DCU Educational Disadvantage Centre's Inclusive Systems and Inclusive Arts Education Key Principles: A Strategic Framework for *Fighting Words*' Poverty and Social Inclusion Commitments

"A Different Way of Being"

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Section 1 Introduction: Key Principles and Terms of Reference

Fighting Words is an Irish charitable organisation dedicated to providing opportunities to develop creativity and writing skills among individuals of all ages. Co-founded in 2009 by author Roddy Doyle and Seán Love, the organisation provides free mentoring in creative writing. Its programmes are designed to help participants harness the power of their own imaginations and develop their writing abilities. The organisation explicitly seeks to empower and strengthen children and teenagers from all backgrounds to be resilient, creative and successful shapers of their own lives. Fighting Words offers a range of creative opportunities, including primary and secondary school workshops, summer camps, writing clubs, extended projects and specialised programmes for adults and groups with special or diverse needs. By collaborating with schools and communities across Ireland, Fighting Words aims to make creative writing accessible to all, nurturing a culture of storytelling and imagination.

DCU Educational Disadvantage Centre was commissioned by Fighting Words to undertake this review in order to build on Fighting Words' declared strategic commitment to develop its focus on students and communities experiencing poverty and social exclusion. Fighting Words has in the past two years accelerated significantly its focus on working in DEIS schools and with socioeconomically marginalised communities. The Fighting Words Tales to Scale: Scaling Education Strategy 2023-25 places equity and fairness as one of its core values while its Mission statement states 'Our aim is to help children and young people, and adults who did not have this opportunity as children, to discover and harness the power of their own imaginations and creative writing skills'. A central focus of this strategy is expanding the work of Fighting Words in DEIS schools. The Strategy commits that 'DEIS schools and further education centres will be given priority during Fighting Words programme scheduling across the regional centres', with '50% of its workshop capacity by 2025' dedicated to contexts of socioeconomic exclusion p.8.

This review takes place against this backdrop. While Fighting Words operates both in the Irish Republic and Northern Ireland, this review is primarily focused on developing its poverty specific strategy in the Republic of Ireland and to inform future strategic development on this aspect both for Fighting Words and the wider sector of creative writing for social inclusion in education and communities. In doing so, it is to be acknowledged that the recent World Vision, EMPOWER programme partnership offers a significant further layer

to Fighting Words's poverty strategy, so that the international and indeed global potential of Fighting Words for engagement of children, young people and adults in contexts of poverty is an exciting one, though outside the direct scope of the current review.

The review seeks to apply a framework of key principles of inclusive arts education developed by DCU Educational Disadvantage Centre (McCabe & Downes 2024) to the illustrative example of Fighting Words project. These key principles build on 10 key principles for inclusive systems to address early school leaving published by the EU Commission based on the 2017 monograph Structural indicators for inclusive systems in and around schools (Downes, Nairz-Wirth & Rusinaite 2017). This monograph sets out the following 10 key principles:

Ten Key Principles for Inclusive Systems in and around Schools (Downes, Nairz-Wirth & Rusinaite 2017)

1. System wide focus Schools, agencies and families are distinct but connected systems, each having a set of relationships and mutual influences that impact the individual – both system blockages as barriers and system supports.

2. Equality and non-discrimination Substantive equality requires a commitment to educational success for everyone irrespective of social background; to achieve this, different groups may need additional supports. Non-discrimination includes a right to equality of concern and respect in a supportive environment free of prejudice.

3. Children's rights to expression of voices and participation, and other educational rights Children have a right to be heard on issues directly affecting their own welfare, with due regard to their ages and maturity.

4. Holistic approach A holistic approach recognises the social, emotional and physical needs, not simply the academic and cognitive needs, of both children/young people and their parents.

5. Active participation of parents in school, including marginalised parents Parental input into school policy and practices, as well as their children's education, requires both a general strategic commitment and a distinctive focus on marginalised parents' involvement.

6. Differentiation in prevention approaches Different levels of need require different strategies to meet them, including those students and families that are experiencing moderate risk and chronic need.

7. Building on strengths Promoting strengths in effect challenges the negative deficit labelling of vulnerable groups, and seeks to promote growth (both for individuals' personal and educational development and for system level development) rather than simply prevent.

8.Multidisciplinarity as a multifaceted response for students with complex needs A range of actively collaborating professionals is needed to address the complex, multifaceted needs of marginalised groups.

9.Representation and participation of marginalised groups Marginalised groups include those experiencing poverty and social exclusion, those at risk of early school leaving, those experiencing bullying, mental health difficulties and/or special educational needs, and in addition, some groups of migrants and ethnic minorities. There must be a distinct focus on the processes and structures that ensure these groups' representation and participation.

10. Lifelong learning Lifelong learning, from the cradle onwards, requires a distinct educational focus on active citizenship, personal and social fulfilment, intercultural dialogue across communities, and additionally on poverty, social inclusion, and employment. It embraces informal learning, as well as nonformal and formal education classes relying on active learning methodologies.

Seven Key Principles of Inclusive Arts Education: DCU Educational Disadvantage Centre (McCabe and Downes 2025)

1. Equity and Access: Inclusive arts education ensures equal access to arts learning opportunities for all students, regardless of their abilities, socio-economic background, gender, or ethnicity. EU policies emphasise eliminating barriers to participation, ensuring that all individuals have equitable access to the arts and can develop their full potential. This includes making arts education spatially, physically, socially, and economically accessible, ensuring that marginalised and vulnerable groups are fully included. A financial resource allocation process needs a prioritising focus on those most in need.

2. Personalization and Flexibility: The design of arts education must be adaptive and responsive to the diverse needs of students. This principle highlights the importance of differentiated learning and curriculum flexibility, which enables personalised learning paths that cater to individual talents, learning styles, and cultural backgrounds. The European Council *Recommendations on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning* underlines the necessity of fostering inclusive learning environments that accommodate the varied needs of learners to encourage creativity and innovation.

3. Collaboration and Participation: Inclusive arts education promotes active participation and collaboration between teachers, students, communities, and stakeholders. It encourages a co-creation approach, where learners, particularly those from marginalised or vulnerable groups, are involved in shaping their educational experience. This principle aligns with the *European Pillar of Social Rights* and the *UNESCO Education 2030 Framework for Action*, which call for inclusive systems that enable dialogue, engagement, and participation of all actors in education.

4. Cultural Diversity and Inclusivity: The *UNESCO Framework for Culture and Arts Education 2024* emphasises the promotion of cultural diversity as a cornerstone of inclusive arts education. It encourages the integration of various cultural expressions, traditions, and art forms from around the world, ensuring that students are exposed to a wide range of perspectives. This principle supports the idea that arts education should reflect and respect diverse cultural identities, fostering an inclusive environment where all students can see their cultures represented and valued.

5. Interdisciplinary Collaboration: Inclusive arts education encourages collaboration across disciplines, integrating the arts with other fields of study to promote holistic learning. Unesco (2024) advocates for an interdisciplinary approach where the arts are combined with sciences, social studies, and other subjects to enhance creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills. A particular focus here is on interdisciplinary curricular aspects involving the arts.

6. Community Engagement: The *UNESCO Framework for Culture and Arts Education 2024* emphasises the importance of community engagement in arts education. It calls for arts programmes that connect students with their communities, promoting social cohesion, empathy, and civic responsibility. Successful arts-based community development should aim for sustainability, creating projects that can flourish over time and adapt to the evolving needs of the community. This includes building capacity within the community and securing resources to ensure the continuity of arts programming.

7. A Spatial Turn Focus on Physical and Relational Spaces for Equitable Inclusive Systems: A further key principle is added to this framework in recognition of the spatial turn for equitable inclusive systems in education building on the work of DCU Educational Disadvantage Centre's 2024 Symposium on this theme and The Routledge International Handbook of Equity and Inclusion in Education 2024 (Downes, Li, Van Praag & Lamb

2024), as well as Downes (2020) on inclusive systems as concentric spaces of assumed connection. This spatial turn in education is increasingly recognised for equitable inclusive systems (Ferrare & Apple 2010; Downes, Li, Van Praag & Lamb 2024). This focuses on design of suitable and accessible physical spaces to engage and empower marginalised groups. It further adds a strong focus on relational spaces including going beyond diametric spaces of winner/loser oppositions and exclusions (Downes 2020).

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Section 2. Application of DCU Educational Disadvantage Centre's Inclusive Systems Key Principles to Fighting Words

This application of DCU Educational Disadvantage Centre's framework of key principles is both to identify resonances with Fighting Words' current practice and to examine pathways for further development with a particular focus on contexts of poverty and social exclusion in education.

Key Principle: Strengths Based

Public ceremonies to celebrate changes in social identity to weave new narratives for an individual's self perception and social perception has been recognised as an important educational contribution building on a narrative psychology framework (Hegarty 2007). This strengths based focus on celebrating in writing and in a public forum is a feature of Fighting Words. As Lehane (2023) notes, 'in many cases teachers were able to organise celebratory events, performances and readings in the school' p.9, 'sharing and honouring the work created throughout the Story Seeds process has been a key element of the programme' p.11.

The words of a child in Phelan's (2023) evaluation are pertinent here, 'I loved getting the book at the end, it was cool to see our story in the book' p.17. This *feedback as recognition* is to be distinguished from one of judgment. Lehane (2023p, 14) also emphasises feedback from students on the importance of there being no right or wrong answer and not being judged. Fighting Words goes beyond the diametric oppositional space of winners and losers (Downes 2020) to more connective spaces as part of fostering children and young people's agency.

