Room with a view

The astonishing success of a remote primary's arts project, giving its pupils unparalleled freedom, is helping children as far afield as Nepal, writes

**Reva Klein**

Just as I think I'm getting to grips with what the project is all about, Jennifer Cattaneo, head of the school where it all began, declares: "If you think you understand Room 13, you've got it wrong." This is the story of a small primary in a far corner of Scotland that developed a project so creative that it is being replicated nowhere in other schools in Britain but, surprisingly, as far away as Asia.

Culd primary is a former village school in the border hamlet of Rothiemurchus. There are 20 pupils and a proud tradition of hard work and determination. It was founded in 1848 by a group of devout Methodists, who were obsessed with education. They were determined that their children would be the equals of their peers in the larger, more prosperous villages nearby.

The school has a strong link with the local community, and is run by a group of dedicated volunteers. Pupils are taught in a small, well-equipped classroom, and they have access to a range of resources, including a well-stocked library and a computer lab.

In recent years, the school has begun to focus on the arts, with a particular emphasis on music and drama. The pupils are encouraged to express themselves in a variety of ways, and they have the opportunity to participate in a range of performances, from concerts to plays.

The project that has captured the attention of educators and parents alike is Room 13. This is a space within the school that has been transformed into a creative hub, where pupils are encouraged to experiment and express themselves freely. The room is filled with a range of materials and equipment, and it is a place where pupils are allowed to let their imaginations run wild.

"The project has been very successful," says Jennifer. "It has given the pupils a voice, and it has helped them to develop their confidence and self-esteem. It is a place where they can be creative, and it is a space that they can call their own.

Mr Fairley, I give them critical feedback every step of the way, asking them difficult questions to make them think analytically about what they're doing. I treat the work here like any other piece and give it the attention that it deserves. It is the integrity of the work that I'm looking for.

Part of the Room 13 approach is giving pupils the intellectual skills they need to fulfill their potential in years to come. So as well as creating their own artwork, they carry out research projects weekly based on a list of eminent scientists, artists and writers. While the research assignments relate to curricular requirements, their main purpose is to teach pupils how to research, use footnotes and reference data: skills, says Mr Fairley, which they would not be taught in the primary curriculum.

Nurtured primary in Hartfield, Sussex, started the first Room 13 in England last September in a Creative Partnerships project. A core group of eight Year 6 children have been working with artist-in-residence Shan Ali to create their version of the Caud project in a dishwasher computer site in the school. They have been helped by visits to and from Caud and have established an email exchange system, or "digital conversations," which consist of electronic postcards featuring paintings, photographs or videos that the pupils have created.

One of the themes that the Caud and Hartfield pupils have chosen to explore on

**Visionary: Rob Fairley**

(left), artist-in-residence at Caud primary school; pupils involve themselves in all forms of art from painting (above) to photography (right)
Watch me write

The internet means pupils can follow an author's progress stage by stage.
Stewart Ross recounts his experiences emailing from Kent to a school in Swansea.

The first time I met face to face the pupils who were studying my writing, we started a discussion about what noise—precisely—an arrow makes when it hits a man's head but. John Kelly, who designs my books, had pencilled in it: "thwack" in one section but, after some discussion, we decided on a more accurate "thud."

I had asked them to compose their own story boards—20 frames of words and pictures—that would be smaller versions of the book I was preparing professionally for the publishers. Delving Kindersley. My title was Tales of the Dead: Ancient Rome, which combines a graphic novel within a non-fiction framework. It was what Derek Cobby, coordinator of the Swansea Wordplay Festival, wanted for our project, which aimed to give children an insight into the way professional writers operate. "For many children, especially boys, he explained, "that's what they want to read. I want the project to show that non-fiction writing need not be just as creative as fiction or poetry." I was asked to work with Year 6 at St Ilid's, a Roman Catholic primary school, Swansea, which is a long way from my home in Kent. I had wondered whether I should set up a camera in my garden but workplace and stream video down to South Wales, but the pupils would either have had to endure mind-numbing hours of me typing or I would have had to stop every five minutes and explain what I was doing. Insane.

Instead, I sent them copies of a similar book I had written on Egypt to show how the innovative design worked and give an impression of what Ancient Rome would look like when finished.

The pre-view work involved email interaction between DK editor Simon Beocrodt, DK designer John Kelly, and the pupils, via their teacher Alison Howells, and myself.

I sent the school the original book plan and the revised version, in which the story moved from North Africa to a climax in the Colosseum, involving the pupils to compare the two and suggest why the second was preferred to the first. This sophisticated exercise in comparison also meant thinking about the book’s potential market.

I sent the school some of John Kelly's non-fiction research. The pupils used these as a guide for spreads of their own, choosing subjects from the agreed book map. This means designing, drawing, planning and writing clear, concise and lively non-fiction text to accompany their artwork. The results were impressive. The children saw their work as something "real"; linking to the world outside; this was how it was done in the writer’s workshop, on the designer's drawing board and on the editor's desk—and they were involved in it. Writing non-fiction took on a new purpose and meaning.

The final stage of our virtual relationship was writing the graphic novel. As with the non-fiction, I forwarded to the pupils the relevant sketches and emails that had passed between Simon, John and me, allowing the pupils to produce their own versions of the story in 30 panels. As each spread was a story complete within itself, the pupils had to write an attention-grabbing opening and then develop it towards a cliff-hanging ending, an exercise in planning that would benefit their own story-writing. Moreover, whereas writing for traditional sources can encourage flowery language, a graphic novel relies on a minimum of words. The genre obliged pupils to produce good modern English: simple, clear, concise.

And then I went to Swansea so that finally we could meet. Alison Howells, their teacher, was positive throughout. "It was great to see the children realizing that writers are normal people," she said. "Living in the same world as them with deadlines and people to answer in, just like them." The Adopt an Author scheme, funded by the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (Nesta) offers many of the benefits of a writer's residence at a fraction of the cost. The pupils looked at writing fiction and non-fiction in depth but they also made use of technology and came to understand the need for planning all academic work. The exercise also reinforced the confidence of a group of youngsters whose self-image can at times be less than positive.

Stewart Ross is chairman of the educational writers group of the Society of Authors. His The Middle East Since 1945 has just been published by Hodder Arnold. Pirates, Pants and Panders (Random House/Eden Project) is due out in spring 2005. Contact him at stewartross.com

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