

RESEARCH WITH SCHOOLS IN SOUTH DUBLIN COUNTY: Creating a culture of creativity

Until now, TENDERFOOT has worked with eight secondary schools in South Dublin County through the Tenderfoot programme each year, with eleven schools being involved in total since 2007. Over the next three years, it aims to expand this, through the IMPACT plan, to work with all thirty-five secondary schools in the county, starting with the implementation of six writing hubs across the region in Spring 2020.

Over the course of this research period in 2019, we have been aiming to make 'meaningful contact' with all thirty-five second level schools in South Dublin County, through creating a connection with a 'liaison teacher' who has a particular interest in theatre/drama and in being involved with Tenderfoot. The process of making 'meaningful contact' takes personal attention and time, with a recognition that teachers are under pressure. The process of making contact with schools is gradual and ongoing.

So far, we have established contact in the form of liaison teachers with twenty-five schools in South Dublin County. Of these connections, seventeen are 'meaningful'. This work is continuing.

We have taken the following steps in our work with secondary schools:

- Making **initial connection** with each (of thirty-five) second-level school in the region and working towards establishing a '**liaison teacher**' who could be the main contact with Tenderfoot.
- **Visiting schools** who have had no prior connection with Tenderfoot to introduce the Tenderfoot programme.
- Creating and sending a **survey on the provision of theatre/drama for secondary school students in South Dublin County** for each liaison teacher to complete. This survey has allowed us to begin to map the provision of theatre/drama in secondary schools in South Dublin County and to better understand what exists, what is valued and where the gaps are.
- Hosting an '**Arts and Education Forum**' in The Civic Theatre in September 2019 for artists and educators.

The process of connecting with each school in South Dublin County, the survey on the provision of theatre-related activities in secondary schools in the region, and the hosting of an 'Arts and Education Forum' are helping us to create a better understanding of what exists in terms of theatre/arts provision, what is valued, and what is needed.

In this section, we outline findings from our work with teachers in second level schools in South Dublin County, firstly those emerging from the survey sent to liaison teachers around the provision of theatre/drama in secondary schools in South Dublin, and, secondly, those from discussions with both teachers and artists at our Arts and Education Forum.

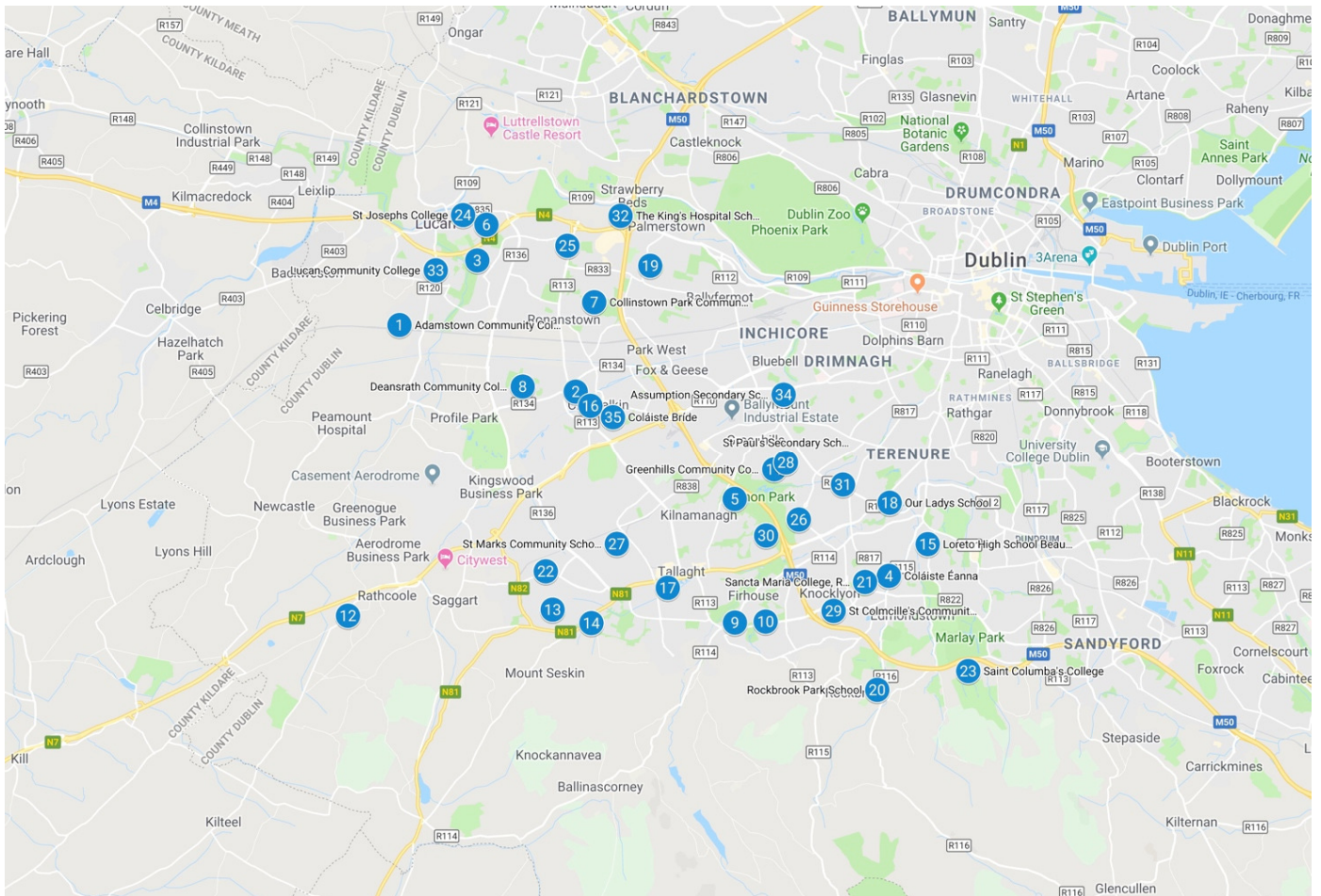
Tenderfoot is aiming to contribute towards a ‘culture of creativity’ in secondary schools in South Dublin County.

