

Briefly tell us the story of your project – What was it about? Who was involved? How did it get started?

Julie Clarke, Fingal Arts Office

Room 13 is a well-established and renowned arts education programme, which began in Fort William, UK, and now exists in schools throughout the world. I was interested in the school studio concept for a long time and curious about how it would work in practice. I had consulted with artists and schools to assess their experiences of traditional artist-in-residence projects and to identify their cultural needs in going forward. I knew that artists and schools were interested in exploring alternative models of arts-in-education and Room 13 encompassed all the principles we were interested in upholding.

Orla Kelly had a keen interest in Room 13 also and following much thought and dialogue we embarked on visiting the original Room 13 in Caol Primary School, Fortwilliam, to see what a student run art studio looked like. It was a wonderful visit and we were greatly inspired by the children and artist we met there. Their studio is hosted by the primary school but autonomous in all other aspects. It is managed by the students and self-sustainable.

On our return to Fingal we set about meeting with Dublin 15 schools interested in the possibility of establishing a similar studio model in their school. Scoil Bhríde Cailíní NS in Blanchardstown and Tyrrelstown Educate Together NS were eager and excited about the potential of such a project. They had a strong understanding of the child-centred ethos of Room 13 and they were prepared to provide their students with a suitable space within the school to be transformed into a working studio.

After some planning the door of an empty classroom was opened to artist Orla Kelly and to Anne Cradden in Scoil Bhríde Cailíní NS and Tyrrelstown ETNS respectively and to each child and teacher in the school to use as a creative studio. Orla and Anne began introducing themselves to the children and teachers in their respective schools by delivering playful artistic sessions over several weeks. During this time the children became familiar with the artist, the art materials, facilities, and the freedom attached to this new space within their school. Relationships formed over time and interest groups organically emerged. Fifth class in both schools established themselves as lead protagonists in developing the studios. Initial dialogue focused on key questions around 'studio' and 'environment'. We compared the spaces we share with others to the spaces we occupy and enjoy alone. We reflected on how our environment influences our behaviour and activities. Together we considered the characteristics of an effective studio environment in a school context and the idea of a 'shared studio' as a site supported by a community of people, for thinking and making.

A workspace within the Studio ~ Scoil Bhríde Cailíní was given to artist Orla Kelly for her own personal practice by the students. Like other Room 13 projects, the artist's role is to offer guidance to the line of enquiry led by the children and to scaffold their creative curiosity. The studio is for those who want to engage with it and is not compulsory for any child or teacher to participate in studio activities.

Cultural visits to exhibitions, places of interest and professional artists' studios are an important element of the programme. Already the children have visited and explored Draíocht's artist studio; The Hugh Lane Gallery, Frances Bacon's Studio and works; IMMA artists' studios and collection; and they intend on visiting the NCAD graduate show this June. The site visits provide the children and teachers with opportunities to experience contemporary art outside of the school environment and inform their own investigations back in the Studio.

Renee Moran, Visual Arts Coordinator in Scoil Bhríde Cailíní

Reflections on Room 13

We were delighted to hear that we had been chosen to take part in Room 13 after expressing an interest in the project to Fingal Arts Office. Admittedly, after the initial excitement, I began to grow anxious, as I really wanted it to work. Everything that had enthused me about the project also posed a considerable challenge. On a practical level, what would a working art studio demand of a primary school? Could we meet the demands? How would we work with the artist? Would the artist suit our school, would we suit the artist? Would our pupils embrace Room 13 or be confused or at best, bemused by it? Could the rules of a school be relaxed enough for the ideology of Room 13? Would our staff be willing to give up valuable class time for the art workshops?

Thankfully, these challenges were met and dealt with effectively over the school year. First and foremost our artist, Orla Kelly, has been a pleasure to work with. She has built a wonderful rapport with the pupils and teachers of our school and the importance of this cannot be underestimated as it has fostered a creative and collaborative environment in which to work. Both teachers and pupils enjoy Orla's enthusiastic and encouraging approach to work within Room 13.