Lehane's report (2023) notes that 'In some cases, finding what is common has involved going first 'on a global adventure', as one staff member in Cork explains. One class travelled in story through Poland, Afghanistan and Ukraine, learning more about where their classmates come from' (Lehane 2023 p.12) building strengths based social identity of concentric relational spaces to help overcome prejudice and foster commonalities of narrative and experience (Downes 2024).

Key Principle: Holistic needs

The social dimension of Fighting Words offers a key protective factor against loneliness that is a major factor in early school leaving (Frostad et al. 2015). As Lehane's (2023) Fighting Words evaluation notes 'with quieter children finding their voices and children who struggle with the school routine finding other opportunities for engagement' p.17. Another key contribution of Fighting Words for contexts of poverty post pandemic is regarding concentration skills (Orgiles et al. 2020). Concentration skills are very much needed post pandemic and are embedded in Fighting Words's approach in 'writing a first, then a second and then a third draft' p.17 Strategic Plan 2021-24.

The holistic commitment to 'personal, social and academic development' p.17 in the Strategic Plan 2021-24 needs to recognise that these, while connected, also have distinct aspects There is a need for a distinctive strategic focus on private writing for personal development in relation to trauma and adverse childhood experiences, a focus that is to be distinguished from more public, communal identity writing and processes. Trauma and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) take many different forms:

- Domestic violence
- Substance abuse in family
- Emotional and/or physical neglect
- Mental illness in family
- Loss of parent through divorce, death or abandonment
- Physical abuse
- Emotional abuse
- Incarcerated family member
- Consistent Poverty
- Experience of suicide
- Childhood homelessness
- Bullying in School
- Placed in State Care

Narrative dimensions to bullying prevention is well established (Hegarty 2007) and links with bullying and early school leaving are well known (Downes & Cefai 2016). PISA (OECD 2018) recognised strong associations internationally between low literacy levels and risk of being bullied, as well as between poverty and being bullied.

The Fighting Words plans emphasise 'Positivity and excitement. We always look on the bright side...'EDI Plan 2024-25 'a joyful fun way' 'resilience...skills for life in becoming mentally stronger individuals' p.17. Yet the Strategic Plan 2021-24 needs also to acknowledge issues of trauma and vulnerability pertinent especially for contexts of poverty. Moreover, simplistic conceptions of individual resilience is challenged in more recent research that focuses on agency and going beyond resilience as an individual skill to seeing these issues in systemic terms (Ungar 2012; Downes 2018). A wider systems of care focus is needed here that leads into the issue of multidisciplinary teams and community spaces as gateways to such supports to address these complexities.

Key Principle: Multidisciplinary Approach for Complex Needs

As part of a strategic emphasis on sustained local community spaces for Fighting Words's engagement, to maximise continuity, student ownership over the environment and sense of belonging, as well as peer-leadership development, a further opportunity may arise in such spaces. This is where Fighting Words sessions in areas of high poverty can help open bridges of trust for participants to engage with their experiences of trauma and adversity, for example, the work that is happening currently in collaboration with North East Inner City. In doing so, some of these young people may need further multidisciplinary supports such as specialist emotional counsellors/therapists. A community based one stop shop vision for such local spaces would focus on these spaces as a gateway to more specialist supports for trauma and ACEs (Cedefop, Lifelong Learning Platform, Educational Disadvantage Centre 2019). If these other supports are co-located with where Fighting Words is engaged, this builds a supportive network for young people to access much needed supports in an environmental space of trust. This issue is less one of health supports for 'hard to reach groups' but rather in reenvisioning local community spaces of trust. This is particularly important given the increasing recognition of the association between mental health and trauma difficulties and leaving early from school (Quiroga et al. 2013; Esch et al. 2015; Robison et al. 2017) .

Other key features of a combined model as a one-stop shop are:

- Continuity of support over time, flexible levels of support, programmes tailored to levels of need
- Outreach: reaches groups missed by pre-packaged programmes

- Drop-in dimensions
- Peer supports over time
- Going beyond 'passing on bits of the child' so that referrals of families and children can take place within a team-based approach in a common location to help address the fragmentation of the existing support services
- A focus on establishing relational spaces.

Against the backdrop of Fighting Words's 'Programme targeting mental health issues' (Ó Cuanacháin 2021, p.19) this proposed multidisciplinary team gateway principle for trauma and ACEs specialised supports goes beyond simply a view of programmes to one of systems of care for embedded and sustained supports for complexity of needs

Building spaces where relations of trust can be built

This approach to promoting environments as relational spaces of trust can help reduce stigma in accessing, for example, mental health and emotional counselling supports. It can also help bridge the divide between services and groups who may tend not to access such services. Word-of-mouth recommendations from peers can help open alienated communities to services in a climate where there may be much distrust of 'the system'. These community-based centres offer a key opportunity to engage those more vulnerable adults with services meeting their needs, in an environment where they already feel at ease and a sense of belonging.

Key Principles:
The key principle of **Representation and Participation of Marginalised Groups** can be integrated with the **Lifelong Learning** key principle
The representation dimension invites a community leadership dimension for Fighting Words where participants become mentors and there is a strategy of including community leaders from marginalised communities in leadership roles of the volunteers.
As the Strategic Plan 2021-24 states, 'Fighting Words is helping to form a new generation of bright creative citizens' p.12, the next step is to ensure this new generation is firmly rooted in working class communities.

Developing Fighting Words's role as part of community lifelong learning centres for a lifelong learning and active citizenship agenda, the Strategic Plan 2021-24 highlights that

'teenage writers learn to recognise the question as their most useful tool' (p.17). This offers resonance with Freire's problem posing approach to education and community development. The Freirean dimensions to Fighting Words have already been recognised (White, Lorenzi & O'Higgins Norman 2018). This invites further development of not only a community development and leadership dimension for Fighting Words but also of how to foster processes to sustain such an approach.

There is merit in further focus on peer support and leadership dimension of mentors as leaders of sessions, building on UCD Future You Project, as part of cultural confidence dimension and active citizens as leaders. Though the UCD Future You project focused on access to higher education for socioeconomically excluded groups, the learning from the peer support network for working class students is potentially transferable to a youth community leaders strategy for Fighting Words to sustain a collective group of working class leaders and to break down social and cultural barriers for education. In the evaluation of UCD Future You project (McNally & Downes 2016), the clearest finding which emerged across all stakeholder groups was that peer mentoring made the most substantial difference to participants of the programme and that it did so by addressing cultural and social barriers that participating secondary school students faced in accessing university. Peer mentoring enhanced participant motivation, confidence, and knowledge. By providing key information in-person through mentors on financial supports available, on the second-level and third level education systems, and on how to navigate university websites and application processes, students, parents and mentors felt that the programme made a significant difference in ability to access university. Future You offers a) a distinctive relational focus, b) a peer support network focus and c) a sensitivity to social class needs through ensuring that dialogue is with peers from a similar socio-economic background, living in areas that are either the same or culturally resonant with those of the prospective access students. Furthermore, Future You implicitly follows d) community development principles through establishing mentors as leaders from the community. Developing this peer support dimension for Fighting Words can build on Lehane's (2023) words, 'Having overcome any initial reservations, these teenagers now confidently offer advice for others' (p.14).

Key Principle: Differentiation

A differentiation focus for inclusive systems (Downes, Nairz-Wirth & Rusinaite 2017) centrally distinguishes universal, selected and indicated prevention levels.
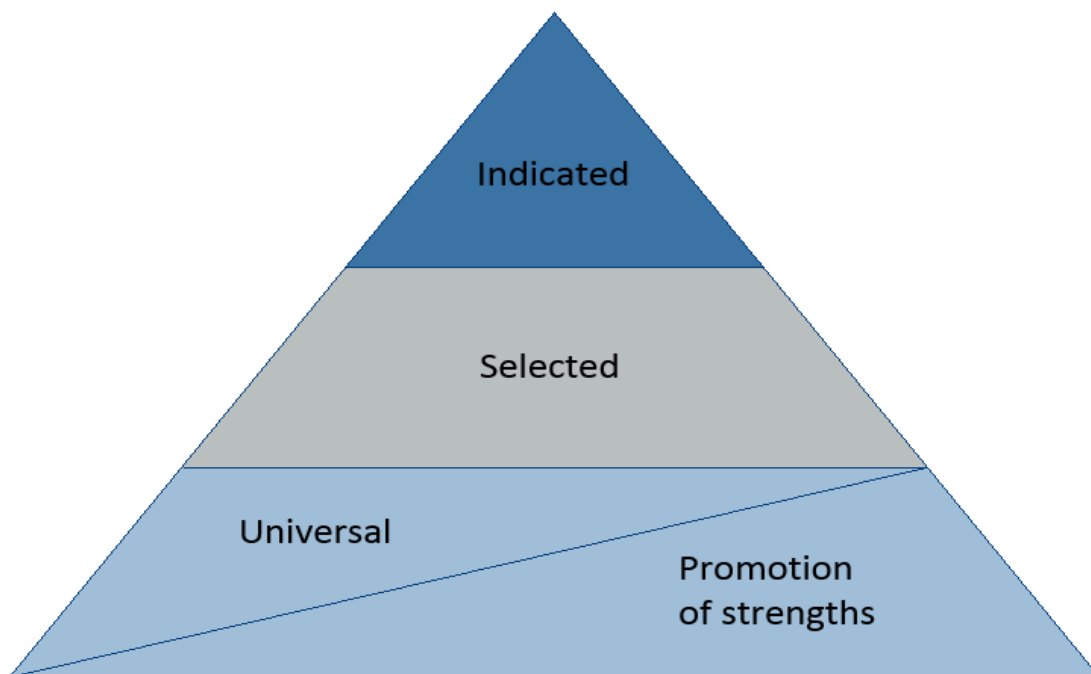
Universal – *All*
Selected – *Some, Groups, Moderate Risk*
Indicated – *Individual, Intensive, Chronic Need*

In doing so, different levels of need and system interventions are required to distinguish support for all, some (groups, moderate risk) and individual (complex needs). This model has been transported from public health contexts to educational aspects of inclusion. This basic framework also informs the EU Council Recommendation Pathways for School Success. It is also central to recent thinking on literacy education (Kennedy & Shiel 2024).