In order to do this, we need to know what exists and what is valued in terms of theatre/drama provision in second-level schools. The aims of our survey were to:

- Find out what already exists in secondary schools in South Dublin County, in terms of in-school theatre/performance activity (including the teaching of drama, in-school drama clubs/groups, and in-school theatrical productions).
- Learn more about what opportunities exist for students of secondary schools in South Dublin County to engage with drama and theatre activities outside of school.
- Explore what is valued in terms of theatre arts, both by schools themselves and by the funding structures that exist.

15 teachers from 15 schools in South Dublin County have responded to this survey.

Second Level Schools in South Dublin County



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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Adamstown Community College 2. Coláiste Chillian* 3. Coláiste Cois Life* 4. Coláiste Éanna 5. Coláiste de hÍde 6. Coláiste Phádraigh 7. Collinstown Park Community College* 8. Deansrath Community College* 9. Firhouse Community College 10. Firhouse Educate Together Secondary School* 11. Greenhills Community College 12. Holy Family Community School* 13. Mount Seskin Community College 14. Killinarden Community School* 15. Loreto High School Beaufort 16. Moyle Park College* 17. Old Bawn Community School* 18. Our Lady's School | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 19. Palmerstown Community School* 20. Rockbrook Park School 21. Sancta Maria College, Rathfarnham* 22. St. Aidan's Community School 23. St. Columba's College 24. St. Joseph's College 25. St. Kevin's Community College* 26. St. Macdara's Community College 27. St. Mark's Community School 28. St. Paul's Secondary School 29. St. Colmcille's Community School 30. Tallaght Community School* 31. Templeogue College* 32. The King's Hospital School 33. Lucan Community College* 34. Assumption Secondary School* 35. Coláiste Bríde* |
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**We have established 'meaningful contact' with schools marked with an asterisk.*

What have we found?

IN-SCHOOL DRAMA/THEATRE OPPORTUNITIES

- 33% of schools surveyed have no drama/theatre options at all.
- 53% have a Transition Year (TY) drama module.
- 27% of the schools hold an annual theatrical production.
- 13% of the schools hold a theatrical production every two years.

In the majority of schools (60%), liaison teachers estimated that under 20% of students would take part in some kind of drama/theatre activity over their six years of secondary education.

Aims of drama/theatre arts programme (if one exists) include:

- Personal development and the development of confidence/self-esteem
- Development of teamwork/participation/inclusion/camaraderie
- Development of communication skills
- Development of critical thinking skills
- Exposure of students to theatre/the arts/encouraging a love of the arts
- Enhancing exam texts
- Engaging with contemporary drama
- Building an ethos of hard work

Drama/theatre tends to be connected to the teaching of English. The 'liaison teachers' tend to be English teachers, TY coordinators, or in some cases, a teacher who has a particular personal interest in drama/theatre/music. In 80% of the responding schools, any drama/theatre activity involves, or has involved in the past, English teachers.

