

EVALUATION OF THE FIGHTING WORDS CREATIVE WRITING MODEL



CREA

Center for Culturally
Responsive Evaluation
and Assessment
at Dublin City University

**FIGHTING
WORDS** Providing free tutoring in creative writing
for students of all ages in Ireland.
www.fightingwords.ie

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A close-up photograph of a person's hand holding a black pen, writing on a piece of paper. The image is heavily tinted with a teal or cyan color. Overlaid on the image is the text 'FOREWORD BY RODDY DOYLE AND SEAN LOVE' in a white, sans-serif font. The pen has some text on it, including 'Max Grip' and 'D.11111 #2'.

FOREWORD BY RODDY DOYLE AND SEAN LOVE

We opened a creative writing centre in Dublin's north inner city in January 2009.

We called it Fighting Words – a temporary name that immediately felt like a good idea. We didn't conduct extensive market research to see if it was wanted. Nor did we seek to align it to the formal education system. We took our line from 'Shoeless' Joe Jackson, in *Field of Dreams*: 'If you build it, they will come.'

We wanted to address the absence of outlets for children and young adults in Dublin to engage with creative writing, and the lack of space for creative writing in the school curriculum.

It seemed daft, in a country that prides itself in being a land of writers, that there was so little time for writing.

From the very beginning, the interest has been colossal. Since January 2009, we have been hosting up to 10,000 students each year – mainly children and young adults – in free creative writing workshops and programmes. We do not receive state funding, and our workshops and programmes are all delivered by volunteer tutors. Most of the students come with their schools, but we also host sessions with individual children and teenagers outside of school time, and with a wide range of special-needs groups. We are constantly booked out a year ahead, and every workshop or programme is vastly oversubscribed. In short, we quickly discovered that there is an overwhelming demand for the service we provide.

Most stakeholders are well aware of the limitations of the current curriculum at second level. There has been considerable public discussion, much of it led by teachers, of the ill-preparedness of teenagers arriving at university for critical thinking, creative thinking, independent thinking.

We believe that the absence of opportunity to properly engage with creative writing and related arts is a significant contributory factor.

It is important to emphasize that we are not criticizing teachers or schools – the problem is the system. Our experience is that teachers are the people best positioned to know what their students most need, and we are aware of the huge amount of creative work happening in our schools - even when they are not properly resourced to provide it.

Fighting Words has been unable to meet the huge demand countrywide for the service we provide, and we have been left in the unenviable position of having to disappoint far too many schools who apply to participate here. Teachers have asked us to investigate ways in which we could expand the access. Specifically, many teachers requested that we look at ways in which the model could be linked with the curriculum.

This report has sought to do exactly that: to critically evaluate the model and assess its suitability for adaptation within the curriculum. We are immensely grateful to the School of Education Studies at DCU, in particular the authors Francesca Lorenzi and Irene White, for such a professional and powerful study.

Roddy Doyle & Seán Love

Acknowledgments

This report would not have been possible without the generous participation of the secondary school students, teachers and *Fighting Words* volunteers. Equally invaluable were the insights gained through interviews with Dr. Anne Looney, Roddy Doyle and Séan Love and school principals.

The evaluators would like to express their gratitude to Orla Lehane for her tireless liaising with all the surveyed stakeholders and in-depth knowledge of *Fighting Words*.

We would like to thank Nuala Finnegan for her prompt and accurate transcription of the interviews and contribution to the analysis of the data and Professor Gerry McNamara for his advice, expertise and knowledge which have been fundamental in shaping our report.

Finally, we would like to acknowledge the contribution of Dearbhail McDonald who has edited the abridged version of this report.

Francesca Lorenzi & Irene White

CREA, School of Education Studies, Dublin City University

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is an evaluation of the *Fighting Words* creative writing centre.

The purpose of the evaluation is twofold; firstly, to evaluate the pedagogical effectiveness and impact of the model in its current format on secondary school students, and secondly, to examine the potential transfer of the model to the second level formal curriculum.

The research, a predominantly qualitative study conducted over a twelve month period, presents data gathered from various key stakeholders through interviews and questionnaires.

The report's findings indicate that the *Fighting Words* model has positively impacted on participants' personal, social and academic development and the analysis highlights specific areas where this impact is evident.

The findings indicate that participants in *Fighting Words* demonstrate increased levels of engagement – with creative writing and with the school experience-and motivation, improved confidence and self-esteem, recognition of and pride in creative ability, a greater ability to work collaboratively, and improved literacy.

The report also finds that the *Fighting Words* model has considerable grounds for inclusion in the revised Junior Cycle curriculum. The areas considered most suitable include as a short course in the revised Junior Cycle, as part of the revised Junior Cycle English curriculum and/or as a module in Transition Year.

The report concludes that the principles underpinning the *Fighting*

Words ethos are consistent with the key principles of the revised Junior Cycle.

Please note that this is an abridged version of the evaluation report.

The full report can be obtained from *Fighting Words* - at www.fightingwords.ie

INTRODUCTION

A close-up, slightly blurred photograph of a person's face and hands. The person is holding a black BIC ballpoint pen and appears to be writing on a piece of paper. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent magenta filter. The BIC logo and 'Matic grip 0.1mm #2' are visible on the pen.

Rationale of the evaluation

The current global economic crisis has sparked much debate about the need for creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship in a twenty first century society.

While there are many international studies on various aspects of arts education, relatively little research has been published specifically on the amalgamation of out of school arts based programmes into formal education.

This evaluation has two main purposes:

- Evaluating the benefits derived by secondary school students from participation in *Fighting Words* activities
- Ascertaining whether the *Fighting Words* creative writing model could be translated into the second level curriculum and identifying suitable curricular environments for such translation.

The origins of Fighting Words

Fighting Words is a creative writing centre established by Irish writer Roddy Doyle and Seán Love in Dublin in January 2009.

'Fighting Words helps students of all ages to develop their writing skills and to explore their love of writing'.

Inspired by the creative writing project *826 Valencia* founded by American writer Dave Eggers in San Francisco, Doyle and Love saw potential for such an initiative in Ireland.

The participants

Between 2009 and 2014, *Fighting Words* has worked with 45,000 participants from all parts of the country, but predominantly with students from the greater Dublin region and particularly with schools based on the North-side and inner areas of the city, where greater social disadvantage is more likely to be found.

84.5% of the participants are of school age between 6 and 18.

Over those first five years, a total of 90 primary schools and 45 secondary schools have taken part in various workshops: to date, *Fighting Words* has worked with a total of 500 primary and 230 secondary school groups.

Such is the popularity of the *Fighting Words* workshops, they are oversubscribed by a multiple of five.

Due to this oversubscription, *Fighting Words* applies a selection process to ensure that schools in disadvantaged areas or those which have been on the waiting list for over a year are given priority.

Fighting Words also offers its services to special and diverse needs groups. Approximately 15 groups from fields of intellectual disability, mental health, elderly care and support and children's hospital support avail of its services each year.

The activities

Fighting Words is open seven days a week all year round with the exception of one week during the Christmas festivities. It offers all activities free of charge.

Primary schools workshops

Approximately 5,000 students a year take part in the primary school workshops.

These workshops are offered during the school term and involve approximately 20-30 children per session.

Children work initially collaboratively to construct a story and in the

second half of the session they continue writing individually. At the end of the session all participants are given a personalised book containing the stories they have written.

Secondary schools workshops

There are approximately 2,500 places a year for students in the secondary school workshops. The workshops can be once-off sessions or a series of workshops or can be part of an academic year-long book project. These book projects culminate with the publication of an anthology of short stories written and edited by the students themselves. Since its inception, *Fighting Words* has supported seven year-long book projects.

The Write Club

Unlike the workshops, which are connected to school activities, the Write Club is offered to young people who have manifested a personal interest in creative writing and want to pursue their creative pursuits in their own time. No tutoring is involved, but professional writers are in attendance and offer support when required. A core group of approximately 20-30 young people aged between 13 and 18 attends these sessions.

The Writers' Circle

The Writers' Circle is an opportunity for those who have graduated from the Write Club (over 18) and for *Fighting Words* volunteers who are interested in creative writing, to write, and obtain support.

Summer camps

During school summer holidays, *Fighting Words* runs eight week-long camps for three age groups (6 to 9 year olds, 10-13 year olds and 14-17 year olds).

These camps are not connected to school activities - children come as individuals. The focus is on developing young people's ability for writing fiction, song-writing, graphic fiction, film and script-writing, film-making, journalism, poetry and playwriting.

Similar themes to the summer camps run on a more elaborate scale throughout the year at weekends and midterms. Again, these activities are not connected to school activities. They are collaborative creative projects with professional arts/media organisations such as the Abbey Theatre, Brown Bag Films, Yellow Asylum Films, The Irish Times, The Science Gallery, The Irish Print Museum etc.

The summer camps and collaborative projects are attended by approximately 750 young people every year.

The cinemobile

The *cinemobile* is a one hundred-seater cinema which has been leased from the Irish Film Institute. Launched in 2013, it offers a mobile venue to replicate the school workshops. Over 1,500 students outside Dublin were able to participate in once-off primary and secondary school workshops as a result.

The Verbal Arts Centre - Derry

Also launched in 2013 is a pilot project to offer the workshops in the North-west of Ireland in co-operation with the Verbal Arts Centre located in Derry. *Fighting Words* hopes to offer their activities in this location on a permanent basis in future.

Special needs activities

Fighting Words also offers workshops for children and adults with special needs such as intellectual disabilities and issues with mental health and patients in the children's hospitals. Approximately 15 (300 participants) groups a year take part in these specific activities.

