

From Beatrix.....to Harry

**County Longford Children's Creative Writing Development Focus
Group**

Report

Anne Gallagher

1 Introduction

Longford County Arts Office and Longford County Library have identified children's creativity and in particular, children's creative writing and an appreciation of reading as a development priority. To date, within the county, a considerable body of experience and skills has been amassed through the development and delivery of a programme of creative writing/storytelling in partnership with teachers, students and parents of primary and second-level schools in the county. In November 2005 a focus group was established to inform and guide a strategic programme of development in the area of children's creative writing. This document briefly outlines and summarises the work of that group.

2 Background

The following projects have formed part of the Longford County Arts Office and County Library Services programme of creative writing/storytelling and literature appreciation.

2.1 Longford Creative Writing Programme

Phase 1 – Collaborative Novel written by fifth-class primary school children completed and launched (February 2003).

Phase 2 – Paired Writing / Scribing Project .

- Meetings and workshops with teachers & parents introducing the concept of paired writing; Longford, Lanesboro, Granard & Ballymahon .
- Author & Scribe Writer's Groups established in four libraries around the county, parents and children meet weekly to share story making and creative writing .
- Workshops for teachers
 1. Paired Writing/ Scribing
 2. Storytelling Techniques for the Classroom
 3. Workshops for parents in Primary Schools around the county in partnership with Home-School Liaison Teachers

Phase 3 - Production of a Good Practice Guide / Training Manual & Multimedia CD-ROM on Paired Writing / Storytelling .

2.2 Other literature-based projects

In addition to the creative writing programme outlined above, a range of literature-based projects and activities included:

- **Writers in Schools Residencies** in partnership with Poetry Ireland, in a number of primary schools.
- **Patrick Kavanagh and James Joyce Readings** for Leaving Cert. students in secondary schools in County Longford in partnership with Poetry Ireland
- **Children's Book Festival**
- **Aisling Children's Arts Festival** literary programme.
- **Seachtain na Gaeilge**
- **Summer Festival**
- **Intergenerational drama project**
- **Books for Babies** project in partnership with the Department of Education and Science and local public health nurses

3 The Focus Group

3.1 Establishment of the Group

The impetus for the establishment of the focus group emerged from a consideration of the achievements to date and an awareness of the need and scope for further development.

The focus group was approached as a strategic development in line with best practice frameworks in the area of arts development and arts in education.

The group met four times during the period November - December 2005. Each meeting was facilitated by an external facilitator. (See Appendix for list of participants.)

3.2 Participants

Focus group participants were selected to represent key perspectives and experience in relation to the development goal and included teachers at primary and second level in the formal sector, second-level non-formal sector and vocational training, parents, library professionals, youth workers, and an artist - all based in County Longford.

4 Objectives of the focus group

The objectives of the group were to explore two potential streams of development:

- Strategies for student creative writing and literary appreciation in partnership with the primary and second-level education system in Longford
- Strategies for the development of children's creative writing directly with the community through the Library Services

Both streams are interlinked but also have specific contexts, opportunities and constraints.

A third, and related stream is the development of a programme of research and publication which may form the basis of a series of conferences/seminars/symposia on children's creative writing.

The programme aims to contribute to developments at a national level in relation to arts in education and arts in the community. It will do this by developing models and ways of working which are suited to the particular contexts of County Longford, and which may also be more generally applicable.

5 The group process

The focus group process was designed to maximise opportunities for participation, consultation and representation and to enable partnership and shared ownership of the programme. The process aimed to enable participants to:

- Share experiences and insights
- Identify -
 - Common ground
 - Objectives, expectations and needs in relation to children's creative writing
- Lay the groundwork for ongoing partnership and consultation

6 Outcomes of the process

6.1 A shared vision

In articulating a shared vision for children's creative writing group discussion ranged widely and identified the myriad factors involved in the promotion of literature.

Underpinning the work of the group was the shared recognition of the positive impact of involvement in arts activities on communities, with particular emphasis on children and young people. Literature, creative writing and reading provide opportunities for expression, for opening up communication, for an experience of achievement and success.

The shared vision/goal can be expressed as follows:

“Planting a seed which can be nurtured by means of encouragement, personal relationships and access to best practice so as to enable the fullest possible development of readers and writers”

6.2 Strengths and Opportunities

The strengths and opportunities available in the county which could be harnessed towards achieving the development goal for the programme were identified as:

- Availability of writers in the county
- Experience of developing and organising successful creative writing projects
- Models which have proved effective
- Good training available
- Public interest and awareness
- Positive attitude to the arts office and library service among the public
- Experienced and committed teachers, parents and other professionals
- An increasingly multi-cultural society
- The recent development of services for young people
- The development of the focus group itself

6.3 Challenges

Key challenges were identified as:

- The involvement of teenagers - any programme must “make it cool and fashionable to write”

- The constraints of the formal curriculum and related examination pressures at second level

7 Key guiding principles

The focus group has developed a set of key guiding principles to underpin and inform programme development, design, delivery, monitoring and evaluation in all strands of any proposed programme. These can be seen as development objectives which will serve as a foundation on which to build specific strategies. The guiding principles are:

- **Inclusion and access**
- **Child-centered approach**
- **Sustainability**
- **Lifelong learning**
- **Collaborative structures and partnerships**
- **Flexibility**

In the process of working towards identifying the key guiding principles, several topics and examples were discussed by the focus group. A summary of themes and issues under some of the key guiding principle headings is presented below.

