A Highland primary has an art room like no other. Run by the pupils, it is a haven of extraordinary creativity, where children are free to go at any time of the school day, and where they turn out accomplished art that belies their tender years.

Harvey McGavin
reports from Room 13

At first sight, it appears to be an ordinary art room. Its lime floor is spotted with paint, the walls are covered with exhibition posters, photomontages and drawings. But look more closely and the picture changes. The newspaper cuttings on the wall are all about this place, the exhibition posters advertise its work. The paintings stacked neatly here and there are technically accomplished and charged with ideas. Most extraordinary of all, their creators are still at primary school. Welcome to Room 13.

The story of Room 13 begins 10 years ago, before most of these children were born, when Rob Fairley was artist-in-residence at the West Highland Museum in nearby Fort William. He was compiling a list of local primary schools to work with, and Coaol (pronounced "cool") primary, housed in a dilapidated concrete-clad building in the middle of a council estate, was an unattractive proposition. "It was the local dump school, a difficult, hard place," he recalls. "They would take kids who were trouble, from anywhere, just to keep the roll up."

But, needing one more school to fill his quota, Mr Fairley took a chance on Coaol, thereby embarking on an educational experiment that has produced some of the most exciting and inventive art work ever to come out of a primary school.

In his first year, Mr Fairley asked two disaffected girls if they would like to take the school photographs. They did such a good job the laboratory praised them for the professionalism of their work, and the photographs of their fellow pupils sold well with parents, raising £500. When Mr Fairley's residency ended, Coaol used the money to pay for him to stay at the school for one day a week.

Gradually, the children of Coaol took over Room 13, so named for the simple reason that that's the number on the door. It became a kind of pupils' republic, run by a democratically elected management committee of 10 children. They order supplies, apply for funding and raise money through sales of T-shirts, postcards and school photographs (still their single biggest earner).

The school provides the room, the heating and the lighting, but the children pay for the telephone and photocopyer and can sign cheques. They also make the rules (for example, anyone failing to clean their brushes receives a 5p fine). But the most significant rule (made with the full co-operation of Coaol staff) is that the 10 and 11-year-old children in Primary 6 and 7 can have their lessons go to Room 13 at any time of the day as long as they are up to date with their school work.

The idea of giving children so much freedom might alarm some teachers, but it has proved a great motivator, and in 10 years no one has ever been ordered back into class. "It's a non-problem," says Mr Fairley.

Mr Fairley is not a trained teacher, nor does he teach art in the conventional way. "You can't teach art," he says. "Then it just becomes copying." Discussions on everything from philosophy to share prices take the place of still lifes and life drawing. Within the space of five minutes, conversation might veer from contrecoupe to Renaissance gliding, to the trigonometry of a goal in Rangers' last game. In Room 13 the ideas come first, the means of expressing them follow.

Mr Fairley begins with Primary 3 pupils, letting them play with paint, and talking to them about what they are doing. "Some of the best paintings have come out of these discussions," he says, such as Rachel Allison's Magic Yellow Elephant, painted when she was seven. It was inspired by a lesson spent talking about the Hindu creation myth of elephants enancing the world. It's a huge canvas, about two metres square, so big that Rachel had to stand on a step ladder to reach the top of it. After discussing whether changing the name of a colour would change the way it looked, Rachel decided to paint the elephant red. "We drop in advanced ideas like this, but just for fun," says Mr Fairley.

Rachel, who's now nine, loves Room 13. "It's a very exciting place," she says. "It's lucky that we have it."

Mr Fairley uses an array of brilliantly simple techniques to help the children develop their visual awareness. When he asks who's ever eaten a digestive biscuit, everyone puts their hand up. But when he asks how many holes it has, nobody knows. Close your eyes and picture it, he tells them. After that, they learn to look more closely at things, to take it in the detail. Coaol sits in the shadow of Ben Nevis, and from Room 13 there is a majestic view of the mountain. It's an arresting sight and an obvious subject, but too familiar to inspire the pupils. Besides, in Room 13, obvious is not on the curriculum. Instead, to illustrate a lesson on how our eyes work and "the way our brain can sometimes tell lies", Mr Fairley once blacked out the windows, transformed Room
Opening doors: Rob Fairley with some of Room 13's young artists. "You can't teach art," he says. "Then it just becomes copying!"

Photograph: Ashley Coombes

Caoil's winning way with art
Caoil primary school was among the 27 winners of this year's Artsworks Young Artists of the Year awards announced yesterday — and the only school to pick up two awards.

More than 57,000 young artists representing 150 schools entered their work for the fourth annual awards, organised by the Cleo Duffield Foundation, which rewards exciting teaching in art and design. Winners in the three categories — teaching with artists, galleries and resources — each receive £2,000 and a limited edition signed print by the artist and sculptor Julian Opie.

The award-winning work is on display at Tate Modern on London's Bankside and at the Artsworks website: Children's Art Day, celebrated yesterday, continues this weekend (July 5 and 6) with events to highlight art in schools and galleries, museums, art centres, and science and discovery centres across the country. For listings go to www.artsworks.org.uk.

Outside her office, an array of work produced in Room 13 lines the corridor. Each piece is labelled with the artist's name and a date, 1994 or 1995, that seems somehow incongruous. Mr Fairley laughs. "At exhibitions, people will often say, 'In that when it was painted?', and I tell them, 'No, that was when the artist was born.'"

Room 13 has blazed a trail for creative education, but its methods are not easily reproduced in the traditional format of CD-Rom, resource pack and teacher's notes. Instead, Mr Fairley sees it growing "organically", through residencies, workshops and co-operative projects.

"People make the mistake of thinking this is all about me," he says. "But the results could be replicated in every primary school the length and breadth of Britain. There's nothing inherently different about these kids." But, having been a part of Room 13, they will leave it very different people.

Room 13 website: www.room13.co.uk. The exhibition of work by Danielle Souness, Lindsay Martin and other Room 13 artists runs until July 31 at the West Highland museum, Fort William. Highland. Tel: 01397 701219.