, extended kinship networks, and the broader Traveller community are identified as vital threads that intricately weave together the fabric of their unique identity. Beyond mere social interactions, these connections are imbued with cultural, historical, and symbolic significance, serving as conduits for the transmission of traditions, values, and a collective sense of identity. As the literature explains, the emphasis on connection is not merely a social phenomenon; rather, it is a cornerstone of Irish Traveller culture, embodying resilience, continuity, and the enduring strength of community ties.

Sense of Community, Identity and Belonging

The researcher facilitated group discussions with mothers away from the children to give them the opportunity to discuss their thoughts and feelings relating to the project. They described the importance of giving their children the opportunity to meet other children from the Traveller Community. Shirley said, “[It’s great] mixing with people like their selves.” As highlighted in the literature review, the importance of group identity and connection holds significance in Traveller culture, serving as the bedrock of their social fabric. The concept of extended family and community is central, creating a sense of belonging and solidarity among Travellers. Group identity is not merely a cultural marker but a source of strength and resilience. In the face of external challenges, maintaining a strong sense of group identity becomes a source of pride, resilience, and cultural continuity for the Irish Traveller community.

The children and young individuals shared their feelings with the researcher regarding their collaborative work on the art pieces, John said “That’s technically connecting with other children!” Winnie agreed, “It’s fun playing with other children and getting to know them.”

Children and young people talked about their favourite parts of the project, brothers Peter and Jimmy Boy told me “I liked when we eat our lunch together on the beach...” “...The spin of the bus and collecting the rocks...” “...I liked building...”

The ritual of the bus journey was important to the children and young people, and they talked about this when the project was completed. There were a couple of occasions when the bus had music playing and lights on for the journey. This was memorable for the children and young people, and they continued to discuss it throughout the project. Shirley told me “...they loved going on the bus and singing.” Teresa said parents loved how the children and young people got excited by “the idea of going on the bus on a Saturday together... like a day trip.” Teresa felt that the only other time the children and young people would go on a coach would be a school tour with other children and young people from their class whereas on the project they would be with “children from their own culture, their cousins and their brothers and sisters...” She thought it was great that the children and young people were able to share this experience with each other and it wasn’t in any way related to school or that type of environment. In comparison, Christina felt that the outings gave reticent children an opportunity to socialise in a more comfortable setting. “Some children are shy and don’t really go out so when they’re out and about they’re mixing... they were with kids they don’t always play with... it was nice to see them bond with each other.”

Christina and Anna explained how important they thought it was for the mothers too “The mothers enjoyed it because it gave them the opportunity to meet each other as well...”

Dolores the Co-Ordinator of Dungarvan Community Health Project (DCHP) spoke about the sense of community she observed as the project neared an end. She talked about how the children and young people appeared confident with each other and were happy to show off their skills like dancing or gymnastics to the larger group. She talked about a familiarity and a sense of group identity, the children and young people seemed to have bonded with each other and developed confidence in each other’s company. This was not something she had seen before from the children and young people. “For me, there is a sense of camaraderie... they’re not all from the same family... or related... so for me, it was watching that with the children.” Christina reiterated this during the follow up discussions one year on from the project, “...The children all go to different schools so it gave them a chance to be together in the outdoors...”

The need for community and a sense of belonging is important for human growth and development.

As human beings we are born to connect and relationships are central to our happiness, learning and development. Relationships are the foundations for the construction of identity – ‘who I am’, ‘how I belong’, and ‘what is my influence?’ (EYLF, DEEWR, 2009, p. 20).

The evolving sense of respect among the children for each other’s artwork and artistic processes became increasingly evident through several observable behaviours and interactions within the creative learning environment. This was discussed during follow up sessions one year on from the project. Initially, there may have been a hesitancy or lack of appreciation for the diverse artistic expressions within the group. However, as the children engaged in collaborative projects, shared their individual artistic journeys, and participated in group discussions, a palpable shift occurred. Mary described how the children and young people “got very interested... [she] thought they would be running around but they didn’t... if they found something...a different shape they would show the others...” she described how the children and young people developed problem-solving skills when they used their hats to collect items on the beach and help each other “It was clever what they did with the hats... it was great!”