7.1 Inclusion and Access

- Wide range of target groups
- Multi-cultural approach
- Promotion of creative writing as a recreational activity rather than an extension of the school curriculum
- A peer learning and support model
- Inclusive methodologies
- Publicity
- Networking

7.2 The child-centered approach

- Meeting the needs of the child/young person
- Listening to the child/young person
- Fullest possible participation of the child/young person in all aspects of the programme
- Reaching all the contexts of the child's /young person's world
- Range of locations and spaces to gain access to the child/young person
- Involvement of the adults in the child's /young person's world

Such themes and actions are in line with *The National Children's Strategy* (Department of Health and Children, 2000).

7.3 Sustainability

- Professional development
- Mentoring
- Capacity building
- Partnerships
- Staged development of programme

7.4 Lifelong learning

- Progression
- Inter-generational approaches
- Parental and family involvement

7.5 Collaborative structures and partnerships

- Parental and community involvement
- Establishing new networks and partnerships
- Linking with existing networks and partnerships
- ‘Going to the people’
- Collaborative processes e.g. decision making, planning, etc.
- Sharing of insights and good practice
- Establishing links with others involved in arts in education so that learning, emerging ideas and practices can be shared

7.6 Flexibility

- Meeting a range of needs and levels of interest
- Matching abilities, learning styles and developmental stages
- Enabling different levels of input from participants
- Choice rather than imposition
- Development of a variety of methodologies
- Paired writing, progression, increasing complexity

Other key principles to emerge from discussions included:

7.7 Integration

- Forward planning
- Focus group and potential sub-groups
- Multi-art form approaches
- Continuity rather than one-off events
- A county-wide approach

7.8 Monitoring and evaluation

- Systems for monitoring and evaluation built into project elements from the earliest stages
- Inclusion of key participants in monitoring and evaluation

7.9 Research, policy and practice development

- A programme of research and documentation of projects
- Dissemination of findings and lessons learned
- Commitment to learning from and developing policy and practice in the light of such research

7.10 Professional development

The focus group acknowledged the need for a long-term approach to building the necessary skills base. It will be important to facilitate opportunities for teachers, youth workers, writers, parents, library staff and others involved in the programme to further develop their skills and understandings in relation to literature in education

8 Proposed developments

The focus group identified three broad strands of development within the two major contexts of the formal education sector and the non-formal/community sector in County Longford.

1. Continuation and development of current work
2. A more immediate new programme initiated
3. A longer-term programme set in train

Detailed strategies under each of these strands will be developed and delivered.

9 Conclusion

The work of the focus group outlined in this document has succeeded in laying a strong foundation upon which to further develop children's creative writing in County Longford. The key principles identified will guide the development of effective models and methodologies, suited to the local and rural contexts of Longford town and county. The good practice, experience and skills developed will be of benefit to the field of arts development, community participation in the arts and arts in education at a national level and beyond.

Focus Group Members

Name	CV
Mary Mullooly	Is an secondary school English teacher who believes that training young people to appreciate quality writing is the first and most important step in animating their inherent creative writing talent.
Bernadette Noonan	Is a Home School Liaison Officer with four primary schools in Longford. Her creative work revolves around language development and paired creative writing.
Loretto Farrell	Is Principal of St. Joseph's N.S. and has a particular interest in the development of children's creative potential. Her priority is to ensure that children receive exposure to the broadest spectrum of creative experience.
Fiona Cooney	Is a Librarian and the mother of two children aged twelve and nine. Fiona has been actively involved in the development of Longford Scribing/Paired Writing Project.
Kate Swain Nolan	Kate Swain Nolan is a Youth Worker with the County Longford Youth Service. She believes that that the creative talents of Longford youth needs to be channeled in a positive way with help and encouragement in both formal and informal settings.
Fergus Kennedy	Is Longford County Arts Officer and has been involved for almost ten years in the development and delivery of children's creative writing projects.
Mary Carleton Reynolds	County Librarian. Founder member of the Youth Libraries Group and the National Children's Book Festival. Coordinator in partnership with the Department of Education of the Caper (Children and Parents enjoying reading) research project, Joint Editor of the report 'School Libraries: Guidelines for Good Practice'. Member of the National Advisory Group to the JCSP Demonstration Schools Library Project.
Declan Flanagan	Is a teacher of English, Information Technology and Classical Studies in St. Mel's Education and Training Centre. His view is that education

should be by nature holistic and inclusive; that creative writing, in its broadest spectrum, can be both a means to knowledge acquisition and individual development as well as being an end in itself within the pantheon of learning.

Anne Gallagher

Teaches at the Dept. of Adult and Community Education in NUI Maynooth and the National College of Art and Design. She also works as researcher evaluator and facilitator in the area of arts in education and has published a number of reports based on her work with the Irish Museum of Modern Art the National Museum and Poetry Ireland.

