Creative spaces. Why don’t we see more art like this in schools?
Living colour

John Crace visits Caol primary in Fort William, where pupils run their own studio - a rare enterprise in a nation that doesn't think too hard about creative spaces.

A small clump of carefully planted, bedraggled begonias on the edge of the village optically announces "Caol in Bloom." Here, on the outskirts of Fort William, one of the wettest places in the UK, flowers don't have a prayer. Grey is the only colour on offer as dark rain clouds reach down to slub over row after row of identical concrete boxes masquerading as houses. Had John Betjeman bothered to travel this far north, he might have had second thoughts about Slough. Of all the monuments to depressing functionalism, though, Caol primary school is in a league of its own. If it ever had better days, they are long past; from the outside it appears almost derelict.

Things aren't too much better on the inside. The paint isn't so much peeling as searching for an area of plaster to cling on to; in places the walls are stripped back to the brickwork. Caol is a Highlands village with inner-city problems and the school is a more than adequate measure of the local economy. Money may be tight, but there is no poverty of aspiration as, in stark contrast to their surroundings, many of the pupils are covered with artworks of breathtaking imagination, sophistication and technical ability.

These paintings all stem from Room 13, a unique experiment that has been running here for nine years. Ever since Rob Fairley took up a brief stint as an artist in residence at the West Highland Museum in Fort William, "I was asked to contact all the local schools," he says. "But I was initially tempted to leave Caol out as it had such a diabolical reputation. I had one stamp left over, though, so it made the list."

Fairley started working with two girls who were being bullied by some of the rowdier elements of their class. "I got them to take the school photographs," he continues, "and they did it brilliantly. The lab in Birmingham even wrote back to say the work was of a professional standard." Fairley was invited back the following year and given his own room - Room 13 - and has never left. He tried to, mind, when he was offered a much better paid job elsewhere, but the managing director of Room 13 refused to give him a reference as she didn't want him to leave. And this is where it gets even more interesting, as the managing director at the time was 10-year-old Becky Macleodgall. Room 13 is run by the children as an autonomous republic, independent of the school. It effects its own officials, keeps its own accounts and pays Rob Fairley his salary. To raise the money they have sold Christmas cards, painted murals and obtained grants. Two years ago, one girl applied to the Scottish Arts Council (SAC) for a Young Person's Lottery Award. There was some consternation at the SAC when they rang to speak to the managing director of Room 13 and were told by the school secretary that she would call back when she was out of PE, but she still wound up with £31,000.

What makes it still more special is that kids in years 6 and 7 are free to leave their lessons whenever they want - a further testament to the power of imagination and a determination to make the most of a situation.

Lindsay
Guardian

Rob Fairley in Cool primary school's Room 13, and (below) Lindsay Martin, aged 10 (centre), the new chairperson of the operation, with Danielle Souvene, 10 (right), its current managing director, and Fiona Cameron, 12, its president.

Photograph: Tom Finn/Atom

where in the country are given, is the opportunity to do the same is another matter.

A new report, The Big Sink, published this week by the Clore Duffield Foundation to coincide with Artworks, the young artists of the year awards ceremony at Tate Modern, highlights the lack of thought and resources that go into many designated creative spaces in schools, museums and galleries. The report gets its name from the fact that many art teachers put a large sink at the top of their list of priorities for their ideal space, as 20 minutes of any lesson can easily be spent tidying up. But the title works equally well in a metaphor for the sound of money disappearing down the plug hole.

These days a great deal of cash is being made available for all sorts of capital educational projects: the Heritage Lottery Fund has awarded more than £1.2bn since it was set up, and the DfES is allowing £5m over the next two years to renovate and expand schools. However, while some playgrounds are issued on the design and equipping of secondary schools, others are more primary schools, where the children survive the reality of the transfer to the school system. Furthermore, as Oxfam continues to relegate the arts to the bottom of its inspection agenda, the art budgets are often overlooked when archiving oversight.

Much the same can often be said for the educational facilities in museums and galleries, though programs in being made. The new Turner centre in Margate, which this week is due to open, is a significant step in this direction, says Victoria Powney, the Turner centre's director. Even so, Powney is still negotiating with the architects over the size of the educational facilities. "I don't want them hidden away!"