Findings point towards schools having access to very little external funding for drama/theatre activities.

- In 67% of the schools which responded, any drama/theatre activity is voluntary by teachers.
- Any theatrical productions are self-funded by the school; two of the schools surveyed included donations/sponsorship from local businesses to put on productions.

In the majority of the schools (73%), the teachers involved decide on content for theatre/drama workshops.

- In 27% of the schools, teachers mentioned that students are involved in this decision.
- 33% of the schools said that students would be involved in choosing plays for production.

Contemporary theatre and playwriting appear to be generally undervalued.

- The majority of productions in the schools surveyed have been musicals.

- One school surveyed put on an original piece written by the teacher in the recent past.
- One school has produced mainly pantomimes.
- One school surveyed includes scripts written by students.

13% of the schools surveyed have collaborated with another school to put on a performance.

Factors influencing the choice of shows put on in schools:

- Cost/budget
- Cast size/size of class/roles available
- Interests of teachers and students involved
- What is popular at the time
- Deemed capabilities of students
- Relationship to curriculum
- Suitability for students and audience
- Options offered by 'Act Up Festival' at Rua Red

Factors which might make a play unsuitable to put on in school:

- 40% of the responding teachers mention that content would be an issue.¹
- 33% of schools mention budget/funding as an issue.
- 13% of schools mention lack of expertise/technical support.
- 13% of schools mention lack of space or a stage for theatre activities.

We asked liaison teachers what they would ideally like to see happening, in terms of theatre/drama opportunities in schools? Some of the suggestions included the following:

- Running an annual performance
- Access to theatre/performance training from outside the school/professional organisations, for both students and teachers
- Drama club in school
- Increasing the quality of drama training/production
- Drama courses for Junior Cycle
- Drama as a TY module
- Funding for drama/theatre activities
- Expanding in-school performance to contemporary plays (moving beyond musicals)
- Scripting and performing of plays by students themselves
- Providing workshops to an increased number of students
- A dedicated space for theatre
- Greater emphasis on and resources for performance
- Exposing students to more professional theatre productions

¹ We have been interested to find out if there are guidelines to this content, and if so, what they might be – see below for further discussion on this.

THEATRE OPPORTUNITIES OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL

- 67% of the schools surveyed said that they had some engagement with theatre outside school, either seeing a production or taking part in/creating a production.
- In the vast majority (60%) of schools surveyed, liaison teachers estimated that a student would have the opportunity to see a play/performance in a professional venue once or twice during their second level education.

Connecting with professional organisations

Organisations mentioned by teachers which are currently providing schools in South Dublin County with theatre/performance workshops included:

- Kairos Communications, Maynooth (live TV studio days for TY students)
- Tenderfoot at The Civic Theatre
- INSPIRE Theatre Programme / The Civic Theatre
- Film club with Peter Kelly
- 'Act Up' one-act theatre festival for secondary school students/ Tallaght Community Arts
- Music Generation South Dublin (National Music Education Programme)

73% of the schools surveyed currently have no connection with an outside/professional organisation for the provision of theatre/drama activities in the school. Just over half of the liaison teachers expressed an interest in having some such engagement.

What would teachers like to see provided to schools by outside/professional organisations in terms of theatre/performance?

- Teacher training for facilitating drama-related activities
- Drama/theatre workshops for students
- Funding to provide such workshops in schools
- More use of Rua Red facilities/expertise
- Increase in what is already being provided by Tenderfoot/INSPIRE programme/Rua Red

Knowledge of funding structures – Creative Ireland and the Arts Council:

- 80% of the liaison teachers who responded had not heard of Creative Ireland.
- 33% of these teachers had not heard of the Arts Council.
- 60% of the teachers had heard of the Arts Council but, to their knowledge, their school had never engaged with it.
- One of the teachers reported that their school had had some form of engagement (applied for funding) with the Arts Council.
- 93% of the schools surveyed had been to see a performance in the Civic Theatre; 43% of these schools had come through the connection with Tenderfoot.

How is this information useful?

