



How one teacher's grand designs evolved into life lessons for pupils

Ann Horgan's architectural ideas allowed her fourth class to find their own strengths, writes Katherine Donnelly

TEACHERS can draw their inspiration, and power for change, in the most unexpected places.

Two years ago this week, Ann Horgan was out and about in Cork, enjoying Culture Night. While watching a performance outside City Hall, she got thinking about whether the City Fathers would support an arts in education idea running around her head.

The primary school teacher, who teaches fourth class in Scoil Oilibhéir, Ballyvolane, on the northside of Cork city, is strongly of the view that a talent for art in a child is too often viewed through the narrow confines of whether, for instance, they can draw a perfect flower.

"Children often have a different creative side, but they don't get recognition and don't get encouraged. They often get filtered out, but, actually, they are artists," she says.

Ann herself has a particular passion for architecture. "It is a hidden art and I had it in my head that I wanted to bring architecture into my class."

Back in the classroom after Culture Night, Ann discovered that none of her pupils had gone to any of the events. She also learned that none of them really understood architecture or knew what an architect was. "They thought an architect was a builder," she says.

Nothing ventured, nothing gained: she approached Cork City Council and landed a grant under the auspices of its Artist in Residence scheme.

"I knew I had to bring an architect into the school and I found my architect" — Seán O Muiri, MRIAI, of Cork architects, the Fuinneamh Workshop.

Seán came into the classroom that year and worked with pupils in designing a school.

She applied for funding again for 2015/16, but didn't get enough to cover Seán's time. Undeterred, she cast a wider net for sponsorship and the retail giants, Dunnes Stores, came on

board and so too did the **Royal Institute of Architects** Ireland (RIAI).

"I had a very tight budget, but enough for an architect to come into the class for two hours a week," says Ann.

They decided to design a library - and more: "mediatheque - a library for the future for Cork". As well as books, mediatheque was to have facilities for community activities such as dance and sport.

Apart from Seán's workshops, where pupils learned about architecture and developed observation and design skills, the project pushed out other boundaries. Field trips included a visit to the city library and an interview with librarian, Catherine Creedon, and an outing to the Crawford Art Gallery, for some sketching. They read about the history of libraries and checked out examples of good libraries all over the world.

According to Ann, pupils learned loads along the way, including "about differences between public spaces and private spaces".

They drew up a plan for mediatheque and the class divided into groups, each responsible for a different floor.

It was after that, according to Ann, that the "magic happened".

Even at fourth class, she says that "socially, some children were already deciding that school wasn't for them, but they started to see it in a different way.

"They were working independently, they were researching architects, they were finding out what works and what doesn't. They identified a problem and came up with a solution. The fear came out of them."

She brought in articles from architecture magazines and that became their English reading; their vocabulary expanded; they learned about diagonal lines, and shapes.

"They all got drawing journals and were taught how to observe. They interviewed and involved their parents; one father made furniture for one of the floors.

"It took over the curriculum, I never expected that," she says.

The benefits went well beyond developing creative thinking skills and putting maths into practice, to building confidence.

While each team had an appointed leader, other natural leaders emerged, and their teacher was delighted to witness groups taking responsibility for the project as a whole.

"They began to take criticism in a very healthy manner; I thought that was an amazing step forward.

"The children found each other's strengths. Because they were broken into groups, everyone's opinion was valued."

The students built a 1:50 model of their library in foam board, and presented their project at an event in the school hall Ann Cuffe Fitzgerald, a director of the RIAI. It wasn't just a visual display, each child addressed the audience about their contribution.

The mediatheque project coincided with some real-life building work at the school, in the form of an extension, to which Mrs Horgan's class brought their new-found expertise and critical eyes to bear.

"When we moved into the new building, one pupil said to me 'Mrs Horgan, that wall should be 100cm taller and then it would really cover the toilet door!'"

The proud teacher adds: "The effect is far reaching. They realise that the space in which they work and play really affects them."

The Scoil Oilibhéir project will be showcased at FÉILTE, the Teaching Council's festival of education in learning and teaching excellence, which provides a platform for teachers to share their

stories of innovation with each other and the public. It takes place in the RDS on Saturday October 1.

Culture Night 2016 is this Friday, September 16

Irish Independent

'Working with kids at primary level, you see an enthusiasm and energy'

ARCHITECT Seán O Muirí lectures in University College Cork (UCC) and does Transition Year modules in a local second-level school, but the Scoil Oilibhéir mediatheque project was his first experience working with primary pupils.

Away from any pressure on students about performance and exams, he says "working with kids at primary level, you see an enthusiasm and energy".

His work with the Scoil Oilibhéir pupils included visits to landmark buildings in Cork city, from the historic English Market and Shandon Bells to the modern, Firkin Crane performance centre.

"The kids got to observe buildings, and think about why things, such as windows, were where they were," he says.

The architect visited his young students on a weekly basis, in the first term of the 2015-16

school year. His workshops also introduced the pupils to size and scale, and among their tasks was to make scaled down, millimetre-accurate tables and chairs for their mediatheque, replicating their classroom furniture.

"Basically, they were learning how to use measuring tapes," he says.

The 29 pupils also explored concepts such as colour and light, and how they affect a room.



From left: Fourth class students Ryan Geaney, Conor McCarthy, Rebecca Moynihan, Ava Murray, Ellie Higginson and Chloe Stewart, from Scoil Oilibhéir primary school, Ballyvolane, Cork
PHOTO: DARAGH MC SWEENEY/PROVISION