

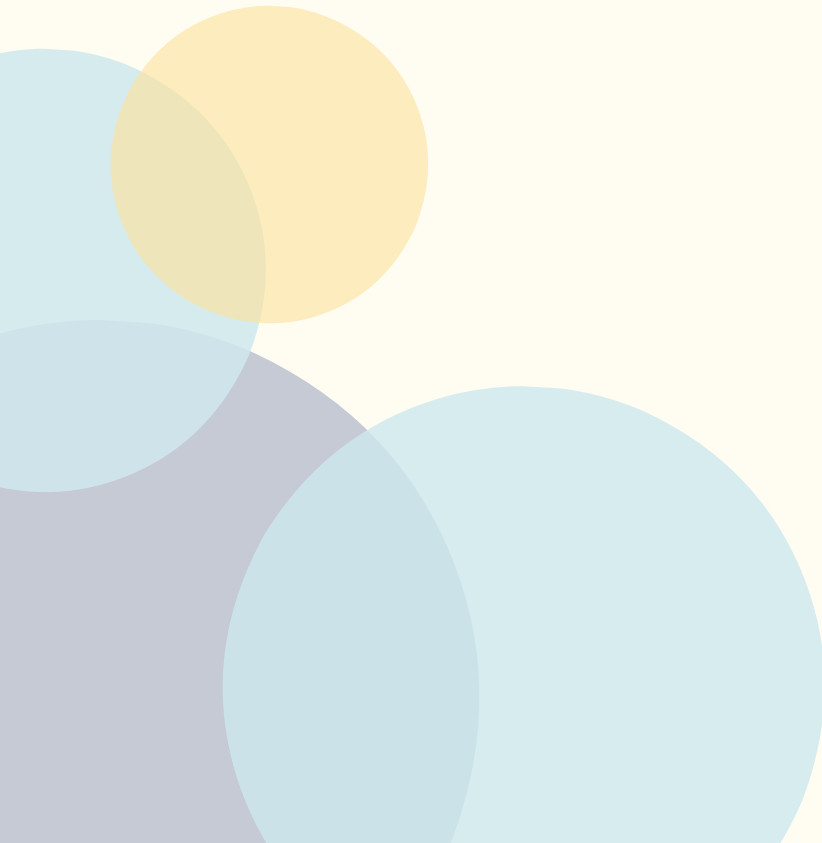


DCU Educational Disadvantage Centre's Inclusive Systems and Inclusive Arts Education Key Principles: A Strategic Framework for *Fighting Words*' Poverty and Social Inclusion Commitments

“A Different Way of Being”

Executive Summary

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Introduction: Key Principles and Terms of Reference

Fighting Words is an Irish charitable creative writing organisation whose programmes are designed to help participants harness the power of their imaginations and develop their creative voice. Fighting Words offers a range of creative opportunities, including primary and secondary school workshops, summer camps, writing clubs, extended projects and specialised programmes for adults and groups with special or diverse needs.

DCU Educational Disadvantage Centre was commissioned by Fighting Words to undertake this review in order to build on Fighting Words' declared strategic commitment to develop its focus on students and communities experiencing poverty and social exclusion. This review will primarily focus on developing Fighting Words' poverty-specific strategy and will inform future strategic development on this aspect both for Fighting Words and the wider sector of creative writing for social inclusion in education and communities.



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Key Principles Framework

The review seeks to apply a framework of key principles of inclusive arts education developed by DCU Educational Disadvantage Centre to the illustrative example of the Fighting Words project.

Seven Key Principles of Inclusive Arts Education: DCU Educational Disadvantage Centre (McCabe and Downes 2025)

1. Equity and Access: Inclusive arts education ensures equal access to arts learning opportunities for all students, regardless of their abilities, socio-economic background, gender, or ethnicity. EU policies emphasise eliminating barriers to participation, ensuring that all individuals have equitable access to the arts and can develop their full potential. This includes making arts education spatially, physically, socially, and economically accessible, ensuring that marginalised and vulnerable groups are fully included. A financial resource allocation process needs a prioritising focus on those most in need.

2. Personalization and Flexibility: The design of arts education must be adaptive and responsive to the diverse needs of students. This principle highlights the importance of differentiated learning and curriculum flexibility, which enables personalised learning paths that cater to individual talents, learning styles, and cultural backgrounds. The European Council *Recommendations on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning* underlines the necessity of fostering inclusive learning environments that accommodate the varied needs of learners to encourage creativity and innovation.