This information, combined with discussions with teachers and artists at the 'Arts and Education Forum', has allowed us to begin to better understand the current provision, needs and interests of schools in terms of theatre arts provision. The learning from the gradual process of making connections with schools, from the survey sent to liaison teachers, and from the 'Arts and Education Forum', is feeding into the development of a regional model of professional theatre arts provision in secondary schools in South Dublin County.

ARTS AND EDUCATION FORUM, THE CIVIC THEATRE

(A short video of highlights from the Arts and Education Forum is available [here](#)).

On Saturday, September 28, 2019, Tenderfoot and The Civic Theatre hosted an open **Arts and Education Forum** for artists and teachers to help inform our thinking towards the expansion and development of Tenderfoot. Key speakers, including Martin Drury (Senior Arts Consultant) and Tony Reekie (Creative Producer, Lyra, Edinburgh), presented on our national context and international practice. We also presented initial findings from our research on theatre provision in second-level schools in South Dublin County.

The Forum functioned on a number of levels:

- It provided an important opportunity for stakeholders, teachers and artists to meet face-to-face, as a first step towards building a regional theatre arts and education community.
- It provided both artists and teachers with an opportunity to understand the common territory shared by the arts and education sectors.
- It provided an opportunity for Tenderfoot to share plans for expansion and development with interested teachers and to hear their feedback on this.
- It provided an opportunity for the Tenderfoot team to hear a nuanced and open discussion on the benefits and challenges of developing that shared territory.



Tenderfoot in action, The Civic Theatre

DEALING WITH DIFFICULT TOPICS IN CONTEMPORARY THEATRE WITH YOUNG ADULTS: Age guidelines, taboo and censorship

One aspect of this research has been to create a clearer understanding of the benefits and challenges of **freedom of expression** for young adults. Tenderfoot is committed to **contemporary work**, both in the work it creates with young people and the work it exposes its young people to. Contemporary work is more likely to reflect the world in a very immediate way, and, as such, contain challenging content. This can be complex territory, both for artists working with young people, and for teachers, who are navigating the expectations of students, parents, school ethos and the curriculum.

In this period of expansion and development of the Tenderfoot programme, it has been important, and is of continued importance, to explore how to maintain a balance between, on the one hand, maintaining the theatre as a space for expansion and for the exploration of complex or 'taboo' topics, and giving young people uncensored freedom of expression in the work that they create, and, on the other hand, protecting and supporting the young people through this process, and managing the expectations of schools and parents.

Throughout this research, we have been exploring these issues through several avenues: through our survey with 'liaison teachers' in second level schools, which revealed that content is an important deciding matter in terms of the theatrical work young people perform and the work they are exposed to outside of school; through our discussions with international companies, Lyra, O Teatrao and Kopergietery; and through the Arts and Education Forum, where we facilitated an open discussion with both artists and educators working with young adults.

The **questions guiding our discussions** have been the following:

- What are the benefits for students/young adults in encountering contemporary theatre work?
- Are age guidelines for theatre appropriate, or useful?
- If you were going to see a show with students, what would be not permissible? What would you be afraid of? Are there 'taboo topics'?
- Do specific guidelines for appropriate content exist, that you know of?
- How are difficult issues which might emerge when creating work with young people or exposing young people to contemporary theatre dealt with? Are there mechanisms which could be put in place that support this?



Tenderfoot in action, The Civic Theatre

The idea, and importance, of **theatre as a space to push boundaries and to discuss and challenge difficult issues** emerged through discussions at the Arts and Education Forum, as well as in discussions with international companies, Lyra, O Teatrao and Kopergietyery.

Theatre for young people was described by one participant at the Arts and Education Forum (a facilitator of theatre with young people) as a 'third space where young people can push the boundaries of who they are, figuring out who they are maybe'. Another participant, with experience of creating theatre with young people, said:

It is interesting, like the whole nature, in a way, of theatre is to push boundaries and ask difficult questions and discuss difficult issues, but we have to be sensitive or concerned about how this might be difficult for the young people. I have been very surprised with some of the plays that we did: the young people had no problems at all about some of the things, whereas, when the parents came, they were a little wobbly, so to me, nothing really is taboo and I would encourage asking all those awful questions because I think that's what theatre is ...

