An examination of the means by which Monkeyshine Theatre artists meet and support children to partner with artists using reciprocal and dialogic means

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Research Context and Rationale

"*Our work always begins with a question. We question, we explore, we nurture, we kindle, always excited to see what will grow. Staying alive to possibilities and open to discoveries.*" (Monkeyshine, 2023)

This research project set out to explore the nature of reciprocity and dialogic exchange in a workshop to inform performance work for and with children. Monkeyshine is an arts and theatre company with open and collaborative creative exploration fundamental to their espoused methodologies of questioning and exploring, nurturing and kindling.

The content of the researched workshop was developed as a component of Monkeyshine's More-Than-Human project for Ready, Steady, SHOW at the Civic Theatre. Ready, Steady, SHOW! is an ongoing programme of work for young people funded by The Arts Council of Ireland and South Dublin County Council. The workshop in question was facilitated entirely in role by the artists as The Ministry for All Beings, whereby children were invited to become Agents of Change.

The research call was circulated by Technological University Dublin in partnership with the Civic Theatre, Tallaght.

- o The research concern emulated from the desire to create a dialogue which is founded on respect and empathetic understanding, and is both temporal and 'unfinished' in nature.
- o The research purpose was to explore pedagogies which support children's agentic input in exploratory workshops informing performance creation by Monkeyshine on behalf of the Civic Theatre, Tallaght.
- o The research objective was to illustrate the means by which Monkeyshine support children's agentic input in exploratory workshops informing performance, in order to improve that practice.

- The **research question** which framed the enquiry was "*By which means do Monkeyshine Theatre artists meet and support children to partner with artists using reciprocal and dialogic means?*

The small-scale study was completed by research consultant Dr Tríona Stokes of Maynooth University. The research was conducted with 3rd Class children (aged 9-10) in a school in West Dublin in 2022, along with their teachers, and the participant artists.

A Review of Pertinent Literature

Introduction

The review of literature sets out the nature and context of a small-scale Irish study which investigates a school-based participatory theatre project. It considers the nature of participation and the extent to which the work of theatre artists represents a child-centred and democratic approach to participation within a partnership model. This necessitates an examination of agency and the nature of its articulation within the school context. Aligned with agency is the construction of voice in this domain. Further areas of discussion include an examination of the main methodologies through which the work of theatre artists in schools is often conducted. Active methodologies which facilitate expression through the body are described, as part of the pre-production workshop that is the focal point of this study.

Theatre in Education

Theatre artists work in schools in a variety of different ways and for a variety of purposes. The duration of their visit, and whether that visit is singular or part of a series of visits, will be a factor in determining its remit. A brief overview of the history and traditions of theatre artists' input in schools follows with an identification of the nature of the school visit pertaining to this project.

Theatre-in-Education (TiE), established in the UK in the 1960s, enabled children's access to theatrical productions via theatre artists engaging with classes in schools. The aim of TiE has been cited as the provision of:

> *"an experience for children that will be intensely absorbing, challenging, even provocative, and an unrivalled stimulus for further work on the chosen subject in and out of school"* (Jackson, 2005:1).

By engaging students in a fully embodied participatory learning experience, the learning objective of the content contained within the play in question could be met through TiE, as part of a programme of theatre experience, rather than merely a theatre viewing (O'Toole, 1976; 2009).

TiE programmes have often been founded on issue-based themes, providing opportunities for students to explore challenging content through workshop participation (O'Toole, 2009). Writers on Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) have embraced Bruner's (1960) belief that any subject can be introduced to a child at virtually any age in some form. It has also been argued that TYA companies hold responsibility:

> "*to serve as pedagogues, teaching children about theatre and aesthetics, contributing to their social development in a diverse world, and incorporating links to school curricula*" (Omasta, 2009: 113-4).

Further, it is argued that as a meaningful way in which societal healing can be brought about, radical theatre in this field is suited to and indeed necessary for young audiences (Schonmann, 2022). Such ideals are broadly representative of progressive educationalists with respect to primary education, and the age-group represented by this study.

A continuum of engagement can be seen in theatre-making workshops in schools extending from the use of games and exercises connected with the theme under scrutiny, to inviting participants to devise solutions using a more problem-based approach. The methodologies used in TiE have been influenced by Drama in Education (DiE), and the work of Gavin Bolton and Dorothy Heathcote, including 'Mantle of the Expert' (Heathcote and Bolton, 1995). DiE, more commonly referred to as process drama, has been defined as offering participants opportunities for Heathcotian 'living through' selected aspects of experience through the manipulation of drama conventions (Neelands and Goode, 1992).

Neelands (2018) traces a shift in more recent years from Theatre in Education to Applied Theatre. Applied Theatre is a term used to define theatre, extending beyond the traditional scope of conventional Western theatre forms, whereby all participants, including actors and spectators, are engaged as active theatre makers (O'Connor and O'Connor, 2009). Applied theatre can be crafted in response to social or political concerns, to instigate and mould social change. As such, it often constitutes a "process where difference and change can be wrought

through its making" (O'Connor and O'Connor, 2009:471). In the move towards Applied Theatre, Neelands' (2018:13) insists that drama practitioners "took their methods of working with them". The focus in this research is on the drama methods used in a pre-production theatre workshop and how they are applied to explore the associated performance narrative.

Pre-production workshops occur at any time prior to the viewing of the theatre productions. Participation in theatre can extend from the role of an audience member, to 'vocally, verbally and physically engaged' arts-makers becoming part of an explorative theatre-making process (McCaslin, 2006:10). The workshop content is framed by a selected performance theme and narrative in development, to which characters are added.

Theatre Artists in Schools

When taking place in a school, pre-production workshops will be influenced to some extent by the nature of the school as a working institution. Theatre artists entering a school space are subject to the institutional norms and established protocols of that space. Schools are governed by rules, and thus, school activities operate within those rules and norms (Devine, 2004). Moreover, schools are institutions with deeply embedded practices that have long served to reinforce power relations. For example, traditional practices of seeking permission to leave one's seat or to ask a question are commonplace in many Irish schools.

From negotiating gaining access to the school building, to signing into the visitors' book, such introductory interactions can shape the nature of the experience for artists working in schools. Time is governed by school schedules and lunch breaks, and space is in high demand. Therefore, both must be negotiated, which is done to some extent prior to artists' visit, but it also happens in situ, for example, reworking a classroom space to suit the workshop needs.

