Young at art
Children at a Fort William primary school are learning how to paint their feelings about terrorism and the Soham murders. 

Lucy Sweet is amazed by the 11-year-olds who produce Britart

Fairley looks like the stereotype laid-back artist, bearded with sandals and a love of India. Throughout the school, the children's paintings are peppered with golden hippies and flying elephants, inspired by his interest in Hindu mythology. He brings out a sketchbook and a white pencil his input stop and the children's start. Fairley says, "We work as an open studio and interact with each other in a participative piec. This sketch book is a collaboration between me and the pupils. I'm really happy that 50/50 style art is given free to - develop their ideas in their own ways. Not to judge children using grown-up logic is a lesson Fairley learned early.

Mature: Jodie Fraser's 9/11, left, and The Lava Zebra and Moonlight Zebra by Nicky Donnelly, eight

decorated with inscriptions from the book of Genesis, which he is working on with Danielle. The only Genesis I know about was when I was bad something to do with Philip Collins. I can't imagine I am the only one who might enter 13 with a degree of scepticism. Where does Peter Haining who lives in Ireland, and the book goes passed between them. Often it's impossible to work out which pages are his and which are Danielle's. After about an hour, you begin to realize that the unconventional nature of their work is a result of everyone treating each other as equals. Apart from basic rules of good behaviour, in Room 13 there are no distractions between children and the teacher. The pupils, who are mostly girls aged from five to develop their ideas in their own ways. Not to judge children using grown-up logic is a lesson Fairley learned early.

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"When Jodie was 9, she asked me to paint, and I said just 10 people in front of the window. So she started painting these strips - a blue stripe on top, a white stripe in the middle and a green one at the bottom. I was thinking, what is this kid? Then I realised that because she was small, all that was in her eyelash was the sky, the window frame and the rain. That taught me a lot - never assume that what you see is necessarily what they see."

Another amazing aspect is that these children are so comfortable with the staff of their souls is that, at Caol Primary, children are taught about the teacher's sympathy from the start. There's also a debate society that takes place after school. Claire Gifford, the classroom assistant, traded in a place at art college for four years' experience. "In Room 13, there tell us that they all enjoy a good art school is how they develop a question, such as: 'Do you think airways smokers should be allowed into the country? Some weren't exactly sure what airways smoker meant, but they adapted it and came to their own conclusions. It was fascinating.' "It's often quite good," agrees Fairley. "I came in the other day and there was a bunch of nine-year-old discussing masculinity."

But there is usually too much going on for idle introspection. Rather than the usual power paints and PVA glue, children here are allowed to use oils, spray paint and any other art material they can squeeze out of the budget.

Attendance is voluntary. There is no specific course and children can come and go as they please, providing they finish their other work. The room is open from 8.30am and some stay until the late opening, competing for a chance to get to paint on the canvases that hang on the wall at the end of the room. "If Mr McManus tells me I can paint on it, but it has to be good," Danielle explains."

There is an air of government that gives the pupils equal say in the running of the school. This year Lindsay was chairwoman, in charge of organising meetings. Rose-checked Eilidh, who is doing the disco dressed as a tree, is treasurer. The children also read newspapers every day and play the fantasy stock market on the internet. "The more time you spend in Room 13, the more it becomes obvious that the children really do run the show, and they do it exceptionally well." The room is there and the work they produce is a tribute to their curiosity about the world. Their commitment is total. When Jodie talks about the Britart Prize, there is no trace of self-congratulation. She just wants to win the money so that Room 13 can buy more materials. Danielle and Lindsay show me around the 'gallery', a selection of paintings dotted about the school. colourful, ambitious and pure of intent, they put many an art undergraduate to shame.

The Shack Is My Future, an orange blind abstract seascape, is like something the abstract painter Howard Hodgkin might have come up with, he said: the innovation to incorporate rubber goldfish into his canvases. This painting by Kirsten is based on the art ballroom by Picasso," Danielle says. "I saw you of Guernica'?" Their knowledge is glossed from Room 13 library, a small cupboard in the corner which houses a few art books and the odd Pocket Classics. (Classic: frighteningly, Danielle says her favourite novel is East of Eden by John Steinbeck."

Furniture by by James Joyce, "like a story," says Fairley. "It's the end of the story."

The end of the story, it seems, has been reached. The children's enthusiasm for Britart has faded. It seems boundless. There is no way they can be put off, it seems, by anything different, it is not taught like this in all schools. There are problems of course - mostly financial, the sort that are not always good. But they seem to sort it out. "The sad thing is that in Scotland we're not. Nobody needs to give us funding," Fairley says. His stumbling block is that room 13 is, unlike many others, do fit into the terms of conventional schools. They follow the standard rules set out in the education process. "I used writing up the course so other schools could see what we do, but it was impossible."

Not that this damps anyone's ambitions. Danielle has an idea to expand Room 13 by creating an aniseed in the nearby high school. At present the money is tight. But perhaps the Britart Prize will change that. Whatever Jodie does next, Room 13 will continue to produce work that goes beyond the expectations of conventional adults. They have a maturity which coexists with the freshness of the brightest of their quirks, dreams and says: "People forget that children are people."