The volunteers

Fighting Words relies almost entirely on volunteers. There are now 450 active¹ volunteers of which approximately 100 frequently contribute to *Fighting Words* activities.

Volunteers are selected through an interview process, subjected to reference check and Garda (police) vetting and undergo specific training.

They come from different walks of life. Among them there are most

1 An active volunteer is a volunteer who participates in at least 2-3 sessions a year.

commonly current or retired teachers, post-graduate students, writers or aspiring writers, journalists and librarians. They range in age from 18 to over 60, and are predominantly female.

The purpose-built space and its use

The premises of *Fighting Words* are located in Dublin's inner city, an area often associated with economic disadvantage. The building is a purpose-built space and is an integral part of the approach to creative writing taken by *Fighting Words*.

Sharing the model

Fighting Words was the first project of its kind in Europe but others, inspired by the *826 Valencia* model and subsequently by *Fighting Words*, have since followed with centres established in London, Stockholm, Milan, and Barcelona - all of which acknowledge the role of *Fighting Words* in their development.

A further five projects, in Amsterdam, Vienna, Paris, Copenhagen and Belfast, are currently in development. *Fighting Words* is also a key player behind the establishment of the Alliance of European Writing Centres (AEWC), a European network. The association will aim to protect the core principles that have informed the establishment of non-profit free creative writing centres for children.

A close-up, blue-tinted photograph of a person's hand holding a black BIC pen, writing on a piece of paper. The pen has 'BIC' and 'Matic grip 0.1mm #2' printed on it. The background is blurred, showing the person's face and clothing.

CHAPTER 1: CREATIVITY IN EDUCATION

The role of arts based organisations in promoting creativity in second level education in Ireland

Despite its international reputation in a range of art forms, Ireland has relatively limited arts education provision.

In January 2013, the Irish government launched the first ever *Arts in Education Charter 2013*.

This joint initiative between the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht and the Department of Education and Skills declares that creativity must be Ireland's primary focus for the future.

The *Arts in Education Charter* intention to place the arts at the centre of Ireland's education system certainly signals a new approach to the provision of arts education in Ireland.

UNESCO's *Roadmap for Arts Education* (2006, p. 7) advises that, 'Any approach to Arts Education must take the culture(s) to which the learner belongs as its point of departure'. Given Ireland's literary legacy and reputation for storytelling, an initiative like *Fighting Words* appears to be of immediate relevance to Irish cultural tradition.

Curricular developments in second level education in Ireland: the potential for greater promotion of creativity?

The Irish second level education system is currently undergoing a process of enormous curricular change and reform. In October 2012, the government announced a radical reform of the Junior Cycle curriculum in its publication, *A Framework for Junior Cycle*.

The explicit inclusion of creativity as one of the key principles for Junior Cycle education is significant.

The *Framework* proposes that in addition to English, Irish and Maths, which are to remain core subjects, students choose from a range of subjects and short courses and also partake in 'other learning experiences' provided by the school.

The introduction of short courses is a new component that allows schools to design and deliver their own courses based on students' talents, abilities, needs and interests.

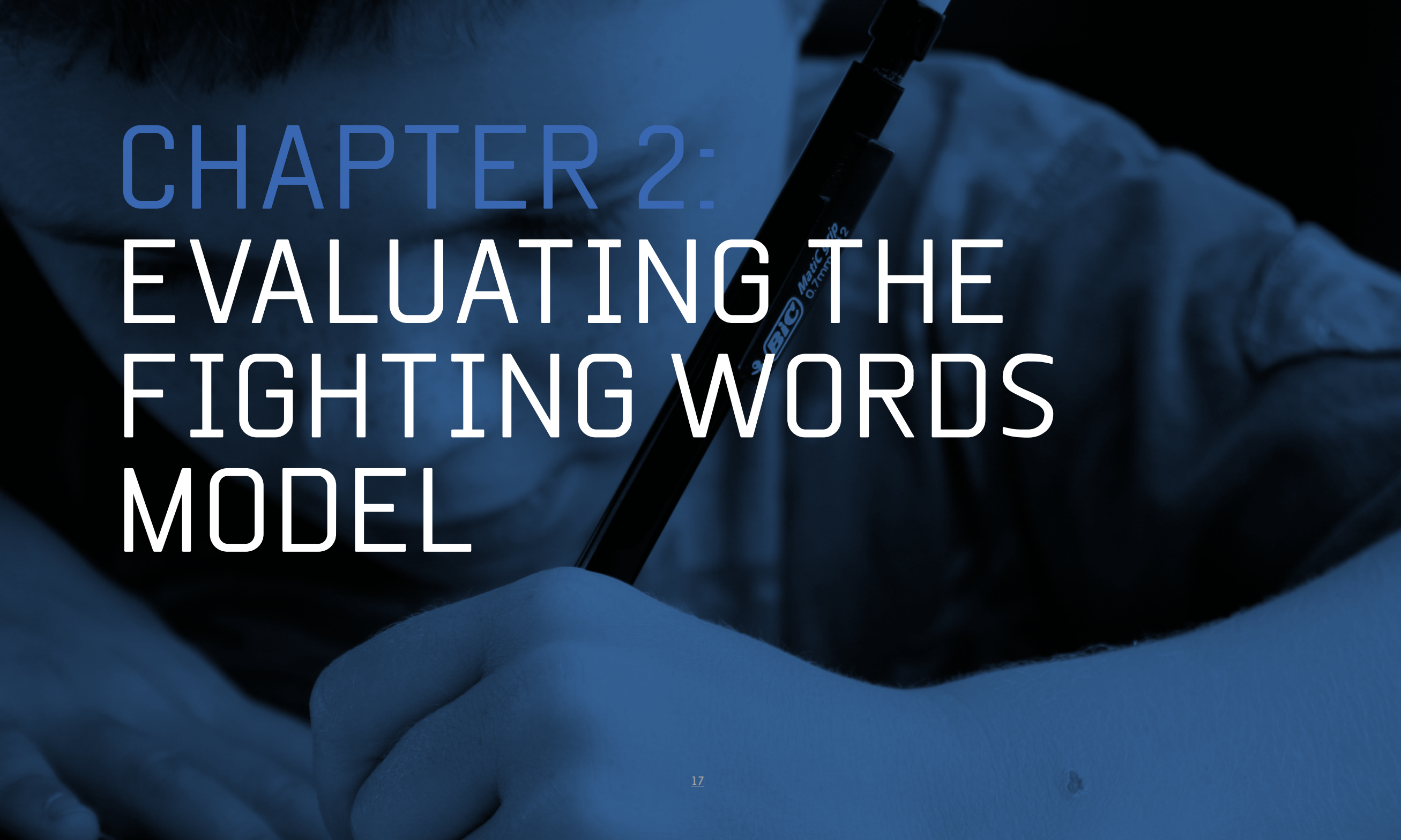
This opportunity in tandem with greater school autonomy and flexibility within the curriculum offers strong prospects for real and exciting change in Irish second level education.

In particular, the prospect of schools developing short courses in conjunction with external organisations from the cultural, industrial, agricultural and business sectors should give rise to the formation of dynamic educational initiatives.

The development of partnerships such as these is, in itself, an impetus for creativity that may trigger the type of creative response needed to address ongoing calls for creativity.

The next few years may see the emergence of innovative links between schools and entities from a wide range of fields.

Fighting Words is one such initiative and the creative writing model it offers has the potential to transfer in a number of ways to the formal school curriculum.

A person is shown from the chest up, wearing a light-colored shirt, holding a black BIC pen and writing on a document. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent blue filter. Large, bold, white text is centered on the image, reading 'CHAPTER 2: EVALUATING THE FIGHTING WORDS MODEL'. The text is arranged in four lines: 'CHAPTER 2:', 'EVALUATING THE', 'FIGHTING WORDS', and 'MODEL'.

CHAPTER 2: EVALUATING THE FIGHTING WORDS MODEL

Purpose of evaluation

This evaluation provides an evidence-based account of the pedagogical effectiveness of the *Fighting Words* creative writing model. The purpose of the evaluation is to evaluate the *Fighting Words* model, firstly, in terms of its impact on participants' academic, cognitive, personal, and social development and secondly, in terms of its suitability for translation into the main curricula for all secondary schools.

Data collection methods employed

The evaluation was carried out over a twelve month period and the following data collection methods were used:

- Questionnaire distributed to 116 book project students
- Questionnaire distributed to 7 book project teachers
- Questionnaire distributed to 41 *Fighting Words* volunteers
- Questionnaire to 120 once off workshop students
- Questionnaire distributed to 20 Wednesday afternoon students

In addition to the data collection, qualitative data were collected through the following interviews:

- Interview with the manager and founder of *Fighting Words*, Séan Love
- Interview with the artistic director and founder of *Fighting Words*, Roddy Doyle.
- Interview with, the Chief Executive Officer of National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), Dr. Anne Looney
- Individual interviews with 6 of the 7 principals of schools which participated in the year-long book projects (one principal had since retired and was not contactable)

These key stakeholders were selected because of their understanding of both the *Fighting Words* model and the current and new developments in the secondary school curriculum.

Responses to the questionnaire: benefits and challenges of being involved in *Fighting Words*

Despite the different initial impetus for participating, there are strong similarities between the motivations mentioned by students and teachers.

“Love of English” and a “hope that participation in *Fighting Words* would help with writing skills” are the most commonly mentioned factors emerging from the analysis.