The staff of Scoil Bhríde has supported Room 13 from the beginning and was eager to take part in all of the workshops. Class teachers were flexible with their own timetables to allow for this and support teachers were encouraged to bring smaller groups to the studio. We consider ourselves privileged to have such a space within our school where pupils can go and make art in a very different way to the classroom environment. The pupils absolutely love Room 13. Scoil Bhríde is a primary school and therefore operates within certain constraints. As a staff, we were curious about how the somewhat informal approach of Room 13 would work out. It has been interesting and uplifting to see that the pupils, in particular the senior pupils, have adopted a respectful attitude to the studio. Rather than taking advantage of the freedom offered within the studio and wasting the opportunity afforded to them, they have embraced this and used this in the spirit with which it was intended. They experiment, explore and enjoy the process rather than focusing solely on the end product.

The biggest change with regard to Room 13 is that we now have an art studio within our school and this has become normal! Room 13 has worked its way seamlessly into the life of Scoil Bhríde. We have all adopted it as something that we can all avail of. Orla Kelly is a valued colleague and Room 13 is our studio.

Sinéad Toomey, Fifth Class Teacher Scoil Bhríde Cailíní

What aspects of the project made you smile?

Seeing the children make art with very few limitations or inhibitions. As a class teacher, you try to encourage children to be as creative as possible. However, in a classroom setting this is not always feasible as firstly, there are the time constraints of setting up the classroom for art and tidying up afterwards. Secondly, in the classroom it is generally more practical to focus on one strand of the art curriculum at a time as it is easier to manage art supplies. This also means that the children tend to have to finish their art in a limited space of time before moving on to a new strand.

With Room 13, the art supplies are ready and waiting for the children. They know where to find everything they need and where to put them when they are finished. They're not afraid to get paint on the floor or desks! They can spend as much time as they want on a project. In this way they are exploring all of the strands of the curriculum on their own terms, often mixing and blending media. They are less concerned with getting things "wrong" and work more confidently and intuitively.

What aspects of the project made you feel challenged?

One of the main aspects of the Room 13 project is letting the children take control of their own learning and encouraging them to be more independent. During the first couple of weeks most of the children really took to this and started working straight away. Others found it difficult. Some children would flit from paint to clay to fabric, starting an art activity within the studio and leaving it half way through. Others would wander around the room, struggling for inspiration. As a teacher I found it very difficult not to intervene and give them a project to complete.

However, I have noticed a huge change in these children since the project started. Now when they come to Room 13 they spend a few minutes looking through art books or observing other pieces of art for inspiration before getting started. Often they will have ideas before they come into the room, or have something they began the day/week before that they want to finish. I don't think that these children would have developed these types of skills if they weren't given the chance to work independently.

Artist Orla Kelly ~ Reflections on Room 13

I am a contemporary artist working presently with painting and drawing. On a regular day I can have about 20 drop in visitors to my shared studio space in Scoil Bhríde Cailíní to see what I am working on, to chat about art, materials, constructing and engineering, or just to give a hug. It's not a regular studio environment, as the average age of those I share with are 8-11 years old but it is a perfectly dynamic and rich one, offering daily crits, posing meaningful aesthetic challenges, providing an enthusiastic and vocal audience for developing work.

The studio is almost always an ordered mess which is perfectly fine. After we visited Francis Bacon's studio at The Hugh Lane Gallery on one of our cultural visits, we agreed that sometimes a certain amount of chaos is required for creating, although we didn't want to reach his level just yet. When the young artists and I work together in the space we usually do so on the floor. It means we are all on the same level, investigating together. The conversations we share are a mixture of student – teacher technical inquiry, philosophical wonderings, aesthetic meanderings probing the nature of the arts and life. It is a generous and honest environment.

How do you feel about Room 13?

Scoil Bhríde Cailíní NS, 10 – 11 yrs

'Really happy and lucky'

'I enjoy that its messy as it means we're very creative'

'You get to use lots of art materials and you can work on any art project you want'

'I'm so happy that Orla and Julie are in our school because without them we would not be able to do anything we want concerning our own creativity'

'I'm glad to have Orla in my school; she is very kind and helpful'

'When Orla is there I feel welcome she inspires me a lot, when I don't know what to do she helps me work out ideas'

'Sometimes it's challenging, once I had to go and use the hot glue and Orla was there to rescue me'

'It feels really fun and exciting Orla is very talented'

'I enjoy all the art with my friends'

Aoife Coffey, Arts Coordinator, Tyrrelstown Educate Together NS

What aspects of the project made you smile?