It is clear that Fighting Words does offer a differentiated approach to engaging diverse marginalised groups. Lehane's (2023) evaluation notes that Story Seeds has worked with more than 50 community and youth organisations, including young people affected by addiction, homelessness and poverty, and young refugees and asylum seekers. Further development of focus on specific marginalised groups, such as Children in Care,

Homelessness, Addiction, Mental Health, should be part of a differentiation principle for Fighting Words. This invites need for:

- inding the balance between creative freedom and structure depending on participants' needs
- Co-designing programmes with participants
- Age differentiation and processes, including mentoring
-Intergenerational benefits of engaging the wider community in writing in areas of high poverty

Key differentiation aspects of Fighting Words is to support those who may not conform to the school routine, as Lehane (2023) identifies, Sports journalist and football club opened a real life angle so 'creative writing does not always have to be about stories and writing. This was especially true for a group of students who find it difficult to "conform to the school routine" ' (p.15). This differentiation is sensitive to ensure individuals or groups are not othered and labelled. For Lehane (2023 p.16), 'The broad approach to creative writing, the openness to a wide variety of genres and to combining genres based on the wishes of the participants, are also factors that contribute to the sense of inclusion on the Story Seeds programme' 'without labelling or "othering" anyone'. A previous evaluation of Fighting Words (Lorenzi & White, 2013) concluded that Fighting Words may be of special value to 'students with special needs, students with poor language skills and students with challenging behaviour' (p. 50).

The Fighting Words approach includes many features consistent with the principles of inclusive differentiated pedagogy. Firstly, community writing centres offer a safe, welcoming environment which is a key aspect of inclusive space. Flexible, inclusive and democratic learning environment of out-of-school writing projects has been highlighted as especially critical in their success (Beal et al., 2019; Lennox et al.). Secondly, it promotes collaborative, meaningful, playful and active learning, which develops learners' agency, and is consistent with the principles of universal design for learning (CAST, 2024). Thirdly, in relation to language and literary pedagogy, through promotion of different genres, such as comics, podcasts, song writing, creative writing programmes are inclusive of broader and modern language and literacy skills. The employment of these creative, modern genres (for example, song writing) may develop a sense of achievement among the children and young people who disengage with more traditional writing methods. It is important that Fighting Words programmes continue not to place focus on the technical aspects of literacy (i.e., spelling, grammar, word choice, coherence, etc. In evaluating Fighting Words as a creative *writing*

initiative, we must understand literacy as a complex social practice with its both technical and cultural aspects (Gutiérrez et al., 2009; Love, 2014). Students identified to have 'poor' reading and writing skills may struggle with technical aspects of writing (i.e., spelling, grammar, mechanics), but storytelling and creative expression in their essence do not require traditional literacy skills.

More traditional writing outputs, however, can be supported by designed scaffolds (incl., story prompts, vocabulary banks) and/or assistive technology (for example, speech to print software), while approaches such as translanguaging (Pacheco et al., 2021) may be used to support 'writing' of emerging multilinguals. Fighting Words should continue to explore the utilisation of such scaffolds to support *all* children and young people, including those with language and literacy needs, in meaningful engagement in their programmes. There is an emerging literature on the use of AI in story writing (Fang et al., 2022; Oakley et al., 2020; Nik et al., 2024). This literature shows that the mediation of AI in story writing can be a very effective creative method for maximising student engagement (as well as more technical aspects of writing such as presentation skills). The use of AI in creative writing tasks to engage the most marginally disengaged young people is an area that could be further explored by Fighting Words. In December 2023, the 826 Project published a position statement on generative AI which stated the AI's supportive potential.

Projects in Europe modelled on the original 826 Project (from 826 Network • 826 National)

Fighting Words	Fighting Words Belfast	Fronte del Borgo – Scuola Holden	Grimm & Co.
Dublin, Ireland	Belfast, Northern Ireland	Turin, Italy	Rotherham, England
La Grande Fabbrica delle Parole	Le Labo des Histoires	Little Green Pig	Ministry of Stories
Milan, Italy	Paris, France	Brighton & Hove, England	London, England
Noordjes Kinderkunst	Ordskælv	Porto Delle Storie	Super Power Agency
Amsterdam, Netherlands	Copenhagen, Denmark	Florence, Italy	Edinburgh, Scotland
VoxPrima	W-ORT		
Barcelona, Spain	Lustenau, Austria		

Literacy needs of children and young people are highly individualised and the students with the highest level of literacy needs often need a personalised, differentiated learning experience. This may include, for example, incorporating their strengths and interests into writing activities, accommodating their behavioural needs, and meaningful differentiation of all activities and approaches. This *may* be more challenging to achieve by facilitators of

programmes which are short in duration (e.g., 6-8 weeks), are not meaningfully and sustainably embedded in schools (i.e are of 'visiting' nature), and whose facilitators may have fewer opportunities for close collaboration with teachers in relation to the learning profiles and planning for individual students. In this context, there may be potential opportunities for partnerships between Fighting Words and staff working in, for example, School Completion Programmes who are well embedded in both Irish DEIS schools and their communities and who may offer valuable insights into the needs of individual children and young people and how to create a successful and adapted learning experience for them.

In order to respond to individual 'writing' needs of children and young people, Fighting Words should continue to support volunteers in providing one-on-one mentoring within Fighting Words. The value of individualised support in creative writing is emphasised by, for example, the 826 Project, which is the largest youth writing network in the US, and on which the original Fighting Words project was modelled, in their recent report 'It takes a village: the benefits of individualised support' (Oliveira & Chiong, 2024). Similarly, in a different project in the US (California) for 'teenagers in underserved communities', namely the Barrio Writers project (Beal et al., 2019), each participating young person avails of two one-on-one sessions with a 'writing adviser', while in the UK (Manchester), the New Chapters programme (Lennox et al., 2024) is delivered to groups of no more than six young people. A meta-analysis of 21 studies on volunteer tutoring programmes, which included studies that used randomised control trials, concluded that such individualised interventions (delivered by a volunteer) are effective in improving students' reading and writing (Ritter et al., 2009).

Key Principle: Systemic

A systemic focus highlights issues of continuity over once-off interventions (Bronfenbrenner 1979; Downes 2018), as well as intensity of supports, as seen as central for drug prevention approaches (Morgan 2001). This implies sustained sessions rather than simply once off workshops. The evaluation of White (2021, p.8) emphasised long-term engagement to build trust and 'to allow individuals to progress at their own pace, building confidence and overcoming fears'. This sustained support dimension is vital for socioeconomically marginalised young people to help overcome the well recognised issue of fear of failure that may stop them from trying in school, as well as the less recognised fear of success of standing out from their peers that has also been identified for working class students (Ivers &

Downes 2012) and ethnic minorities (Fuller-Rowell & Doan 2010). Fighting Words should systematically flag longer-term opportunities as part of their once-off workshop provision.

The approach used by Fighting Words to partner with local organizations provides an opportunity to identify organizations that have a strong poverty focus such as:

- Familibase Ballyfermot, An Cosan, Tallaght, DCU Local Community Outreach Hubs, Darndale-Coolock-Kilbarrack-Finglas, EPIC, Ana Liffey Drug Project

There is scope to build on the existing partnerships with Youthreach documented in Phelan's evaluation (2023, p.16) to embed this more systemically across Ireland. Wider opportunities for engaging with statutory services such as Local Area Partnerships, Area Based Childhood Programmes and School Completion Programmes, as well as VTOS (Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme) are all with a strong local community and poverty prevention focus. In the words of Lehane (2023), 'A key element of the Fighting Words workshop model has always been to take the young people to another space, one that isn't school' p.9. Hence the links with libraries and arts centres nationally that are ripe for further development through a focus on these in areas of higher poverty.

There is scope for further scrutiny of theatre collaboration locations beyond the current ones working with Fighting Words, to ensure there is a stronger focus on areas of poverty and social exclusion. The current ones are as follows:

- The Everyman Theatre, Cork
- The Riverbank Arts Centre, Kildare
- The Abbey Theatre, Dublin
- The Gate Theatre, Dublin
- The Linenhall Arts Centre, Castlebar
- Lyric Theatre Belfast
- The Playhouse Derry
- The Íontas Theatre, Co. Monaghan
- The Galway Arts Centre, Galway

The Young Playwrights project used to run in 8 of these theatres though it only runs in four of them now (The Abbey, The Linenhall, The Lyric and The Everyman). Obvious opportunities for expansion of Fighting Words theatre engagement includes with Draiocht, Blanchardstown, the Axis Ballymun, as well as Familbase Ballyfermot. Systemic issues are also pertinent to further embed Fighting Words in DEIS schools and for volunteer development aspects. Fighting Words' track record in trying to respond positively to all requests for creative collaboration will need to be balanced with a pivot to more proactive poverty-focussed work.