Motivations and expectations about participating

Book Project students	Once off workshop students
· I thought it would help me to become a better writer/ I enjoy writing · I love English · The opportunity to publish a book · I hoped it would help me to increase my vocabulary · I hoped it would help me to become more confident · I thought it would help me with the Leaving Certificate · To improve my language skills (I am not a native speaker of English) · I originally was very anxious because I find it difficult to write · I initially did not want to get involved but I really liked it once involved	· I thought it might be fun · I love English · I wanted to see how this would benefit my English writing · To improve my writing skills · It sounded interesting · I like reading and find people’s thoughts and stories interesting · I thought it would be a great opportunity · I was hoping that Roddy Doyle would be there · My teachers recommended it · I wanted to improve my story planning and writing · I heard it was good from students who had participated the previous year · I was looking forward to the break from school · I had already participated in primary school and enjoyed it.

All questionnaires asked the various stakeholders to comment on the benefits that participating in *Fighting Words* activity may offer.

Best aspects of being involved in FW

Teachers (commenting on benefits for students and teachers)	Tutors (commenting on benefits for students and tutors)
· Seeing confidence developing in students · Sense of achievement in producing and publishing a book · Break from routine · Inspiration and creativity enhanced in both students and teachers	· Interacting with young people/supporting them and building relationships · Seeing young people developing and learning · Becoming aware of young people creative potential · Enriching sense of mutual service (both parties gaining from the exchange) · Meeting other volunteers

Best aspect of being involved in *Fighting Words* (according to students)

Book Project students	Once off workshop students	Wednesday afternoon students
· Having mentors supporting me · Freedom of creativity/ being able to write what I wanted · The space: light and friendly · Relaxing atmosphere · Being able to express myself · Working with others · Publishing a book · Being able to share my ideas · Working with Roddy Doyle and established writers · Nobody judges you · Being away from the classroom · Constructive criticism · Having my say · It did not feel like school · Improving my English	· It was fun · Writing a story with peers · Hearing other people's stories · Working in groups/ interacting with the class · Different ideas from different people/sharing ideas · Helpful and relaxed environment · It got me to think outside the box · Being allowed to do our own thing · Getting the confidence to speak out/ not feeling intimidated · No right or wrong answers · Help from volunteers · Made creative writing less scary	· Constructive advice on my writing · Nice atmosphere for writing · It gives you a chance to think more about writing · It makes you work harder · Being around people who enjoy writing · Opportunity to interact with established writers

Benefit/Impact of *Fighting Words* on students

Teachers	Tutors
· Develops creativity and imaginative skills · Perseverance and commitment to a project · Working with established writers and not being taught · Develops confidence · Sense of freedom generated by being allowed to write their own stories · Develops planning skills · Develops writing and editing skills · It offers real education [source quote from questionnaire] · Got students interested in story-writing · Provides a great sense of achievement · Enriched the lives of students	· Offers a space alternative to school/ no-judgmental space allows students to make mistakes · Builds self-confidence · Builds creative potential · Allows self-expression · Being creative outside the formal school environment · Meeting likeminded people for those who are interested in writing · Offers a student-centred approach · Students are given a voice · Gives an outlet to those who are shier and less comfortable with self-expression

Most stakeholder groups refer to the relaxed and supportive atmosphere they have experienced in *Fighting Words*. In addition to the physical space, the non-judgmental ethos is clearly perceived even by students who only attend a once-off session.

The most important thing learned from participating in *Fighting Words*

Book Project students	Once off workshop students	Wednesday afternoon students
· Being surprised at my own ability · Not being afraid of sharing my ideas / it is good to share ideas · I am more confident · I can be creative · I can write · I had a good story in my head and I did not know about it · To respect other people's imagination · No idea is bad/stupid · Teamwork is helpful · Speaking out	· There is no right or wrong answer · Listening to others is important · Thinking outside the box is beneficial · I value my own creativity more · I am more willing to share my ideas · Teamwork is helpful · Anybody can write a story	· Not to give up when stuck/resilience · Writing is a really worthwhile activity · My skills have improved and as a result I am less hesitant sharing my work with others

Having published a book is the most frequently mentioned accomplishment by the students who engaged in the year-long project.

One of the teachers when asked to comment on students' achievement recalls how he came to realise the impact that participation in *Fighting Words* had on a particular student:

“Reading the stories the students published in the published book, I knew how much of an achievement it was for some of them....I had the pleasure of dropping off a copy of the book to a student who due to cultural pressure had decided to leave school. He was from the travelling

community. His story was all about the adventures of a boy on Junior Cert. night. This was my best memory, handing the book to his mother who looked proud of him. He had told her all about it”

The biggest achievement from participating in *Fighting Words*

Book Project students	Once off workshop students	Wednesday afternoon students
· Writing my own story · Working with Roddy Doyle · Having my story published in a book · Being able to complete a story · Improving my creative writing skills · Being more confident in my own thinking · Understanding how a story is planned and constructed · Being able to communicate my ideas more clearly · Being more confident to ask questions even in school	· It made me more confident · I am able to speak in front of people · I am able to complete a story and to persevere · It is important to think outside the box · I has helped me to become a better listener · I learned to be more creative · I trust my imagination · I learned how to express my opinion better · I learned how to write a story	· Having produced novels and being published · Having achieved a high score in my Leaving Certificate thanks to my involvement in <i>Fighting Words</i>

Students who have attended once-off session seem to derive a similar sense of accomplishment at having been able to complete a full story in a very short period of time.

Students academic benefits

In addition to benefits in terms of students’ personal development the evaluation attempted to ascertain whether some benefit of an academic nature had also been derived from participation in *Fighting Words* activities.

Four out of five teachers strongly agreed on the impact of *Fighting Words* on literacy and on the strengthening of students’ interest in literature.

All teachers also either agreed or strongly agreed that students developed their ability to analyse texts of varied nature.

Additional benefits

Teachers were asked to comment on whether the involvement had an impact on the relationship with their students. Here are some of the recurrent comments made by teachers.

Changes in the teacher-student relationship as a result of the involvement in *Fighting Words*

Teachers
· Greater bond with the students and among the students themselves
· New-found respect for each other
· Improved relationship with parents
· Students more likely to approach teachers with new ideas
· Better appreciation of how students learn

All teachers acknowledged the positive influence of the *Fighting Words* experience on students and one teacher also comments that this has also resulted in a “very healthy classroom environment” thus suggesting that the supportive and respectful atmosphere which had been experienced in *Fighting Words* had also transferred to the school environment.

There is a sense that teachers and students are equals in the enjoyment of the experience.

One teacher states: “it helped us to bond as a group of people who love stories”.

Transfer of the model to second level curriculum

While no teacher considers the translation of the model impossible, tutors are less optimistic about the feasibility of such translation.

The majority of teachers and of tutors express some reservations and believe the model could not be transferred without modifications.

Teachers are primarily concerned with recreating the atmosphere generated by *Fighting Words* and the “out of school experience”, which allow the students to take a break from school related activities.

To some extent tutors echo the comments presented by teachers regarding the setting and the implications for the experience. One tutor comments:

Much of the beauty of it is difference from the norm of school... so maybe a specific ‘creative room’ would need to be set aside in the school so that students don’t view it just as another class.

Tutors also emphasise the importance of the type of support they are able to offer which from the comments emerges as characterised by personalisation and equality.

Teachers and tutors identify similar modifications. Essentially they advocate that the school environment accommodates some of the core features of the *Fighting Words* model such as the creation of a dedicated space for creative interaction, the support of tutors and the involvement of established writers.

Therefore their suggestions imply that the school system should introduce a little more flexibility in terms of the physical space, but also in terms of the parties involved in supporting and mentoring students.

Locating a suitable space within the curriculum

Three out of five teachers see the model more suited to be incorporated in the English syllabus.

This view is also shared by two of the six principals interviewed and by Dr. Anne Looney, Chief Executive of the NCCA.

Those teachers in favour of a translation within the English syllabus bring as reasons more time available for the development of stories compared to the duration of a short course.

Perceptions of *Fighting Words*

This section outlines the outcomes of the analysis of dialogues with some key stakeholders. These are the founders of *Fighting Words*, Roddy Doyle and Seán Love; the Chief Executive Officer of the NCCA (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment), Dr. Anne Looney; principals of 6 of the 7 schools which participated in the year-long book projects.

The section also draws on the transcript of an interview carried out by Irish radio station *Lyric FM* with several *Fighting Words* stakeholders and on the transcript of the speech by Séan Love and by President of the Irish

Republic Michael D. Higgins at an event organised by *Fighting Words* to celebrate the launch of a stamp by the national postal system containing a short story written by a *Fighting Words* former student.

On 16th May 2013 President Michael D. Higgins visited *Fighting Words* to unveil a stamp capturing the essence of Dublin city in a brief story written by one of the students who had participated in the *Fighting Words* year-long book project. On this occasion Seán Love chose to encapsulate the main purposes of *Fighting Words* in the following quote by President Higgins.

“When we learn to read and to write, to understand letters on a page and to create our own sentences using those letters we are handed a great gift, a gift that allows us to engage fully in society, to educate and inform ourselves to open our minds to realise our possibilities and to discover new worlds and new ways of thinking.”

Along with the overtly declared intent of encouraging creative writing, a civic and social purpose also implicitly emerges from the choice of this quote.

More frequently Seán Love and Roddy Doyle describe *Fighting Words* exclusively as a creative writing centre with two main characteristics: making writing accessible and giving an opportunity to participants to be creative by compensating for what they perceive as a lack of creativity in the Irish education system.

Openness, creativity-as the opposite of rote learning and empowerment

are cited as defining purposes of the activities offered by *Fighting Words* by both of its founders.