3. Collaboration and Participation: Inclusive arts education promotes active participation and collaboration between teachers, students, communities, and stakeholders. It encourages a co-creation approach, where learners, particularly those from marginalised or vulnerable groups, are involved in shaping their educational experience. This principle aligns with the *European Pillar of Social Rights* and the *UNESCO Education 2030 Framework for Action*, which call for inclusive systems that enable dialogue, engagement, and participation of all actors in education.

4. Cultural Diversity and Inclusivity: The *UNESCO Framework for Culture and Arts Education 2024* emphasises the promotion of cultural diversity as a cornerstone of inclusive arts education. It encourages the integration of various cultural expressions, traditions, and art forms from around the world, ensuring that students are exposed to a wide range of perspectives. This principle supports the idea that arts education should reflect and respect diverse cultural identities, fostering an inclusive environment where all students can see their cultures represented and valued.

5. Interdisciplinary Collaboration: Inclusive arts education encourages collaboration across disciplines, integrating the arts with other fields of study to promote holistic learning. Unesco (2024) advocates for an interdisciplinary approach where the arts are combined with sciences, social studies, and other subjects to enhance creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills. A particular focus here is on interdisciplinary curricular aspects involving the arts.

6. Community Engagement: The *UNESCO Framework for Culture and Arts Education 2024* emphasises the importance of community engagement in arts education. It calls for arts programmes that connect students with their communities, promoting social cohesion, empathy, and civic responsibility. Successful arts-based community development should aim for sustainability, creating projects that can flourish over time and adapt to the evolving needs of the community. This includes building capacity within the community and securing resources to ensure the continuity of arts programming.

7. A Spatial Turn Focus on Physical and Relational Spaces for Equitable Inclusive Systems: This focuses on design of suitable and accessible physical spaces to engage and empower marginalised groups. It further adds a strong focus on relational spaces including going beyond diametric spaces of winner/loser oppositions and exclusions (Downes 2020).

These key principles build on 10 key principles for inclusive systems to address early school leaving as developed by Downes, Nairz-Wirth & Rusinaite¹:

¹ Downes, P., Nairz-Wirth, E., Rusinaite, V. (2017). *Structural Indicators for Developing Inclusive Systems in and around Schools in Europe*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union/EU bookshop.

Ten Key Principles for Inclusive Systems in and around Schools

1. System wide focus Schools, agencies and families are distinct but connected systems, each having a set of relationships and mutual influences that impact the individual – both system blockages as barriers and system supports.
2. Equality and non-discrimination Substantive equality requires a commitment to educational success for everyone irrespective of social background; to achieve this, different groups may need additional supports. Non-discrimination includes a right to equality of concern and respect in a supportive environment free of prejudice.
3. Children's rights to expression of voices and participation, and other educational rights Children have a right to be heard on issues directly affecting their own welfare, with due regard to their ages and maturity.
4. Holistic approach A holistic approach recognises the social, emotional and physical needs, not simply the academic and cognitive needs, of both children/young people and their parents.
5. Active participation of parents in school, including marginalised parents Parental input into school policy and practices, as well as their children's education, requires both a general strategic commitment and a distinctive focus on marginalised parents' involvement.
6. Differentiation in prevention approaches Different levels of need require different strategies to meet them, including those students and families that are experiencing moderate risk and chronic need.
7. Building on strengths Promoting strengths in effect challenges the negative deficit labelling of vulnerable groups, and seeks to promote growth (both for individuals' personal and educational development and for system level development) rather than simply prevent.

8. Multidisciplinarity as a multifaceted response for students with complex needs A range of actively collaborating professionals is needed to address the complex, multifaceted needs of marginalised groups.

9. Representation and participation of marginalised groups Marginalised groups include those experiencing poverty and social exclusion, those at risk of early school leaving, those experiencing bullying, mental health difficulties and/or special educational needs, and in addition, some groups of migrants and ethnic minorities. There must be a distinct focus on the processes and structures that ensure these groups' representation and participation.