Sally Bacon, executive director of the Clore Duffield Foundation, also frets that modern and the Dulwich Picture Gallery as admirable exceptions but is she far from happy with her findings. "As a funder we were concerned that many potentially good spaces were just not being thought through," she says. "They were being designed without anyone even asking the teachers and pupils who were going to use them what they would like. Too often the first time that a gallery or museum curator and educational officer have a conversation is after the educational space has been built. This year we have gathered data and opinion on what makes the ideal creative space; next year we plan to publish a report that sets out templates of best practices."

John Steers, general secretary of the National Society for the Education of Art and Design, says the report holds no great surprises for him but that its message is important and being repeated. "Buildings do make a difference. The school in Hackney where I was working relocated to a tower block with the art department dumped on the top floor. The behaviour and attitudes of the kids changed overnight. That was 40 years ago and we still haven't learned the lesson."

"There is a lack of joined-up thinking between different government departments. The Department of Culture, Media and Sport is working hard to promote the creative and cultural industries, which have far outstripped all other sectors and now contribute £14bn to the UK economy; the Department of Trade and Industry is promoting British design, but the DfES cannot see beyond its obsession with literacy and numeracy. One of the issues here is that most people in this country have little idea the UKCMS exists. "Culture and creativity are taboo words and should be covered in the national curriculum" says Peter Jenkins. "Creativity scares people; they think it's anarchic and out of control but it's fact the opposite. Creativity requires discipline and control. Someone who was instrumental in setting up the new art gallery in Walsall, is now running the new £2m Creative Partnerships collaboration between the DCMS and the BBC which is designed to expand the creative links between schools and the community. "We want to show that education and culture can work together; for instance, instead of a school getting an artist in for a week it will now be able to develop longer-term relationships."

This, of course, is something that Rob Fairley knows all about. Parents often talk him in the fish and chipper on subjects such as Modigliani's technique as they struggle to get up to speed with their children. The problem with creativity, though, is that it's hard to measure and quantify, which makes it a sitting target for the DfES bean counters, who often prefer their evaluations to be written in black and white. It's true that the arts have a positive impact on children's behaviour and punctuality, but many arts professionals are wary of making too many claims about the knock-on effects on other parts of the curriculum, even though they firmly believe they occur. Jeannie Cattaneo, Cats' headteacher, has no such reservations. She took over the school four years ago and has transformed its academic and behavioural performance; she inherited Room 13 as a going concern and her only thought was how best to keep it going.

"The self-confidence that children get from what they do there is unbelievable," she says. "Kids who struggle in other areas no longer feel failures, and they feel able to have a go at difficult areas of the curriculum that they would otherwise decide they are too hard and boring. Through Room 13 we are able to involve the whole school, and the art room is a source of pride and a source of joy that pupils and staff can point to with pride."

A part of Room 13's success is undoubtedly due to the vision and determination of Rob Fairley, and no amount of money or buildings will ever find you that. But it is also down to the ownership that the children feel for their creative space. When you join Room 13 you are asked to make a lifelong commitment," says 13-year-old Fiona, Room 15's president. A similar commitment to arts education from hundreds of kids who are a little older and should know better wouldn't go amiss.

The full report of The Big Sink is available on the Artworks website: www.cloreartworks.org.uk. The Young Artists of the Year Awards take place on National Children's Art Day on June 30 at Tate Modern. Artworks is supported by the Guardian.

Class notes

Poor grammar, bad spelling, chewed gum and scruffy clothes are among the faults that the new Lollipop Person of the Year is expected to have mastered. Indeed, what is expected of the Lollipop Person now far surpasses the qualifications required of the traditional kind of helper. According to the Department of Education, the new Lollipop Person of the Year can, for example, be expected to have a working knowledge of the national curriculum, to have had a number of interviews with schoolteachers and to be able to write an essay on the effects of poor diet on children's performance. The Lollipop Person of the Year can also be expected to have a working knowledge of the history of education, to be able to write a letter persuading parents to allow their children to attend the school, and to be able to give a speech on the importance of education. The Lollipop Person of the Year can also be expected to have a working knowledge of the history of education, to be able to write a letter persuading parents to allow their children to attend the school, and to be able to give a speech on the importance of education.

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