One observable manifestation was the attentiveness and interest displayed during the presentation and discussion of each child’s piece. Children began to actively listen and provide constructive feedback, acknowledging the unique strengths and perspectives embedded in their peers’ creations. Furthermore, instances of collaboration and mutual support became more prevalent, with children offering assistance or encouragement to their fellow artists. This growing respect was also evident in the way children started to recognise and value the varied artistic processes employed by their peers. The children began to appreciate the diverse pathways to creative expression, fostering an inclusive atmosphere that celebrated individuality. This increasing sense of respect for each other’s artistic endeavours not only enriched the learning environment but also contributed to the development of a supportive and collaborative community of young artists.

Protection

Protection was a theme that the artists identified from the beginning of the project, Francesca and Maree saw the children minding each other. The researcher observed the dynamics of the older children looking after and protecting younger ones often creating a nurturing and supportive environment. This type of nurturing behaviour is rooted in a natural sense of responsibility, care, and familial bonds that Francesca described at the beginning of the project and is emphasised in literature relating to Traveller Culture (NCCA, 2019) (Sweeney & Mathews, 2017). Maree describes “we were presented with protection... the older children and the minding of the younger ones.”

During one of the sessions, the children and young people collected objects to represent something or someone that they wanted to protect. They created sculptures and structures to protect their treasured objects.

Francesca described one of her favourite moments from the project when she connected with one of the children as the child described the art she was making. “She layered all these tiny little shells and finding the most minuscule and putting them inside and other shells on top of them and saying this is my sister and just little moments like that and the ability to be able to articulate that...” (Francesca, Artist Interview, 26th May 2023).

During interviews with the children, they revisited photographs of their artwork and the same child described the piece Francesca referred to. Teresa Kate discussed the photo of the piece she created, she had found a medium-sized shell and placed smaller ones stacked inside each other until finally there was a tiny one in the middle of it. “I put all the things in there then I was going

to put that over it [points to the larger shell] to protect it so they wouldn't fall out and stuff," When asked why she did this, she said "To show that you'll always be protected and if you do fall out of your shell, you'll always turn out the same"

While on the beach the children and young people engaged in discussion with each other as they created their artwork. Winnie Ann (Age 3) made marks in the sand with her stick, she said it was a "bunny rabbit" and that she had to "save it from the sharks" John drew his name and put a big circle around it to protect it from everyone else.

Another session involved the children and young people working together in teams to create Grotto-like structures. Peter found a cuttlefish bone and used it to create a statue-like structure at the top of their sculpture. This was revisited during interviews and Peter said "Remember when I got the white fish thing... we were building up something like a statue... I said it looked like a picture, like Mary [mother of Jesus]."

During sessions, the group was asked to say what came to mind when they thought about protection. Some of the responses were "...Avoiding getting hit..." [referring to boxing], "Protect each other", "Protect yourself... tell someone...", "Stand up for each other...", "...mind somebody...", "Mind a flower like if it is dying give it water", "Mind your stuff".

During interviews children and young people were asked; What does protection mean to you?

The following are their responses.

"It means that you are protecting someone from something bad".

"It means to be loved", "people helping you", "Being protected means people take care of you", and "if you were inside your house and an earthquake came, you would be protected".

Barbara expressed her enjoyment of the practice of caring for items by covering them with sand, a sentiment observed by the researcher who witnessed Barbara, on several occasions, engaging in a ritualistic process of tending to the cherished shells and stones she had discovered on the beach... She washed them in a rock pool before she would put them in her bag or use them in her artwork. Francesca compared this moment to the work of the Serbian Artist Marina Abramović whose work often involves rituals to prompt a profound and often transformative experience for both her and the audience. "That reminds me so much of the work of the artist Marina Abramović, when she is washing these bones and no matter how much she washes them or how hard she washes them she is never going to get them clean... it reminds me so much of that performance... it was the same with [Barbara] she was washing the shells and no matter how much she washes them she was never going to get the sand off and that's what it kinda [SIC] reminded me of" (Francesca, Artist Interview, 2023)

As the children engaged in discussions about protection, parallels could be drawn to the cultural context described in the literature. The concept of protection within the Irish Traveller culture extends beyond physical safety; it encompasses safeguarding traditions, preserving identity, and fostering a sense of community resilience. The children's conversations about protection may resonate with the Traveller community's historical and ongoing efforts to shield their cultural heritage from external pressures and prejudices. Additionally, the literature highlights the significance of extended kinship networks and community bonds in providing a protective framework for Irish Travellers. Drawing connections, the children may come to appreciate how their discussions on protection mirror the communal ethos of safeguarding shared values and fostering a supportive environment, akin to the protective mechanisms observed within Irish Traveller culture.