10. Lifelong learning Lifelong learning, from the cradle onwards, requires a distinct educational focus on active citizenship, personal and social fulfilment, intercultural dialogue across communities, and additionally on poverty, social inclusion, and employment. It embraces informal learning, as well as nonformal and formal education classes relying on active learning methodologies.



Key Conclusions and Recommendations of Review

It is to be concluded from this review that Fighting Words' current practice and strategy is strongly resonant with DCU Educational Disadvantage Centre's key principles for inclusive systems and arts education, focusing on poverty and social inclusion contexts. Fighting Words is directly resonant with key principles such as being **strengths based**, offering a **holistic** and **differentiated** approach, while its significant acceleration of focus towards prioritising areas of poverty and social exclusion in the past three years especially, has brought notable steps towards a **systemic & equity and access** strategy for Fighting Words regarding meeting the needs of these students and communities. The whole approach of Fighting Words is based on key principles of **students' voices**, in a respectful environment promoting principles of **equality and nondiscrimination**. Fighting Words's work displays impressive increases in numbers of DEIS schools in recent years and in its target for engaging Traveller groups.

The report identifies Fighting Words as a relational space, including within its local community outreach work, which points toward an emerging spatial-turn emphasis in the organisation's practice. The substantial increase of focus for DEIS schools and marginalised groups in recent years highlights the clear dedicated commitment of Fighting Words to expanding its distinctive contribution for children, young people and adults in contexts of poverty and social exclusion. Fighting Words is to be strongly commended for all of this.

Fighting Words plays a crucial role in addressing the poverty aspect of educational access by providing **equitable and inclusive creative opportunities** for young people. The initiative successfully eliminates financial barriers by offering free workshops, ensuring that all children, regardless of socio-economic background, can participate. While expanding access, it is important to maintain a balance and avoid supplanting the role of the teacher. This calls for rigorous training of volunteers, ongoing review of materials to ensure alignment with educational objectives and best practices and adherence to best practice in arts partnerships.

The authors find that a key strength of Fighting Words lies in its **personalisation and flexibility**. The tailored approach accommodates diverse learning styles through multimodal storytelling techniques, including stories, poems, songs, animation, and drawing. This expertise

in multimodal storytelling could be further enhanced and explicitly framed as a core methodology in which Fighting Words offers expertise and guidance.

The model is also highly **collaborative and participative**, benefiting from multiple partnerships. Educators report a significant impact, particularly when they witness the process in action with students. Embedding teacher observation as a core element of partnership structures could strengthen the long-term influence of Fighting Words on educational practice.

Fighting Words is committed to **cultural diversity and inclusivity**, with the publication and sharing of students' work playing a vital role in amplifying voices from diverse backgrounds. There is an opportunity to incorporate a wider range of storytelling traditions and to be more explicit about the existing work being done in relation to diversity and cultural inclusivity.

Interdisciplinary collaborations have provided avenues for impact according to the report, as seen in the recent Parting Words - Young Playwrights Showcase at The Abbey Theatre. This serves as a strong model for how Fighting Words can support DEIS schools in implementing the new Leaving Certificate subject of *Drama, Film and Theatre Studies*. Expanding similar interdisciplinary partnerships and integration with Wellbeing curricula could provide further enrichment opportunities for disadvantaged schools.

The report evidences the success of the organisation within the formal education system: Teachers working in the education system report that they are inspired by the child-centered approach of Fighting Words (Filho and Ó Cuanacháin 2022). Phelan (2023) notes that the Fighting Words workshop model is directly relevant to opportunities for CPD for teachers regarding process writing. One teacher noted 'It boosted my confidence - it taught me a different way of being with children. It gave me a model and also the support I needed. I had great freedom and I was very much changed by the experience.'

Community engagement is a fundamental aspect of Fighting Words, offering a platform for underrepresented voices and developing a sense of belonging and agency. Through its initiatives, Fighting Words empowers young people, particularly those facing socio-economic barriers ensuring that their stories are heard and valued.



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Key areas for development:

According to the report, There is a need to build on key principles such as **multidisciplinary**, **representation of marginalised groups**, **a spatial turn** for sustained outreach spaces, **lifelong learning**, **parental engagement**, as well as extending a **holistic, differentiated** and **systemic** focus, to further develop Fighting Words's commitments to engage with communities and schools in contexts of higher poverty and exclusion.