Self-esteem is also mentioned as a recurrent outcome resulting from engagement with *Fighting Words*.

Similarly one of the principals describes *Fighting Words* as an “outlet for students to develop their talents” and offers an opportunity that –while seen as valuable- it is also rarely offered in a school environment.

Fighting Words as a physical space

The premises of *Fighting Words* are an embodiment of the principles that animate the creative writing centre, with open and bright spaces and minimal use of physical barriers such as doors. In an interview with the radio station Lyric FM, Orla Lehane, *Fighting Words* former Educational Co-ordinator affirms:

“The building itself is quite magical and I think the space is an important part of what we do...We are lucky to have a magic door at *Fighting Words* and the magic door is a bookcase that opens up so when the kids are ready to go through they come up with a couple of magic words and the main part of the centre is a big bright space. “

One of the principals recalls:

“the setting, the setting is superb it’s a wonderful place to go down and visit. I remember being blown away the first day going into that first reception space walking through the wall of books if I’m right into the

other nice bright space” (Principal B)

Opening up of a new bright space through a door made of books is a metaphorical image that can be interpreted as representing a broadening of perspective through creative writing.

The physical space however has also a further symbolic connotation which is recurrently and consistently brought up by all interviewees.

It represents an “out-of-school space” and an “out-of-school experience”.

Anne Looney comments that the “out-of school” dimension is a key constituent of *Fighting Words* and emphasises how the physical space is also a vehicle for a different type of experience for the students.

We’re taken out of that into a space that’s much freer, quite different, we interact with different kinds of adults, they’re not teachers who tend to be a particular class, type, so they interact with different people...now is that integral to the *Fighting Words* experience? Is that experience of coming out of school into a different kind of space where everything is different, there’s no desks...the organisation of the space is different.

The “out-of-school space” is a space that does not reassemble a classroom. Three out of the six interviewed principals affirm that if the model were to be replicated in the formal school environment the school library or even a space outside but close to the school would need to be rented for this purpose.

The “out of school experience” is also space with less defined boundaries, both physical and metaphorical.

In the case of *Fighting Words* the “out of school experience” is also an educational experience, but education becomes dissociated from schooling.

As a principal commented the educational boundaries dissolve and the student rather than the syllabus becomes the centre of the educational experience.

Another principal comments that the out of school experience offers a memorable experience precisely because it offers an alternative from what is normally done in schools.

Fighting Words as an emotional space

Recurrently in the interviews, *Fighting Words* is described as an emotional and nurturing environment that supports without judging and in so doing creates a safe place in which to thrive both academically and personally.

The participants come to *own* the space. A young participant in the interview given to Lyric FM comments:

“It’s just something about it that I can’t even describe but it just gives the kinda feeling that this is your world. What you want to happen, happens and it’s just great.”

The empowerment that results from supportiveness of the environment opens up a creative space where participants are not afraid to experiment with their imagination, but also to express their views in a broader sense.

Students are given full control over their stories and no teaching takes place. Roddy Doyle in the interview with Lyric FM speaks of students feeling comfortable with taking charge of the activities they carry out in *Fighting Words* and suggests that this leads to generating a sense of community and of mutual respect.

“They’re making up their own rules, swapping work with each other although they’re very, very gentle with each other which is a good thing as well and they just have that common cause, so to speak”.

Similarly, Seán Love speaks of “creating something that is entirely theirs, from their own imagination” and adds that this is largely possible because of the freedom that students experience and the lack of judgmental activities like assessment.

Furthermore, President Michael D. Higgins in his speech at *Fighting Words* stamp launch highlights that the co-operative atmosphere generated by *Fighting Words* has implications beyond its overt aim to enhance creativity. It also gives students an experience of empowerment and active participation that might they feel encouraged to reproduce in a broader sense in society.

It is so important making the provision of a space for exploring and nurturing creativity as *Fighting Words* has done...eh...it’s a powerful

contributing to a future generation to develop their imagination and to explore their potential and possibilities within a truly, truly decent society and a fair society.

He also adds that through working together with others students develop a tolerance and ethics that enables them to respecting other people through respecting in first place their imagination.

According to all the principals interviewed, in *Fighting Words* different dynamics from those existing in schools are generated. Key to the establishment of such dynamics and contributory factor to the creation of an “out of school experience” is the support of *Fighting Words* volunteer tutors.

Anne Looney considers volunteers so integral to the *Fighting Words* model that she questioned whether the same experience could be replicated without them.

Students' personal benefits

Stakeholders identified a number of personal benefits for participants of the *Fighting Words* project. Students who participated in the project were perceived to have increased levels of engagement and motivation, improved confidence and self-esteem, and a strong sense of their creative abilities.

Being given an opportunity to have their voice heard was seen to be an empowering experience for participants, particularly for those who were

quiet or withdrawn, and those with poor language skills or behavioural difficulties. It was also noted that participants took enormous pride in their creative achievement and for many it was the highlight of the school year.

Having a voice

The opportunity to express their views and have their voices heard was identified as a significant factor in building participants' confidence and self-esteem. Some stakeholders observed the value of *Fighting Words* in providing a platform for the student voice.

According to NCCA, CEO, Dr. Anne Looney, voice is at the core of the initiative:

“*Fighting Words* to me is about voice so it's about giving students the tools to articulate views, opinions, ideas, concepts, questions even if they're challenging...giving them the tools, giving them the space and... giving them the confidence as well to find that voice.”

An outlet for students who are shy, students with behavioural challenges or poor language skills

While all the stakeholders agree that those who participated in the *Fighting Words* project benefited in numerous ways, a significant number of the stakeholders also commented on the impact of the project on students with special needs, students with behavioural difficulties and students with poor language skills. According to Seán Love, this was one

of the unanticipated benefits of the project and he remarks that some of the workshops with special needs students have been particularly engaging.

“Some of my favourite workshops are with children and adults with special needs. The feedback from themselves and from their parents or teachers or whoever is with them is that it can have tremendous benefits for all of them... particularly, I ‘m struck by parents of children with Aspergers about what it has done for their children... and for the visually impaired... I think the workshops with those children are just the best fun ever... a few days ago we had a group up from Cork of adults with a range of intellectual disabilities and it was just the most fantastic session. They had a fantastic time, they wrote a fantastic story together, they wanted their books and so they waited and... got a late train home.”

A number of principals also remarked that one of the major benefits of the project was its impact on special needs students.

One principal noted that participating in *Fighting Words* “would have done absolute wonders for their self-confidence and their self-esteem” (Principal A). Another principal observed that it was a hugely affirming experience for non-national students to have the opportunity to tell their stories and have their voice heard.

“One of our girls was a non-national student who was very poor at English, she wrote a wonderful story which *Fighting Words* kindly translated from Polish into English. It was good to show that, that girl,

even though she was not from Ireland and couldn’t speak English, she too could write her story. To then have it translated so that it was printed in both languages in the book... I think was an amazing thing.” (Principal B)

The opportunity to have their voice heard was also particularly significant for notably quiet students and students with mental health difficulties.

Another principal provides a further example of how the project particularly benefited a student with poor social skills who had been seriously bullied in primary school.

Participating in the project was good for him, good for his parents and has helped him develop that little bit of extra confidence that wasn’t there before. (Principal A)

An outlet for creativity and imagination

One of the obvious strengths of *Fighting Words* is that it provides participants with an outlet for creativity. Stakeholders identified its capacity to stimulate the imagination and engage the creative skills of participants as a significant opportunity for students to develop their creativity.

The lack of opportunity for creative expression in the present formal curriculum is also highlighted by a number of the principals who comment on the noticeable absence of the arts and the consequent neglect of young people’s talents.

The freedom to imagine and the opportunity to be creative are central tenets of the *Fighting Words* initiative.

Seán Love sees these as essential elements in the development of the individual and argues that the formal education system is not providing young people with this opportunity.

Another principal refers to the impact of the group dynamic and the fact that the *Fighting Words* experience is different from what students might usually encounter in school. In her view, students learn from this and “learn to be more creative or at least open a door to their creativity”(Principal E). According to one principal, the development of creative skills is more important now than ever and therefore *Fighting Words* is a timely initiative.

“I think it’s more than just short story writing, I think it’s about developing the creative skills, the mind-set in young people today; they’re so tuned in with their i-phones and TV programmes, sometimes to get into that creativity the students don’t realise that they actually have...I just think the idea...get in there, something so simple and basic yet I think we fail to do that in schools, at times within the mainstream curriculum. I think they found a niche, a fun way of developing those creative skills because they are skills we’re looking for in young men and women leaving school. We’re looking at one of the key skills in the new Junior Cycle *Framework* as well, so I think they’re hitting the nail on the head and this can only go further.” (Principal F)

Confidence, empowerment and self-efficacy

Having a voice and an opportunity to develop the imagination raised students’ awareness of their creative potential, this - in turn - had a positive influence on students’ self-image. All of the key stakeholders commented on the tremendous sense of empowerment and confidence that participants gained from the *Fighting Words* experience.

Principals observed a noticeable improvement in participants’ self-confidence and self-esteem.

“Their esteem shot through the roof... some of those girls may have certain issues at home, broken backgrounds... alcoholism at home... coming into school is almost a relief for them... they never get the praise... the merit in anything because they’re average students... but going out there every Thursday... they were coming back having been praised by the volunteers in *Fighting Words*... told they can do this, that they were wonderful human beings, that they were brilliant creative beings and I could see over the course of the year, their shoulders were physically up more.” (Principal F)

Another principal remarked, that engaging in the writing process and seeing the final output of their collective efforts was a hugely affirming experience that raised participants’ self-perception.

