



‘The seeds sown are rarely wasted’: A charter for change in arts education

Ruairí Quinn and Jimmy Deenihan promise ‘arts-rich schools’, putting creativity at the centre of education. How might this work, and how long will it take?

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Arminta Wallace

 The role of the arts within education over the years has been patchy, to say the least. And with relations between teachers and Minister for Education Ruairí Quinn fluctuating between high drama and stony silence at this year’s annual conferences, it might not appear to be the most auspicious time for the Government to launch a long-term initiative in this particular area of pedagogy.

  But when Quinn and Minister for Arts Jimmy Deenihan jointly published their Arts in Education Charter, at the beginning of January, it was cautiously welcomed as a step in the right direction.

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The charter hit the headlines for its sweeping declaration that all artists and musicians who receive taxpayer funding or tax exemptions will be obliged to donate time to a local school in return. It’s not the only philosophical hot potato in the document, which also proposes the creation of “arts-rich schools”, €5 concert and theatre tickets for schoolchildren and an aim for every pupil to visit a national cultural institution at least once at secondary school.

The charter aims to place the arts at the centre of Ireland’s education system, from primary schooling through to third level and beyond. It notes that although the arts do not have a monopoly on creativity, they foster it particularly well. “Creativity,” it adds, quoting Ken Robinson, the education adviser to the UK government, “is not a purely intellectual process. It is enriched by other capacities and in particular by feelings, intuition and by a playful imagination”.

Which is all highly commendable – except that the history of Irish education is already littered with similar aspirational documents about the role of art within schools, compiled by a plethora of experts over the past 35 years and available for anyone to read, in their slightly depressing entirety, on the Arts Council’s website.

How to turn aspiration into action at a time of unprecedented financial cutbacks is the question that will face the people who will have to implement the Arts in Education Charter in the real world: a higher-level implementation group chaired by Prof John Coolahan of NUI Maynooth.

A veteran of *The Place of the Arts in Irish Education*, Ciarán Benson's 1979 report for the Arts Council, as well as former chairman of Team Theatre Company and a director of the Ark Children's Cultural Centre, Coolahan is optimistic about the charter – though he warns that it is no quick fix.

“I don't see the charter as immediately altering the whole landscape,” he says. “I see it as an incremental process building on sound foundations, establishing close partnership with arts agencies and groups, listening to what they have to say and nurturing new ideas.

“I'm a teacher at heart, and watching children respond to drama, to music and to mime has been the greatest reward of my life. The seeds sown there are very rarely wasted. They work themselves out in different forms. People live just one lifetime, and if they can be enriched by the joy, the stimulation, the richness given to them by the arts, I think it deepens the quality of their lives and maybe, also, their relationships.”

Coolahan sees the role of his implementation group as a conduit for those ideas – so long as the economic situation doesn't pull the plug. “There's no official budget, and that certainly is worrying,” he says.

There are other questions as well. How should we define the arts in the 21st century? Does our arts education reflect the latest international research? What kind of support will be given to primary and secondary teachers, already hard pressed by the demands of a wide-ranging curriculum, increasing class sizes and shrinking resources? And how will the charter affect the work of our national cultural institutions, all of which already have extensive outreach programmes?

These and many other topics were raised at the National Gallery of Ireland last Friday at a conference called *Lighting a Fire*, organised by the Abbey Theatre. “We're delighted that this charter has been issued,” says Phil Kingston, the Abbey's community and education manager. “We welcome any initiative in this area with open arms, and we wish to bring our experience to bear on how the charter is implemented.”

To open up the debate, *The Irish Times* invited a range of arts and education professionals for their comments, suggestions, observations and reservations.

JANE O'HANLON

Poetry Ireland

“In 1934, John Dewey made the claim that art is experience. Nowadays, with new technology, kids live on a different planet, and the arts is so important to that, because it's about ways of thinking. We should never underestimate what the artist brings to the classroom, and, given the right circumstances, teacher plus artist equals passion. Achieving this delicate balance requires particular expertise, and trying to replicate it by imposing a mandate on artists could have

many pitfalls. For instance, how do you make it fair? Is it creative for everyone?”

