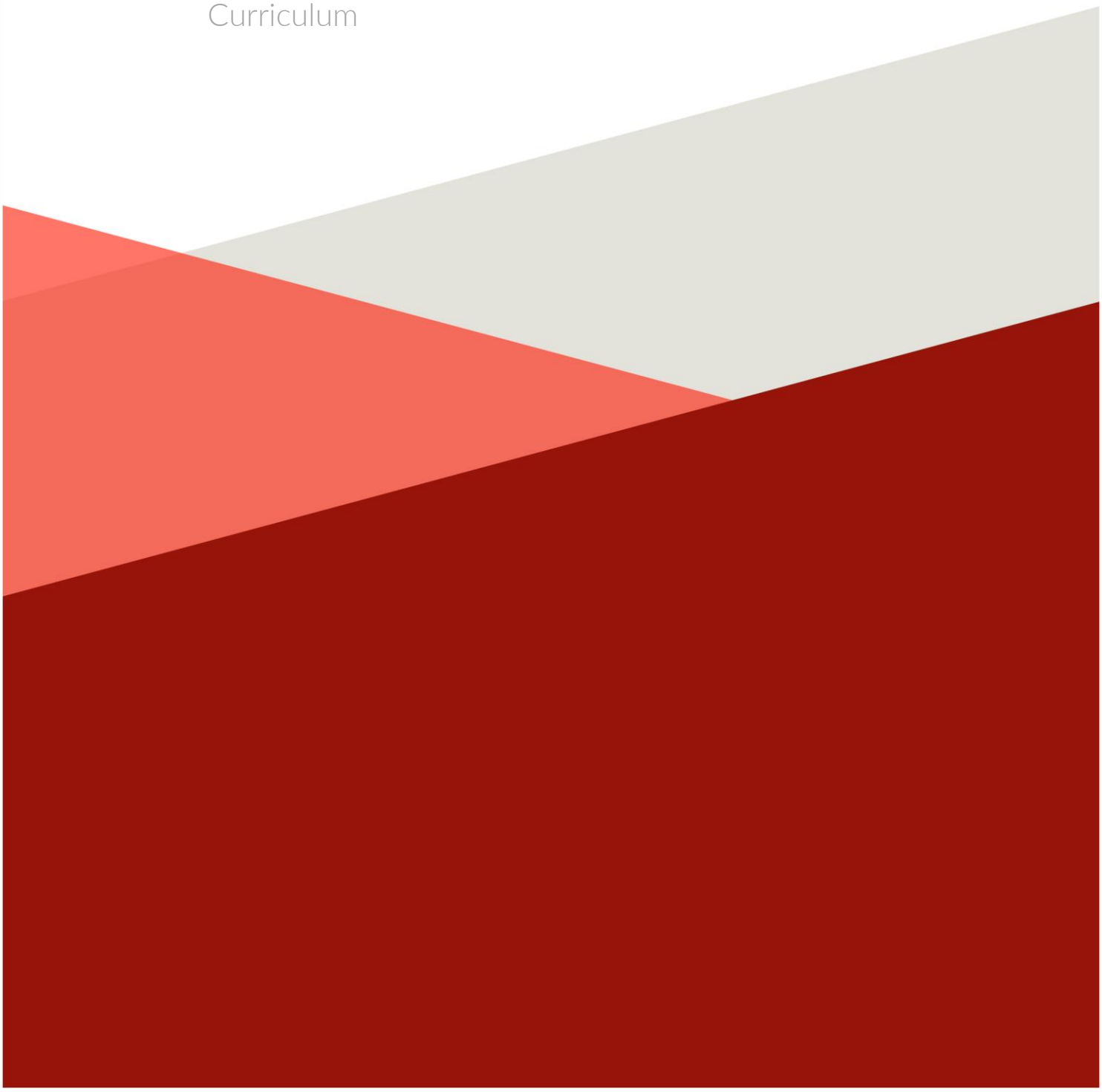
NCCA
An Chomhairle Náisiúnta Curaclaim agus Measúnachta
National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

Arts Education and the Primary School Curriculum

Report on a consultation with school communities on the nature of Arts Education in a redeveloped Primary School Curriculum



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Introduction

This report describes and recounts a curriculum consultation event entitled 'Arts Education and the Primary School Curriculum' that took place in Kilkenny on 26 October 2022. The event was jointly organised by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and the Burren College of the Arts. The event was designed using an adaption of the *Bringing Education Alive for our Communities On a National Scale* (BEACONS) model, developed by the Teaching Council, and was part of a pilot study entitled *Pilot Study of a Local School Community Engagement Model for Informing Education Policy Making*, supported by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

The BEACONS model is an approach to consultation that aims to bring a diversity of stakeholders into conversation with each other and enable them to listen to each other on educational issues of common interest and importance. The stakeholders involved in this event were primary-school children, parents, teachers, special needs assistants, schools leaders, NCCA executive staff and other educational stakeholders from a range of organisations including the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST), the Teaching Council, the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) and Education Support Centres Ireland (ESCI).