Phelan's (2023) evaluation observes that 'Teachers noted that there was an impact for their own pedagogy and that the Fighting Words and Fighting WordsNI methods were useful in their day-to-day teaching' p.5. Phelan (2023) provides feedback from facilitators that is directly relevant to opportunities for CPD for teachers regarding process writing: 'It boosted my confidence it taught me a different way of being with children it gave me a model and also the support I needed I had great freedom I was very much changed by the experience' 'I will definitely bring the pedagogy into my overall practice I learned to trust in the process more I now know the participants are always going to give you gold' (p.18)
'to teach our young people to run wild with their flow of consciousness' (p.22) A key quote from a teacher in Phelan (2023) highlights 'a freedom to speak and go beyond perceived convention' p.9. This is a vital dimension of Fighting Words and artistic work in general, the relational space to challenge conventions, as part of an experiential opening Phelan (2023) recognised however 'The complexity of training freelance facilitators on the Fighting Words and Fighting WordsNI pedagogy and approach was noted. More time to develop a training process that allows for the newness of this way of working for facilitators to be fully understood may be beneficial' (p.8)

For a systemic approach to collaboration between Fighting Words and DEIS schools, there is a need to move beyond case by case negotiated access to DEIS schools to a) an embedding of Fighting Words as part of its mainstreaming in schools, b) clarification of where on the curriculum Fighting Words fits best and c) development of a whole school approach to creative writing building on Fighting Words. It has a clear potential role in the wellbeing curriculum, as part of a social and emotional education focus, as acknowledged by a teacher. There are significant opportunities for its embedding in transition year programmes across secondary schools. An active citizenship dimension also gives opportunities for a curricular

opening in CSPE classes in secondary school. There is scope also for integration of Fighting Words with SPHE curricular aspects at primary school, as part of an agency, student voice and capacity to put language on emotions, as well as for empathy, creativity and perspective taking competences. Fighting Words could be a significant resource for the new *Drama, Film, and Theatre Studies* Leaving Cert subject. The creative writing and storytelling focus of Fighting Words is in direct alignment with the scriptwriting, performance, and analytical aspects of the new curriculum subject. Fighting Words workshops could support students in the development of original scripts, character development, and experimentation with different genres, styles, and themes that reinforce understanding of dramatic structure. The Fighting Words approach and its focus on collaborative storytelling also supports improvisational work in drama, allowing students to dramatise their own or their peers' scripts and enhance their performance skills, supporting a deeper connection to dramatic expression. Additionally, Fighting Words could introduce students to a diverse range of professional playwrights and screenwriters. By documenting their creative process in Fighting Words workshops, students produce valuable material for the portfolio assessment of The Leaving Cert *Drama, Film, and Theatre Studies* subject . Fighting Words methodologies, particularly its multimodal methodologies, also lend themselves very well to curricular integration.

It is the case that timetable barriers to Fighting Words have been noted in secondary schools by Phelan (2023, p.8), but the new subject status of *Drama, Film and Theatre Studies* should eliminate some of that barrier and facilitate the further systemic embedding of Fighting Words in DEIS schools. More widely, there is a need for discussions on these issues with the NCCA. Stronger links with Children's Ministry and Poverty and Social Inclusion units in Dept of Education and Youth, and Taoiseach's office should be made. The expanded role of Dept of Education to include Youth represents a firm strategic opportunity to further engage the Dept of Education Social Inclusion Unit as part of embedding a systemic focus for Fighting Words and creative writing.

Staff development is a key aspect of a systemic focus. The challenge of community creative writing initiatives, not unlike other initiatives which rely on volunteers, is its capacity. Previous international evaluations of creative writing initiatives have identified staff and volunteer capacity among its greatest challenges (Oliveira & Chiong, 2023; Ritter et al., 2009).. Building on Fighting Words Community of Practice, new and additional ways of

deepening staff and volunteer mentoring, coaching and professional development. should be explored. For example, the 826 project hosts a national staff development conference and has a shared online repository of resources for staff and volunteers. Young children's stories show a strong interdependence with family and community life, both in what children tell about and how they tell it (Flynn, 2024). It is important that community facilitators of creative writing initiatives are appropriately prepared to respond to such contexts.

Internationally, many creative writing programmes also operate digital libraries of resources for schools and educators (incl., 826 Project, Super Power Agency in Edinburgh). Strengthening *oral* storytelling skills is known to support written academic skills (Gillan et al., 2023). Many of the creative approaches used in the Fighting Words programmes, such as project-based, cooperative and collaborative learning, including collaborative pre-writing activities before 'getting the words on the page' (Lorenzi & White, 2013) can be easily replicated in the classroom, and are indeed features of a quality writing pedagogy in general, especially that intended to engage children and young people with poor reading and writing skills.

Previous evaluation of Fighting Words (Lorenzi & White, 2013) highlighted that while the participating children and young people's literacy skills may improve as 'a natural follow on' (p. 34), developing literacy skills is *not* the primary purpose of the programme. Nevertheless, school principals interviewed as part of this previous evaluation remarked that Fighting Words promoted literacy in the school in a way that is inclusive of all levels and abilities, while teachers commented that the participating students' writing had improved.

Key Principle:
The key inclusive systems principle of **Active participation of parents in school, including marginalised parents** is given expression through parental attendance at public ceremonies displaying children and young people's work in Fighting Words. This principle also invites consideration of a Family literacy angle here.

The concept of family literacy is difficult to rigorously research, but there has been some scholarly attempts to examine what is and is not effective in such programmes, and for what populations (Fikrat et al., 2021; Manz et al., 2010; van Steensel et al., 2011). In relation to populations experiencing poverty and social marginalisation, previous meta-analyses of FLPs

concluded that effective FLPs need to be flexible, adapted to the characteristics and needs of the participating parents, and consistent with parents' values and behaviours, rather than prescribed (Fikrat et al., 2021; Manz et al., 2010). Thus, FLPs should make use of the community's cultural wealth and the community and the parents' preferred engagement and linguistic assets, for example, by using storytelling, play, and/or translanguaging.

Family literacy programmes (FLPs) are based on the assumption that making changes in children's home learning environment can influence children's literacy development. Such programmes typically directly involve the parent and the child (van Steensel et al., 2011). Both Fikrat et al.'s and Manz et al.'s analyses confirmed the powerful mechanism of shared reading and the importance of programmes that promote shared reading in families where this may not be a common activity.

Furthermore, Fikrat et al.'s analysis found that low-SES families benefit more from a *targeted* rather than from a broad and comprehensive approach in family literacy projects (FLPs), that is, to be most effective, FLPs should focus on a limited set of activities (e.g., just shared reading) and be restricted to one setting (i.e., either home or center/school, *not* both). Other than the content and setting, other program characteristics, such as duration, number of sessions, modeling, etc., did not yield significant effects.

Considering these findings in the context of Fighting Words planning, it may be valuable for the Fighting Words project to make links with local initiatives that promote reading/shared reading, such as Dolly Parton's Imagination Library | Childhood Development Initiative. The Dolly Parton Imagination Library initiative, currently operating in the Tallaght area of Dublin (www.cdi.ie), is a free book gifting programme for children from birth to 5 years of age. For example, the stories/books created through the Fighting Words project could be celebrated by being distributed via this initiative.

Fighting Words offers particular potential in taking a family storytelling approach, rather than literacy as such, and perhaps in small groups of families in areas of higher poverty and socioeconomic exclusion. A pertinent consideration for Fighting Words projects may be to create/co-create engaging family guides/activities for home, similar to for example: BEST_SHORT_STORY_BBC_RESOURCES (4).pdf, that would promote storytelling and story writing.

Section 3. Application of DCU Educational Disadvantage Centre's Inclusive Arts Education Key Principles to Fighting Words

Arts and Inclusion:

The next section of this report responds to the question of how Fighting Words, as an organisation and sector representative, maintain and strengthen the arts and inclusion focus of their work. The crossover and potential of international models is examined, followed by a discussion of how quality is defined in relation to inclusive arts practice. Relevant national and European policies are explored. The DCU Educational Disadvantage Centre's *Equitable Inclusive Systems for Arts Education Key Principles* are applied in order to examine practice and make recommendations for future strategic development.

Creative Youth Projects in the International Context:

A recent comprehensive study of *UK Arts, Culture and Young People: Innovative Practices and Trends* highlights a range of useful findings in relation to aspects of practice identified as those which arts organisations must prioritise in the current social and global context. The issues identified are Representation and Access; Mental Health and Wellbeing; Neurodiversity, Disability and Diverse Learning Styles; Global Crises and Activism; Skills and Training, and Right and Youth Voice (British Council 2024, p.11). The UNESCO Framework for Culture and Arts Education cites access as a critical foundation for exercising the right to education and cultural rights (UNESCO 2024). Ensuring access to culture and arts education of quality should encompass addressing all obstacles for learners, ranging from limited infrastructure and resources to vulnerability and exclusion irrespective of race, colour, descent, gender, age, language, religion, political opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, economic or social condition of birth, disability or any other grounds" (Unesco 2024, p.5). There is a growing emphasis in arts research on the need for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to work with the members of disadvantaged and minority communities to create arts education programmes and policies that "engage with and build upon these communities' cultural traditions, thereby leveraging the power of arts education through the development of identity" (Holochwost; Palmer Wolf and Brown 2024, p.9). Increasingly, a mode of delivery of creative arts for young people is achieved via funding for arts partnership

programmes. Rigour is not always applied in assessing the quality of these initiatives (Kenny and Morrissey 2021). It is essential that these initiatives are of quality, and that in providing creative experiences, they do not negate the role of teachers in providing for inclusive arts experiences. Purposeful, collaborative partnerships enhance rather than deskill teachers' capacities. In the case of arts organisations which are entirely community based, quality of provision for children and young people is indicated by a sustained and sustainable model which responds with care and attention to the specific needs of that community. .