As theatre artists operate in the physical school space, this itself shapes the context in which they meet and create with the children. Therefore, the space itself and the differing roles adopted by artist and teacher are dependent on communication and negotiation. Thus, the traditional model of power relations between adult and child, whereby the child is significantly less agentic, are subject to renegotiation.

Segueing into Drama- Setting the Scene

The conventional classroom space, synonymous with children seated in rows or groups of tables, is usually transformed for theatre work, and often for drama. Singh (2004:56) contends that "the active playfulness of drama can loosen this rigid ordering of space and time". This can assist with signalling the commencement of a different way of working within the school space, which may have been transformed to some extent. In this way, standard school norms are being relaxed and expectations changed. Furthermore, the act of breaking down the physical order of the classroom and reducing the social distance between teacher and child, can further serve to infuse trust and make conversation possible (Singh, 2004). The affordance both of such a metaphorical space has been likened to "a space for enquiry" (Cahill, 2014:35). Thereby, the associated curricular learning content is approached in both a broad and integrated manner across cognitive and affective domains.

Process drama represents an embodied form of learning. Throughout the past four decades, Haseman and O'Toole have defined process drama as a powerful way to learn experientially through all the elements of drama:

> "*an approach which brings your mind, body, emotions, imagination and memories into the classroom to shape and deepen your learning*" (2020, viii).

Piazzoli (2018:95) contends that in drama, "we let the body drive and use language to express what the body is communicating". To this end, the body initiates both the action and the communication, preceding all verbal communication. Thus, the body is fundamental to drama and action, which is at the centre of it, and without the body instigating the action to drive the narrative forward, there can be no drama. The ensuing verbal communication is therefore intrinsic to the dramatic expression but only as part of the holistic expression arising from the body, and not distinct from it. In this way, the knowledge or 'knowing' of the body is honoured as an entity in itself.

Researching Theatre-making Workshops

Active learning methodologies are wide-ranging in nature and purpose and include as a subset drama methodologies. Active learning is recognised as a contributing factor in the development

of self-confidence, self-discipline and self-control in the learner (PDST, 2023). By becoming an active participant in their learning, children can engage with content and acquire knowledge, skills and attitudes in a multitude of ways. This approach increases the likelihood of learners internalising the content explored and applying it in their everyday lives (PDST, 2023).

Some active methodologies encourage talk and discussion while others extend beyond talk and discussion, to entail play, physical action, trail or fieldwork. For example, methodologies such as walking debate offer participants an opportunity to 'vote with their feet' and group themselves according to their viewpoints with others in space. Similarly, games are used for active engagement and for a variety of purposes, from socialisation to serving as icebreakers in drama workshops.

By their nature, drama methodologies require of participants that they work with one another to explore the given pretext. Where children work together as individuals as part of pairs or groups to fulfil certain roles or tasks, they are engaging in co-operatively learning. Collaborative learning has its roots in social constructivism and demands deep engagement with other learners in achieving a shared learning goal or objective. The work of Vygotsky(1998) established the centrality of social aspects of teaching and learning encounters to their success, whereby individuals construct knowledge arising from experiences where the information they receive from others socially through speech and action is transformed into new knowledge.

There are many drama methodologies, more commonly referred to as drama conventions, shared by drama teachers and theatre practitioners alike. Theatre techniques such as soliloquy and alter ego are often used by drama practitioners, and related conventions such as Thought tracking and Voices in the Head find frequent usage in process drama. It has been asserted that the key conventions of Teacher-in-Role and hot-seating were developed jointly and in parallel by DiE and TiE practitioners (O'Toole, 2009). Moreover, Cibroly et al. (2021) identified the use of these 'core' drama conventions worldwide based on a study of drama teaching in higher education across three Western countries. The definition of 'core' drama conventions such as those alluded to, are as set out in Neelands and Goode (1992).

Theatre-making workshops, by their nature also offer a variety of ways, with means for rich and layered meaning expressed through the body and physical voice. In offering children varied

means of exchange, deep and nuanced meaning can emerge featuring a keen use of the aesthetic. In terms of facilitation, to use drama well requires knowledge of the power of the art form and the felt knowledge associated with aesthetic learning, thereby "not simply appreciating it as a lexicon of potentially useful pedagogic strategies" (Winston and Hasemann, 2010: 473).

Finding Voice

A conceptualisation of voice in drama might begin with an acknowledgement of the fundamental property of voice or vocals to the creation of sound, character and specifying vocal expression as a form of meaning. Voice acting is a term sometimes used to describe dramatic sound delivery in a theatre production where there is a separation of the visual from the aural signs, such as radio drama. Voice is thus a component of semiotics, as a significant sign or symbol of meaning within theatre. For example, tone of voice can be analysed through semiotic studies, whereby that which is signified is presented in audible form and is interpreted by its receiver (Quiles, 2015).

Conceptualisation of voice more generally across education and educational research in recent years centres on an examination of power or agency of the subject. In recognition of the child as a human being, primarily, and as a social actor, Qvortrup at al. (1994) challenged the traditionalist perspective of adults as 'beings' and children as 'becomings'. Prout and James (2015), assert that children are and must be seen to be active contributors, both to their own lives, and to societies of which they a part. A view of children as passive subjects of social structures or processes is negated by children assuming an active role in determining their own lives and futures.

Since the introduction of the United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC,1987), the belief that children are the experts in their own lives has steadily gained recognition in and beyond educational research (Clark and Statham, 2005; Greene and Hill, 2005; Clark and Moss, 2008, Lundy 2007, Smith, 2011; Lundy & McEvoy, 2012). To this end, the UN Rights of the Child includes the right of the child to express their views, feelings and wishes on all matters affecting them and to have those views treated with respect (Articles 13, Freedom of Expression and 12, Respect for the Views of the Child, respectively).

Under Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, access to art and culture, including theatre, has been recognised internationally as a right for children as well as adults (UNCRC, 1987). Further, Neelands and Goode (2015) contest that theatre activity which is meaningful and personally useful to individuals enables all to maximise the culture of their ethnicity, class, gender, age or ability.