The potential for positively boosting students’ self-esteem and giving students a sense of empowerment through creative expression is the impetus behind the *Fighting Words* initiative.

While they claim to be nothing more than a creative writing centre, they are cognisant that providing young people with an opportunity to engage in creative self-expression can positively influence lives.

“It is about self-esteem, self-confidence and empowerment. We’re not looking to create the greatest writers of all time. We can see them passing through here, but that’s not our purpose.”

(Seán Love)

Seán Love highlights the importance of encouraging people to experiment, take risks and search for answers.

Another principal argues that enabling students to discover their creative potential not only promotes self-efficacy, it also results in the development of transferrable skills.

Sense of pride and achievement

A number of the stakeholders referred to the tremendous sense of achievement that students experienced from their involvement in *Fighting Words*. In particular it was noted that students were enormously proud of the fact that they had created something entirely from their imagination.

This outcome was especially significant for those students who had previously lacked confidence. For Roddy Doyle, participants pride in their

achievement is understandable.

He observes:

“It’s one of the measures of independence really isn’t it? The ability to write something that is your own and to actually take the next step and let other people read it.”

For many participants the feeling of success was heightened by the reaction of others to their work and the fact that other students in the school now looked up to them.

“They were so proud of themselves to have their book launched, to be sold, to become writers, published writers – a lot of those girls – their self-esteem has just blossomed and they hold their head up high and they’re kind of role models now to the other students, the other students in their year group thinking, wow, you did that, pure role models.”

(Principal F)

The night of the book launch was also described as an enormously uplifting experience for students and their parents and a cause for great celebration in the school.

“When we had the launch night here and when parents came in they were very proud of their children – any opportunity where parents are proud of their children is obviously a good thing, you know. It was a very positive experience for the students who took part... We took photos and you could see all the happy faces... some of those kids were quite shy so it really was a great achievement for them “ (Principal D)

A couple of principals compared the *Fighting Words* opportunity to engage in creative arts to the opportunity other students get to partake in a sport.

Roddy Doyle makes a similar comparison in relation to the Wednesday and Saturday *Write Club*

“I suppose Write Club is where teenage writers can be anonymous, where...a kid with an interest in football has no difficulty asserting that and finding other people who play football and it’s great. On Wednesday afternoons a lot of schools get half days and this room is full of kids who want to write on Wednesday afternoon and some of them weren’t aware that anybody else wanted to write and they love it here.” (Lyric FM)

All of the principals remarked that the project was a positive, educational and enjoyable experience for students and some principals pinpointed *Fighting Words* as the highlight of the school year for many participants.

Students’ academic benefits

The key stakeholders identified numerous academic benefits including, learning to work with others, participating in a collaborative process, developing a love of writing and improved literacy.

Learning to work together and participation in collaborative processes

Both Doyle and Love emphasise the importance of the group working together at the beginning of the writing process. They see this collaborative approach as an integral part of the creative process and have found it to be a highly effective strategy for enabling writing.

Roddy Doyle and Seán Love state that adopting a collaborative approach enables participants to overcome the fear of the blank page as they have already began the story before they start to write individually.

Doyle remarks:

“I like the notion, the collective start. I do think it rids it of a lot of its terror... and it’s, ye know, it’s... dare I say it... fun!”

Starting with a scenario based role play, participants are given the opportunity to develop dialogue, create characters and establish a setting, all of which gives participants the inspiration and confidence to start writing immediately.

Doyle remarks, “It’s the blank page that terrifies people more than anything else”.

Love agrees, emphasising that this process not only allows them overcome this obstacle; it also enables them to take ownership of the work.

Simple as it may appear, the screen is a hugely significant element of the model both in terms of the collaborative creation of the story and the powerful effect it has on the participants. Love and Doyle emphasise that

for the participants the simple act of seeing their own words being typed on the screen is incredibly liberating and hugely important confidence building experience.

The method is particularly striking in that it appears to work for everyone, especially those who do not consider themselves as writers.

Love of writing

A number of the stakeholders commented on the potential of *Fighting Words* to spark a love of writing that would remain with some participants for life.

Development of literacy

Doyle and Love make no reference to developing literacy skills and while levels of literacy may improve as a natural follow on, this is certainly not the primary purpose of the project.

Nevertheless, some principals see this as an important component.

“The primary purpose is to help students express themselves in English and to write and to develop their confidence and improve literacy” (Principal D)

In many instances, principals see *Fighting Words* as an important vehicle for raising the profile of literacy among participants and the wider school.

Another principal agreed that the project helped promote literacy in the school and was also cognisant that the model caters for all levels of literacies and abilities.

Participants, irrespective of their level of literacy, were confident in their ability to write and continued to draft and redraft their work until they were satisfied with what they had produced. All the principals commented on the quality of the work produced and Seán Love remarks:

The consistent, extraordinary high quality of writing by children from every background, from every ability, would blow you away

Additional benefits

Improved teacher student relationship and enhanced capacity to engage in dialogue

A number of the stakeholders observed that participating in *Fighting Words* tended to foster improved teacher/student relationships and enhance students’ capacity to engage in dialogue with teachers, peers and other adults.

Anne Looney makes a similar point in relation to dialogue. She also remarks that the collaborative approach adopted by the *Fighting Words* model engages students in a dialogue that enables them to manage their own learning. This dialogical approach to learning, she observes, is

similar to the assessment techniques that will form part of the reformed Junior Cycle.

“The phrase we’re using instead of assessment criteria, because that’s hard for students to understand, the phrases we’re using are features of quality. So in conversations with students, we’re saying... before we start this piece of work we want to agree what are the things that would make this a really good piece of work? What are the quality features here?... You’ll find that they can identify the ones you would want, ye know, as a teacher. Once you’ve got those features of quality out there and students know what they are and they’re shared with students... that dialogue around assessment is actually quite in keeping with the *Fighting Words* spirit... you know about empowering students to take control of their own learning and also to have some peer input. So if you’re, as a teacher in the English classroom, if the class has decided that one of the features of quality that it has to, that your dialogue or your interview or your speech has to keep our attention well one of the ways a teacher can assess that is to ask the other students... well did it keep our attention? Does anyone want to suggest how they could’ve got our attention more? That kind of dialogue is very powerful for students in an assessment context.”

Increased resilience and perseverance among students

A couple of principals remarked that they noticed an increased resilience and perseverance among students who had participated in the *Fighting Words* project.

Students displayed behaviour and attitude that indicated they had developed an understanding of deferred gratification and an ability to persevere with a course of action even when they encountered challenges that they would have previously considered insurmountable.

This change in behaviour and attitude was most noticeable among students who would be considered at risk of leaving school early. These students showed increased resilience and determination and went on to complete school.

A principal singled out one student in particular whom he felt surpassed all expectations in her achievements.

“Well, one of the girls there she had the best, she’d the best Leaving Cert last year you know and got her first choice in college right and she would not have always been an obvious person for that.” (Principal D)

Students more likely to take leadership and mentoring roles

One of the principals observed that *Fighting Words* participants were more likely to take leadership and mentoring roles in the school.

Significantly, most of the *Fighting Words* participants in this particular school went on to play active leadership roles in the school with one participant becoming head girl of the school.

The principal felt this trend was partly due to both the practical skills but

also the confidence, initiative and sense of agency students acquired as part of the *Fighting Words* project.

Transfer of the model to second level curriculum

This report investigates whether the translation of the Fighting Word model in second level schools in Ireland is possible and beneficial. It also aims to identify to what curricular context the *Fighting Words* model might be best suited.

Whether *Fighting Words* is compensating for a creativity deficiency or providing a complementary activity to what can be offered in the formal education system, it nevertheless represents a model for encouragement of creativity among a range of students, including secondary school students.

Locating a suitable space within the curriculum

The majority of the teachers surveyed and of the *Fighting Words* tutors were only partially convinced that the model could be translated in the school curriculum and that the transfer would entail some modification of the model which might compromise its integrity.

Transition year offers an ideal environment for exposing students to the *Fighting Words* model in a curricular environment allows them to break away from the more traditional school experience.

Whether Fighting Word can infiltrate the more traditional school experience remains debatable.

Roddy Doyle argues that the model has “worked with so many different types of kids, so many different types of people so many different varieties of ability and backgrounds” and it presents a flexibility that may allow for some translation model beyond the less traditional Transition Year.

Seán Love cautiously refers to hope that the Junior Cycle reform could act as a springboard for future linkages of the *Fighting Words* model with the formal school curriculum.

“Teachers at the second level are so driven by the system, the curriculum, they need at the moment to deliver the Junior Cert and the Leaving Cert and so... “I don’t know” is the honest answer to whether what we do can really infiltrate the system unless there is, as there is at the moment, a whole reforming of the Junior Cycle and the Leaving Cert and hopefully it does accommodate as promised a much greater emphasis on creativity and individual thinking. I’m hoping that’s where it goes.”

All interviewed principals responded positively about the translation of the *Fighting Words* model in the school curriculum and four out of six concur that the revised Junior cycle may offer greater opportunities for such translation.

Roddy Doyle argues that the model would fit anywhere in the school system:

“I don’t see why it wouldn’t work, if we’re talking about secondary school kids, at any particular level. Obviously Transition Year is the easiest one to fit with because that’s the nature of transition year and they’re looking out for you know I don’t think there’s any school approached that said no we’re too busy.

They all jump at it, they love the idea so it’s the easiest one to do but if creative writing was to be a part of the Junior Cert following the model that we use, I think would be very doable very, very doable.

