Danielle Souness, 11, and I are standing outside the headteacher’s office at Coal Primary School, staring at the wall. She is showing me some of her art. Words (2001) is a text-based piece which reads, ‘The different points in life depend on what you are’.

Danielle is interested in words. She tells me, ‘lines and texture’ and the philosophy behind art. When she visited the Turner Prize exhibition at Tate Britain last year, a particular favourite was the artist Fiona Banner, whose work included the transcription of the contents of a pornographic film. Nearby hangs The Future is Gone (2002) by Jodie Fraser, a digital print of the New York skyline superimposed by three ghostly planes. An impressed visitor at her show in the West Highland Museum asked which school Jodie was teaching at. The museum had to point out that Jodie was actually still at school, and in fact only 10 years old at the time.

The children of Coal Primary School, just outside Fort William in the Scottish Highlands, are probably the most art-literate pre-teenagers in Britain. The corridor wall is covered with Primary 1’s interpretations of Van Gogh’s Sunflowers and Primary 2’s takes on Fruits from Mobi by Renoir. But it is the work that has flooded out of the school’s Room 13 that is the most astounding.

Room 13 is Coal Primary School’s art club. It is more than that: it is an entirely self-funding business, located within, yet independent from, the school. As Room 13’s recently published annual report explains, the only resources they take from the school are heat and light. Each year, the pupils elect 11 Primary 7 children as office-bearers. The present management team are predominantly girls. Danielle is managing director, Jodie is secretary, Eileen Innes is treasurer, and Lindsey Martin is chairman. The children run it by themselves, for themselves. They apply for grants, order supplies, give talks at educational conferences, and manage their own finances.

The only adults involved are artist Rob Fairley, 48, and his apprentice Claire Gibb, 18. But they aren’t the children’s teachers; they are their employees. On
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any question Fairley may give advice, but the final decision is made by the committee.

Danielle leads me along the corridors, past Seven Everywhere, a homage by Lindsey, 11, to the dot-deploying master: The Mistakeable Trial, by Danielle and Francis McLeod, inspired by the Soham murders, and The Magic Yellow Elephant, painted by Rachel Allison when she was seven. A remarkably detailed oil-on-canvas featuring a gold river and flying elephants, it adorns the T-shirts and postcards which Room 13 sells to raise funds. The painting was inspired by the Hindu creation myth which Fairley had explained to the children. The titular elephant itself is red. ‘No one’s sure whether the elephant is actually red because it’s magic,’ explains Danielle, who is studying the Greek philosophers for a school project. ‘Or because Rachel sees yellow as red.’

Fridays are when the younger children at Calo Primary School can spend all day in Room 13, if their schoolwork is up to speed. Everyone’s work is. This, and an enthusiasm for spending nine hours a day at school, means the room stays open until nearly 6pm. One of the more minor peculiarities of Room 13 is that any child can come here at playtime, lunchtime or after school. They can use the facilities at any point in class time, as long as their teacher is in agreement. Aside from a dip in attendance at lunchtime, when a snowball fight provokes a bigger draw, the place is jumping all day. It has the air of an industrious youth club, packed with children grazing on crisps and hoovering juice. Some read Room 13’s copy of The Times, which they have delivered each day. Others hover, chattering non-stop about Coronation Street, sweets, and art being worked on. In the background classical music plays quietly.

It is a wild day in late January, and a blizzard is blowing across the village of Calo, located at the bottom of Loch Lomnich. Calo pronounced ‘cool’ may lie in the shadow of Britain’s highest mountain, Ben Nevis, but this is no picturesque idyll. A taxi driver tells me the area enjoys 80 inches of rain a year. It is a largely post-war development, built to service the lumber and paper industry. The village’s poverty and social deprivation are those of an inner-city housing estate. The school itself is drab in the extreme on the outside anyway.

It is not the most obvious location, perhaps, to discover ground-breaking art. But that is exactly what the children who have passed through the

‘I could have bought “911” and stuck it in my trendy minimalistic flat in Mayfair, and no one would have thought it was by a 10-year-old’

Room 13 Studio have been producing since its inception 10 years ago. Word of their abilities whether in oils, acrylic, collage, photography, clay, video or a variety of random materials has spread. Josie has exhibited in London, Kathmandu and New Delhi. Danish radio described a Room 13 exhibition as ‘one of the most important exhibitions, possibly in the whole of Europe’. And Highland Council commissioned the 2001/2002 team to curate a travelling crafts exhibition.