Children can be posited as active agents, partners and participants in the process of theatre-making. This ideological stance has been stated in the working principles of well-established TiE companies, for example:

> "*Big Brum vows to treat young people not as undeveloped adults but as human beings in their own right, respecting their experiences and understandings, getting to the heart of what it is to be human*" (Big Brum, 2022).

This echoes the stance of educator and philosopher Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852) who declared childhood a valued entity and life stage, rather than as a preparation for adulthood (Bruce, 1987).

Giving Voice in Research with Children

Childhood experiences vary greatly, forming at the convergence of different cultural, social and economic systems and environments, negating the view that there can be "one childhood" (Frønes, 1993:1). Thus, the wider geographical, economic and social context in which any workshop exploring theatre content is facilitated becomes a critical factor in enabling participation, and 'giving voice' within that context. For example, this can influence communication, in terms of the difficulty of instructional language used, the need for translation, and even the examples offered the group in demonstration.

An essential component of communication which builds trust and relationships between adults and children is active listening. Listening to children demands an open disposition as part of an active engagement that demands interpretation (Rinaldi, 2001). Monkeyshine (2023) avow an open disposition in their creative process, "staying alive to possibilities and open to discoveries."

'Listening to thought' is one of the central tenets of the concept of listening from the educational school of Reggio Emilia. Listening is concerned with hearing the ideas and thoughts of another, treating them seriously and respectfully (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005). Skilled facilitators plan and instinctively adapt for the individual circumstances in which they work to support children's participation as a matter of course. Where a longer-term engagement between class group and theatre company exist, co-planning and feedback between stakeholders can enhance the efficacy of the experience for all.

The term children's voice denotes the singular, however, the term voices of children illustrates an awareness of the plurality of children's voices, and their likely differences and divergences. With regard to research with children, rather than a consideration of voice as singular, it is held that children have a multiplicity of voices which can be accessed in a variety of ways (O'Toole and Hayes, 2020).

Conclusion of Literature Review

The review of literature considered the nature of participation in theatre-making workshop processes as part of the context of artists working creatively with children in schools. This required an examination of agency and the nature of its articulation within the school context, aligned with which is the construction of voice in this domain. The literature review also considered the range of methodologies used to explore the dramatic pretext.

Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of this report section is to account for the research methodology employed, to outline the features of the research design and to describe the research instruments used in this study. The adoption of a participatory approach to research is discussed. The research design and its component research instruments are described, and some ethical considerations are presented.

Research Paradigm and Methodology

Since the study sought to explore the experience of children and adults, it was located within an interpretivist paradigm, drawing on qualitative methods. Qualitative research is grounded in a philosophical position which is broadly interpretivist, as interpretation of the complexities of the social world are its focus. Qualitative research is:

> *"a research strategy which usually emphasises words, rather than quantification, in the collection and analysis of data."* (Bryman, 2012: 380)

As the 'words' of both children and adults sharing their experiences of the workshop facilitation are pivotal to addressing the research questions, this confirms the qualitative form of the study. Nonetheless, the study goes beyond a reliance on words as data. Some of the many means by which children communicate are drawn upon to offer them a variety of media through which they can articulate their responses. Darbyshire et al. (2005:423) assert that:

> *"It seems almost intuitively appealing to imagine that a range of methodological strategies would capture a broader and deeper range of children's perceptions and experiences than a reliance on a single technique."*

As the primary focus of the study was child participants, who were viewed as rights-holders, a participatory approach was adopted. The centrality of children to the study thus invited the

consideration of a participatory approach to the research and a need for varied methods of engagement to ensure better 'seeing through the eyes of the people being studied' (Bryman, 2012:399). Participatory research relationships see the participants and researchers working together, challenging the traditional model which marks distance between them (Cohen at al., 2011).

Arts-based Participatory Methods

By offering children opportunity to contribute via multiple ways or methods, participatory research honours children's voices. Moreover, it enables a focus on means of expression that best suit children's interests or learning dispositions. Therefore, social science research increasingly includes multiple means by which children can be supported to actively and meaningfully respond to a research question (Danby and Farrell, 2004, White et al., 2010). Children may be offered a choice of methods through which to respond to a research question, from diamond ranking to drawing.

Art has long been considered as the symbolic language of children through which they can express their thoughts and feelings (Coad, 2007). Arts-based participatory research methods incorporate the arts as a means of better understanding and re-thinking important social issues (Barone and Eisner, 2011). Arts-based participatory research methods can be drawn from a myriad of art forms from puppetry to creating collage or roleplay. For children, drawing is an everyday activity in which most naturally engage. Drawing can be an inclusive means of responding to research as an alternative to spoken language, as it is considered a language of itself (Hamama and Ronen, 2009). Arts-based methods have playful attributes, whereby children can engage in their own meaning-making processes both offering means that sometimes words cannot achieve and enabling creative expression, yielding responses to the research question beyond traditional research forms (Biffi et al., 2021). Researchers can also benefit from the provision of a broader, more textured picture of the topic through 'higher definition' detailed thematic representation available as data (Stokes, 2019).

Research Sample, Question and Instruments

The research was conducted with 23 children (aged 9-10) in 3rd Class a school in West Dublin in 2022, along with their teachers (2), and the participant artists (6). The research sample was

purposive in that it was selected for this specific study based on both its geographical location in terms of access to the Civic Theatre and its open disposition to the arts. The school in question has both a commitment to the arts and a strong tradition of rich arts education practice. A staff member has been appointed as an arts education coordinator which demonstrates a commitment to ensuring the children gain quality arts experiences across their school years.

The research question formulated was:

> "*By which means do Monkeyshine Theatre artists meet and support children to partner with artists using reciprocal and dialogic means?*

The study explored the research question with each of the following stakeholders:

- o Artists: Through the lens of the research question, artists were offered opportunities to reflect on the extent to which their workshop practices honour dialogue and reflexivity.
- o Teachers: Through observation and dialogue, host teachers became privy to the process of creating performance and were invited to reflect on the nature of workshop practices which promote reflection and dialogue.
- o Children: Through sharing their experiences and insights, children were invited to give feedback on their experience of the workshops.