NCCA is currently redeveloping the *Primary School Curriculum* (1999). At the time of writing, the *Primary Curriculum Framework* had been approved by the Council and was due to be published in early 2023. The framework provides the foundation for a redeveloped Primary School Curriculum in the coming years. The next phase of work involves the development of specifications for five broad curriculum areas, one of which is Arts Education. In the current primary curriculum, Arts Education consists of Visual Arts, Music and Drama. The framework supports an expanded Arts Education in primary schools with particular reference being made to media arts, dance and film. It also seeks to encourage increasingly integrated approaches to teaching and learning in this space. This broadening of Arts Education was welcomed during the consultation on the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* (2020). The redevelopment of Arts Education provides an opportunity for a renewed understanding of the importance of a broad and balanced approach to the Arts and the positive impact that participation in the Arts can have on the lives of children. Therefore, the aim of the event in Kilkenny was to:

- to gain greater insight into the role and place of Arts within the Primary Curriculum
- to help develop a consensus around the learning experiences that Arts Education should provide in a redeveloped primary school curriculum.

This report follows the sequence of activities on the day as they evolved, and provides a description of the day's discussions and conversations. Suggestions, views and opinions in italics are as they were spoken or written. Given the relatively small scale of the event, the picture that emerges cannot be claimed to represent the general views of Irish primary school children, their parents or their teachers. It simply represents the views of these stakeholders at this point in time. Of central importance during the day was the process of engagement, with children and adults being given an opportunity to enter into conversation with each other on matters of curriculum development.

Setting the scene

In attendance at this consultation were some 65 people, of which 32 were children from middle and senior classes in four primary schools in Leinster, accompanied by some of their teachers and Special Needs Assistants as well as a number of their parents. A list of the schools present can be found in Table 1. Schools were encouraged to ensure that their diversity was broadly represented and, where possible, to include people who represent 'seldom heard voices'.

NCCA liaised with schools to ensure necessary supports were put in place to support the needs of all children and adults. NCCA staff assisted in the organisation and supervision of the day's activities. The event took place in a large function room, with direct access to an outdoor garden area. Children were free to access that area for recreation during their breaks, while within the room, a large collection of arts resources were displayed and made available to the children during the event's activities and breaks. The intention of providing these resources was to generate an atmosphere of exploration and creativity within the Arts and to build the context for the day.

Table 1. List of participating schools

Wandesford National School, Castlecomer, Co. Kilkenny
Bunscoil Rís Edmund Rice Senior School, New Ross, Co. Wexford
St Mary's National School, Bagenalstown, Co. Carlow
St Angela's Ursuline Primary School, Waterford, Co. Waterford

An outline of the day is provided in Table 2. Following an initial welcome and overview, the facilitator, a representative from Burren College of the Arts, directed the event throughout the day. Activities were structured and sequenced towards the purposes mentioned in the introduction.

Table 2. Outline of the day

Introduction
Expectations – 'one word from everyone'
Activity One – the current reality of the Arts in the curriculum
Activity Two – imagining possibilities

Activity Three – inclusion and meeting diverse needs

Activity Four – moving things forward – ‘more’ and ‘less’

Evaluation

Final comments and close of event

Expectations: One word from everyone

As an opening session and ice-breaker, participants were asked to write 'just one word' on a post-it note - a word to say something about the day ahead. Table 3 shows the range of words shared, grouped by theme. (Numerals indicate multiple mentions.)

Table 3. A word from everyone

Fun (7) - Exciting - Enjoy - Happy	*Empathy - Listening - Listen*
Creativity – Creative (5) - Engagement - Artistic - Activities - Art activities	*Child agency - Voice - Pupil voice - Making connections*
Discussion – Talking - Ideas - Opinions (3) - Options	*Subjects - Curriculum*
Music (3) - Drama (2) - Acting - Miming Performing – Dance - Making something	*Instruments (2) - Lego*

The words listed clearly showed participants in a buoyant mood, with positive expectations of the day. The activity provided an early indication of different perceptions of 'the Arts', as held on the one hand by the adults present (teachers, SNAs, parents), and on the other hand, by the children. Children's words were more experiential in nature – seeing arts as 'doing' - fun, enjoyment, activity, expression, performance, making, acting. Words such as engagement, pupil voice, curriculum, child agency and empathy were likely contributed by adults.