I can see nothing to get in the way other than the usual things that get in the way of any project. By and large none of them are ever insurmountable really.”

Some principals argue the *Fighting Words* model should be developed as a short course: others believe it is best incorporated in the English syllabus.

Anne Looney, NCCA CEO, emphasises that *Fighting Words* model promotes verbal interaction and that this element, if incorporated the English syllabus could potentially allow to introduce assessment of oral competence. She further explains that what can be translated from *Fighting Word* rather than the model *in toto* is the methodological approach.

“Well, the kind of methodology that *Fighting Words* uses is, is good teaching and learning I mean it’s the kind of teaching and learning you want teachers to be using not just in English but in other subjects.”

She is otherwise not fully convinced that the model in its entirety can be translated because such its integral features such as the “out of school experience” cannot be replicated in the formal school environment.

Challenges to the transfer of the model

While the majority of the interviewees regard the translation of the *Fighting Words* model in the school curriculum possible, they also refer to potential challenges which may affect the transfer or result in a loss of integrity of the original model.

Roddy Doyle expresses concern in relation to assessment which would add a pressure that would take away from the enjoyment of the *Fighting Words* experience.

Seán Love expresses a similar sentiment. He acknowledges that assessment is part of the formal education system and that the extent to which the model can be compromised by assessment is dependent on the form of assessment utilised.

Factors that would help facilitate the transfer of the model

While some of the stakeholders indicated that the transfer of the model to the formal school curriculum could present some challenges, most of the stakeholders, nevertheless, agreed that the transfer would bring a

number of benefits.

Chief among these was the fact that the presence of the model on the school curriculum would give it wider access.

A principal felt that if the model was to transfer to the formal school curriculum it would give the school a greater insight into the work, more teachers might get involved and it would be a source of motivation for younger students who would look forward to having the opportunity to participate as they moved up the cycle.

Seán Love argues that the model provides students with the opportunity to think critically and creatively, skills he hopes the proposed curricular reform will actively promote and “accommodate, as promised, a much greater emphasis on creativity and individual thinking”.

He contends that “whatever system the reformation of the moment creates it has to allow for freedom to think” and expresses concern at what he sees as a lack of ‘real’ education in western society.

“There’s no freedom to think in secondary and, you know, I think if you’re really educating children they have to have the freedom to think. It’s not just an Irish issue, this is why the model that we have and that’s now in other countries and which we have adapted from the U.S. it’s the same thing being said... that the education systems in so many of the countries of the developed world is so restrictive. There’s little opportunity for anyone to be creative.”

There was a general consensus among the stakeholders that a number

of key factors would help support the transfer of the model to the formal school curriculum. Further detail will be provided in Chapter 3.

A few of the stakeholders expressed an interest in seeing the model being fully developed into a short course. A couple of principals suggest that *Fighting Words* should design a short course in accordance with NCCA guidelines.

Fighting Words appear to be amenable to such suggestions.

“I think we’d be happy to design a course. Our only issue is assessment. How closely we would be connected to the assessment [we would have to consider], but designing a course – absolutely. Yes, why not?” (Seán Love)

Several of the principals remarked that the delivery of the model should not necessarily be confined to English teachers. It was felt that any teacher who had a passion for writing or a creative flair should be given the opportunity to teach the model.

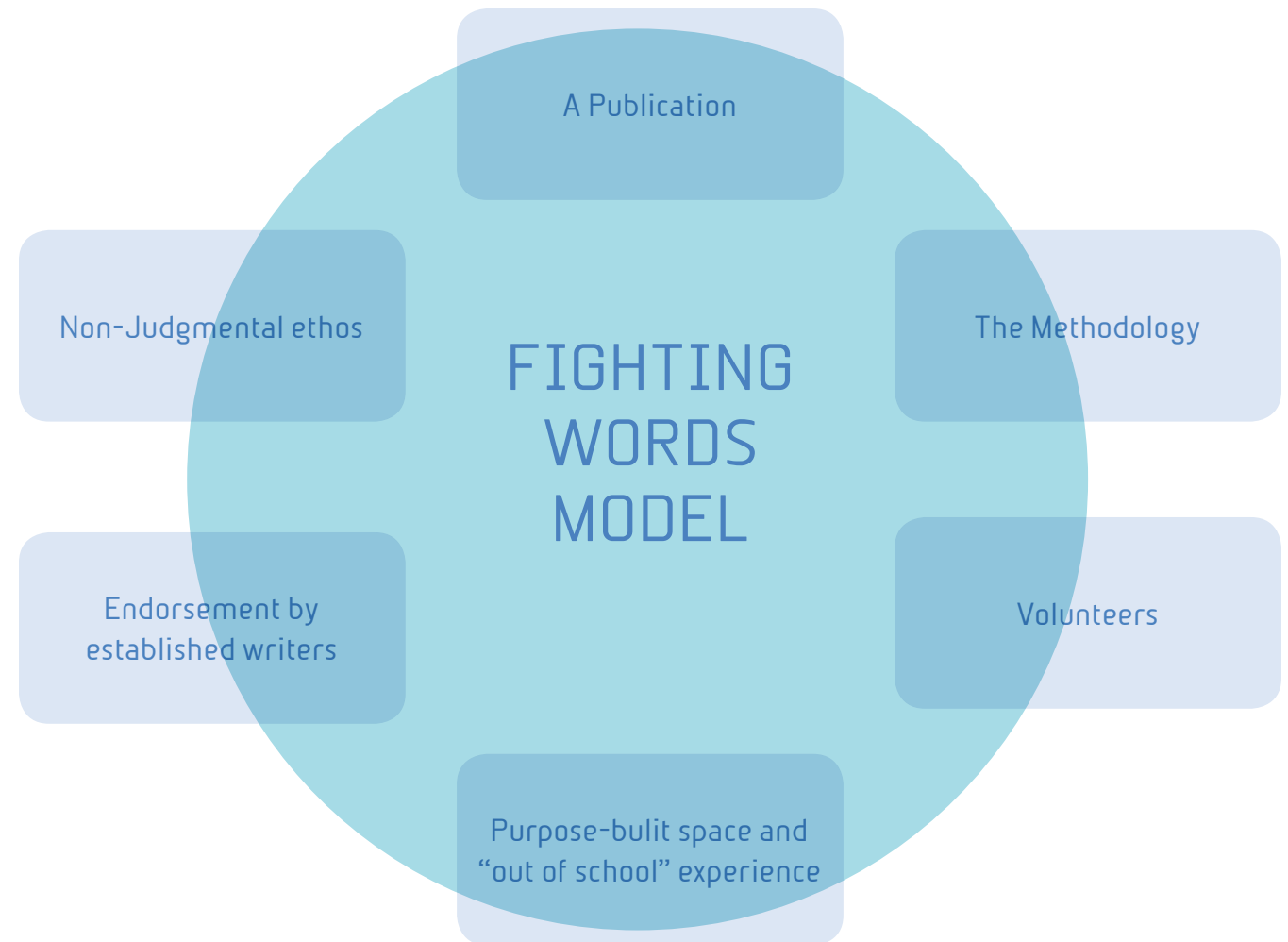
Concluding comments

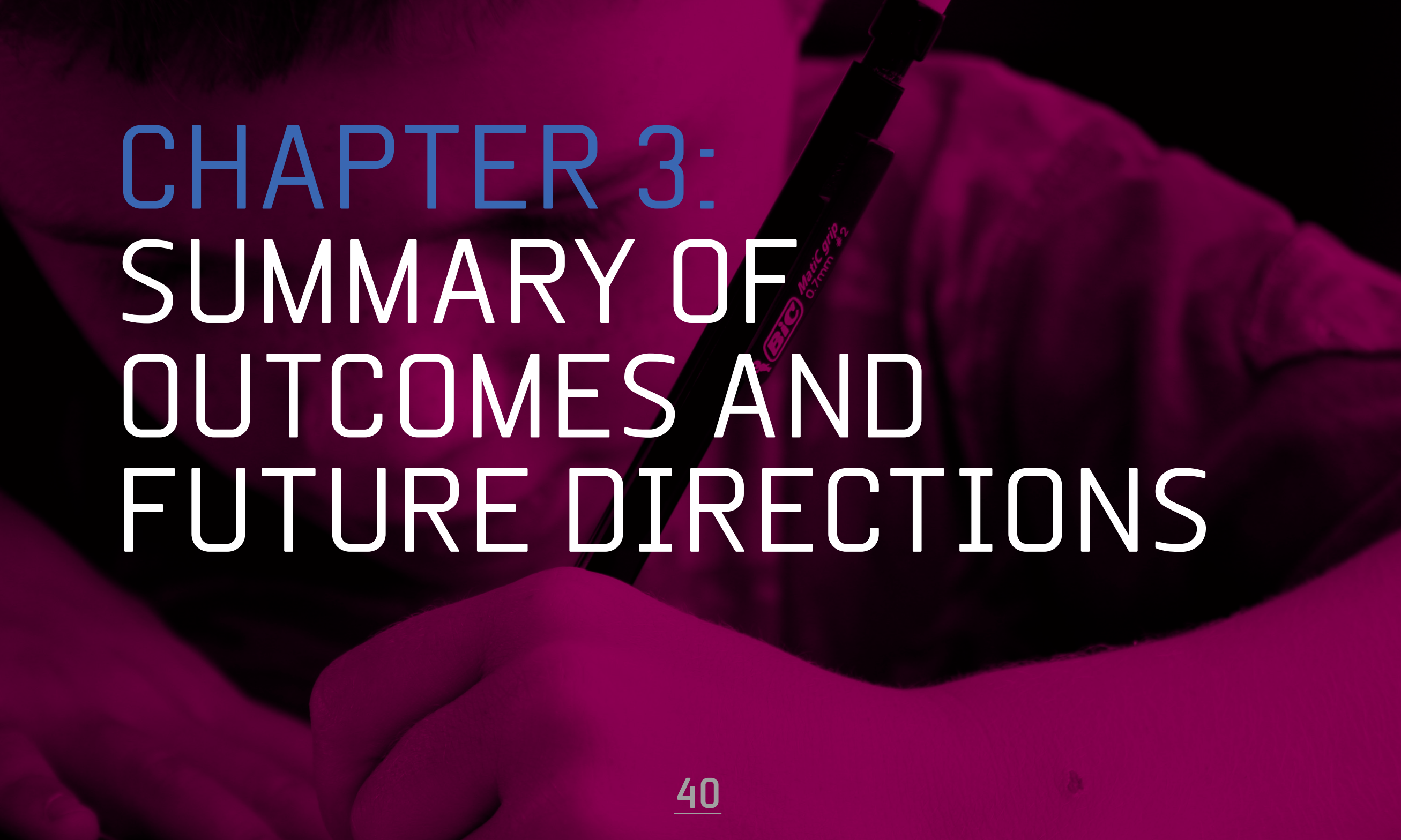
Despite the self-denomination ‘simply’ as a creative writing centre, *Fighting Words* appears to go well beyond its overtly stated remit.