Observation and focus groups were the main research instruments employed, with participatory methods introduced as part thereof. Observation of the school-based workshop was completed by the researcher as well as observation of the post-workshop artists' debrief at their invitation. A focus group was subsequently held with the artists and creative director at the Civic Theatre. The focus group with the children offered them a choice of modes of talk and discussion, writing and/or drawing with which to respond to the research question which was broken down into three component parts.

Ethical Considerations

Educational researchers engaged in qualitative research often discover that ethical and methodological considerations are 'inextricably interwoven' (Cohen et al., 2011:89). Thus, the dual consideration of ethics and methods are an integral part of effective research design. Therefore, it behoves the researcher to forge the best possible methodological match to serve

children's differing communication modes and means, which can be facilitated through the adoption of participatory research methods (Stokes, 2019).

Institutional ethical approval to undertake this research was granted by the Maynooth University Social Research Ethics Committee. To complement institutional ethical approval, a reflexive approach was applied to the research process, outlined by the conceptualisation of listening to children as an active and interpretative process, as previously outlined. Furthermore, ongoing endeavours for researcher self-appraisal were informed by institutionally guided ethical standards and the associated body of literature, in addition to the systematic review of field notes from observations in conjunction with other data gathered.

In regard to data analysis, in order to ensure that researcher interpretation accurately reflected their contribution as part of the findings, these were presented in draft form in writing to the adult participants for review. Participant children attended a presentation of draft findings by the researcher which outlined the collated findings from the children. This constituted a Powerpoint presentation which featured the words, writing and drawings contributed by the children, who were given an opportunity to review their contributions and discuss the findings and gain a sense of the next steps in the research process.

Key Findings

Introduction

The findings of this small-scale study derive from the views garnered through focus groups with children, artists and teachers participant in the study. Through a process of collating, coding and reviewing the data gathered, which comprised researcher notes from focus groups, art and writing samples of the children, common themes emerged from analysis. The key findings pertain to the nature of active engagement as critical to workshop success, and the role of communication in the establishment of relationships with children.

The data presented showcases the responses of the children to the research question via three sub-questions and draws on the adult findings to seek further illumination. Three sub-questions were posed to children to which they could respond orally, in writing or pictorially through drawing.

Communication as Key

The research question was subdivided into three component parts, to which children were invited to respond. In response to question 1, ***How were you given chances to share your ideas?*** children used a variety of verbs to indicate the many ways in which they could communicate in the workshop. Thus, in addition to speaking, demonstrating and acting were named, the use of gesture and of the senses. Children noted a choice of modes of expression for conveying their ideas in the data collated:

> "*I could express my feelings and act them.*" (Sample child response to Q1)

This underlines the importance of the embodied learning opportunities present in the theatre workshop and suggests that communication through the body is attributed equal value by the artists as the verbal contribution.

Image 1: Sample response from child to Q1, ***How were you given chances to share your ideas?***

In the data gathered, children also conveyed an understanding that their ideas were both seen and heard by Monkeyshine. The verb 'listen' and the act of listening was mentioned several times, as per examples below.

> *"You said it to them, and they were listening, and they wrote it down."*
> (sample response from Child to Q1, *How were you given chances to share your ideas?*)

> "*They were focusing only on you. They were nodding and they weren't really talking."*
> (sample response from Child to Q2)

Children drew and spoke about putting their hands up to share ideas, although this condition had not been imposed on the class by the theatre artists. 'By putting your hand up and contributing' was simply recorded as one of the many ways children could share their ideas. In Image 2 below, the speech bubble says 'teacher', which may indicate the sharing of ideas with the class teacher or indeed, with the artists who were facilitating the entire workshop. Some children referred to the support of the teacher, although it was equally unclear whether they

were referring to the class teacher or to an artist. With regard to the findings, the nature of that felt support of the adult is that which arguably holds resonance for the purposes of this study, in that children noted the clarity of instruction and the support structure:

"Because the teacher told us everything."

The language of what was and was not 'allowed' was used by children at different times in the workshop in response to various instructions. In the drawing below, children are depicted with their hands up sharing their contributions. This recalls the school-based context in which the workshop is facilitated and indicates that as a school-based activity, it cannot be easily separated from school rules and norms (Devine, 2004). It may be the case that with more frequent engagement with the artists, adherence by the children to such protocols as putting your hand up to speak might relax.
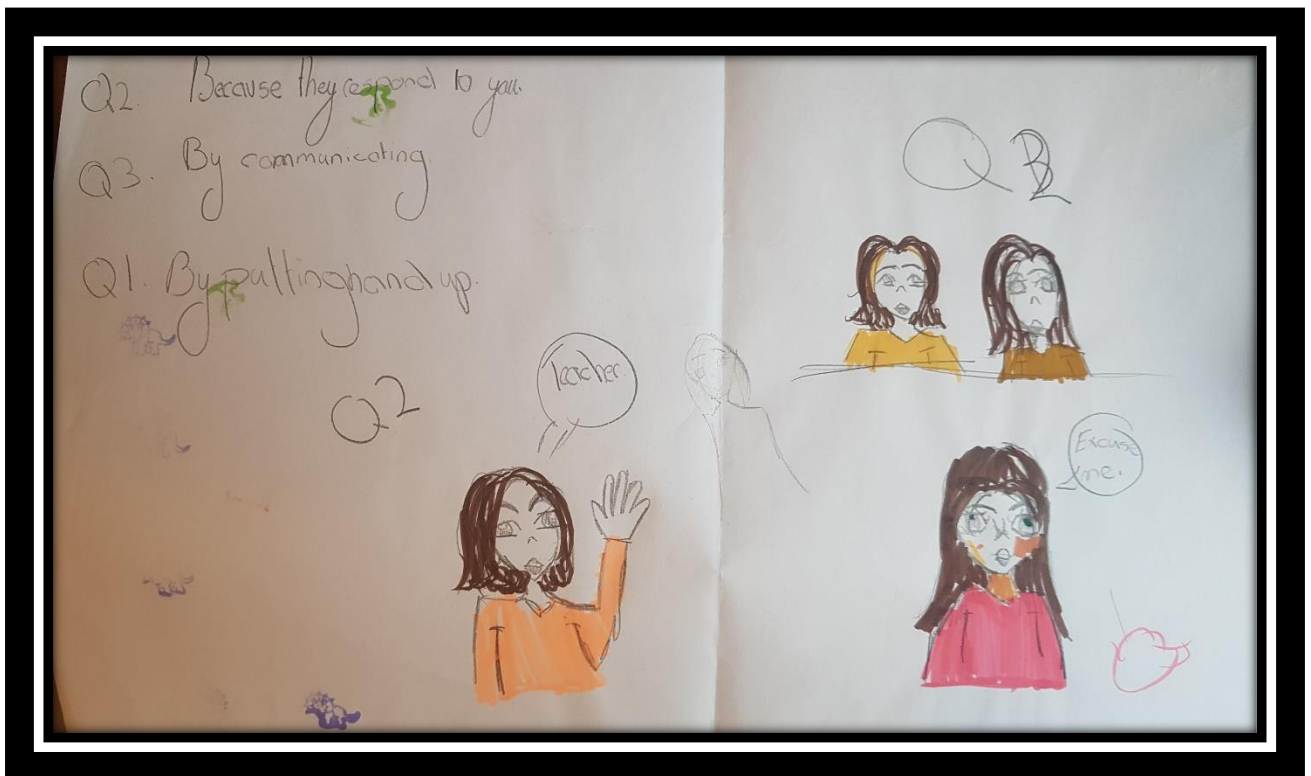