Activity one: The current reality

The purpose of this activity was to prompt the children, teachers and parents to reflect on the importance of Arts Education. The methodology employed was an adaption of a common drama methodology known as 'teacher-in-role'. An actor from the Burren College of Art presented herself to the participants as the 'Minister for the Future'. The role of the actor was to intentionally provoke a strong response from the participants. Her key proposal was to remove Arts Education from the curriculum to make space for what she deemed to be '*more important subjects*'. She suggested that creating art using digital media was a sufficiently broad Arts Education experience for children. She sought approval for her 'policy' from the children, teachers and parents who were asked to state their views by means of a variety of media, which could include drama, a poster, a song, a poem, a drawing, a mime, etc. They were asked to also use their responses to say what it was about the Arts that mattered to them.

Unsurprisingly, responses to the policy proposals by the 'Minister' were overwhelmingly negative and disapproving. To the fore in criticisms of her ideas were arguments against digital media as a replacement for the Arts more broadly. Participants outlined a number of limitations of relying solely on digital media for experiences in the Arts, namely: *creativity*, *expression* and *fun*. In fact, what were judged to be the constraints of electronic media were the opposite side of the coin to the perceived values and strengths of the Arts and Arts Education. Some examples of statements made on posters and charts illustrate these two related and opposing perspectives/opinions:

I don't agree with her [the 'Minister']. Everything being digital would just be online school again. Art is expressing yourself and being creative. Everything being digital would take that away.

I disagree with her because I do love art and she's taking the fun out of art.

[Electronics] just fills your head and with art, it's fun to get creative and draw and paint and all that.

I think we should build things out of boxes or old things, not on tablets.

It was noticeable in the foregoing representative responses that many children equated 'the Arts' with what they experience in schools as 'Visual Art'. This is despite the fact that the introduction to the day's events set out the many forms of expression and representation that Arts Education encompasses, extending to include dance, film and digital media. The umbrella term 'Arts' is an adults' organisational concept, likely not yet comprehended by most primary school children. Such limitations notwithstanding, children telling what value they placed on the Arts included the following examples:

Drama and pottery are also very therapeutic [sic] not just for children but also for adults.

I like using my imagination when I'm doing art.

My favourite part of drama is performing. Maybe schools could do more plays like how the Del a Salle [local post-primary school] did a show.

Making stuff in school is fun because if you do it in a group you can have a laugh and you'll see no piece of art is the same.

One group listed 'Like to do' activities as: *drawing*, *painting*, *build from boxes*, *Lego*, *modelling*, *film making*, *listening to music*, *colouring*, *drama*, *art* and *movement*. Just as children's responses to the questions posed were mediated by their experiences of the Arts, in the same way, responses from teachers and other adults in the groups here reflected their own values and experiences in teaching the Arts, as well as curricular provision for them. Responses included:

Arts important for the development of mind and body.

We need more art and music, not less!

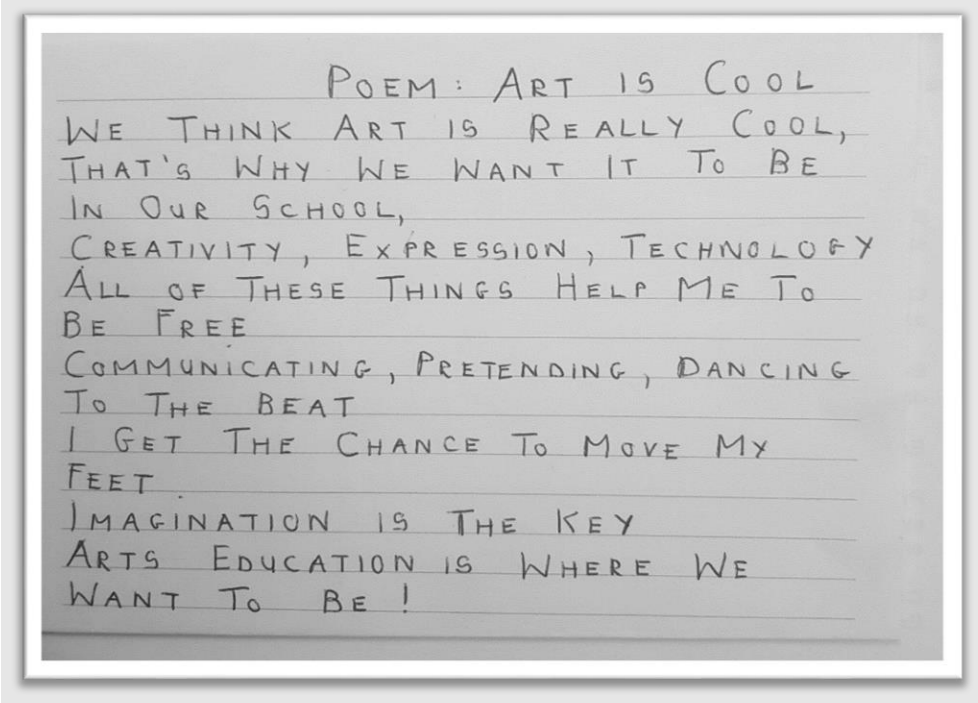
Not enough time for creativity in schools, so much to cover on the curriculum already.