Key to the success of the *Fighting Words* model for the promotion of creativity is a workshop format that is flexible, based on co-operative principles and informed by a non-judgmental ethos.

The benefits for students outlined by the key stakeholders range from the development of some academic skills such as literacy and writing skills to personal benefits such as the development of self-confidence resulting from a strong sense of achievement derived from their creative writing achievements.

All key stakeholders indicate that a translation of the *Fighting Words* model in the secondary school system is possible, albeit one that may require substantial modifications to the original model. The translation in curricular environments other than that of Transition Year is necessarily associated with the introduction of some form of assessment, which is potentially one of the most substantial threats to the integrity of the original model.



A close-up, slightly blurred photograph of a person's hands writing on a piece of paper. The person is holding a black BIC ballpoint pen. The background is a solid magenta color. The text is overlaid on the image.

CHAPTER 3: SUMMARY OF OUTCOMES AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

BENEFITS

Personal Benefits

Confidence, empowerment and self-efficacy

An outlet for creativity and imagination

An outlet for students who are shy, difficult or with poor language skills

Sense of pride & Achievement

Having a voice

Academic Benefits

Learning to work together & participation in collaborative processes

Love of English

Love of writing

Development of literacy

Additional benefits

Improved teacher-student relationship & enhanced capacity to engage in dialogue

Students more likely to take leadership and mentoring roles

Increased resilience and perseverance among students

Perceptions of Fighting Words

The consultation with *Fighting Words* stakeholders has produced a description of the core features of the model and of the principles that animate the activities offered by the creative writing centre. As shown in figure 1 six core features have emerged.

Core features of the *Fighting Words* model

The *Fighting Words* model creates an environment and generates a process by which both individual and groups of students, regardless of their initial aptitude become capable of producing short stories that demonstrate a level of originality and creativity often unexpected by their teachers.

The overwhelming majority of students who took part in the *Fighting Words* book projects speak of the publication of a book as their greatest achievement.

As pointed out by the principals of the schools that participated in the year-long book project, the launch of the book has been a highlight of the school year not only for the students but also for the schools themselves. The publication of a book has increased the visibility of schools and - according to the principals - their profile has been raised thanks to the association with *Fighting Words*. Nevertheless, the responses to the questionnaires by the students who have attended only a once-off workshop show a proportionally comparable sense of achievement derived from completing a story in a short period of time and without

the benefit of a professional publication. Bringing a creative task to completion therefore emerges as a positive outcome even if dissociated from a high profile publication.

The methodology utilised by *Fighting Words* in their workshops is regarded by the teachers who have participated in the workshops as an inspirational form of teaching and a teacher has commented:

“I feel I was lucky to have witnessed real education and have had this opportunity”.

Similarly, in her interview Anne Looney refers to the *Fighting Words* approach as an example of good teaching.

The support of **volunteers** is consistently mentioned by all stakeholders as fundamental to the success of the model. The tutors themselves highlight the importance of their often arduous motivational role in helping students to build self-reliance and resilience.

The association to *Fighting Words* of several established writers along with Roddy Doyle is quoted by the students, teachers and principals involved in book project as giving prestige to students' publication. The introduction to all the books has been written by different high-profile published authors who comment on each individual short story included in the book.

The endorsement of writers has generated a sense of validation of students' creativity among the students themselves and those students who have continued to keep in touch with *Fighting Words* through the

Write Club confirm that this factor has influenced their decision to continue to write creatively.

The importance of the ***Fighting Words space*** – both physical and emotional- has been mentioned consistently by all stakeholders surveyed and interviewed for this evaluation.

The physical space is represented by the building per se and by its openness, brightness and minimal use of physical barriers.

The emotional space is the lived experience of the space, the atmosphere and the ethos as experienced by the students.

Tutors are fundamental to the creation of a safe and supportive emotional space as they embody the *Fighting Words'* values in their interaction with the students.

The space has a symbolic connotation as it represents an ***'out of school' experience*** for the students. The students themselves have commented on breaking away from the school routine and teachers and principals have suggested that the dynamics and student behaviours witnessed in the *Fighting Words* centre are different from those normally witnessed in school, such as for instance a greater willingness to verbalise their ideas and to actively contribute to the development of the story.

The 'out of school experience' has been described by Anne Looney as the most problematic aspect of the *Fighting Words* model to recreate in a school environment. If the *Fighting Words* model were to be offered within the school environment, the major challenges would be

represented by not being able to move students physically out of school but also by the difficulty in moving schooling –and its associated roles, behaviours and dynamics-out of the educational experience.

The ***non-judgmental ethos*** of *Fighting Words* plays a significant role in the establishment of a supportive and safe environment for students but also in the development of creativity and in particular of “possibility thinking” and divergent thinking.

The fundamental belief that anyone can be creative permeates *Fighting Words'* activities and this is clearly perceived by the students who have attended the centre.

Students speak of the freedom that being creative offers and a sense of perceived validation of individual and collective imagination emerges from the responses to questionnaires by all three surveyed groups.

Some form of assessment of the students work takes place as students receive feedback on their creative efforts. However the feedback is formulated in formative terms and does not present a summative dimension.

Benefits of the *Fighting Words* Model

The consultation with *Fighting Words* stakeholders has revealed a wide range of personal, academic and additional benefits for students.

Personal Benefits

Responses to *Fighting Words* were overwhelmingly positive in terms of the project's benefits to participants. All the stakeholders agreed that *Fighting Words* had a positive impact on participants' personal and academic development. All stakeholders indicated that participants had increased levels of **confidence, empowerment and self-efficacy** and some of the stakeholders attributed this to participants **having a voice**.

Benefits for students

The data reveals that *Fighting Words* provides student with a much needed **outlet for creativity and imagination**. This was also considered to be an important factor in boosting students' self-esteem particularly for **students who are shy, difficult or with poor language skills**.

Some stakeholders indicated that the participants' sense of creativity was boosted by the fact that *Fighting Words* considers all students to be creative.

Other stakeholders indicated that the increased levels of confidence and empowerment were a result of the **sense of pride and achievement** participants felt at having completed a task and having created a piece of

work solely from their imagination. Participants' positive self-image was attributed to a change in attitude – participants viewed themselves as writers, as creative beings capable of overcoming a challenge.

Academic Benefits

The majority of students commented on their improved confidence in writing. Some students **discovered a love of writing** and expressed surprise at their ability to write and the sense of achievement that came from having completed creative work. Teachers agreed that students' writing had improved and principals remarked that the project supported the **development of literacy** in participants but also promoted literacy in the school.

All of the stakeholders felt that one of the benefits of the model was that students were **learning to work together**, to share ideas and to listen to other people's views. **Participation in collaborative processes** was considered to have a positive impact on learning and the quality of student writing.

Additional benefits

Principals and teachers reported **improved teacher student relationship** arising from the *Fighting Words* experience. Teachers and students developed a new-found respect for each other and developed a greater bond. Principals also remarked that **students were more likely to take leadership and mentoring roles** in the school. Principals, participants and teachers all commented on **an increased resilience and**

perseverance among students. Some principals observed that this was especially true for potential early school leavers who, prior to *Fighting Words*, had a negative perception of school and difficult relationships with teachers but subsequently went on to complete second level and in one case third level. As can be seen from the findings that emerge from the data, the benefits arising from *Fighting Words* are closely related to the key skills of the Junior Cycle.

The following table correlates the benefits gained by participants of *Fighting Words* to the Junior Cycle key skills.