Image 2: Sample response of child to Q1-3

Feeling Seen and Heard

In response to Question 2*, 'How do you know your ideas were seen and heard?',* children reported a sense of value and respect being attributed to their contributions and noted that their ideas were taken on board:

> "*Their eyes were on you, looking - they were kind of serious because they were interested.*" (Sample response from a child to Q2)

> *"When I thought of the idea, they thought it was good- they did it."*
> (Sample response from a child to Q2)

The importance of the children's acknowledgement of being listened to and having their opinions taken seriously is enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1987). Furthermore, it honours children's knowledge and understanding of their lived experience and their capacity to voice their opinions on matters of significance to them. Thus, it echoes the stance of educational and early years' research in recent decades that children are the experts on their own lives (Clark and Statham, 2005; Greene and Hill, 2005; Clark and Moss, 2008, Lundy 2007, Smith, 2011; Lundy & McEvoy, 2012).

Communication and its centrality to the raison d'etre of the theatre workshop was highlighted in the children's responses, which emphasised the dialogic nature of the exchange in both 'speaking and listening'. With respect to the artists, one child noted:

> "They share there [sic] ideas to you." (sample response to Q2, *How do you know your ideas were seen and heard?)*

Another said:

> *"They were looking, and they gave ideas which connected with your point."*
> (sample response from a child to Q2)

Artists intently listened to children's ideas and regularly checked their interpretation of these ideas for accuracy. Regular words of acknowledgement and encouragement could be overheard, from 'good idea!', to 'brilliant!' and 'great- that's it'! Teachers acknowledged that:

"*Every child felt heard, which was very heart-warming*"
(Sample response from a teacher)

Children were offered time to piece their thoughts together through the purposeful use of pause:

"*You can keep thinking about it, I'm going to go back to you in a sec.*"
(Sample response from an artist)

At times prompts were offered as a strategy which were observed to affirm and serve to nurture children's empathetic connection with the beings. Stimulating questions such as "What if you were sick?", or "What might it feel like to be…?" equally scaffolded children's critical thinking and awareness. Surmising statements such as "I have heard that…." were added to develop children's understanding and extend their thinking. Clarifying summary statements were sometimes offered by artists which served to model new language as well as affirm group contributions. For example,

"*The snail is not flourishing.*" (Sample response from an artist)

In addition to reciprocating meaning through words, the artists were observed reciprocating meaning using gesture. This was observed throughout the workshop whereby artists explanations often incorporated the use of the body, from stance to gesture, to aid comprehension. Children were encouraged by artists to show as well as tell their views when contributing. For instance, a spider movement was interpreted dialogically between an artist and child, which relied on the body to communicate meaningful phrases over and back.
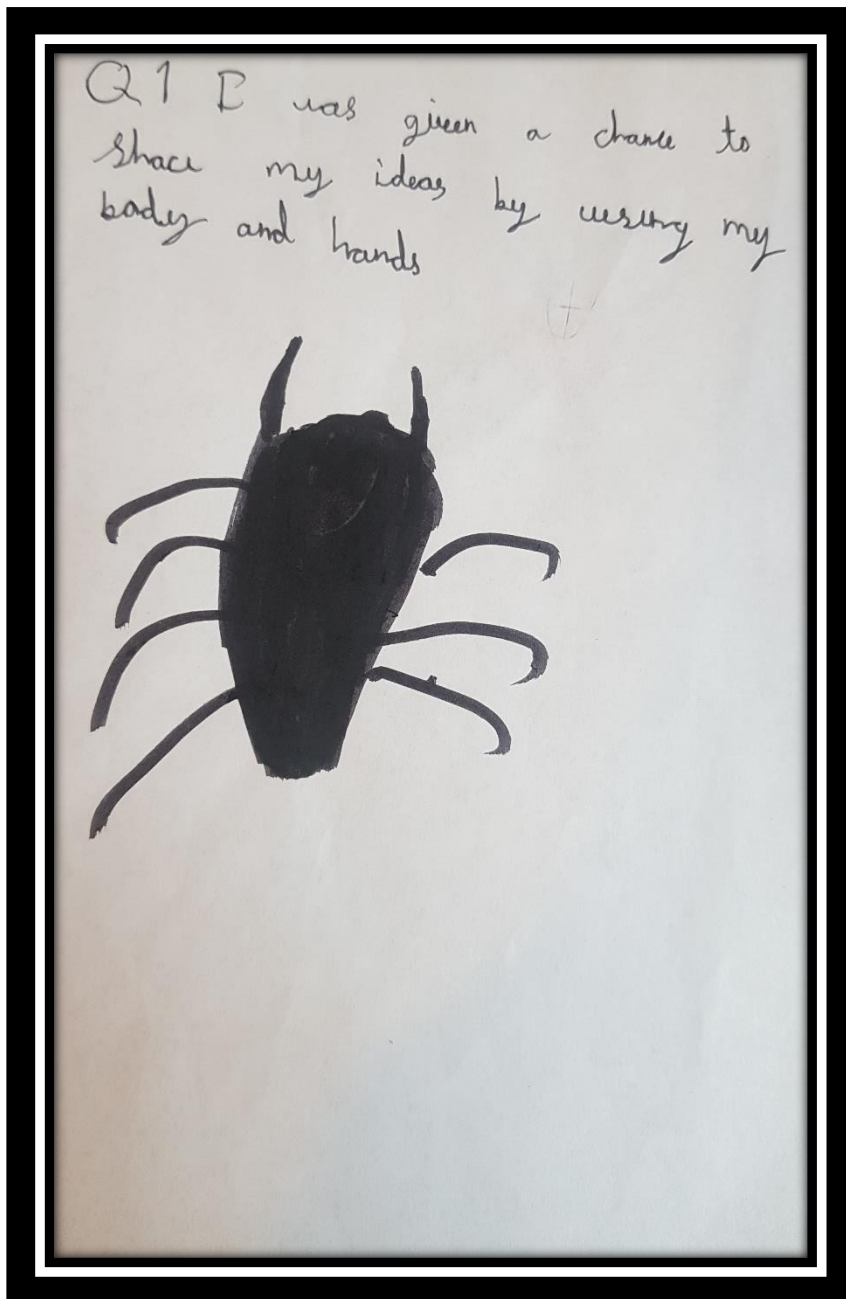
Image 3: Sample response of child to Q1