[Creativity] constricted by the curriculum priorities.

Space to be allocated for free expression with the Arts, especially with the senior classes.

It seems here that some teachers are also inclined to think of the Arts primarily in terms of visual arts.

A few groups presented their responses in poster form, illustrating varied activities in the Arts. A slogan added to one read *Arts digitally run? Where's all the fun?* And one group (consisting of adults and children) composed a short poem.



POEM: ART IS COOL

WE THINK ART IS REALLY COOL,
THAT'S WHY WE WANT IT TO BE
IN OUR SCHOOL,
CREATIVITY, EXPRESSION, TECHNOLOGY
ALL OF THESE THINGS HELP ME TO
BE FREE
COMMUNICATING, PRETENDING, DANCING
TO THE BEAT
I GET THE CHANCE TO MOVE MY
FEET
IMAGINATION IS THE KEY
ARTS EDUCATION IS WHERE WE
WANT TO BE!

A theme among comments and responses from both teachers and SNAs, as well as from children, was the place of digital technology in relation to Arts Education. While the presentation by the 'Minister' was intended to provoke support for the Arts in a general sense, many responses interpreted it as a challenge to take sides in support of the Arts, with digital media seen as somehow incompatible with learning in the Arts. Digital media were generally viewed as hostile to creativity and imagination, as removing the 'fun' from work in the Arts. However, there were a number of mentions of 'digital art' on the charts produced, and a few comments suggested a role for such media in the service of Arts Education:

I think technology is great to use with the Arts . . . not to replace creativity but to enhance it.

We should still use digital devices more, but not entirely use them to replace music, painting, drama.

Recent controversy in public media around the ethics of art being created by digital technology suggests that the role of such media will be a live issue in the immediate future. In the case of the event being presented here, it was but one minor concern, but an indication that participants were aware of the technology/creativity tension that will be seeking resolution.

Activity two: Imagining possibilities in Arts Education

At the outset of this activity, participants were provided with an A3 chart on which was drawn a 'magic cauldron'. Into this, it was suggested, should go what were considered to be the experiences - 'ingredients' - fundamental to arts education. What are the positives, opportunities, challenges, possibilities? Using Edward de Bono's 'Six Thinking Hats' approach to unpack the discussion, coloured strips of card were provided to allow the 'ingredients' to be thought about from different perspectives. It should be noted that the facilitator was trained in the 'De Bono Thinking Hats' approach. The different 'hats' produced the ingredients presented in turn below. (One hat – the blue one – wasn't used here as its focus on process wasn't of relevance to the day's events.)

The white hat: facts and realities as we see them now

The White Hat calls for information known or needed.

Responses to this 'hat' can be seen in Table 4. Participants mentioned art activities, attributed feelings to art and commented on making art. The facts about Art were seen as 'what we do'. There was a big emphasis on 'Visual Arts' rather than the wider Arts Education and again, children's views reflected their experiences.