Under the Room 13 umbrella there is also an investment group who experiment with stocks and shares, a camera club, a debating club and trips to the theatre. The noticeboard in the corridor details an outing to see a production of Wagner’s Ring at the Edinburgh Festival. Room 13’s summer expeditions include a walk across Scotland. Children who take part are then given the opportunity to partici-
pate in one of Rob Fairley’s annual trips with secondary-age pupils to Kathmandu.

As the children’s art has rippled out, so has their expertise. They have given talks at primary schools, lectured at a conference at Tate Britain, and have become adept at sourcing funding, whether raising it by taking the school photographs themselves or securing a £21,000 grant from the Scottish Arts Council. The National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (NESTA) has invited them to apply for a grant of £150,000.

Last December, at a presentation in London, Caoil Primary was awarded the £20,000 Barbie Prize (billed as the junior Turner), while Jodie was awarded the £1,000 individual prize. Her contribution was 9/11, a grey-sprayed canvas covered in 3,000 burnt matches, one for each person killed in the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre.

As she told the Scotsman after receiving her prize from the pop singer Samantha Mumba, ‘I wanted to make a piece of work that would make people cry.’ There was a personal note for Room 13: a team of American bankers had been buying artist’s materials for the group for a few years, and had committed to donating $20,000. Their offices were on the floor above the impact point of one of the hijacked aeroplanes— all the team were killed.

Lindsey Martin’s Barbie submission was also inspired by 9/11. Entitled Performance Piece, it featured a photograph of herself wrapped in white carpet underlay, with surgical gloves on her hands and face and scattered around her body. She wanted it to represent what it might feel like to be covered in dust and rubble ‘as it turns into a shroud’.

“There were lots of things that fascinated us about the children’s work,” says Ivan Massow, the former chairman of the ICA in London and chairman of the Barbie judges. ‘The noticeable difference was that they had been asked to think about things and express themselves through art. Secondly, their portfolio was so varied you could tell it was all their work. Finally, there was the sheer quality of the work. It was conceptual and it was beautiful. I would have bought 9/11 and stuck it in my trendy minimalist flat in Mayfair and no one would have thought it was by a 10-year-old.’

If all this sounds remarkably mature and sophisticated, that’s because it is. It might appear freakish, or the paint-splashing equivalent of the stage-school ambition-monster. But the children of Room 13 are level-headed, their art unshowy, powerful and persuasive. Lindsey and Jodie’s 9/11 work demonstrates what can happen when children are given the opportunity to respond
instinctively, without the well-meaning but mollycoddling interference of adults. As a typically direct Danielle, told a conference organised by Children in Scotland in Stirling last March, 'Room 13 proves that if you give us the chance we can organise our education and we are fed up at being patronised by your idea of what we can understand.'

I ask Danielle about Tracey Emin. She hasn’t heard of her, so I describe her infamous ‘bed’. What does she think? She concentrates for a moment. ‘I would say that was a piece of art,’ she says. ‘But I’m not sure if it means anything to me. She wouldn’t have done that for no reason. She must have been really upset or really ill. The important thing is to show your feelings in art. Every single piece of art is down to the way you feel. It doesn’t matter if no one gets it, as long as you do.’

Not for the first time I wonder, are these wise well-adjusted children smarter than we? And if so, shouldn't every school in Britain be as bold and revolutionary as this one tucked away in this rather desperate bit of Scotland?

Rob Fairley first came here 10 years ago. As artist-in-residence at the West Highland Museum in Fort William, he was asked to contact all the schools in the area. He almost bypassed Caol Primary. It had a bad reputation as a run-down, failing school with an unapproachable pupil body. He began by asking two girls who were being bullied to take the school photographs, with notable success. The next year, he secured his own room in the school. Room 13. Fairley is not a traditional art teacher. He is not a teacher of any qualified sort. He is not the 'grown-up' with adult responsibilities in Room 13; those are the children's roles.

He shows me a letter from the bank. Room 13 decided to put £4,000 of the Barbie winnings towards running costs. The remainder is being deposited in an account to fund trips to exhibitions and to France, events for the whole school. The bank is telling ‘Ms Innes’ that it needs an adult signatory to open the account. ‘I apologise for the inconvenience that this has caused,’ it writes. The bank, Fairley says, is 'one of the good ones'. It talks to the children as equals. However, many agencies,

including the Scottish Arts Council, have been discomfited at dealing with an MD and a treasurer who are not yet teenagers. Fairley is positively gleeful at the thought of how the adult world will deal with his protocols and the £64 million question.

That is the sum attached to an ambitious plan being put together by a local businessman. Finlay Finlayson. A corner of the loch is to be in-filled, creating a waterside retail and cultural development. Finlayson, an active supporter of Room 13, has assembled one of two consortia involved in the bidding process. His plans envisage a Room 13 headquarters and arts centre as integral to the site. ‘I’d like to see Room 13’s whole way of thinking woven into the lochside,’ says Finlayson. ‘People can be fairly negative in the Highlands, but Room 13 has had a very positive effect on the community.’