Children's Rights

One of the artists' goals was to give children and young people the opportunity to develop their creativity while using their voices and exercising choice. The artists gave brief guidelines to the children and young people; however, they ensured there remained space for the children and young people to make their own decisions at all times. Children and young people were given space to make decisions regarding who they worked with and how they worked. Artists also spent time reflecting on and responding to the conversations they had with children and young people to ensure their voices were heard throughout the project. The experiences provided to children and young people participating in the project were all in keeping with a rights-based approach to working with children (Hayes, 2013). When children and young people's rights are respected and encouraged, they have the opportunity to develop a positive sense of who they are and the community they belong to.

Play

The importance of play is highlighted in the literature review. As discussed, play can look different for the older child or young person therefore it is important to know that play should be "freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated" (National Playing Fields Association, 2000), or "what children and young people do when they follow their ideas and interests in their own way and for their own reasons" (Play Scotland, 2020). The whole group was observed at play during the project. The children and young people were absorbed in their creative processes and following their own agendas while living in the moment. During interviews, the children and young people repeatedly expressed their enjoyment of being both in the outdoor environment and following their own ideas (Play Scotland, 2020).

Play is often associated with younger children, but its importance extends into adolescence and beyond, playing a crucial role in the mental health and well-being of older children (National Playing Fields Association, 2000). As children grow, their modes of play may evolve, shifting from imaginative games to more complex and structured activities. Engaging in play during the later stages of childhood provides numerous benefits for mental health:

Stress Reduction: Play serves as a natural stress reliever. Older children face increasing academic and social pressures, and play provides a constructive outlet for releasing tension and managing stress (Waters, 2022).

Social Development: Play fosters social skills and collaboration, essential for older children navigating complex social landscapes. Collaborative projects contribute to the development of communication, cooperation, and conflict-resolution skills (Waters, 2022).

Emotional Regulation: Play allows older children to explore and express a range of emotions in a safe and controlled environment. Whether it's through the medium of art, or physical activities, play helps children understand and manage their emotions effectively (Laevers, 2000).

Cognitive Growth: Play continues to stimulate cognitive development in older children. Complex games, strategic thinking, and problem-solving activities enhance critical thinking skills, creativity, and intellectual growth (Waters, 2022).

Physical Health: Play contributes to physical well-being by promoting an active lifestyle. Furthermore, outdoor activities and physical play help maintain a healthy body weight, improve cardiovascular health, and develop strong bones and muscles (NCCA, 2009).

Sense of Identity: Play provides opportunities for older children to explore their interests, passions, and talents. Whether engaging in artistic pursuits or exploring hobbies, play contributes to the development of a strong sense of identity and purpose (Waters, 2022).

Adaptability: As children transition into adolescence, they face numerous changes. Play helps them adapt to new situations, build resilience, and develop the flexibility of thinking needed to navigate challenges (Play Scotland, 2020).

Play remains a critical component of a child's and young person's overall development, including their mental health and well-being, as they transition into and through adolescence. Encouraging and supporting a variety of play experiences for older children contributes to a holistic approach to their growth and happiness (Kernan, 2007) (Play Scotland, 2020).

The researcher observed the children and young people deeply engaged in play, noting their high levels of concentration, enthusiasm, and emotional well-being. This engagement aligns with the Leuven Scales of Well-Being and Involvement, which assess the quality of a child's emotional state and the intensity of their participation in an activity (Laevers, 2000). The researcher noted that the children's involvement often reached the upper levels of the scale, indicating significant focus, enjoyment, and satisfaction. High levels of well-being were evident through their relaxed and happy demeanour, while their deep involvement showcased their intrinsic motivation and engagement. The use of found materials and the dynamic landscape provided stimulating and challenging contexts, enhancing both their well-being and involvement, creating an optimal environment for learning and development.