Table 4. White hat thinking

Drama helps us to become good communicators	*Creativity is mindful*	*Art can be difficult*	*It's fun and enjoyed by everyone*
Art has many different variations – film, photography, painting, drawing, music, drama, etc	*Fun and inspiring*	*We draw a lot for art time*	*Art is creativity*
We do school concerts on our stage in our hall	*We include music by us having a choir*	*In music we learn the different types of music notes*	*We have lovely choirs in our school*
We do a lot of drama and plays	*When we learn drama, we act it for our class*	*Colourful*	*Drawing, music, dancing, painting*

Drawing, abstract, colours, tin whistle, paper, cutting.	*Art is expressive*	*Everybody can do art*	*Art is imagination*
Happiness	*Art is good for calming*	*In painting, we use loads of different colours to express ourselves*	*We learn about different artists*
Music, art and drama are the main arts	*We make up songs*		

The red hat: feelings about Arts Education

The Red Hat signifies feelings, hunches and intuition. When using this hat you can express emotions and feelings and share fears, likes, dislikes, loves, and hates.

Predominantly positive feelings were expressed in relation to the Arts and were directly associated with art and arts activities, especially Music. Feelings were often described as being a consequence of engagement with the Arts. Some negative feelings were also expressed, related to one's own expectations/desire for perfection, and inability to create what they intended to create. Some negative feeling was also attributed to the way a teacher handles art and its 'production'. An overview of the responses can be seen in Table 5.

Table 5. Red hat thinking

Excitement; excited (9); *exciting* (4); *Joyful; fun*	*Calming; calm* (5); *Art calms people down*	*Frustration; frustrating; Pressured; pressure; Distracted; Nervous* (2); *You might feel nervous if it doesn't look good*	*Happy* (15); *When I sing, I feel happy; When I sketch, I'm happy;*
I feel good/relaxed when I listen to music; Calmed after listening to music	*Proud; proudness after finishing a picture*	*Feeling of fulfilment; Satisfaction; Achievement*	*Creative; creativity; When I do art, it makes me get creative and I get happy*
Imaginative; Reflective; Focused; Inspired	*Relaxing (3); relaxed (7); switched off; When I draw, I feel relaxed and happy*	*Comfortable*	*Free (2); Empowered*

Art can make you happy and sad sometimes	*Surprised*	*Sad (2); bored*	*Magic*

The yellow hat: identifying positives, opportunities

The Yellow Hat symbolises brightness and optimism. Under this hat you explore the positives and probe for value and benefit.

Performance was a prominent theme during the 'yellow hat' thinking section. Examples of performance mentioned included singing and acting. Interestingly, co-operative art activities were favoured by participants, whereby, groups could work together to create art. Enjoyment was also highlighted. Children's agency was to the fore during this discussion. Concepts of choice, freedom, personal direction of an activity and active engagement in it were all discussed. Another positive was the sense of accomplishment felt when you create something or try something new. Finally, discussions here were often forward looking, with children speaking about *what you could be* or *want to be* in the future.

Table 6. Yellow hat thinking

Focus on strengths and talents	*Freedom; choice; play*	*Lively*	*I enjoy singing and acting*
Acting	*Performing, presenting, sculpting, drawing, singing, poetry, Lego, fashion, dancing*	*You could be joyful*	*The benefit of getting to make something makes me happy*
I love the feel of a finished product	*Crafting, the end result, acting, painting, music, clay, trying different techniques*	*Empowering; Satisfaction*	*You can become an artist and express your feelings (3)*
Being positive and being proud	*Art might make friendships stronger during group work; Group work with your friends; Friendship and fun*	*Proud; excited (2)*	*Entering art competitions*

Singing makes me happy; Singing in the car; Singing; music; everyone laughs	*Singing, drawing and colouring together*	*Dancing with friends and family; Dancing when my mom watches me; Crazy dancing with kids*	*I love drawing it makes me feel happy and focused*
We get to go to the cinema because of the Arts	*I want to be a film director (sic)*	*Helps me learn a new skill; Learn a new skill*	*You could be a famous singer*
On a rainy day in school, I love when the teacher just gives us a colouring page	*Working and playing with others, laughing, creating something that wasn't in the world before*	*I really like watching a family movie in family time*	*Performing on stage and colouring*
Trying to get better at art	*A blank piece of paper to try new things in art*		

The black hat: challenges

Risks, difficulties, problems –spot difficulties where things might go wrong, why something may not work, inherently an action hat with the intent to point out issues of risk with intent to overcome them.

The challenges identified by participants were mainly seen as a lack of confidence in one's own ability in art. This was described by some as not meeting certain standards and an awareness of other's opinions of your work or product. This raises questions about children's ideas about art: that there is a right way of 'doing art'. Children discussed the quality of their art being judged, either by themselves or by others (classmates and teachers). Practical 'challenges' identified included resourcing and material issues. Some examples included, the mess and clean-up that Visual Arts work might involve, the lack of time to complete work and not having opportunity to work without interruption or distraction. Once again, there was a strong focus on Visual Arts, though a few mentioned music, acting and film.