However, **content** was raised as an important issue for teachers, both through the survey sent to liaison teachers and through the Arts and Education Forum. The survey showed that content would be an important factor in choosing shows that students could perform and see, but didn't necessarily specify what content which could cause difficulty might consist of. In terms of content and 'taboo' issues in literature around theatre for young people, there is some agreement among theatre makers that it is not

what is presented to children, but rather *how* it is presented. Argentinian theatre maker, Hector Presa dismisses the idea of 'taboo topics' for children. He says:

To me, there is not and there should not be any differences. I do not believe there are taboo topics; what I believe is that there are different kinds of narrative that belong to different ages.²

Several teachers at the forum raised the point of **responsibility** in terms of dealing with the fallout/backlash from complicated issues:

So, I think, if you do bring a school to a difficult show, then, ultimately, it's the teacher who has to deal with the fallout of that. So even though they are brought with the best will in the world, if there are issues, ultimately it is the school, or the teacher, who will have to manage that. I think that doesn't cover that responsibility. Whose responsibility it is, I am not sure, but there has to be an awareness of that ...

It was pointed out that **trust** in teachers, both in school and in a theatre setting, is very important, and trust that the young people will not be 'thrown into an area where they are uncomfortable':

I suppose there is something about trust, mutual trust. You don't throw things at people before the trust is there. I mean it would be a lovely thing if there were absolutely no boundaries. It is about sensitivity.

There is also complexity around the idea of '**maturity**', where two students of the same age may not be at the same level of maturity:

I think within a group of people, you can have some who are really able to deal with difficult issues, and trying to balance that is difficult.

... because at the end of the day, there are still students who may come across as mature, but they are not, you know what I mean? They may not know much about ... from experience ... so it's a difficult one.

And there is also the issue of dealing with a **multicultural context**, in which certain generally accepted ideas may be unacceptable to a particular young person, or to their family:

I also think in a multicultural context as well, you have all sorts of areas of potential issue, mixed school, backgrounds, practices, all that. For one, a conversation about wearing the scarf, perfectly reasonable for us, Western women, whereas for someone who is wearing the scarf, it would be really something that [raises issues].

Are age guidelines, then, important when young people are brought to see theatre? Or is it about sensitivity and confidence on the part of the teacher, and creating a framework for discussion around the issues that the performance raises, for example, discussing

² Cited in Goldfinger, Evelyn, 2011. 'Taboo Themes in Theatre for Children: Between Theory and Practice'.

these in advance with the young people in order to prepare them and de-briefing with them afterwards?

And you have a responsibility to know what it will be so that you are not caught out ... prepared. Abuse, or incest: all of those things are part of the world. Weirdly, we are ok with children experiencing violence in film/TV, but when it comes to sexuality or nudity, or the other end of the love/hate spectrum, we think we can't talk about it. It is up to the facilitator to be emotionally prepared to do the work. You may think [as a teacher], 'I am not going to open that box'.

We discussed these issues with Lyra, O Teatrao and Kopergietyery to see how they were dealing with them. We asked whether there was anything in particular that they wouldn't bring their young people to see. The main potentially 'taboo' topics discussed were nudity, swearing, sexuality, homosexuality, abuse, suicide and abortion.

For all three companies, the main concern when choosing shows for the young people in their care to see was whether they would enjoy the show, whether they would find a connection with it in some way. However, the issue of difficult topics and reactions to these emerged as important in different ways.

For Lyra, attention would certainly be paid to a show's age guidelines, but Lyra's young company (age 11+) are often brought to see adult shows, with some discussion of content beforehand to prepare them. Swearing is usually seen as fine for secondary school students, but would need to be flagged with the school. Nudity would be acceptable for age 16+. For Kopergietyery, the age recommendation seemed much more focused on the possibility of having a connection with the show and enjoying it, rather than on potentially 'taboo' topics. The company has a **dedicated staff member to work with schools**. For all in-house shows, this staff member is responsible for placing an age recommendation. Rather than doing this alone, she does this by sitting with a (young) audience and gauging their reactions. No issue is seen by the company as 'taboo', and Ghent (Belgium) is described as a generally liberal environment. However, as was raised also by teachers in South Dublin County, particularly in a multicultural environment, what is seen as 'normal' for some families may be 'taboo' for others. It is up to the school/teacher to **prepare the terrain in advance**, by coming to see a show in advance, and/or preparing students by pre-show discussion of issues. **Kopergietyery provides training for teachers to prepare their students for shows.**

The importance of theatre as a space for allowing complex issues to arise and the importance of not limiting the scope of what young people are able, in particular, to create, was reiterated by artists working with young people in a theatre context. However, the importance of strong support systems to deal with these as they emerge was also pointed to, in terms of supporting and/or training teachers to prepare topics in advance, holding pre- and post-show discussions with young people, and the presence of a trained person/people during shows and workshops to support young people if and as difficult topics arise for them.

