

From a small space in a Highland school to international art success, Lynn Gilmour traces the story of Room 13.

Room with a view

Take one room, a remote Scottish community, and an arts project run entirely by young people. It may not sound like the ideal model from which to build a global arts community, but that is exactly what Room 13 has become in the 12 years since its inception, at Caol Primary School, near Fort William.

Room 13 was originally an art studio where the students at the school could go to make artwork, research, read or discuss ideas with their artist in residence. The aspect that made it special, however, was that it was their room, their space and as such, was always managed entirely by them.

Inherent to Room 13 is a belief in the provision of training through the visual arts and the value of expressing each individual's integrity. These ideas were refined by the project's founder, Rob Fairley, who worked closely with a number of primary schools during his time as artist in residence with Highland Council, before going to Caol.

"Room 13 is a meritocracy that places visual literacy, the ability to think and the skills of visual expression at its heart," he said. "Its stimulus was exasperation at the lack of interest in teaching visual literacy as a general subject and the lack of interest in teaching the basic technical skills necessary to express ideas through visual imagery."

Room 13 has grown from a one-day-a-week voluntary project into an admired arts organisation with an international reputation for creating high quality work and informing creative education. It now employs two full-time and two part-time artists in residence and is an open door to any student who is interested. With no age specification, the only criteria are that students must negotiate time off with their teacher and ensure all classwork is kept up to date.

In 2003, the project received funding from the National Endowment for Science, Teaching and the Arts (Nesta) and was able to expand its activities beyond Caol. The network now includes a music studio at Sacred Heart Primary School in Glasgow, and a new studio in Lochaber High School, Fort William. This is the first of its kind – a multimedia studio where students have access to music, film and sound recording facilities. The international dimension of Room 13 is also flourishing, with projects in

South Africa and Nepal now providing similar opportunities for groups of young artists.

For more information about the origins of the project and current activities of all Room 13 studios visit www.room13scotland.com