Table 7. Black hat thinking

Sometimes you might not be happy with the product;	*Mess (4) Glitter (3) Messing up*	*Distractions (3); people chatting, moving subject times;*	*I don't think we have enough musical instruments*

Becoming frustrated when you can't do it; It annoys me when I mess up; If something spilled on your art (2) When someone spills water on your art	*Having to clean up Mess can be good too*	*big crowds; parents (2); not enough supplies; teachers (2); People chatting; loud noises.*	
Lack of confidence (2); Low confidence; Not being good at art; People commenting on our art; Other people's opinions; Expectations; Pointing and laughing; Overthinking; Having to restart if something goes wrong	*Time (4); You might run out of time; No time to get it done; Not enough time to finish (3); You are in a lot of pressure; When you do art you shouldn't be rushed – you have to take your time; When my teacher says it's time up for art*	*Too many rules and directions; Perfection; Precision*	*Choice; Imagination*
Technology	*Asked to do something creative when you're not feeling creative*	*We don't learn enough about how to act*	*Being nervous in front of a crowd; Acting in front of a crowd; Singing in public; Nervous; Fear; self-conscious; Art can be stressful; Filming makes me nervous*

The green hat: opportunities and creative considerations

> The Green Hat focuses on creativity; the possibilities, alternatives, and new ideas. It's an opportunity to express new concepts and new perceptions.

The limitations of one-word responses to this 'hat' were sometimes difficult to interpret. Some participants offered suggestions regarding the resourcing and facilitation of arts lessons. They alluded to time, resources, the importance of smaller class sizes, using art as a means of recycling, museum visits and the use of specialist teachers. Participants suggested a wide variety of learning experiences that they would like to encounter through Arts Education: photography, film, animation, creating newsletter, origami, music video production, clothes and fashion design, knitting, crochet, working with clay, attending or being part of a craft fair and/or art exhibition. Responses to this 'hat' can be found in Table 8, below.

Table 8. Green hat thinking

Keeping it simple – less stress!	*If every school had access to arts professionals plus space to perform, stages, etc.*	*Resources; Time; Money; Support*	*Have a week/day where we just did arts open-ended – no plans, just go for it*
A musical or film brings lots of arts together	*Something new, imagination; Art is a universal language*	*If arts had a form of assessment instead of just Maths and English that we could communicate to government*	Other ways to be creative – *baking, gardening (2); Drama; instruments; sewing (3); knitting; crochet (2); baking; film; photography (3); Gardening; growing food to eat; build a robot; Lego*
We should do more knitting and sewing, also designing Fashion; Clothes making; stop-motion video; designing	*Outdoor art (3); Abstract art; Nature (2); Digital arts*	*Let children take turns planning art, drama, music lesson – trust students – build on one another's ideas Get students to share their creative skills with their peers*	*I wish we could do more painting*

We need to travel to more places and get some good information e.g. a museum, other places like that	*Emotional and expressive acting and singing; Meet an actor; More acting and music in schools*	*More Lego; Minecraft*	*All of the resources and available schemes/initiatives to be communicated to schools – that may support teaching the Arts*
Our News – paper / newsletter	*Animation; Making music videos*	*Clay and origami; Making stuff out of clay (2); Sculpting (2); Painting stones*	*Making new instruments*
If we took 15 mins art break after every hour	*Using cardboard (2) from the recycler to craft with; Use old rubbish from your house to build something; Rubbish (2)*	*Resident artist; Art teacher moving between schools*	*Reduced student-teacher ratio*
Art exhibition (2); Craft fair	*Trying your best in work*		

Activity three: Inclusion and meeting diverse needs

The purpose of this activity was to raise awareness of those for whom participation in Arts Education can present particular personal challenges, and consider ways in which Arts Education and related activities could be made more inclusive. Responses raised a number of physical obstacles that people with physical and sensory disabilities experience which can limit their participation in the Arts. However, there was also awareness of personal and emotional issues that are problematic for some, such as shyness or lack of confidence, as well as the learning preferences that everyone has.

Ideas for improving access and participation for people affected included strategies that could be employed in school classrooms as well as in the wider arts community. Some proposals would also be relevant to learning in areas other than in the Arts. Discussions at the groups' tables acknowledged that many of the strategies listed are currently practised in schools and communities, but some, would require additional resources beyond the capacity of schools.