As stated above, Tenderfoot is **committed to contemporary work**, both in the work to which it exposes its apprentice theatre makers, as well as the work that is created with

them. Both due to the pressure of school curricula, and a feeling that they should keep strictly to theatre that is directly related to this, as well as due to potential complex issues arising from contemporary theatre, teachers and schools often avoid exposing their students to this type of work, and keep to classical theatre. The related issues of the importance of contemporary theatrical work and the complex issues which may arise through engaging with it are key for Tenderfoot at this point of its development for two reasons.

- Firstly, in the context of a shift in educational priorities towards, among other areas, creativity, critical thinking and well-being, we make the case that it is important for students to be exposed to a range of theatre, and theatre that is relevant to contemporary life and to the lives of young people, even if that work is not directly on the curriculum.
- Secondly, freedom of expression is of utmost important in the Tenderfoot process. However, in order to work closely with schools and create a regional/national model, continued discussion between Tenderfoot and participating schools is needed around the related issues of contemporary work, freedom of expression and age guidelines.

What have we learned from this?

The insights gleaned from these discussions have provided us with a deeper understanding of how to navigate the complex interplay between contemporary work, freedom of expression and age guidelines. We started this process looking for clear guidelines for what is considered age-appropriate in theatre for young people. It is becoming clear that universal guidelines around this do not exist. It is also becoming clear, particularly from discussions at an international level, that if they did, it would be detrimental to this type of work.

However, there are mechanisms that can be put in place to support artists, teachers and young people in navigating this complex territory, and ultimately supporting and protecting young people as they deal with complex issues which might arise. These include:

- **Presence of ‘welfare officers’, or other trained personnel**, to support young people in the process of creating work. Tenderfoot has, since 2008, its second year, included two welfare officers, one male, one female, as part of the annual Tenderfoot mentor team. Welfare officers have a pastoral role: they oversee general behavior, supervise breaks and are available to students to chat should any issues, practical or otherwise, arise.
- **Preparation of young people** for the issues which might arise during a performance, **and debriefing sessions afterwards**, either carried out by theatre facilitators/staff or teachers. This is the model used for Tenderfoot’s pilot programme, INSPIRE, in Tallaght Community School, which is investigating the effect of sustained exposure to contemporary theatre work on a whole school population. The pilot is built around facilitated trips to the theatre for targeted

classes, with each trip supported by a preparatory workshop and follow-up post-show discussion with the performing company. These supports are carried out by an experienced arts facilitator, with class teachers continuing the debriefing process within school hours in the days following a trip.

- **Training of teachers** around how to facilitate discussion of contemporary theatre with students. Learning from our research with schools is being incorporated into the development and expansion of Tenderfoot. One example of this is 'Page to Stage', a workshop developed by Veronica Coburn as part of the Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT) Support Programme, offered by Tenderfoot and The Civic Theatre to second level teachers. The programme aims to support secondary school teachers as they start to work with drama in a school setting, by inviting them to think about drama in an educational setting as about participation and understanding through creative expression, rather than about a right or wrong opinion on the interpretation of a play. The workshop aims to give teachers the confidence to facilitate their students' engagement with drama and theatre.

Our findings point towards a generally narrow and limited engagement with theatre in second level schools in South Dublin County, with a general lack of engagement with theatre, both in school, and outside of school; a lack of engagement with contemporary theatrical work; and a lack of importance placed on the development of writing, and articulation of voice, of young people themselves.

However, from our discussions and the results of our survey, this lack of engagement does not translate into a lack of interest on the part of second level teachers. There is a sense from them that they are limited by pressure and a sense of responsibility to work that is directly related to the curriculum. We have also found a real desire from our liaison teachers to expand theatre-related activities, both within and outside of school, and to engage with Tenderfoot as part of this.

There is also a clear need for balancing freedom of expression with a framework of support, for students, teachers and artists working with young people, in order to deal positively with complex issues which might arise as a result of working with contemporary theatre.

In order to move towards encouraging a 'culture of creativity' in schools, with the ultimate aim of fostering a more creatively engaged population, capable of flexibility and critical thinking, more funding and engagement are needed for schools and for teachers to be able to both engage with contemporary theatre and have a framework of support and training to deal with complex issues.