International Examples of Inclusive Practice in Creative Writing Programmes:

In addition to the 826 project and its relations referred to earlier in this report, there are many other programmes similar to Fighting Words in existence internationally, and there is evidence that these organisations have a similar approach and focus on those who are marginalised or disadvantaged. A selection of these programmes is examined here to identify practices which Fighting Words, and the arts sector in Ireland, could further leverage or adopt. Typically at the core of creative writing programmes worldwide is an aim to empower young people by enhancing literacy, developing self-expression, and providing positive alternatives to challenges such as violence and substance abuse.

Writopia Lab in the United States is a non-profit organisation offering creative writing workshops in multiple cities for youth aged 4–18 in New York, Washington D.C., Chicago, and Los Angeles, Writopia provides workshops on a sliding scale fee system and conducts free programmes in partnership with public libraries and shelters. The organisation also runs the *Worldwide Plays Festival,* showcasing plays written by young writers (just as Fighting Words does) and produced by theatre professionals, which could be an interesting development for Fighting Words. *The Sydney Story Factory,* a not-for-profit organisation based in Redfern, Australia, is dedicated to transforming the lives of marginalised young people through creative writing and storytelling. By focusing on enhancing literacy and self-expression, the organisation addresses educational disadvantages that often correlate with poverty. The organisation's most recent evaluation report (Prunotto 2023) finds that their creative writing programmes enhance the wellbeing of marginalised youth in distinctive ways, such as being present; connecting with self (identity and emotions); agency and connecting with others. It is noted that "particularly for marginalised people, exchanges and dialogue about their experiences is critical for individuals to enter the social and intellectual

life of their community" (Prunetto 2023, p.17). This supports the suggestion that there is a particular potential for Fighting Words to impact Wellbeing curricula.

The *Read On* project in Italy aimed to engage young people in reading, creative writing, and literary activities. The project was particularly impactful in disadvantaged communities, offering opportunities for young people to develop literacy skills, express creativity, and participate in cultural exchanges. Examples of inclusive arts practice are the *Passports* project which promoted discussions on European identity, migration, and cultural diversity, particularly benefiting second-generation migrants and marginalized groups. Youthcast enabled young people to create and share vlogs and podcasts, with Irish participants producing a successful radio play. The programme also includes activities which introduced young people to literature from migrant authors, increasing cross-cultural understanding and giving a voice to underrepresented communities. Fighting Words could build on their existing inclusion of cross-cultural voices (as evidenced for example in the 2018 Write Here event) to be more explicit about the work they are doing in this area.

Helicopter Stories is a programme run by the UK education charity and theatre company *Make Believe Arts*, focussing on storytelling and story acting in early childhood education (Lee 2015). Based on the storytelling curriculum developed by the organisation's original patron, Vivian Gussin Paley (followed by Michael Rosen), the method is highly researched and developed in line with early years curriculum principles. The method can be used with children as young as two, and with children with severe and profound learning difficulties. A research report in 2013 was the impetus for *MakeBelieve Arts* to establish four licensed Centres of Excellence. One of these is a Special School, where a way of delivering Helicopter Stories for children with special needs was developed. As Fighting Words have now been in existence with increasing success for over fifteen years, and intend to further embed within the formal school system, it would be worth considering establishing a similar DEIS school based Centre of Excellence which exemplifies the approach and its impact.

A cost is attached to accessing Helicopter Stories visits, resources and training but it is low, and provides support and resources which teachers find highly effective for their teaching. This support and training for teachers is the manner in which accessibility is achieved in this model. Extensive web supports are provided, including a programme made to help teachers and parents in using Helicopter Stories in their homes. It would be useful for Fighting Words

to develop their existing online Educator Resources support into a more extensive and research informed resource. Research articles document the success of the approach of Helicopter Stories in a variety of settings and education contexts (e.g Manyukhina et al 2023). An evaluation of the Helicopter Stories approach by Cremin et al (2013) identifies benefits to the children's language, creativity, second language learning, and motivation. It is notable that, similar to Lorenzi and White's (2013) statement about Fighting Words although the programme is literacy focussed, the most significant findings (2013, p.8). evidence "children's developing sense of agency through its respect for children's voices, the emphasis on children choosing whether and how to tell a story and take part in story acting, and the provision of a secure and supportive space for story. The use of multimodal analysis also revealed the significance of communication across different modes (e.g. facial expression, gaze, body movement as well as verbal language). This was evident both in children's communication, in adults interacting with children, and in how they improved in their performances of the stories they wrote.

Defining Quality in Inclusive Arts Practice:

The *Creative Youth Plan* (2023-27) aims to continue providing opportunities for creative engagement for young people from birth-24 years in every aspect of their lives. There is an emphasis on ensuring that children and young people have a key voice in decision-making, prioritising those who are seldom heard and most at risk of disadvantage. A key element of this provision will be to ensure that elements of the *Creative Youth Plan* continue to be developed in consultation with children and young people, drawing on the 2021 *National Framework for Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making*.

It is pointed out in the *Creative Youth Plan* (2023 p.6) that children and young people who wish to develop their skills in the arts and creativity currently rely heavily on community based provision and that Creative Youth programmes and initiatives should seek to be accessible across the spectrum of additional and special needs (Arts Council 2023 p.11). Murphy and Eivers (2023), in evaluating the significantly funded *Creative Schools* programme, identify barriers to engagement in arts and cultural activities for young people as economic, linguistic and disability situations. They state that the economic barrier is related to household income, with most structured cultural activities outside of school requiring payment, and suggest that access to the arts for children (and boys more so than girls) who are from disadvantaged contexts, immigrant families, have special education needs, or are

attending small schools might be targeted for creative initiatives in schools in particular" (Murphy and Eivers 2023, p.35).

In the international context, Irish arts policy documents will be influenced by *The Unesco Framework for Culture and Arts Education* which centralises the promotion of equity and inclusion. It states that "access is a critical foundation for exercising the right to education and cultural rights" (Unesco 2024 p.5) provision of quality formal, non-formal and informal education for the development of vocations and professional careers in culture and the arts, including through diversified cultural contents. Furthermore it is stated that " access to culture and the arts is inseparable from the existence of spaces dedicated to it that are open and allow for the participation of all" (Unesco 2024, p.5). There are additional European policy documents which are of relevance: For example the *Unesco 2030 Framework for Action* provides guidance to countries for the implementation of the Education 2030 agenda and aims to mobilize all stakeholders around the ambitious education goal and targets which call for inclusive systems that provide for dialogue, engagement, and participation of all actors in education. Similarly the European Council *Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning* underscore the need to accommodate the varied needs of learners to encourage creativity, innovation and adaptability.

Fox and McPherson (2015, p.19) discuss the characteristics of those who practice inclusive arts, with a focus on those with disabilities. They caution against oppressive and tokenistic inclusions, and articulate a need to move beyond such segregations as relaxed performances. They are clear that inclusive practices require the artist or practitioner to have a knowledge of the role and effect of practices during a workshop, and to be prepared to take risks rather than practising from a traditional evidence base or ethical standpoint. McCabe and Flannery (2022) support this view and describe how, in all arts education contexts, the role of the educator using arts pedagogies necessitates a shift from more traditional approaches to facilitate less prescriptive or recipe oriented experiences. They recommend that the focus should be on process and that ownership of the process should be shared with or transferred to the participant. This contributes to the safe environment which is needed for creative engagement and expression to occur, and such an environment is further strengthened by approaches which adapt to the needs of all learners. This sense of safety is necessary for a culturally responsive arts educational environment in which children and young people are

supported to share their cultural backgrounds through the arts, engage in multiple forms of artistic expression, and share and collaborate with community members through the arts.

Application of the Framework:

Key Principle: Commitment to equity and access:

Fighting Words clearly demonstrates a commitment to equity by providing free workshops, eliminating financial barriers to participation, and prioritising DEIS schools. The organisation actively partners with schools in disadvantaged areas, ensuring that children from marginalised socio-economic backgrounds can access their programmes. Fighting Words provides physical spaces and creates relational spaces where young people feel welcome and safe to express themselves without fear of judgment. There is evidence that the sessions are designed to be non-competitive, which is especially effective in ensuring students from diverse backgrounds feel comfortable. In these workshops, each participant's ideas are valued equally, and the focus is on collaborative storytelling rather than individual achievement, which creates a community-oriented environment that celebrates collective creativity. The Fighting Words Strategy (2021-4) states a priority to "run alongside, complement and challenge the current school curriculum" (Fighting Words, 2021).