Table 9. Factors that limit participation in Arts Education and suggested solutions

Factors that may inhibit/limit participation	Examples of solutions suggested
Hearing impairment	Irish Sign Language; Lámh; sound systems
Vision impairment; colour-blindness	More materials in Braille
Mobility issues	Bigger equipment such as paintbrushes, etc. Take things more slowly; more steps; easier tasks
Children learning English as an additional language Children with speech difficulties	Translators; Google translate; people to explain; use more visuals
Children with autism	Sensory art; quieter sounds
Fear of failure; stage fright Shyness, lack of confidence, low self-esteem	More encouragement and praise Smaller groups working with teachers; find their strengths, and display their work if they would like it
Narrow range of learning areas available	Provide more choice of areas in the Arts; allow children to choose their preferred activities
Children who have difficulty concentrating	Provide more support for schools in the areas of special educational needs

Children who don't like arts activities	'A friend can help'
General	Meet children's basic needs for food, rest, etc

Activity four: Moving this forward from here

The final activity was framed as a set of 'more and less' suggestions: what should we have more of, or do more of, to progress our aspirations for education in the Arts; and conversely, what would aid that progress by being eliminated or at least minimised. As with other activities of the day, the wishes and concerns of children and adults showed the contrast that is to be expected, given their different understandings and experiences. Teachers and SNAs had among their concerns the resourcing of Arts Education, providing teachers with continuing professional development opportunities, and having a degree of flexibility and freedom within curriculum structures. Children's concerns included the time available for arts activities, with hurried finishing an irritant. A desire for a wider range of learning in Arts Education was evident, with a few comments critical of lack of choice in art activities, and a certain conformity in expression sometimes required.

Table 10. What participants wanted 'more of'

More of...
. . . CPD for arts, within schools with fellow teachers (Croke Park hours)
. . . having a table with [musical] instruments, art supplies, and activities
. . . integration of arts in other subjects
. . . fun play; animation; 3D art
. . . freestyle dance
. . . baking, crafts, dancing, clay (2); knitting
. . . time; time to be creative; freedom; flexibility
. . . more painting than colouring
. . . equipment; art supplies
. . . music/singing competitions; choir (2)
. . . support (SNAs, classroom assistants)
. . . musical instruments; playing instruments
. . . outdoor activities; nature; outdoor arts
. . . specialists coming into our school
. . . drama (2); plays (2); English drama; mime
. . . working together

Table 11. What participants wanted 'less of'

Less of…
. . . focus on timetables
. . . copying pictures
. . . demands for paperwork
. . . tablets and gadgets
. . . results-driven expectations
. . . colouring
. . . curricular demands
. . . teacher's choice
. . . screen time
. . . being rushed to finish
. . . teachers saying your art has to be the exact same as the demonstration
. . . rushing; not having time to finish your work

Summary reflection and observations

In this consultation event, primary school children, some of their teachers and Special Needs Assistants as well as a number of parents, assembled to consider issues around Arts Education in the Primary School Curriculum. In the context of the NCCA's ongoing work in reshaping the Primary Curriculum, it was an event that sought to:

- gain greater insight into the role and place of Arts within the Primary Curriculum
- help develop a consensus around the learning experiences that Arts Education should provide in a redeveloped primary school curriculum.

Participants engaged with a varied activities across the day to explore these aims. The report presented here has recorded and recounted the spirit and substance of those activities and engagements.

The first notable feature of the day was the evident enthusiasm for Arts Education in schools. There was much support from children and adults for arts activities, their value, and the benefits they provide. Participants expressed strong approval for the creativity and varied forms of expression that the Arts can enable, facilitate and develop. Imagination was frequently proposed as key to creativity. Elements of school arts activities, such as performance and working in groups, were named as important, while play and fun were seen as essential features of all arts learning.

There was recognition that the use of digital technology in the Arts could support and enhance creativity. However, it was strongly felt that digital technology should be an addition to Arts Education rather than a replacement for other aspects of the curriculum area. Contributions from the adult participants were evidence of awareness of pedagogy in the Arts areas, concern about provision of resources, including CPD, as well as a higher-level view of the place of the Arts learning in the overall curriculum.

Early in the day, it became evident that most children's understanding of the terms 'the Arts' and 'Arts Education' was somewhat limited. The 'Arts' were often correlated with 'Visual Arts' activities in classrooms. The issue here was essentially one of semantics. It was clear during the day's discussions that children frequently engaged in a range of learning that broadly sits under an arts umbrella, such as music, drama, dance, shows, choirs, modelling, design, story-writing, film and digital media. Comments and responses from the 'adults in the room' showed the broader understanding of 'the Arts' term, although there was some reverting to 'art' at times. What was clear from this issue of language and meaning was that adults as well as children formed their opinions and understandings through the medium of their classroom experiences.