The project is a wonderful opportunity for children to experience what I would consider real art. It made me smile to see my own student from the ASD unit burst through the door every morning with a new creation he had made and to listen to him describe the process of how he made it. There is very much a sense amongst the children that Room 13 is theirs. I'm looking forward to watching this project grow and expand over the next few years. It is an exciting time for us in Tyrrelstown Educate Together. We are so happy and grateful to be working with Anne this year as she has had such a special influence over the children in opening their eyes to the art world!

What aspects of the project made you feel challenged?

The beginning of the project was challenging as we had to find a suitable space within the school without using up space we needed. Emails were flying back and forth with problems and solutions until we found a room we all agreed on. Fortunately we were able to add a sink to the room and our wonderful art studio was born. With the help of Julie, Orla and Anne the whole project ran smoothly from then on. The staff showed a great interest in the project and we all agreed it was a fantastic opportunity for our school and our pupils. When Anne came on board the studio really got going. On any given day as you walk past the studio children are busily designing, painting and constructing. There is always something new happening. It is wonderful to see the children have their own space and time to just create. We are very appreciative in the school to have our very own art studio!

Anne Cradden, Artist ~ Reflections on Room 13

Room 13 has been a revelation for me. At the start, I thought that helping the students with their investigations and then doing my own work in sculpture and drawing would be two entirely separate strands of the same project. However, the fact that we work side by side has meant that an incredibly dynamic creative environment has developed, where I believe the students' approach to art making, and my own, have evolved and changed at a fundamental level. We have been working with an emphasis on experimentation and process rather than on "the end result," and I have been amazed not only by the work the students have produced but also the important and exciting issues that come up in the studio, such as the value of contemporary art, the intersection between art and science, and the meaning of beauty. However, Room 13 has also fundamentally changed how I produce my own work. On one level, being able to use the school building for temporary sculptural installations has been incredibly inspiring. More importantly, sharing the studio with the young artists has meant that constant consultation and discussion with them has become the norm for me, and now I find their input, their unique perspective, and their practical help invaluable.

Tyrrelstown Educate Together NS Students, 10 – 11 yrs

'Room 13 is not an ordinary place'

'it's a place in our school with an artist'

'The studio is having an Art Mart...we will be making our own art...and selling it and use the money to buy more art stuff like paint, fabric, paper'

'Room 13 is a place where you can express your feelings'

'I think about art in a different way now'

What's next for the project?

Julie Clarke, Fingal Arts Office

The development of pupils' entrepreneur and enterprise skills is an important part of the programme. Responsibility for running the studio will be divided among those students with a keen interest in the mechanics of arts administration work. They are gaining an understanding of my work in Fingal Arts Office and the important role played by organisations and individuals providing contexts within which art is made, shared and received. For some students this is the exciting part, and for others the art making is more exciting. Wherever their interest lies, there is a role for everyone interested in being involved.

Both studios are evolving organically. Each week is informed by the previous and although the starting points were similar in each school, the individual studios are unique in how they are used and managed at this time. The pupils are very proud of their art studios and would choose to work there all day given the choice.

It's important to mention that these studio projects are in the early stages of development. Our aim is to build the capacity of the children to experiment, explore, invent and realise their creative ideas over time. Fingal Arts Office and the schools have pledged to support the development of the studios for three years before assessing their viability to continue as self-sustainable entities thereafter.

Documentation

Room 13 ~ Fingal features on the Room 13 International website. However we would like to assist the students establish their very own online resource, one that they can control. We have discussed the possibility of creating a website for Room 13~Fingal with the children. They are interested in sharing their art work online with a wide audience. They are also interested in establishing an editorial team in each school. Some have expressed a keen interest in film / photography and others in writing. They are eager to respond to exhibition visits and share their opinions on the contemporary art that they have seen. The website could act as a forum for exchange between the two Room 13 projects in Dublin 15 and with Room 13 and young people elsewhere. It would be ideal for reinforcing the visual literacy, critical thinking and aesthetic development skills learned throughout the studio project.

Contact Details

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Room 13~Fingal, is proudly sponsored by Fingal County Council's Arts Office

Here's a preview of one studio and some work