With reference to both in school and out of school provision, it is recommended that resources continue to be allocated with a prioritisation framework focusing on schools and groups serving those most in need and to increase programming in rural and underserved urban areas to reach more marginalised communities. In developing the work of the organisation to be more involved in the formal education system, it is important to carefully consider the nature of how that happens. Research is being conducted in that area by the organisation and that is to be welcomed. It may however be the external nature of the organisation which is the catalyst for creativity. Irish curriculum documents indicate that creativity and arts based approaches are part of schooling (NCCA 2024, 2023; 1999). Supplanting the role of the teacher would have a negative effect on equity and access as it de-skills teachers and may create a culture of associating creative practices with external providers, even if this happens in an 'alongside' manner, as is suggested. Consideration should be given to whether the organisation can provide greater access to work that is genuinely creative as a trainer, partner, or through provision that clearly takes place outside of

school. The latter may be the most attractive to young people, and this is supported by a Fighting Words research report (Lehane 2023). The organisation, commendably, reflects on the nature of access to quality provision when it notes the complexity of training freelance facilitators on the Fighting Words and Fighting WordsNI pedagogy and approach and identifies the need for more time to develop a training process that allows for the newness of this way of working for facilitators (Phelan 2023). In order to support quality and consistency, rigorous review of materials and training should be prioritised in order to guarantee quality.

Key Principle: Accommodation of Diverse Abilities and Needs:
Workshops at Fighting Words are designed to accommodate diverse abilities and needs. Participants are encouraged to explore their unique voices and engage in creativity without the pressures of competition. There is evidence of a tailored approach to learning styles and needs, seen in a variety of approaches such as the use of stories, poems, songs, animation and drawing. Fighting Words employs a flexible approach that can adapt to various learning styles and needs, accommodating neurodivergent students, those with learning disabilities, and those who may not have had positive experiences with traditional education methods. Trained volunteer mentors, who come from diverse backgrounds themselves, guide participants in ways that align with each student's pace and preferences. This one-on-one support structure ensures that no participant is left out or sidelined.

Fighting Words practices a student-led approach to storytelling, encouraging participants to steer the creative process, from conceptualising ideas to shaping characters and storylines. This model of agency gives students a sense of ownership and validates their individual perspectives. For example in speaking about a theatre making workshop, an artist comments that signposting in advance which work is personal and not intended to be shared and which work will be read aloud is strongly recommended. Importantly, the organisation does not impose themes or censor content, allowing young people the freedom to explore and express complex feelings and ideas, which can be especially empowering for those from traditionally underrepresented groups.The documentation of the work by Fighting Words demonstrates that methodologies and content are varied both within the field of creative writing and across art forms. Playwriting, memoir writing, joke writing and songwriting, podcasts, and audio recordings are examples of sessions that have occurred, and this evidences a broad, adaptive approach to the interests and needs of participants.

An emphasis is evident on empowering marginalised voices, including students from minority backgrounds, economically disadvantaged communities, and young people who might feel alienated in traditional classroom settings. Through projects like *Young Storykeepers* which highlights stories from Ireland's migrant communities, Fighting Words celebrates cultural diversity, encouraging participants to share and validate their unique experiences through storytelling. Research commissioned by the organisation indicates that this reinforces self-confidence and pride, which has a positive ripple effect on participants' overall engagement.

While there is generally clear evidence of adaptive methods, it is essential to practice inclusive approaches at all times. The *Word Warriors* outline features an unusual adaptation of the Drama game Zip Zap in which the two participants on either side of the crouched participant point to each other and shout "zap!". First person to shout "zap!" wins. In the typical use of the zip zap game there is no high focus participant and there are no winners or losers or focus on the fastest and the slowest. (Poulter 2018). It would be useful to retain the use of drama games, but to increase the emphasis on the source of many drama and theatre games which is the work of Augusto Boal (2002), who aimed to transform and liberate through his approach. In his *Games for Actors and Non Actors*, games and exercises are creative and collaborative, while still breaking down barriers and exploring social issues.

The methodologies described across the range of evaluations and documentation of work suggest a plurality of models. The use of the screen in Fighting Words workshops is discussed as a central part of the approach (White 2021) but it seems that as the work of the organisation has progressed, its approach has evolved and responded to the participants, evidencing its adaptability. Understandably given the multiple ways that stories can be expressed, projects within Fighting Words merge multiple methodologies. Recent feedback from the Word Warriors programme in Citywise, Tallaght shows children's enjoyment of the opportunity to express their stories visually. This expertise in multimodal storying could be enhanced, and specifically described as a method in which expertise is offered. As teachers at primary level are trained mainly in subject areas, it may be less intuitive for them to merge ideas they have met in different curriculum areas.

Key Principle: Collaborative Engagement:

The organisation supports the aim of Creative Ireland 'to enable the creative potential of every child particularly in the area of improving cross-sectoral collaboration to support creativity for children and young people in the community' (which includes linking the formal and nonformal education sectors). The organisation is doing this by building on the already established network of Fighting Words physical locations in the community and online resources available in all areas to provide increased access for children and young people to literature and creative writing outside of the school setting. The organisation engages collaboratively with children, young people, their teachers and educators of teachers. Collaboration and ownership of the process by young people is evident as Fighting Words say 'We don't teach them how to write. We encourage them to become their own teachers, to make their own decisions, to get the most out of what they already have: talent, imagination, resilience'. Stakeholder involvement is evident in many ways; for example a Fighting Words Education Director post is now based at the Institute of Education within DCU, funded by the DES. The purpose of this partnership is to integrate the Fighting Words model into teacher training, to further develop the already multi-faceted number of creative collaborations between the university and Fighting Words and to research the model and its effects for adaptation for use beyond creative writing into other areas of the curriculum. Collaborations are happening across early childhood education, primary education, post primary education and further education, including cross border and international work. The organisation is engaging with the education system from within while remaining outside and complimenting the formal system. Outside the formal system participation, wide participation is evident. Research documents that 'in one 18 month period, Fighting Words has had over 25,000 engagements in the year 2024 with programme participants, including primary school children, secondary school students, youth groups, community groups and "additional needs" children, teenagers and adults' (Fighting Words, 2024). Regular commissioned evaluations and research reports investigate the views of all stakeholders.

Teachers working in the education system report that they are inspired by the child centered approach of Fighting Words (Filho and Ó Cuanacháin 2022). This is interesting as it raises the question of why this is so, when teachers would have received a strongly child centred message in their own training. It would seem that teachers observing the process in action with children and young people (over a sustained period) is key to its influence on their practice, and so that should be a core element of the partnership. Experiencing the process as

a participant is of personal benefit to student teachers but it seems to be the witnessing of the creative process in action with young people which is transformative. This is in part achieved through student teachers volunteering with Fighting Words, and this could be accessed by student teachers from all teacher education settings. The online package for students which has been developed should clearly compliment the literacy and arts preparation which they are required to undertake for their school placement experiences, and should reflect the fact that an individual teacher in a classroom setting does not typically have access to multiple volunteers. As one Fighting Words workshop leader commented, not having the support of others to lead the workshop changes the experience.

Key Principle: Cultural Responsiveness:

Fighting Words places a strong emphasis on cultural diversity, encouraging participants to express themselves in ways that reflect their unique identities and backgrounds. Through the explicit encouragement of incorporating diverse perspectives, inclusion is evident. For example, workshops guidelines and descriptions consistently emphasise the need for positive feedback and an emphasis on participants' own ideas. Fighting Words helps combat cultural exclusion by making creative opportunities available to those who may not typically engage with the arts. Diversity in content creation reflects and celebrates varied cultural identities, promoting inclusion. The publishing and sharing of work is of significant importance in giving voice to children and young people from diverse backgrounds and groups.

There could be more explicit incorporation of diverse storytelling traditions (e.g. Calypso, Dastangoi) into methods and workshops, so that participants see their cultures represented and learn about other cultures. Some funding could be sourced or redirected to pay those from underrepresented or minority cultures to train in sharing stories and storytelling methods with others. Additionally, diverse storytelling structures could be evident in the workshop methods, such as non Western character or situation suggestions or non Western story writing structures. Publishing of diverse voices could be increased further and a festival could be held which highlights those voices.

Key Principle: Interdisciplinarity and Curriculum Potential:

The Fighting Words workshops encourage literacy, critical thinking, and communication skills, equipping participants with tools to break cycles of poverty. It is clear that Fighting Words sees literacy as interconnected with other approaches to thinking and knowing. An

example of this is the link which has been made to maths concepts at primary level where Fighting Words trialled a workshop about the use of children's literature within maths teaching, emphasising the benefits of creativity and creative writing as part of maths education. Fighting Words workshops often incorporate multisensory elements, such as drawing, group brainstorming and acting out scenes, to make the experience as engaging as possible. Fighting Words has also made strides in creating accessible content formats, offering both physical and digital formats for students with visual or auditory impairments, and incorporating assistive technology where possible. *Story Slam* is an example of a Fighting Words initiative which highlights interdisciplinarity and is a recurring open mic event that provides an opportunity for young people between 13-18 years from across the island of Ireland to share their stories, poems and songs at in-person and online events.

In addition, Fighting Words is providing inputs for an increasing number of modules at the Institute of Education at DCU and the wider DCU areas of study. A successful example of this is the project '1, 2, Spraoi!'- a collaboration with the Maths Department of the Institute of Education in DCU and the Irish-language curriculum support body *An Chomhairle Um Oideachais Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta*. The project involves introducing primary school students in DEIS Irish language medium schools to maths stories, written by DCU pre-service Primary teachers, where the problem posed in the narrative is a maths problem. They have the opportunity to engage with maths stories and then write their own. The project has proved to be an excellent tool for teachers to understand their students grasp on mathematical concepts when encountered in a novel and applied context and the approach allows for the expression of the the five key pedagogical practices of the Primary Maths Curriculum including using cognitively challenging tasks, promoting maths talk and encouraging playfulness (NCCA, 2023). The project adopts a partnership approach where teachers are involved in the workshop delivery and have the opportunity to discuss their progress and curricular links in scheduled Community of Practice meetings.