Respectful Listening

Listening was not solely attributed to acknowledgment in words but in body language also:

> *"They were respecting you as you were talking – I can hear – they used signs, like."*
> (Sample response from a child to Q2)

The sense of affirmation in artist responses to children's contribution of ideas is clearly communicated in the child's statement regarding respect. It recalls Dahlberg and Moss (2005) conceptualisation of listening as that which is concerned with hearing the ideas and thoughts of another, treating them seriously and respectfully. A sense of ease in sharing opinions was observed throughout the focus group. Children reported contributing their ideas to the artists and noted their incorporation into the workshop content.

> *"When I gave them an idea, they added it."*
> (Sample response from a child to Q2)

Teachers noted the engagement of the children with the theme and content. They praised the use of group work, pointing out that it increased the level of input demanded of individuals, which helped to keep their attention. This resonates with both the challenges active and collaborative learning bring, and its reported benefits of self-discipline and self-control in the learner (PDST, 2023).

 Teachers also confirmed that:

> *"All ideas were taken on, so that this became very much the children's work."*
>
> (Sample response from a teacher)

The 'impressionable nature of the children' was also discussed by teachers in terms of the children's ages and their stages of development. Consequently, it was noted by teachers that the children can be easily persuaded by adult input, and the observation that "they [artists] fed them little bits", was followed up by the statement:

> *While it's essential to give some ideas, some ideas seemed to come more from adults, for example, the roof top garden."* (Sample response from a teacher)

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In response to question 3, *"Are there any more ways in which they (Monkeyshine) could help you share your ideas?",* two candid suggestions were made by children:

"*a bit more acting and less talking"* (Sample response by child to Q3).
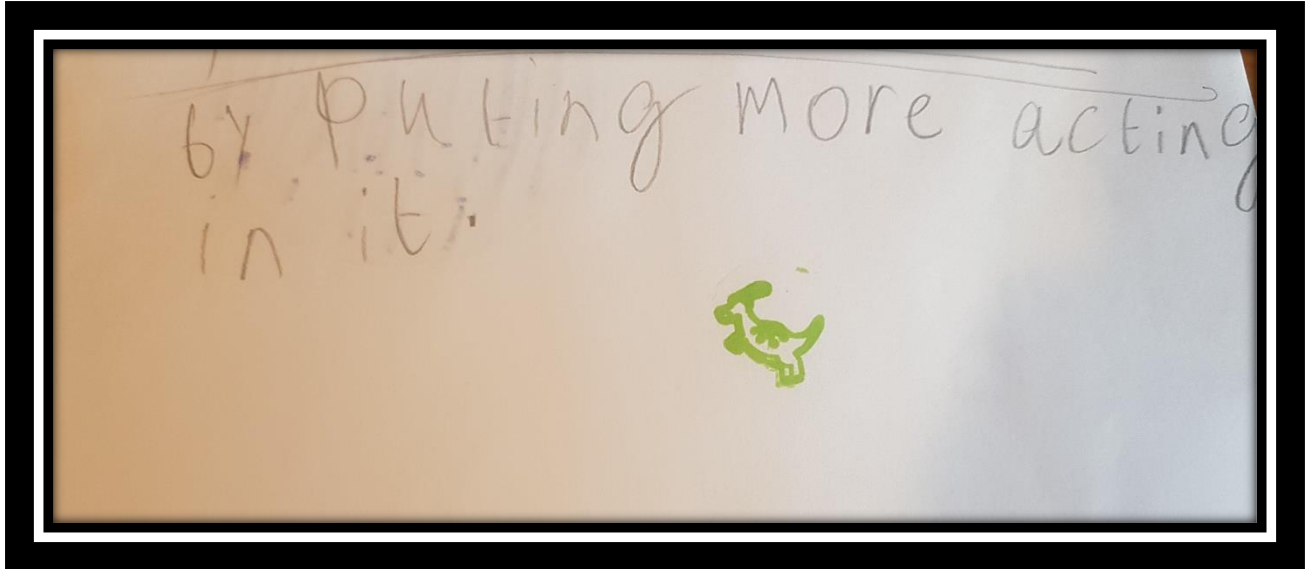

Image 4: Sample response of a child to Q3

This finding was corroborated by the class teachers whereby a similar sentiment was expressed in the proposal for "more opportunity to use more drama skills" and the recommendation for "more getting into role." One observation from teachers that the listening exercises at the start of the workshop were too lengthy and demanded a significant period of sustained attention for this age group. A rebalancing of workshop timings could see a further allocation of time to roleplaying as part of workshop development.

In addition to a preferred named active methodology of drama, this finding underscores the fundamental role of the body as espoused by embodied learning. This is supported by Piazzoli's (2018) contention that in drama, "we let the body drive and use language to express what the body is communicating."