HELEN O'DONOGHUE

Irish Museum of Modern Art

“We all welcome this charter. It’s breaking new ground at a level that is very important. Of course in its implementation it needs to take into account the infrastructure and wealth of experience that’s already in the system. We hope that every child will get to visit a national cultural institution at second level at least once, but we would like to be far more ambitious: quality of engagement requires far more than a single visit.

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“Existing tensions between contemporary arts practice and formal education will have to be acknowledged and understood. The formal system is about learning outcomes and defining those outcomes, whereas the ambiguous nature of arts practice requires us to be more open-ended and accept that maybe things can’t be defined. If an encounter with an artform allows us to look at life differently, how do you measure that?”

AIDAN CLIFFORD

Curriculum development unit, City of Dublin VEC

“We have to get to the view that arts is not a sideline but a fundamental pillar of what it means to be human. Arts should be available to all, and the arts community needs to put forward its own way of contributing.”

MARY MANLEY

Association for Creativity and Arts in Education

“Artists in schools unquestionably add value to children’s learning and appreciation of the arts. However, it must be remembered that the class teacher can, and does, provide equally authentic experiences for children. The child, after all, is with the teacher for 183 days of the year at primary level. The teacher is charged with ensuring the child develops a deep understanding of the arts at an age-appropriate level in the context of a broader arts curriculum.

“Work with artists must be part of an ongoing process. The engagement with artists must be sustainable and lead to improved arts education through professional development for teachers and artists as a core part of the encounter.

“The time is right to place the arts at the centre of our curriculum. Meaningful dialogue with artists, ensuring true partnerships between teachers, artists and children, will help to serve this.

“More importantly, when schools engage in conversations and actions that value process over product, that nurture the child’s voice, that see imagination and creativity as core ideals, then the arts will be placed at the centre of school life.”

MARY SHINE THOMPSON

Chair of Immram Irish-Language Literary Festival

“The arts survive precariously. They are rarely at ease in institutions, where the spaces in which they thrive are few.

The charter is a godsend, a welcome new space. It grants the arts a clearly defined status within the educational system. Encounter with the Arts in Ireland has been quick to recognise the charter’s exciting potential. Its member organisations are pooling gifts, experience and expertise to make its promise a reality. They are its best friend. Now all that is needed is a modest amount of finance, and the work of embedding the charter permanently in the culture of schools can begin.”

ORLAITH McBRIDE

Director of the Arts Council

“The Arts Council is greatly encouraged by the resolve shown by both Ministers to address a part of our education system where it is widely agreed we have fallen short for decades. It is 35 years since the Arts Council first engaged with this area, when it commissioned the research study that informed the benchmark report *The Place of the Arts in Irish Education*.

“Every Arts Council since sees this agenda as central to the fulfilment of its remit and has devoted significant effort and resources to that end. Each Arts Council has also understood that, while the Arts Council can initiate developments, foster partnerships and support provision, the power to make change of the scale and nature meriting the term ‘systemic’ lies with the relevant Ministers and departments and the resources they can invest to deliver this change. It is to the credit of both Ministers that they have initiated the development of the recent charter as an impetus for such change.

“There is so much at stake in realising the potential of this charter. Imagine if the arts were part of the daily life of every single child in Ireland, as part of the formal education system – music, dance, drama, stories, visual arts – and not just viewing or hearing but making work. Imagine the surge in creativity and innovation our society would get from such a great step forward.”

ROSITA WOLFE

National Concert Hall

“The National Concert Hall is very supportive of the charter. Through our Learn & Explore programme, we have been fully engaged in providing and promoting music education, not just to children and young people but to all citizens, regardless of age, location or ability. The hall hopes, in line with this charter and with the support of both departments, to further expand our education strategy and offer even more chances for people to discover the joy of music.

“On the topic of the €5 tickets, we currently offer a student stand-by scheme where possible to encourage attendance and broaden accessibility. Additionally, the RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra, in conjunction with *The Irish Times*, runs a very successful Music in the Classroom series which has introduced many children to the National Concert Hall and classical music for the first time.”

LORRAINE COMER

National Museum of Ireland

“When kids come in to Collins Barracks they lie on the floor. They look at things from completely mad angles. It’s brilliant.”

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