Citizenship and Spirituality

The project not only served as a creative endeavour but also provided a unique platform for children and young people to immerse themselves in the principles of democracy and cultivate a profound sense of citizenship. Through collaborative decision-making processes, where children actively contributed ideas, expressed opinions, and participated in group discussions, they experienced firsthand the democratic ideals of equality and shared governance (Baskin, 2016). This participatory approach not only empowered the children but also fostered a genuine sense of belonging and responsibility within the project. Moreover, as the project unfolded in the context of the group, it offered the children and young people an opportunity to experience being active citizens, contributing to and shaping their shared environment. "In a way we have given them an experience of democracy...of justice... of listening... of fairness... of equality... of being in the world...and that right is so important in early years... they will leave that experience and it might open up a little nipit or an opportunity to believe that they can be listened to..." (Maree, Artist interview, 26th May 2023).

In addition to democratic values, the project also played a role in nurturing the children's spiritual development. The contemplative moments at the beach, the exploration of creativity, and the shared experiences fostered a sense of interconnectedness with nature and each other, fostering a spiritual dimension that went beyond the tangible outcomes of the artistic endeavour. This holistic approach, encompassing democratic principles and spiritual growth, contributed to a well-rounded educational experience for the participating children and young people. "The boys in particular were given that opportunity to... not be feminine but they were allowed to engage with their souls... sensitivity... forget about being the lad...in those moments together to be able to engage in sensitivity... it broke down those expectations and the layers that were there at the start... that was very apparent to me... they could be who they could be" (Maree Artist Interview, 26th May 2023).

The researcher observed the boys deeply immersing themselves in their creative processes, demonstrating a blend of creativity and analytical thinking. They approached their creative endeavours with enthusiasm and persistence, and encouragement from the artists and project team supported them to collaborate, brainstorm and refine their ideas continuously, transforming their initial concepts into well-developed visions. The researcher was thoroughly impressed with the children's persistence as they adeptly balanced imaginative exploration with practical execution to bring their creative ideas to life. The children and young people showcased a remarkable ability to navigate the delicate interplay between visionary thinking and realistic implementation. Their enthusiasm was evident in the meticulous attention they paid to each detail, driven by a genuine passion for their work. Upon completing their pieces, the children exhibited great pride, eagerly discussing their accomplishments and the journey that led to their fruition. Furthermore, they displayed a profound respect for the work of their peers, offering praise that fostered a supportive and collaborative environment

Francesca described this as psychological safety. In psychologically safe environments, individuals feel comfortable taking interpersonal risks, sharing their thoughts, opinions, and ideas, and contributing without the fear of retribution or judgment (Wanless, 2016). When psychological safety is present, individuals are more likely to engage in open communication and take creative risks, leading to increased trust and mutual respect within the group setting. Research has shown that psychological safety is a key factor in promoting teamwork, problem-solving, and overall well-being in various social contexts. "That's because we created a safe space...psychological safety...creating a space where a child is allowed to...engage with their sensitivity and I think that's so beautiful and it makes what we're doing so worthwhile... when a child feels comfortable and safe to be able to do that and that's reflected in the attitudes that myself and Maree present" (Francesca, Artist Interview, 26th May 2023).

During the follow-up session in 2024, Christina explained that she felt the project had a deeper meaning for the children and young people. They learned to appreciate the outdoors, nature, and spending time together. "It's not just about materialistic things... it's doing things together that was good for their mental health... things that mean something and they will always remember."



There were some time delays due to communication, as several organisations engaged in the planning process. Despite these minor hold-ups, the team's dedication and collaboration ensured the project stayed on track and successfully organised the workshops.

There were some challenges with the weather and the outdoor environment. Some of the parents found it difficult to take their children to the beach on cold Saturday mornings. Teresa explained, "One or two of them dropped out because their kids were so small, and the weather was too cold." This meant that some of the sessions had only older siblings in attendance. Parents were worried that the lack of shelter on the coastline was not ideal for their young children. Anna explained, "... sometimes it was a bit cold and rainy, children were getting sick..."