The *Fighting Words* model and the Junior Cycle Key Skills

Key Skills for Junior Cycle (Source: <i>NCCA (2012) A Framework for Junior Cycle</i>)	Benefits gained by participants of <i>Fighting Words</i> as emerging from the consultation with stakeholders
Managing Myself	Students demonstrate increased perseverance and resilience See a task through to completion Look for new and different ways of answering questions and solving problems
Staying Well	Students display increased levels of self-confidence and self-esteem Recognise and celebrate their achievement Develop positive relationships Find enjoyment and fun in learning

Communicating	Students express themselves more readily Speak in front of others Listen to others Respect others' views and ideas Edit, correct and improve writing Participate confidently in class discussion
Being Creative	Students develop their creativity and imagination and an appreciation of their ability to be creative Try out different approaches when working on a task and evaluate what works best Seek out different viewpoints and perspectives and consider them carefully Imagine different scenarios and predict different outcomes
Working with Others	Students learn to work together in a collaborative process Show respect for different positions and different points of view Contribute to decisions as part of a group
Managing Information and Thinking	Students learn to develop planning, writing and editing skills Think creatively and critically Manage their own learning Look for new and different ways of answering questions and solving problems

Transferability of the *Fighting Words* model to the second level education

The Irish second level education is currently undergoing a process of

enormous change and reform. Such process is opening new opportunities for the integration of a broader range of disciplinary domains. It also places greater emphasis on creativity which emerges as one of the core principles informing the revised Junior Cycle.

Fighting Words – as a model for the promotion of creative writing- has

shown during the past four years how creativity can be enhanced and encouraged among secondary school children.

Here is he potential contribution of *Fighting Words* to the Junior Cycle with specific reference to its principles.

The potential contribution of *Fighting Words* to the Junior Cycle curricular environment

Principles for Junior Cycle (Source: <i>NCCA (2012) A Framework for Junior Cycle</i>)	Possible contribution of <i>Fighting Words</i> as emerging from the consultation with stakeholders
Quality All students experience a high quality education, characterised by high expectations of learners and the pursuit of excellence.	All students are considered capable of being creative Students gain self-confidence and achieve beyond their originally expected performance
Creativity and innovation Curriculum, assessment, teaching and learning provide opportunities for students to be creative and innovative.	Offers a teaching methodology example for the integration of creativity in the classroom Offers a model development of creative writing
Engagement and participation The experience of curriculum, assessment, teaching and learning encourages participation, generates engagement and enthusiasm, and connects with life outside the school.	Through group-based component of the workshops students develop an ability to work with others Students actively and collaboratively participate in the initial development of a story and this enhances their ability to relate and respect others
Continuity and development Curriculum, assessment, teaching and learning enables students to build on their learning to date, recognises their progress in learning and supports their future learning	The year-long book project is a process-oriented learning activity that encourages students to improve through continuous feedback and constructive criticism on students' creative efforts. The process offers an example of how writing skills can be progressively developed.

Wellbeing The student experience contributes directly to their physical, mental, emotional and social wellbeing and resilience. Learning takes place in a climate focused on collective wellbeing of school, community and society.	One of the core features of <i>Fighting Words</i> is the supportive atmosphere that characterises all interactions between students and tutors. The emotional space created by <i>Fighting Words</i> exemplified the importance of establishing a co-operative and safe climate in which students can thrive both personally and academically.
Choice and flexibility The school's junior cycle programme is broad enough to offer a wide range of learning experiences to all, and flexible enough to offer choice to meet the needs of students.	One of the core features of the <i>Fighting Words</i> creative writing model is its flexibility which has made it adaptable and suitable for different age groups. This characteristic offers opportunity for integration of the model in different curricular environments within the Junior Cycle
Inclusive education The educational experience is inclusive of all students and contributes to equality of opportunity, participation and outcomes for all.	<i>Fighting Words</i> practice is informed by a democratic and inclusive ethos. The structure of the workshops favours co-operation and fosters respect for all voices The outcomes of this research show that <i>Fighting Words</i> in particular has given a voice to those students with poor language skills, students with mental behavioural issues and students at risk of dropping out of school.
Learning to learn High quality curriculum, assessment, teaching and learning support students in developing greater independence in learning and in meeting the challenges of life beyond school, of further education, and of working life.	The outcomes of this evaluation show that sustained learning has resulted for students who have engaged in the year-long book project. As reported by teachers and school principals, the confidence and skills developed by these students during this project have also motivated greater engagement with learning in the school environment.

The analysis evidenced a strong consistency of the principles and process that characterise *Fighting Words* with the principles that inform the revised Junior Cycle. Such consistency offers a fertile ground for a potential mainstreaming of the *Fighting Words* model in the secondary school system.

Some of the stakeholders (Dr. Anne Looney, Seán Love, Roddy Doyle, school principals, tutors and teachers) were consulted on the possibility of a translation of the *Fighting Words* model. The following four key findings have emerged:

- **The translation of the model in second level education is possible.**

The majority of the stakeholders regarded the translation of the model in the second level school system as part of the Junior Cycle.

40% of the tutors were opposed to such translation primarily because of their concern for the difficulties in recreating the “*Fighting Words* experience”, with a purpose-built space and with individual attention given to students by tutors.

- **A mixed response emerged in relation to what is the best curricular environment for the translation.**

The revised Junior Cycle has introduced in addition to the traditional subjects also 100 hour short courses which can be designed by schools to introduce new subject areas.

The stakeholders are almost equally divided between those who see a translation of the *Fighting Words* model to be suited to the incorporation in the English Syllabus and those who indicate that a short course could be entirely devoted to the development of a book based on the process and format devised by *Fighting Words*.

- **The translation is likely to require some modification of the original model.**

Concerns were raised in relation to the compatibility of the model with specific aspects of the secondary school curriculum. In particular the necessity to associate summative assessment to the model, the unavailability of volunteers to deliver workshops and support students, and the unsuitability of the school environment to recreate the ‘out of school’ experience and the physical/emotional space created by *Fighting Words* are among the shared concerns expressed by the stakeholders.

- ***Fighting Words* should be involved in the translation of the model in the secondary school system.**

School principals and teachers interviewed have indicated that if the *Fighting Words* model were to be translated in some form in the school curriculum they would regard as important the opportunity to avail of *Fighting Words* support through training for teachers and support in the development of short courses inspired by the *Fighting Words* model and designed locally by various schools.

Future directions

It seems clear from this evaluation that *Fighting Words* is a worthwhile project both in terms of the benefits derived and its potential impact on the curriculum.

Fighting Words offers a curriculum project which has unique attributes.

- It brings together interesting and innovative approaches to teaching and learning that can be easily replicated in the classroom.
- It provides a vehicle for project-centred learning, subject integration, team teaching and collaborative and co-operative learning. In so doing it offers a way to deliver some of the key areas and processes of the revised curriculum.
- *Fighting Words* is consistent with the key principles of the revised Junior Cycle and as such offers a model that combines the key skills of the Junior Cycle. This makes it an attractive option for schools seeking to include short courses in the curriculum.
- *Fighting Words* may also be of special value to students with special needs, students with poor language skills and students with challenging behaviour.
- The project allows opportunities for self-direction, peer collaboration, empowerment and the development of self-esteem and self-efficacy for all students.

Despite various activities outside Dublin, the core of the offering is to schools in the greater Dublin area.

Yet its activities could benefit students nationwide if some alternative form of mainstreaming was possible.

It is therefore worthwhile examining possibilities for the translation of the *Fighting Words* model in the school curriculum even if this translation might entail some loss of integrity.

The revised Junior Cycle English curriculum has been finalised and the consultation carried out by the NCCA has been completed and, at present, there is no opportunity to influence the content of the syllabus. However, the methodological approach adopted by *Fighting Words* could be integrated in the Continuous Professional Development offered by the NCCA to English teachers thus achieving some partial mainstreaming of the model.

Short courses designed by schools themselves are also an option for the translation of the model.

The self-contained nature of short courses offers greater flexibility in terms of content and format of the activities that might be included in the syllabus.

Some suggestion about replicating some of the core features of the model can however be advanced as shown below:

Challenges and suggestions for the integration of the *Fighting Words* model in a Short Course

- **Assessment** – Assessment perhaps remains one of the biggest stumbling blocks for the translation. However, if the majority of the

assessment of a short course inspired by the *Fighting Words* model is of a formative nature, this is likely to impact less negatively on the students learning experience and on the development of their creative writing skills.

- ***Purpose-built space and ‘out of school’ experience*** - As suggested by a principal a partnership with local libraries, but also community and art centres could offer suitable venues for recreating an ‘out-of-school’ experience.
- ***The method. The Fighting Words model utilises a team*** of volunteers for each of the workshops. It is not realistic for a teacher working alone to attempt to replicate the model. It is suggested that teachers working in teams could be engaged in these sessions.
- ***The Volunteers*** - Teachers remain assessors and therefore this would only be an approximation of the possibility of replicating a non-judgmental atmosphere that emerges as very strong feature of the emotional space created within *Fighting Words*. For this reason, in addition to teachers - support of locally based tutors trained by *Fighting Words* might be sought.
- ***Access to established writers*** - While some schools might count among their contacts writers who are willing to lend some of their time to endorse a student publication, it is unlikely that this opportunity would be available to most schools. *Fighting Words* might consider establishing a network of established writers who might lend their support to local schools.

- ***A publication***- Partnership with local newspapers could be established by schools for the publication of short stories written by students. Furthermore web-publishing of an anthology of short stories written and illustrated by students could potentially harness the interdisciplinary expertise of English, Art and ICT teachers.

The method	Training for teachers, local volunteers and librarians (either in Fighting Words premises or locally). Interdisciplinary teaching (for instance English in tandem with Art and ICT) Post-training support for teachers Fighting Words to provide support to teachers wishing to develop a school-based short course as per revised Junior Cycle.
Volunteers	Recruitment and training of local volunteers to support teachers.
Purpose built space and out of school experience	Use of local libraries, community centres and art galleries to generate “out of school experience” and familiarise students with local culture-related facilities and prompt lifelong engagement with the arts.
Access to established writers	Fighting Words to help establish a network of locally based established writers willing to support and endorse local school-based publications
A Publication	Local and community based newspapers publishing students’ creative work in addition to school-based publications

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