Yet despite its growing national and international profile, Room 13 is in financial trouble. Assistance from the educational or political establishment has been negligible. The NESTA grant isn’t given. The Barbie money cannot be used for wages. It’s three years before work starts on the lochside development. Right now, Eileen Innes is despairing because she hasn't been able to pay Fairley and Gibb properly since October. Fairley, too, is worried: he can't afford to work for little money much longer. If funding of about £20,000 can't be secured by Easter, he may have to leave.

They often have more quandros problems with suppliers. Orders sometimes don't come through: some firms think it must be kids fooling around, asking for all that oil paint and canvas. Using professional artistic materials is one of the bedrock principles of Room 13. In fact, they use better quality paper and paint than the local high school, one reason that few children are wild about the prospect of studying art at secondary school. Another is the stories of rigid exam-based classes related by alumni of Room 13 who regularly pop in after school hours. Several former students, however, have gone on to become full-time artists.

The children in Room 13 know their unique artistic freedom are not exactly the educational norm. But perhaps they should be. Headteacher Jennifer Cattanach leaves Fairley and the children to get on with things, because she knows she can. ‘We can see a difference in the child as a whole,’ she says. ‘We see their self-confidence building, their whole attitude changing. It is something that everybody in the school welcomes.’

Fairley talks to the children about philosophy. ‘Never teach them art!’ he beams. ‘What is the meaning of it?’ Kirsten Allison, 11, is wondering aloud. She likes doing ‘Picasso-y’ things. ‘But my mum says he [Picasso] must have been on drugs. She doesn’t like the drawings. My mum’s stupid. She draws realistic. When I try and do a Picasso painting at home, it’ll end up in the bin or on the fire. You can experiment more with Picasso.’

The previous day, Fairley, Danielle, Lindsey and I had walked 20 minutes across the village to Lochside Roman Catholic Primary School. Last year’s chairman, Fiona Cameron, wrote to all 32 primary schools in Lochaber, even the tiny Guelue, one, to ask if any of them might be interested in having their own Room 13. The strongest response came from Lochside. The children there have just elected their first committee. They are the same age as Danielle and Lindsey, but noticeably less mature than the Caol girls. Rebecca MacLean is the MD of Lochside’s Room 13. Kirsten Johnston the treasurer. Fairley reminds them that they have a 9.30am appointment tomorrow at the bank to open their account.

Kirsten: ‘What have we got tomorrow at 9?’ Rebecca: ‘Maths.’

Kirsten: ‘Yes!’

‘You’ll be doing maths at the bank,’ the secretary Sarah White points out. Danielle tells the nascent Room 13 about some of the problems they might face. The cost of materials. Finding appropriate space. ‘You might get people coming in and not doing enough art stuff,’ she says, ‘and you should make sure you don’t fail out.’ Kirsten and Sarah say that that has already happened, as some of the children who didn’t get elected became jealous.

Finally, says Danielle, Lochside needs to remember that it might take the teachers a while to get used to the idea. The committee has to remember this when asking for time off class. ‘Hassle. Teachers. Politely,’ mimics Sarah as she writes the minutes. They talk about money. Danielle tells them about the £64 million project. If it all happens, Caol will share any revenue with Lochside.

Then, an ‘art lesson’ from Fairley. The children have to share at Rebecca to convince themselves that they exist. She is sent to walk around the corridors. Does she still exist? They are given homework: to find one thing that they can prove. They must bear in mind that ‘anything you see might be wrong’. A tricky thing, this grown-up art.

Jodie Fraser’s next big piece is called Tiara. She’s pushing boxes and boxes of drawing pins through a canvas, in a wavy curve. The sun will shine on the protruding sharp ends, creating thousands of mini suns. She’s been at it since October. ‘Will I get this finished before high school? Mr Fairley?’ she asks fortuitously. ‘Finished and sold I hope,’ he says with a grin. Jodie would like 9/11 to end up in the Room 13 arts centre in the lochside development. The rumour was that Charles Saatchi wanted to buy it. Lindsey for one is convinced he will. Danielle wants him to invite him and Tony Blair to the opening of Lindsey and Kirsten Allison’s two-woman show at the West Highland Museum this summer.

‘He’s not buying it,’ says Lindsey of Blair, shovelling sweats into her mouth from the pouch of her hooded top. ‘It’s too good for him.’

Room 13 can be contacted at www.room13scotland.com