There is potential for Fighting Words to build on their work which integrates drama as a method of creative pedagogy and writing, as this approach could enhance the delivery of the new *Primary Curriculum Framework* (which has increased emphasis on integration). There is particular potential for Fighting Words and similar projects to contribute to the Wellbeing curriculum given the evidence for identity development, voice and agency. As discussed

previously in this report, there is further potential to have a concrete role in the delivery of the new LC subject of *Drama, Film and Theatre*. The recent showcase of *Parting Words - Young Playwrights Showcase* at The Abbey Theatre is an excellent example of what Fighting Words can offer DEIS schools who may wish to offer the new Leaving Certificate subject but need support.

Community Engagement:

Fighting Words provides a platform for underrepresented voices to be heard, enabling a sense of belonging and agency. Research (White 2021; Lorenzi and White 2013) reports that participants often gain self-esteem and resilience, critical traits for overcoming adversity associated with poverty. Fighting Words extends beyond classroom-based learning, actively engaging with the wider community. It collaborates with local artists, educators, and organisations to create long-term arts programs that promote social cohesion and civic responsibility. By building capacity within the community and ensuring sustainable arts programming, Fighting Words aligns with UNESCO's call for community-centered arts education. The *Story Seeds* programme is evidence of work which places a particular emphasis on place and community. The project is especially focused on reaching disadvantaged communities and marginalised groups around Ireland. In this project Fighting Words specifically aimed to open new and ongoing opportunities for young people in the targeted areas to engage with creative and cultural pursuits. This included tutoring, mentoring and creative engagement by the children and young people in a range of workshops and programmes in story writing, song writing, scriptwriting, poetry, playwriting and graphic fiction. Exhibiting participatory engagement, this was a response to a need expressed by stakeholders in the community. With the Story Seeds project, the theme was flexible enough to adapt for different groups as appropriate. One group of neuro- and gender-diverse teenagers in Cork used the theme to develop a comic book with emotions as characters. One of the functions of this group's regular meetings is to discuss their personal experiences and offer one another support. In the story, anxiety comes across a haunted house and writes a poem to connect with joy. This is a striking example of community needs being met through creativity, by the organisation.

The scale of numbers of those who are reached by Fighting Words is impressive and evidences the commitment of the organisation to access, as noted earlier. It could be

beneficial to concentrate on more sustained provision that can grow over time with specific communities and become embedded in those communities in a way which responds organically to evolving needs and developments in the writing related activities of those communities. Story Seeds is a particular example of success and could be the focus of sustained, targeted work with a high impact, with other more piecemeal work being ended.

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Section 4. A Spatial Turn Focus on Physical and Relational Spaces for Equitable Inclusive Systems

Key Principle: A Spatial Turn Focus on Physical and Relational Spaces for Equitable Inclusive Systems

An emphasis on space is central to Fighting Words, 'Fighting Words set out to provide a space and a model' p.8 Strategic Plan 2021-24. Similarly, Lehane's (2023) evaluation refers to how 'Story Seeds provided a space where the voices of all participants were valued and young people expressed themselves and their ideas.' This is resonant with the key inclusive systems principle of children and young people's right to **active participation and expression of their voices.** Yet a further dimension here is the spatial turn aspect to promote *sustained* spaces of belonging for marginalised children and young people.

Fighting Words needs to embed itself in sustained community spaces, and to help develop and clarify ownership of young people over these concrete spaces.

Fighting Words needs to extend its assertive outreach approach to target community spaces in high poverty contexts, as well as to contribute to a national strategic expansion of community lifelong learning centres in areas of high socioeconomic exclusion.

A poverty focus needs to explicitly plan to provide food and drink in afterschool settings, while the Gateway principle for trauma and ACEs specialised supports has already been emphasised under the key principle focusing on Fighting Words as part of multidisciplinary teams in local community one stop shops.

While 'the importance of culture in times of crisis' p.8 Strategic Plan 2021-24, this needs to challenge the diametric oppositional space in Western culture between nature and culture (Descola 2005; Downes 2024), to develop a nature and outdoor education focus for students experiencing poverty (Brady 2022), a part of workshops etc
- Fighting Words gives concrete expression to the spatial turn in education with its focus on space as place, where children and young people 'express their own stories of place' based in 'collaborative and democratic spaces' (Lehane 2023, p.2) 'pride in where they live' (p.3).

This is resonant with Doyle's (2023) account of early primary inner city pupils' voices celebrating their experiences of local spaces.

In Lehane's (2023) evaluation, 'Teachers have described it as "a big treat" and "incredibly helpful" to have Story Seeds workshops and projects take place in their schools, explaining the value of having artists come to the students' space and engage with them on 'their turf' p.9. This does invite the question as to how and whether students do consider schools to be 'their turf', and to accelerate focus on the kinds of background physical and relational spaces that enable students to feel they have ownership over the process. Further clarity on these spaces as well as strategy to embed these spaces systematically long term in communities with high poverty is needed

A relational space focus invites challenge to diametric spatial hierarchies of above/below for the teacher-student relation (Downes 2020). Phelan's (2023) evaluation noted a facilitator stating, ' it taught me a different way of being with children' p.22. This different way of being is a different mode of relational space fostered by Fighting Words.

While the national expansion of Fighting Words programmes as set out in the Geographical Plan 2023 - 2025 is to be greatly welcomed, and the focus on Limerick is a strong one, there is scope for a much more systematic approach to Dublin DEIS schools in particular. Successive HEA National Access Plans identify key areas, including those in Dublin and Limerick, as being particularly underrepresented at third level due to poverty related factors.

It is important that Fighting Words further develop meaningful and sustainable connections with local communities. This will allow them to utilise local resources and expertise, for example, by working with local artists, which would develop the programme in new ways that grow organically in their communities. Angus et al. (2021) recommended that the expansion of a creative writing programme (i.e., 'Mighty Playwrights' programme) to other areas could be supported by developing a 'template' of its key approaches. Such a national 'codification' of Fighting Words 'programme' can be helpful in providing overarching practice principles and potentially a framework guiding local implementation, but its local adaptation for children and young people with the lowest level of traditional literacy skills would need significant support.

The 826 Project, on which Fighting Words was modelled, developed dedicated third spaces: the so called 'Writers' Rooms', housed within their partner schools, where students develop their writing in a supportive environment. The evaluation of this approach showed positive outcomes and identified best practice components for establishing such 'Writers' Rooms' (Oliveira & Chiong, 2023). In Ireland, the process of embedding Fighting Words in local communities could be supported by collaborations with existing community and voluntary actors. For example, Fighting Words could be 'housed' in the spaces of local youth services or local child and family projects, some of which may already provide academic support and tutoring programmes (for example, homework clubs, subject tutoring, etc.). Internationally, many community creative writing programmes offer drop-in consulting hours, evening and weekend writing workshops for youth and adults, and after-school subject tutoring (Calabro Cavin et al., 2021). Collaborations with the community and voluntary child and family services may lead to opportunities for developing pilot programming for families. In Ireland, many family literacy programmes, for example Doodle Den or STEAM programme (CDI), were originally developed for either children or parents, but subsequently developed joint family approaches. In the US context, collaborations between community creative writing programmes and youth and adult services were documented by, for example, Calabro Cavin et al. (2021) who also stressed the importance of conducting an assessment of community needs before expanding the programmes.

The 'partnership with eight theatres' p.18 mentioned in Strategic Plan 2021-24 needs clarity regarding a poverty focus and this strategic focus requires embedding as part of a national strategy for Youth Theatre. Obvious opportunities for expansion of Fighting Words theatre engagement includes with Draiocht, Blanchardstown, the Axis Ballymun, as well as Familbase Ballyfermot. There is also scope to expand the current association with *Graffitti Youth Theatre* into further associations with other Youth Theatres. The national organisation of *Youth Theatre Ireland* shares a similar vision to Fighting Words, and aims to support the social, personal and artistic development of young people through youth theatre, developing young artists and young citizens. Under this umbrella organisation, a network of youth theatres exists across cities, towns, villages across Ireland, thus reaching a range of participants from diverse backgrounds and social contexts (including Ballymun, Ballyfermot etc.). This could join the dots of national provision for creative engagement in the field of playwriting for young people.

Fighting Words are responding to the spatial need by building on their already established network of Fighting Words physical locations in the community and online resources available in all areas to provide increased access for children and young people to literature and creative writing outside of the school setting. It is clear from the documentation that the online work necessitated by the recent pandemic was met with an innovative response and has been the stimulus for some very interesting innovations for both workshop participants and volunteers. As noted in relation to the theatre making workshops however, online sessions can decrease the relational aspect of the work which is vital for creativity.

Section 5: Key Conclusions and Recommendations

It is to be concluded from this review that Fighting Words's current practice and strategy is strongly resonant with DCU Educational Disadvantage Centre's key principles for inclusive systems and arts education, focusing on poverty and social inclusion contexts. Fighting Words is directly resonant with key principles such as being **strengths based**, offering a **holistic** and **differentiated** approach, while its significant acceleration of focus towards prioritising areas of poverty and social exclusion in the past three years especially, has brought notable steps towards a **systemic & equity and access** strategy for Fighting Words regarding meeting the needs of these students and communities. The whole approach of Fighting Words is based on key principles of **children and young people's voices**, in a respectful environment promoting principles of **equality and nondiscrimination**. Fighting Words's work displays impressive increases in numbers of DEIS schools in recent years and in its target for engaging Traveller groups.