The location of the workshops came up a lot during discussions with parents, project workers, and children. Although they enjoyed visiting Clonea Strand it was felt that the children and young people would have benefited more from visiting various locations. As outlined earlier in the report, the goal of returning to the same location was to provide children and young people with the chance to recognise the value in everyday surroundings, observe changes in the landscape, and connect these observations to ephemeral art using found materials. Christina thought that it would have been nice to visit some different venues so the children and young people could have more variety in their experience. Shirley also said that the children and young people began to get a little bored with going to the same location and would like to go to "different places."

Some of the children and young people agreed with this, when I asked the children and young people if they would change anything Peter said "...we could go to the park or somewhere else..."

Towards the end of the project, some of the children and young people asked if they could go to a different location. In response to this, both Maree and Francesca decided to take them to a different beach near Ballinacourty as this was still in keeping with the overall aims and goals of their vision of stillness and calm while also listening to the children and young people's preferences.

Deeper engagement with the parents during the planning phase would have been invaluable in effectively communicating the rationale behind revisiting the same location. As previously discussed, the primary goal was to nurture the children's ability to look deeper at their surroundings, fostering a deep sense of connection and belonging within the space. By involving the parents more extensively, the artists could have ensured a clearer understanding of this objective, emphasising the benefits of repeated exposure to the same environment. This approach was intended to help the children develop a more nuanced perception of their surroundings, encouraging them to observe details, recognise changes, and build a stronger emotional connection with the space. Enhanced parental involvement would have facilitated better support and reinforcement of these concepts at home, enriching the overall learning experience for the children.

After some reflection, the artists involved in the project realised that the adults didn't fully comprehend their roles in terms of engaging with the children and young people. Furthermore, there was some confusion regarding the roles of Maree and Francesca as the artists leading the sessions. "If we were to do this again, what would we do differently? The next time it would be more emphasis on the parents, defining their role and communicating... I think if we had tried to do it this time round, we would have been trying to do too much and something would have given... you know!" (Francesca, Artist Interview, 26th May 2023).

Additional time was required to establish connections with parents. While the artists believed they had successfully built strong bonds with the children and project workers, they expressed

a desire for more time to engage with mothers and solidify those relationships. “We broke down all of those barriers between us and Mary and Teresa but there was another ten women that we could have worked with for more time” (Maree, Artist Interview, 26th May 2023). In retrospect, the artists thought it would have been beneficial to participate in some of the women’s groups. With the intention of establishing personal connections with the women, devoid of any specific agenda or anticipated results, but rather with the sole aim of fostering relationships. “We would like [time with the adults] to just explore who we are [as artists] and how we work...I think looking back on it, it’s a huge investment to get the women’s commitment but I think now if I was doing it again I would take them out of the prefab and go to [the location]... [to discuss] why is it out on this beach and why are we doing this” (Maree, Artist Interview, 26th May, 2023.)

The artists also believed that conducting two group sessions in a single day was something they should have given more thought to in hindsight. While they made this choice with the intention of offering creative experiences to a larger number of children and young people, it turned out to be challenging due to their own energy levels. They felt they had underestimated how exhausting it would be for them. “That was exhausting... it’s so exhausting facilitating a space for a group of people... there’s so many misconceptions as well around what you do as an artist... you give your soul and that’s exhausting” (Francesca, Artist Interview, 26th May 2023).



Recommendations

Future Investment

The overall response to the project was extremely positive from all the stakeholders. As mentioned before this type of project can have major impacts on the development and wellbeing of children and young people. It is evident from the numbers in attendance that the will is there to continue the project and many of the children and adults expressed their regret that the project was coming to an end. We would recommend future investment in the Dungarvan area to continue with the project or to provide similar experiences for children and young people in the community.

In Dungarvan, children, young people, and families face a significant lack of dedicated spaces and opportunities to come together. There is a noticeable absence of investment in creating environments where these groups can connect, engage, and build a sense of community. While there are youth clubs available, they often do not cater specifically to the unique needs of the Traveller Community. As a result, this community feels overlooked and underserved. It appears that a substantial portion of investment and resources is allocated to other areas around the county, leaving Dungarvan's young population and their families without adequate support or facilities to foster their social and personal development.