Children and teachers had high praise for the theatre workshop, its structure and content. Overall, teachers reported that they were 'very happy with it overall'. Children's effusive praise for the event was more than evident. Several children wrote 'thank you' and many more expressed it, with one child claiming that it was:
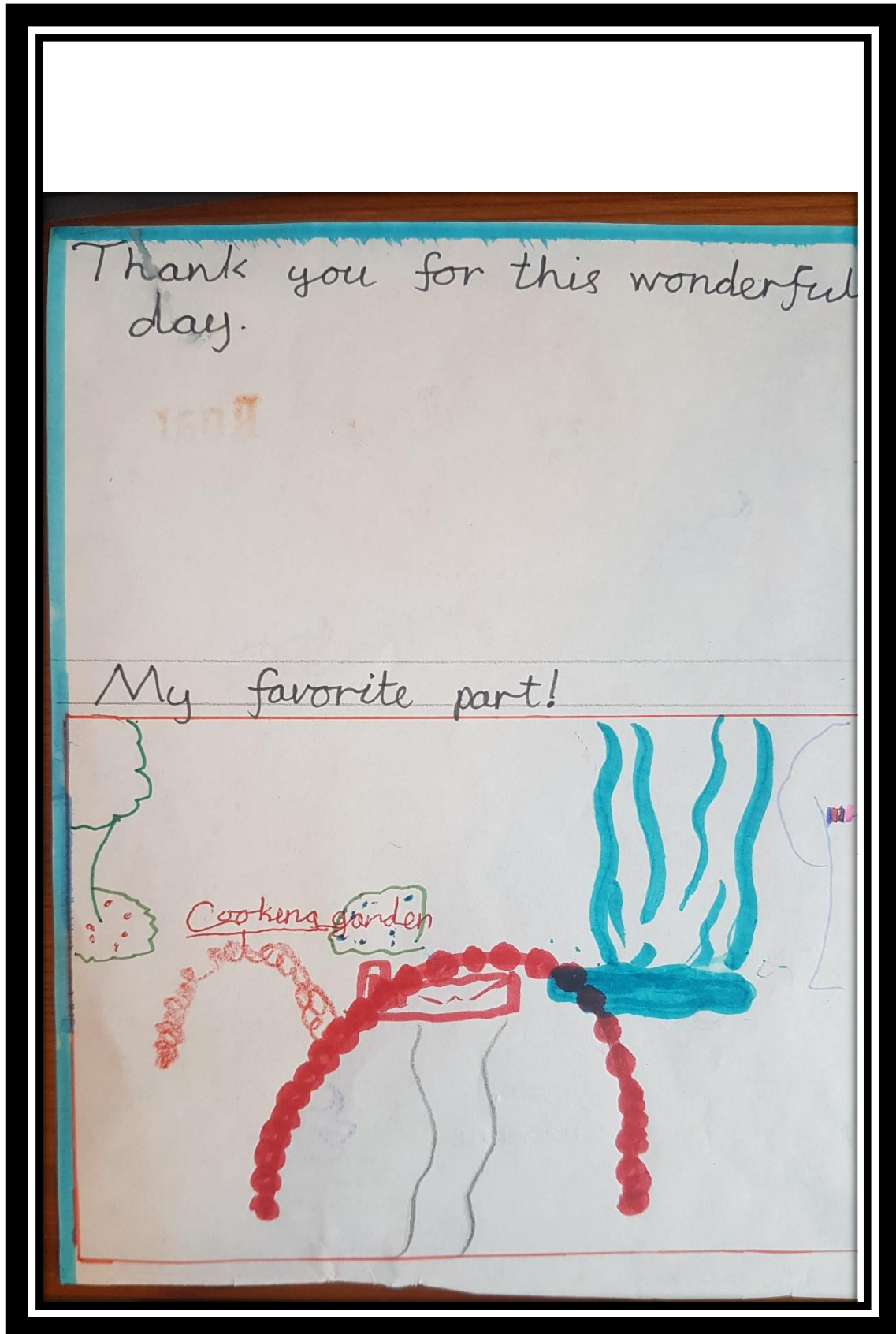
"the best day ever"

Image 5: Picture from child

Conclusions and Recommendations

This section concludes the report with a presentation of arising recommendations. It also reports on the subsequent events in the aftermath of the workshop for the school and the theatre programme.

In conclusion, the researched workshop represented a highly successful, enjoyable and educational experience for the class group involved. The skill and experience of the artists in facilitation has been clearly evidenced from the data presented. The quality of communication represents a key finding and factor in the success of the workshop. This places emphasis on the relational nature of learning and underlines the fundamental importance of artists establishing a bond with children in order to engage them fully cognitively and creatively in such a higher order learning arts experience. The second finding relates to children and teachers' expressed desire for children to experience more drama methodologies as part of a theatre workshop experience.

Two recommendations emerge from this research project. The first recommendation is a deeper consideration of how the separation of theatre from school-based activity might be made more distinct. This may serve to better honour the desire of the theatre company to meet the children in a neutral space, as part of their emphasis on reciprocity and democratic engagement. This involves a deeper consideration of the use of space in school-based theatre workshops.

Given the emergence of more regional theatres nationwide in recent decades, more children have the possibility of visiting dedicated theatre spaces to partake in viewing and responding to theatre and making or contributing to commissioned works. Such amenities offer children opportunities to experience and potentially devise theatre for live performance. As noted previously, theatre-based workshops occur in schools for a myriad of purposes. Where theatre-based workshops are school-based due to a lack of access to a theatre space, this behoves an audit of the available school spaces in which the workshop can take place. Open spaces which best suit workshop-style engagement are limited in Irish schools and tend to be in high usage as a result. Hall spaces can inadvertently become thoroughfares due to school layout. This does not suit the nature of this work which demands the cultivation of an emotionally and

psychologically 'safe space'. This is one of the three prerequisites for drama in the Irish Primary School Curriculum (1999), where it is described as a safe environment.

Multipurpose rooms with less furniture and more open space in which to work present a valuable resource for this work. Irrespective of the physical space available to the artists, the cultivation of a space that is distinct from a school space is sought, in a bid to separate the theatre workshop from school rules and norms (Devine, 2004). A complete separation of theatre work from schoolwork is not possible given school life is both the context and backdrop to the workshop. However, it might be possible to further distinguish the two activities through the realisation of a liminal space that is 'not school, not not school', to adapt a famous definition of metaxis by Richard Schechner (2002).

