

Teaching matters

Articles and opinions on primary teaching, with tips and ideas for the classroom

The Arts in Education Charter and its implementation



The implementation process for the Arts in Education Charter launched by Ministers Quinn and Deenihan in December of last year is currently underway.

There is much to welcome in the Charter which advocates for placing creativity “at the heart of our future as a society and a country” and the “arts, alongside other subjects, at the core of our education system” (Charter pp.3-4). I welcome many of the commitments expressed in the charter; among them commitments to dialogue and partnership, to identifying and sustaining good practice and to the sharing of resources. I also welcome the Charter’s proposed Arts Rich Schools (ARIS) scheme to “incentivise and recognise” schools that “make the arts a key part of school life” (p.17). Indeed, there is strong consonance between ARIS and ACAE’s existing *Creative Schools Award*; an evidence-based award promoting process based approaches to fostering creativity, the imagination and the arts. And, in my view, ARIS needs further elaboration, and the input of practising teachers, to ensure focus on the processes of arts education as well as its products.

I welcome too, the suggestion that the high-level implementation group – chaired by Professor John Coolahan – charged with overseeing “developments arising from the Charter” may also “advise the ministers on updating and improving the Charter” (Charter p. 20).

However, I consider the distinction made in the Charter between arts education and arts-in education to be an unnecessary

one. For me, arts-in-education – described in the Charter as involving “skilled, professional artists of all disciplines working for and with schools in the making, receiving and interpreting of a wide range of arts experiences” (p.10) – is an integral component of arts education and not, as appears to be suggested in the Charter, something added on to, or separate from it. Indeed, one of the aims of the primary school arts education curriculum (as outlined in the curriculum statements for visual arts, music and drama) is to “foster a sense of excellence in and appreciation of the arts in local, regional, national and global contexts, both past and present”.

Furthermore, in primary schools, it is the teacher who has frontline responsibility for providing a broad and balanced arts education for the children in her/his care. The primacy of this role, however, is not acknowledged in the Charter. And, given the lack of input from practising teachers

into the implementation process thus far, it would appear that this situation is not being redressed in the implementation process.

In my view, the success, or otherwise, of the Charter will hinge on the development and maintenance of collaborative working relationships between teachers and artists. And, I am concerned that there is insufficient emphasis in the Charter on the importance of high quality teacher-artist partnerships.

The *Artist-Schools Guidelines* (2006) developed by the DES and the Arts Council, while containing many useful guidelines for artist-school partnerships (as the title indicates), does not acknowledge the central role played by the teacher in the primary school classroom. And, when it comes to the nitty-gritty of working artist-teacher partnerships, it does not provide guidance around the (albeit negotiable and flexible) roles and responsibilities of each of the partners.

I believe, however, that the expertise of both teachers and artists is essential for planning, implementing and evaluating an ‘arts in schools’ experience that will enhance children’s aesthetic, artistic and cultural learning. Teachers bring their teaching skills and their knowledge of the children and the curriculum to the process while artists bring their artistic expertise. Furthermore, successful collaborations enable teachers to develop their artistic skills and artists to develop their teaching skills. And, since all partners in the process (artists, teachers and children) stand to benefit from such collaboration, it increases the likelihood of sustainability.

Partnerships, however, do not evolve overnight. They take time to initiate, nurture and grow. But, since the teacher is the one with primary responsibility for the arts education of the children s/he teaches, the teacher’s role in the development and maintenance of the teacher-artist partnership is pivotal. Yet, in the implementation process to date, as is the case all too often in the artist-schools debate, the teacher has been silent and invisible.

Given the primacy of the teacher’s role, however, it might be worth remembering that artists are invited by teachers into their classrooms to add another dimension/perspective to the classroom conversations and explorations in which teachers and children are already engaged.

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