The use of a methodology based upon Edward de Bono's Six Thinking Hats elicited a rich variety of ideas and opinions from children and adults. The coloured 'hats' invited responses from different perspectives in relation to Arts Education. They are considered here in turn.
Thinking with a White Hat required looking at facts and realities, i.e., what people's experiences of Arts Education were. Here, lists of arts activities were compiled; there were comments on making art; and children noted their feelings about learning in art, which were almost all positive. For children, the 'facts' of arts were essentially 'what we do'.

The Red Hat asked everyone to remark on their feelings around, and about, Arts Education. Here the perspective was through a lens of the emotions. The majority of feelings expressed were positive, with pleasure, pride, fun and enjoyment being widely associated with arts activities. And while some talked of satisfaction and a sense of fulfilment in creating art, a few remarked on frustration, being nervous and feeling under pressure. These emotions may reflect personal dislikes or a lack of confidence. For some children, it was evident that the perception of themselves as an 'artist' was challenging. Successful engagement with the Arts was expressed as being linked with a requisite natural talent. In addition, these emotions were linked to a focus on product over process, with children commenting on what art 'should be', of there being a 'right' way to create art.

Focusing on positives and opportunities was how the Yellow Hat was to be used, and here, children's sense of agency came through. Enjoyment, choices and freedom were emphasised, as were engagement and co-operation. The sense of achievement and performance came across, and throughout, children's sense that they can accomplish and create something worthwhile.

Identifying challenges was the task of the Black Hat. A number of children raised again the idea that art must be 'right', and that others will judge its quality. Once more, references here were mainly to the Visual Arts. Perhaps it was responses from teachers that noted the challenge of seeking perfection in making art. Another issue raised here was how to encourage, facilitate and affirm diverse forms of artistic expression. Some practical issues also received attention, such as lacking the time needed to complete artwork, and the mess and spills that may occur.

The final 'hat' – the Green - asked participants to identify opportunities and creative considerations. A wide variety of suggested activities emerged which highlighted an openness to a range of different art forms involving digital media, hands-on artistic engagement and a sharing of work with broader audiences. Suggestions for facilitating and enhancing arts activities were made – more time, greater resources, smaller class sizes, recycling rubbish, museum visits, art exhibitions. Those suggestions, as might be expected, came from teachers and SNAs. The potential for arts education to be supported by engagement with specialist arts professionals was alluded to by some of the educators on the day with specific mention given to the idea of schools having a resident artist.

A teacher wanted children to have more of a role in planning with teachers, although the idea wasn't expanded upon. That lack of elaboration highlights how short responses sought in activities such as this, while useful and interesting data, have their limitations, as the intended meaning is not always clear.

An activity around issues of inclusion and meeting diverse needs followed the Six Thinking Hats exercises. Children showed a high level of awareness of the many physical and emotional issues that could hinder or restrict some children's participation in learning through the Arts. Children understood that some children's shyness or lack of confidence could be as constraining as physical impairments. A range of constructive ideas for improving access and participation for people comprised classroom strategies as well as wider family and community supports. However, the main value of the conversations arising here was its raising of awareness, a prerequisite for reflection by children and adults on how inclusion can be enhanced at the personal level, as well as in classroom and school organisation.

This final activity was framed as a set of 'more and less' suggestions – what we need more of, or less of, to progress our aspirations for education in the Arts. Children's and teachers' different perspectives and experiences were reflected in their responses. Unsurprisingly, as in earlier engagements, adults' ideas reflected pedagogical concerns with professional development opportunities and resourcing issues, and what were seen as constraining curriculum structures. Children's 'more' wishes desired greater choice and increased time for learning in the Arts, with, conversely, less pressure on time for creating art, and fewer rules around forms of expression in art work.

Successes of this consultation event included the stimulating of discussion and a sharing of views on the role of Arts Education in our schools. Attitudes were seen to be strongly supportive of and enthusiastic about Arts Education and its place in the Primary School Curriculum. There was particular value in having a sharing of ideas and opinions between adults and children around the tables. The event's activities gave children a prominent voice, some of their comments and suggestions offering affirmation and also some challenges to curriculum designers, as well as to classroom teachers. There was much mention of creativity and imagination during the day.

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