A systemic focus on sustained engagement combined with a spatial turn focus invites an accelerated focus on Fighting Words developing sustained community spaces, embedded in local communities. These can also include Youth Theatres to locate Fighting Words alongside and complementary to Youth Theatre Ireland's national strategy. Such sustained community spaces offer enhanced opportunities for young people to feel ownership over their environment, in places that belong to them. These sustained spaces offer a shift in focus away from once off workshops in areas of higher poverty, to ensure that substantial change is possible over time

rather than simply as taster courses, discontinued. Intensity of support is a key dimension here in a systemic, spatial focus.

Embedding Fighting Words in sustained local community spaces in areas of high poverty offers the opportunity to contribute to these multidisciplinary approaches, ideally co-located or even nearby. Fighting Words's sustained spaces for engagement can foster sufficient trust with young people who may be alienated from the system, a trust that can allow them not only to engage with their traumas and adverse childhood experiences in safe spaces for writing and personal expression, but also to then access further specialist supports onsite, such as emotional counselling/therapy. Fighting Words offers a potential gateway here into the specialised differentiated supports, specifically regarding trauma and adverse childhood experiences. This holistic needs- focus in Fighting Words invites sharper distinctions in some of its models between deeply personal writing for self expression and more social identity, group based writing. Both offer different strengths and opportunities.

Fighting Words strategic integration with other local community services/spaces can help provide key features of a combined model as a one-stop shop such as:

- Continuity of support over time, flexible levels of support, programmes tailored to levels of need
- Outreach: reaches groups missed by pre-packaged programmes
- Drop-in dimensions
- Peer supports over time
- Going beyond 'passing on bits of the child' so that referrals of families and children can take place within a team-based approach in a common location to help address the fragmentation of the existing support services
- A focus on establishing relational spaces.

These sustained spaces in local community contexts can be complementary, with schools also being sites for self expression in contexts of high poverty. A particular opportunity here is for schools to facilitate with Fighting Words a youth leadership and peer mentoring dimension, building on models such as UCD's Future You peer mentoring for working class students and

leaders. A medium term strategy is needed for Fighting Words to develop youth leaders as part of its cadre of volunteers. Community based spaces also offer vital complementary opportunities for development of such peer mentors and working class community leaders.

There is need and opportunities here as part of a systemic focus for Fighting Words to further embed its local community work with statutory local partners, including Area Based Childhood Programmes (ABC) funded by the Department of Children, Local Area Partnership Companies that offer a national structure including one focused on marginalised communities and also local School Completion Programmes. This embedding in local community spaces focused on working class communities also invites opportunities for engagement with a range of other local community spaces, including for example, DCU Educational Disadvantage Centre's Local Outreach Access Hubs to Promote Future Teachers, Anna Liffey Drug Project.

It is suggested that there is scope for further scrutiny of partner locations beyond the current ones working with Fighting Words, to ensure there is a stronger focus on areas of poverty and social exclusion. The 'additional resources for regional development' p.19 Strategic Plan 2021-24 needs an explicit poverty focus on a) theatres, b) community projects and sustained spaces, to be developed in each target region.

Further development of focus on specific marginalised groups, such as Children in Care, Homelessness, Addiction, Mental Health, is part of a differentiation principle for Fighting Words. This invites need for:

- Finding the balance between creative freedom and structure according to the needs of the participants
- Co-designing programmes with participants
- Age differentiation and processes, including mentoring
- Intergenerational benefits of engaging the wider community in writing in areas of high poverty
- The role of narrative as part of a bullying prevention focus, given that bullying is a risk factor for early school leaving.

While recognizing the impact of Fighting Words current programming in DEIS settings, embedding Fighting Words in local community spaces as a sustained feature rather than short term workshops or brief programmes may also offer some opportunities for developing a distinctive Fighting Words family storytelling dimension in local community and primary school settings, as part of groups of families and children. There may also be opportunities to develop a nature and outdoor education focus for students experiencing poverty.

The report concludes by identifying key priority areas for sustaining and strengthening Fighting Words' focus on poverty and inclusion. The recommended areas of attention centre on programme design, pedagogical approaches, and enhanced training. Overall, the report advises building on existing strong practice to deepen the organisation's proven commitment to a story-based, creative, and different way of being—one that values imagination and relationality while opening space for new identities, insights, and participation.