Dolores, DCHP Project Coordinator, emphasised the critical need for increased investment in Dungarvan to create spaces that nurture Traveller children's sense of identity and belonging. She discussed how the current lack of dedicated areas and resources for Traveller children hampers their ability to connect with their heritage and community. Dolores highlighted the importance of developing programmes and facilities that specifically cater to the unique cultural needs of Traveller children, allowing them to feel recognised and valued within the broader community. By investing in such initiatives, Dolores believes it is possible to foster a stronger sense of identity and belonging among Traveller children, promoting their personal growth and well-being.

During the follow-up sessions that occurred in 2024, the mothers expressed the excitement and motivation they had witnessed in their children during the project. Margaret explained how her three boys were motivated to get ready on the morning of the sessions, they would "be dressed and ready to go... no encouragement needed". Anna described how the children always "...looked forward to Friday because they had Saturday to look forward to... the sea air agreed with them... they loved everything about it... they had nothing to complain about they enjoyed every bit...". Mary said "They had me mithered for weeks... they wanted to go again every week!" Teresa also described how the children and young people want the project to continue "They're always talking about it... when are we going to the beach again?"

The following letter was drafted by one of the groups, who came up with the idea themselves and all had input into it.

Dear Kids Own,

We are sending this letter for ye because we would love apply to start up this project again we think it was helpful and we really enjoyed it because we don't do stuff like this down here it's a small town.

I loved going to the beach on the bus because it would be my first time.

I would love to go to the beach again because I think the rocks and shells were really cool because I like art.

I would to go again because I got to see my friends and work together.

I would like to go to the beach again because it was a great experience for me.

I would love to go again because I love listening to the waves.

I would love to go again because I love making stuff like sculptures.

I would love to go again because I can run free.

I would love to go again because I love sand.

Eilyanna, Mary Teresa, Eileen, Barbara, Arthur, Teresa Mary,
Arthur, James, Charlie, Teresa Kate

Space and Time to Build Relationships and Buy-in

To enhance the effectiveness and collaborative dynamics of future projects, it is recommended that ample space and time be dedicated to fostering relationships among project participants and providing a platform for open discussions regarding project objectives. Research indicates that establishing strong interpersonal connections among team members positively influences overall project outcomes. Therefore, it is essential to create structured spaces and designated time slots within project timelines explicitly devoted to relationship-building activities and objective-focused discussions. This recommendation aligns with the growing understanding that a cohesive and communicative approach is needed in order to navigate challenges, share diverse perspectives, and ultimately contribute to the success of a project. By prioritising relationship-building and objective discussions, facilitators can cultivate an environment that nurtures creativity, mutual understanding, and shared commitment, resulting in more robust and innovative project outcomes (O'Sullivan, et al., 2018).

"It's so important that there is funding and an opportunity to have an interaction over a sustained period of time and although we had a great amount of time to build those relationships with the children, it's so important that we also have that time to have that with mothers because making art is an experience and if you want to make meaning that takes time to develop... you can only do that by getting comfortable in a space and comfortable with people and allowing that to just slowly evolve over time and that's not something that can happen in five seconds... you can't rush it!" (Francesca Artist Interview, 26th May 2023).

Flexible Project Design

Flexibility and adaptability were crucial for project workers and artists to meet the ever-changing needs and preferences of children. Artists frequently had to think on their feet, adjusting plans based on the specific group of children and young people in attendance. Predicting the attendance of parents and children for each session was challenging due to the previously mentioned difficulties. For future success, it is imperative to embrace a flexible design that can dynamically respond to the unique requirements of the community and the individuals present during each session. This approach ensures a more responsive and tailored engagement with the diverse participants, fostering an environment conducive to the project's overall success. Projects that prioritise the process and take into account the needs of the community, rather than just concentrating on outcomes or the final product, will have a more significant impact on participants. By moving forward at the participants' pace and recognising the obstacles they encounter, these projects encourage greater involvement and efficiency.

Furthermore, creating informal spaces to gather feedback facilitates deeper and more meaningful conversations about the project and gains valuable insights into parents' ideas and feelings. It is recommended that future projects allow for the creation of these types of informal spaces that foster open dialogue and engagement to further enhance the quality of the research.

