



Mian ár gCroí/ Our Greatest Wish

In Fighting Words, we ask children to create stories. One of their tasks is to come up with a character and their greatest wish. This submission will outline Fighting Words' greatest wish for the future educational experience of young people in Ireland. It will be informed by our work with our young writers and storytellers since 2009.

Creativity as an enlivening, transformative force in education

"It made me actually want to write and try" DEIS student, aged 16

We wish for educational settings to be spaces for imagination, for exploring alternative ways of being and for thinking beyond what is known. As we move towards an unknown future shaped by AI and other technological, environmental and social factors, creativity will be a key skill for our young people in order to be adaptable, empathetic and resilient.

Creativity adds vibrancy to learning. It is an animating force. It builds bridges that encourage engagement from students who might not otherwise see a way in.

Creative engagement fuels curiosity about the world and builds interest in further engagement with learning. In a recent evaluation of 'Word Warriors', our after-school creative writing programme for primary school children from underserved communities it was found that almost half of participants (45%) reported that they read *a good bit more*, with 24% reading *a little bit more*¹ having taken part in the programme.

Creative experiences can be transformative. Students can discover hidden sides to themselves and see the world in a whole new way. In the Spark Change report² American students who had access to arts opportunities in their school over a three-year period displayed expanded perspectives, enhanced interpersonal skills, better problem-solving skills and higher hopes for the future. In terms of hopes for the future, a differential of 15% was evident between groups accessing arts opportunities and those who did not. Given the clear link between access to high-quality arts provision and student wellbeing and success, it underscores the need for equitable access to creative learning for all of our young people, especially considering the transformative power it has for our most vulnerable, marginalized and at-risk students.

Authentic voice

"It was very important. I felt like I had my voice heard" – Emmanuelle, aged 11

We believe that young people's meaningful participation in decision-making must be a core element of any future educational vision. We envisage an educational experience that meets

¹ Eivers, Eemer, 'Fighting Words Workshop Provision in DEIS Schools: A Review of 2022 - 2025', <https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/read/70957344/fighting-words-workshop-provision-to-deis-schools-a-review-of-2022-2025>

² 'Spark Change: Investing in Arts Education for All' <https://wolfbrown.com/wp-content/uploads/spark-change-investing-in-performing-arts-education-new-42-impact-research-report-reducedfilesize.pdf>

students where they are and celebrates their unique identity, giving them an opportunity to explore what interests and excites them.

We wish for an educational experience that sees, values and celebrates a young person's authentic voice. Helping a student to find their creative voice is at the heart of what Fighting Words does. Rather than being told how to write a story, students are supported to figure out their own rules. Their creative work is rooted in their own ideas and interests and guided by how they wish to express themselves. Having choice and opportunity to express oneself in a myriad of different ways is important. Developing one's authentic voice gives students the power to engage with the world on their terms and become successful shapers of their own lives.

Play as an appropriate medium of learning for all age-groups

We believe that play is an appropriate medium of learning for all age-groups. Everyone has the need to play, irrespective of age. The nature of play changes as young people mature, but the need to play remains the same. The benefits of play are too lengthy to list here but include fostering a love of learning, empathy and compassion, social and emotional development, speech and language development, healing, confidence and self-regulation³. We advocate for our teens to have access to the benefits of these playful methodologies in learning as much as our young learners do.

Educational settings as spaces of belonging

We wish for the education system to function as a community rather than a system - a place of connection and belonging for all. In recent years we have seen the social fabric in many countries being torn apart and communities becoming increasingly polarized by divisive narratives. Relational school communities offer an opportunity to act as a counterbalance, building an inclusive society from the ground up.

Relational spaces do not happen of their own accord. Fighting Words has considered how space, voice, community participation and unconditional positive regard impact on creating a welcoming environment. What if educational planners prioritized time in the curriculum for activities that foster connection such as celebratory events, clubs and activities that build social awareness? A more balanced school day incorporating youth-led, relational experiences would greatly benefit wellbeing. Could part of the school day at post-primary level be left up to young people to timetable? Could they run their own clubs that tap into their passions and interests, learning key skills along the way, while feeling a sense of belonging?

Relational and participative schools have the necessary agility to make space for different ways of being and different ways of knowing, accommodating students with a wide spectrum of needs, making everyone feel included. We need educational settings that adapt to their learners rather than the reverse.

Space in the curriculum

To actualize this vision for schools as creative, relational spaces, we advocate for space to be made in the curriculum. We imagine a curriculum that is driven by questions rather than content. What guiding questions could be posed? Could young people help pose them? What

³ 'Let the Children Play: Play activities for Children,' National Childhood Network, 2025.

<https://tinyurl.com/26wmnf9b>

would a curriculum look like if guided by the question ‘how do we want young people to feel as they move through their educational journey?’

In conclusion, Fighting Words advocates for educational settings to become inclusive, creative and relational sites of possibility where the end of the story is not yet written for our young people. We imagine an educational experience that fosters their adaptability, creativity and empathy. We imagine young graduates with a voice of their own, strengthened by their community and ready for the world.