Themes of Fighting Words as a relational space, including in local community space outreach contexts offers steps towards expression of a **spatial turn focus.** The substantial increase of focus for DEIS schools and marginalised groups in recent years highlights the clear dedicated commitment of Fighting Words to expanding its distinctive contribution for children, young people and adults in contexts of poverty and social exclusion. Fighting Words is to be strongly commended for all of this.

Fighting Words plays a crucial role in addressing the poverty aspect of educational access by providing **equitable and inclusive creative opportunities** for young people. The initiative successfully eliminates financial barriers by offering free workshops, ensuring that all children, regardless of socio-economic background, can participate. While expanding access, it is important to maintain a balance and avoid supplanting the role of the teacher. This calls for rigorous training of volunteers, ongoing review of materials to ensure alignment with educational objectives and best practices and adherence to best practice in arts partnerships.

A key strength of Fighting Words lies in its **personalisation and flexibility**. The tailored approach accommodates diverse learning styles through multimodal storytelling techniques, including stories, poems, songs, animation, and drawing. This expertise in multimodal storytelling could be further enhanced and explicitly framed as a core methodology in which Fighting Words offers expertise and guidance.

The model is also highly **collaborative and participative**, benefiting from multiple partnerships. Educators report a significant impact, particularly when they witness the process in action with students. Embedding teacher observation as a core element of partnership structures could strengthen the long-term influence of Fighting Words on educational practice.

Fighting Words is committed to **cultural diversity and inclusivity**, with the publication and sharing of students' work playing a vital role in amplifying voices from diverse backgrounds. There is an opportunity to incorporate a wider range of storytelling traditions and to be more explicit about the existing work being done in relation to diversity and cultural inclusivity.

Interdisciplinary collaborations have provided avenues for impact, as seen in the recent Parting Words - Young Playwrights Showcase at The Abbey Theatre. This serves as a strong model for how Fighting Words can support DEIS schools in implementing the new Leaving Certificate subject of *Drama, Film and Theatre Studies*. Expanding similar interdisciplinary partnerships and integration with Wellbeing curricula could provide further enrichment opportunities for disadvantaged schools.

Community engagement is a fundamental aspect of Fighting Words, offering a platform for underrepresented voices and developing a sense of belonging and agency. Through its initiatives, Fighting Words empowers young people, particularly those facing socio-economic barriers, ensuring that their stories are heard and valued.

Key areas for development:

There is a need to build on key principles such as **multidisciplinarity, representation of marginalised groups, a spatial turn** for sustained outreach spaces, **lifelong learning, parental engagement**, as well as extending a **holistic, differentiated** and **systemic** focus, to further develop Fighting Words's commitments to engage with communities and schools in contexts of higher poverty and exclusion.

A systemic focus on sustained engagement combined with a spatial turn focus invites an accelerated focus on Fighting Words developing sustained community spaces, embedded in local communities. These can also include Youth Theatres to locate Fighting Words as part of a Youth Theatres national strategy. Such sustained community spaces offer enhanced

opportunities for young people to feel ownership over their environment, in places that belong to them.

These sustained spaces offer a shift in focus away from once off workshops in areas of higher poverty, to ensure that substantial change is possible over time rather than simply as taster courses, discontinued. Intensity of support is a key dimension here in a systemic, spatial focus.

Eembedding Fighting Words in sustained local community spaces in areas of high poverty offers opportunity to contribute to these multidisciplinary approaches, ideally co-located or even nearby. Fighting Words's sustained spaces for engagement can foster sufficient trust with young people who may be alienated from the system, a trust that can allow them not only to engage with their traumas and adverse childhood experiences in safe spaces for writing and personal expression, but also to then access further specialist supports onsite, such as emotional counselling/therapy. Fighting Words offers a gateway here into the specialised differentiated supports, specifically regarding trauma and adverse childhood experiences. This holistic needs focus in Fighting Words invites sharper distinctions in some of its models between deeply personal writing for self expression and more social identity, group based writing. Both offer different strengths and opportunities.

Fighting Words strategic integration with other local community services/spaces can help provide key features of a combined model as a one-stop shop such as:

- Continuity of support over time, flexible levels of support, programmes tailored to levels of need
- Outreach: reaches groups missed by pre-packaged programmes
- Drop-in dimensions
- Peer supports over time
- Going beyond 'passing on bits of the child' so that referrals of families and children can take place within a team-based approach in a common location to help address the fragmentation of the existing support services
- A focus on establishing relational spaces.

These sustained spaces in local community contexts can be complementary with schools also being sites for self expression in contexts of high poverty. A particular opportunity here is for

schools to facilitate with Fighting Words a youth leadership and peer mentoring dimension, building on models such as UCD's Future You peer mentoring for working class students and leaders. A medium term strategy is needed for Fighting Words to develop youth leaders as part of its cadre of volunteers. Community based spaces also offer vital complementary opportunities for development of such peer mentors and working class community leaders.

There is need and opportunities here as part of a systemic focus for Fighting Words to further embed its local community work with statutory local partners, including Area Based Childhood Programmes (ABC) funded by the Department of Children, Local Area Partnership Companies that offer a national structure including one focused on marginalised communities and also local School Completion Programmes. This embedding in local community spaces focused on working class communities also invites opportunities for engagement with a range of other local community spaces, including for example, DCU Educational Disadvantage Centre's Local Outreach Access Hubs to Promote Future Teachers, Ana Liffey Drug Project.

There is scope for further scrutiny of youth theatre locations beyond the current ones working with Fighting Words, to ensure there is a stronger focus on areas of poverty and social exclusion. The 'additional resources for regional development' p.19 Strategic Plan 2021-24 needs an explicit poverty focus on a) theatres, b) community projects and sustained spaces, to be developed in each target region.

Further development of focus on specific marginalised groups, such as Children in Care, Homelessness, Addiction, Mental Health, is part of a differentiation principle for Fighting Words. This invites need for:
- Finding the balance between creative freedom and structure according to the needs of the participants
- Co-designing programmes with participants
- Age differentiation and processes, including mentoring
-Intergenerational benefits of engaging the wider community in writing in areas of high poverty
- the role of narrative as part of a bullying prevention focus, given that bullying is a risk factor for early school leaving.

While recognizing the impact of Fighting Words current programming in DEIS settings, embedding Fighting Words in local community spaces as a sustained feature rather than short term workshops or brief programmes may also offer some opportunities for developing a distinctive Fighting Words family storytelling dimension in local community and primary school settings, as part of groups of families and children. There may also be opportunities to develop a nature and outdoor education focus for students experiencing poverty.

Key priority avenues for development to include as follows:

- Space – sustained spaces for young people in their communities

- Multidisciplinary – gateway, partnerships for one stop shops

- Holistic – trauma and adverse childhood experiences taken into account in programme design

- Systemic – young community leaders, embedded in wellbeing and citizenship curricula

- Differentiation – for at-risk groups such as children in care, experiencing homelessness or addiction etc

- Intergenerational approaches

List of recommendations
Key principles for developing Fighting Words from an Arts and Inclusion perspective:

- Establish a funding model that supports sustained, long-term engagement.
- Expand and develop training modules for teachers, ensuring they can integrate Fighting Words methodologies into their classrooms.
- Offer co-teaching opportunities, where artists and teachers collaborate to implement workshops.
- Establish a Teacher Fellowship Programme, where educators spend a year engaging deeply with Fighting Words methodologies.

- Provide observational opportunities at designated schools which have successfully embedded Fighting Words methodologies.
- Design workshops that allow young people to choose between different formats (spoken word, digital storytelling, visual art, music, performance, animation, poetry etc).
- Define and document best practices for personalised, multimodal storytelling to develop a Multimodal Storytelling Framework.
- Train facilitators in creative adaptability, ensuring they can modify workshops to suit different learning needs.
- Ensure that materials and technology support neurodiverse learners and those with disabilities.
- Involve participants in designing workshops and shaping themes, ensuring that their voices guide the work of Fighting Words.
- Increase the diversity of the Youth Advisory Panel who provide input on Fighting Words initiatives.
- Introduce storytelling workshops based on indigenous oral storytelling, and other cultural forms.
- Offer workshops in multiple languages, ensuring non-native speakers can participate fully and develop bilingual or multilingual storytelling projects, where young people explore their linguistic and cultural identities.
- Strengthen publishing, public readings, and digital storytelling platforms, ensuring that underrepresented voices are heard even more widely.
- Explore the possibility of featuring Fighting Words young people's writing as curricular texts.
- Strengthen the offering in interdisciplinary projects where writing is combined with drama, filmmaking, or digital arts.
- Develop workshops around social justice themes, empowering young people to explore topics like inequality, migration and identity.

Equity principle - A resource prioritisation focus needs to encompass budgets for food/drink and transport in local community poverty contexts, and to address underrepresentation of socioeconomically excluded groups in summer camps

Recognizing the critical distance that is an advantageous part of the Fighting Words approach, there are clear opportunities for Fighting Words to embed itself in national curricula, especially regarding well being and SPHE curricula, citizenship education, transition year projects, cross-curricular integration and the new drama LC curriculum.

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