To protect the safe environment demanded by the workshop space, access to the space might be limited to those participating in the workshop. For example, a school hall space might have entry and exit points reduced for the workshop duration. Where this is not possible, a one-way entry-exit system might be created to reduce the quantity of by passers. This step may be bolstered by a means to further demarcate the aesthetic space, such as the establishment of a closed circle of chairs inside which workshop takes place, within the identified school space of the hall or empty classroom. The realisation of this will likely require a closer partnering between teaching and theatre personnel ahead of the planned workshop.

The second recommendation is a consideration of how drama might be further incorporated as a methodology to explore the thematic content. Children's desire to do more drama in a theatre workshop is expressed simply and with candour. It reflects an association of acting with theatre, and thus, the expectations of participants in a workshop of this nature. Moreover, it illustrates children's desire to engage further in embodied learning. As both an art form and a form of embodied learning, drama gives participants the opportunity to express their ideas artistically in a way which does not solely rely on words. Children stand to benefit from additional opportunities to learn about and employ the signs of theatre through improvisation and scene-making in response to the material that has been presented to them. The artists focus group also reflected on the question of children's expectations, in considering "*how the invitation to play was framed*". It is thus recommended that this question serve as a starting point to reflecting on how best to incorporate more drama methodologies into commissioned theatre workshops.

The importance of time and space in which children can both make sense of and respond to the material of theatre in their own bodies is critical to the realisation of this goal. This necessitates reviewing the time and structure of a theatre workshop to ensure ample time for exploration and improvisation. Time may be added to a given workshop length or through a rebalancing the available workshop time to allow for a greater allocation of being afforded to exploratory drama methods, further to briefer initial warm-up exercises.

Follow-up

The content explored by Monkeyshine in the researched workshop in June 2022 has since informed their development of the workshopped material as live participatory art and installation, rather than as a theatre production, as originally envisaged. Monkeyshine also plan to extend the reach of their thematic exploration of socially engaged artmaking through online engagement with other school groups following the observed school workshop in June 2022.

Children who attended the workshop in June 2022 attended a follow-up workshop event at the Civic Theatre in Autumn 2022. The second workshop was also convened in role by Monkeyshine as the Ministry for all Beings, and extended the invitation to the participant children to make a collage on a paper disc of a space special to them in the living world which they would like to protect.

The children's paper discs were added to a collective collage which was ultimately formed into a large dome-like structure into which participants were invited to sit inside and reflect as part of the Babaró International Arts festival for Children Earth Rising Eco Festival held in the Irish Museum for Modern Art, 21-24 September 2022. The festival showcases innovations in the field of eco citizen science, art, design and creativity, inviting audiences to become agents of change. A short film made about the associated process by Monkeyshine in developing the dome installation was shared with the class group in April 2023. The film is currently available on YouTube:https://youtu.be/uObQyOPrZos

Next Steps

To acknowledge arts engagement with schools as more open-ended and that which can only be fully developed and thereby enriched in the making, makes demands of the partnering theatre company. The research project and associated work has already informed the programme of work of the Civic Theatre in terms of engagement with schools and its conceptualisation as a living process whose end cannot be fully predetermined from the outset. It requires a relationship of trust between the key stakeholders, theatre, funders, children, teachers and artists. The essence of mutual trust is that the work will be realised fully and authentically to meet and possibly exceed the standard expected of each key stakeholder. By framing commissioned work in this way, a space can be created for dialogic exchange between children, teachers, artists and theatre, which can serve to tailor the offering to suit the needs of all stakeholders.

In order to facilitate artists in working more closely with a participant group of children to make the work representative of them, and thus truly authentic, requires a flexibility of approach and closer alignment within a partnership model. To establish a relationship of trust behoves the establishment of an effective partnership between key stakeholders. The writing of Hallam (2011:155) is insightful in this regard, with reference to music education:

> *'Effective partnership [working] takes account of context, requires good communication, time, leadership, mutual trust, clarity of roles and responsibilities, and the support of senior management...'*

Effective partnership takes account of the specific contextual circumstances at play, in addition to the other key factors of time and communication, and their importance among other factors in building effective partnership. There is a necessity for a clarification of roles and responsibilities for school-theatre partnerships to operate effectively, in addition to the centrality of senior management leadership support of the partnership. Moreover, it requires an alternative approach to a 'pre-set' model, which prioritises the identification of the thematic content and the objectives of a commissioning at the outset, rather than specifying the expected output, which has to be negotiated and arrived at with the school partners. This requires an involved pre-meeting or meetings between staff from the school, theatre and commissioned artists to explore the context, goals and remit of the work to be undertaken. In this way, the

communication between all stakeholders can be clearer in 'framing the invitation' to children to better serve all.

An example of developing partnership in the programme of work commissioned by the Civic Theatre is underway at the time of writing in another school, based on the work of the Set Square Collective, The Mystery of Hair's Father. This is taking the form of a weekly intervention whereby children's ideas and stories are being given dramatic form. In a process which necessitates time and space to flourish, the narrative form is developed through improvisation, scriptwriting, and rehearsal. In this case, this resulted in preparing a performance incorporating children and actors, imbued with a deep sense of children's ownership. To ensure the best possible outcomes for the children involved demands the dedicated time and attention of the host teacher. The host teacher and school staff must trust in the fruits of the unfolding work, along with the commissioned artists who must trust that their craft will be valued in the collaborative partnership.

Researcher Biographical Note

Dr Tríona Stokes is lecturer in Drama Education in Maynooth University Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education. She is also programme leader for the Bachelor of Education programme. Previous roles include working as a primary teacher in national and international contexts. She has served as Artist-in-residence with Fingal and Westmeath County Councils, and as a drama consultant in schools. Tríona holds a Master of Arts in Drama and Theatre Education from Warwick University and an Education Doctorate (EdD) from Queen's University, Belfast.

Tríona's research focuses on facilitating children in pretend play and arts education. She has recently worked as a research consultant for the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) to devise principles for arts facilitation to promote play and creativity in early childhood. On behalf of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, Tríona is currently part of the research collaboration between Maynooth University, Early Childhood Ireland and Stranmillis University College, undertaking a consultation with babies, toddlers, and young children to inform the updating of *Aistear*, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework.

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