Different roles in the project

Incorporating early years educators or youth workers with established infrastructure and pre-existing relationships with parents can prove instrumental in breaking down barriers for artists. These professionals, already embedded within the community and having cultivated a rapport with parents, serve as invaluable bridges between artists and families. Their existing connections offer a trusted and familiar entry point for artists to engage with parents, fostering a sense of openness and receptivity. Moreover, the presence of early years educators and youth workers can contribute to a more seamless integration of artistic initiatives into the community, as these individuals bring firsthand knowledge of the cultural dynamics and sensitivities within the group. By leveraging the groundwork laid by early years educators and youth workers, artists can navigate cultural nuances, build trust, and collaboratively create an environment where artistic endeavours are not only welcomed but embraced as integral components of community engagement and enrichment. Given the previously mentioned lack of funding and resources for the Dungarvan Traveller Health Project, it may be advisable to suggest allocating more resources to similar future projects to ensure their success and sustainability. Furthermore, incorporating individuals with expertise in Early Education and Youth Work could ensure a safe space is provided for children and young people assisting with practical tasks and supporting their engagement at an even deeper level.

Having open discussions with mothers about artists and their work could be a constructive way to enhance their understanding and appreciation of the role of the artists and the aims of the project. To create a meaningful conversation, perhaps taking them to the beach and let the beauty of their surroundings inspire a discussion on the importance of being in the outdoors and being present in the moment.

“We would like to just explore who we are and how we work...I think looking back on it, it's a huge investment to get the women's commitment but I think now if I was doing it again I would take them out of the prefab and go to [the location]... [to discuss] why is it out on this beach and why are we doing this” (Maree, Artist Interview, 26th May, 2023.)

Planning Time

Future funding applications should incorporate further dedicated planning time as an essential component. Artists invested significant hours beyond workshop sessions and allocated planning time, engaging in reflective practices on their interactions with children and young people and planning for subsequent activities. Allocating time for planning sessions with project workers is crucial to ensure a comprehensive understanding of session objectives and how collaborative support can be provided to artists during workshops. This proactive approach enhances the overall effectiveness of the project by fostering alignment and clarity in the planning process, ultimately contributing to a more cohesive and purposeful execution of each session.



Conclusion

The Dungarvan Early Years Art Project stands as an extraordinary achievement, leaving an indelible mark on the children and young people fortunate enough to participate. This innovative endeavour, the inaugural of its kind in Dungarvan, has not only captured the enthusiasm of its attendees but has also garnered widespread interest and endorsement from all stakeholders, emphasising the compelling need for its continuation.

The unwavering dedication of project workers Mary and Teresa played a pivotal role in bringing this project to fruition, ensuring its accessibility for all interested children and young people. Despite initial hesitations to embrace their own creative inclinations, the transformative nature of the project became apparent, illustrating how even facilitators can be inspired to unleash their creative potential.

The artistic guidance provided by Francesca and Maree emerged as the project's cornerstone, demonstrating a remarkable finesse in allowing children and young people the space and time to pursue their interests, fostering an environment that nurtured not only creative expression but also significant outcomes related to children's rights, spiritual development, and creative thinking. The artists' approach went beyond the traditional role of instructors; they cultivated profound connections with the children and young people, as evidenced by the artists' expressed sense of responsibility during insightful interviews. The impact of their guidance extended into the realm of holistic development, as the artists, through thoughtful guidance, encouragement, and support, instilled qualities of teamwork, empathy, and self-expression.

One noteworthy dimension of this project was the artists' commitment to a symbolic ritual of closure—a poignant act of returning found items to the beach. This final gesture exemplified a deep sense of responsibility, imparting valuable lessons about respect and signifying the culmination of the children and young people's meaningful journey with the artists. These considerations and actions underscored a profound bond and shared responsibility between the artists and the children and young people, showcasing that the project was not merely an artistic endeavour but a transformative experience that left an enduring impact on both the artistic process and the personal development of the young participants.

As a researcher privileged to witness this transformative journey, I extend my heartfelt gratitude to all those involved in making the Dungarvan Early Years Art Project an enriching and memorable chapter in the lives of these talented and articulate young



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