

Story Seeds: An Evaluation

A Fighting Words Programme of Creative Writing for Children and
Young People

Report prepared by Dr Orla Lehane, University of Galway
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Executive Summary

Story Seeds is a programme of creative writing developed by the all island creative writing organisation *Fighting Words*. It is designed to introduce children and young people to creative writing and to help them articulate and express their own stories of place, their pride in where they live, play, socialise and go to school. After a successful initial iteration of the programme in Dublin's North Inner City in 2021, the Creative Ireland Programme of the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media and the What Works initiative, supported by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth funded under Dormant Accounts, awarded €250,000 to *Fighting Words* to extend the *Story Seeds* programme of creative writing to the end of 2022.

Aims & Objectives

Further developing and extending *Story Seeds* to include young people in disadvantaged communities was a particular focus of the expansion. This includes replicating the programme for primary school children in seven of the most disadvantaged areas around the country. In addition, *Fighting Words* would develop a parallel programme for secondary school children and youth groups. This work supports Action 13 of the Creative Youth Plan, which commits to developing creativity programmes for young people in disadvantaged communities.

Outcomes & Outputs

The *Story Seeds* programme of creative writing has been specifically designed to provide targeted support to children and young people at risk of marginalisation and disadvantage across Ireland. The priority has been on working with DEIS schools and “additional needs” organisations in the seven identified regions. In an 18 month period, *Fighting Words* has had over 19,000 engagements with programme participants, including primary school children, secondary school students, youth groups, community groups and “additional needs” children, teenagers and adults. This included working with large numbers of young Ukrainian and other refugees, neuro- and gender-diverse teenagers, groups with physical and intellectual disabilities, young members of the traveller community, young people experiencing homelessness and individuals recovering from addiction. *Fighting Words* leveraged existing relationships and established new ones with a range of organisations to ensure they were reaching as many vulnerable young people as possible. This included liaising with Garda Community Officers, Tusla, the Irish Red Cross, CYPSC and number of “additional needs” organisations, such as Dyslexia Ireland, Crosscare, The Irish Wheelchair Association and the Irish Deaf Society. Throughout, *Fighting Words* drew on their experience from partnerships with DCU to ensure the *Story Seeds* programme catered appropriately for those in the target groups. Two project coordinators were employed to deliver the programme and twenty professional artists were contracted to support it. This allowed for substantial projects with teenagers and youth groups, to take place over a number of weeks, resulting in the creation of stories, musicals, plays, poems, podcasts and more. Celebrating and sharing the work created by young people engaged in *Story Seeds* projects has played a significant role in ensuring these young people feel valued and their voices heard, something that is particularly important for youth from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Additional Findings

Participants who engaged in the *Story Seeds* programme experienced a range of benefits that mirror those highlighted by research into the *Fighting Words* model. In addition to participating in cultural activities, *Story Seeds* participants enjoyed working in collaborative and democratic spaces where their voices were valued and they were invited to express themselves and their ideas. The inclusive nature of the *Story Seeds* programme brought joy and fun to some of the most marginalised young people across the country, instilling confidence and pride in their abilities and in their communities. By ensuring all participants were listened to and enjoyed a space to share their stories, the *Story Seeds* programme contributed to the health and wellbeing of the young people in the selected communities.

Introduction

'An alien had arrived down into the docks on the North Strand, and then, out of the blue, Michael D. Higgins appears in the story' (Story Seeds Volunteer Illustrator).

This is a description of a scene from the first chapter of *Felix on Planet Earth*, a collaborative story written by primary school students from four schools in Dublin's North Inner City. It is one of six such collaborative stories published in the collection *Springtime in the North Inner City* by creative writing organisation *Fighting Words* as part of their *Story Seeds* programme in 2021.¹ The stories, all by primary school children, feature an array of intriguing characters, from evil bananas and secret agents to giant fleas shooting lasers and a gang of super fruits, all taking part in action packed adventures around Dublin's North Inner City. Locations featured in the stories include Dublin's docklands, the Royal Canal, Glasnevin Cemetery, the Spire and an assortment of local school grounds and shops.

Story Seeds is a programme of creative writing developed by *Fighting Words*. It is designed to introduce children and young people to creative writing and also to help young people articulate and express their own stories of place, their pride in where they live, play, socialise and go to school. *Story Seeds* encourages and supports young people to engage with their place, whether geographical, social or imaginative, with 'a sense of imaginative possibility' (*Story Seeds* Workshop Facilitator, Cork) transforming their sense of place.

Based on the success of *Story Seeds*' initial phase in Dublin's North Inner City, in 2021 the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (DTCAGSM) and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration & Youth (DCEDIY) approved funding to extend the programme's impact. This funding would provide the resources and expert support to reach children and young people from Dublin West, Dublin South Inner City, Dublin North Inner City, Cork, Limerick, Bray/Wicklow and Drogheda/Louth through *Story Seeds* workshops. It allowed for the development of stories set in Cork's Lough area, with one featuring a cat and a large four foot turtle, wearing matching cowboy hats, who accidentally unplug the lough, draining the whole thing. The funding enabled Arrowman and his gang, including Spudman, Gerry the Chicken Fillet Roll and Popcorn Man to save Drogheda from Flamer the Villain, stopping to watch a movie at the Arc Cinema and to eat a chilli kebab at the Kebab Palace while they do so.

The funding provided to expand the reach of the *Story Seeds* programme, based on the interviews carried out to compile this report, has done more than facilitate the creation of these characters and their adventures in locales around the country. Over 19,000 *Story Seeds* engagements with children and young people took place in some of the most disadvantaged areas and communities in Ireland. According to teachers, youth workers, artists and other *Story Seeds* stakeholders interviewed, the stories and characters created represent something that has happened on a deeper level. This report details the evolution of the *Story Seeds* programme from its initial iteration in Dublin's North Inner City to its expansion, bringing creative writing and storytelling to vulnerable groups in areas where this is most needed. In addition to expanding the project's reach among children and teenagers, *Fighting Words* has engaged with groups of adults with additional needs. The artists involved in the project have developed *Story Seeds* workshops across a variety of genres, including song writing, comics, memoir writing, playwriting and poetry. The work created has been celebrated through readings, performances, book publication, podcast recordings, film, and disseminated in the *Irish Times*. Beyond the engagements and outputs documented in this report, *Story Seeds* provided a space

¹ *Springtime in the North Inner City*, a series of six stories by students from twenty-four primary schools in the North Inner City of Dublin. 2021.

where the voices of all participants were valued and young people expressed themselves and their ideas. These inclusive workshops have served to instil confidence, joy and pride in communities where this is very much needed. In doing so, *Story Seeds* has contributed to the health and wellbeing of children and young people across the country.

Fighting Words – The Write to Right

Fighting Words is an all island creative writing organisation that provides free tutoring, mentoring and publishing in all genres of creative writing for children and young people. Since its establishment by Roddy Doyle and Seán Love in 2009, the organisation has engaged with more than 250,000 children and young people around the island of Ireland. Research carried out into the *Fighting Words* model (White & Lorenzi, 2013; White, Lorenzi, O’Higgins Norman, 2018; White, 2020, White 2021 and Salomao Filho, 2021) demonstrate a wide range of positive impacts on programme participants. Evidence shows that the *Fighting Words* model has a positive impact on personal, social and academic development of participants who demonstrate increased levels of engagement not just with creative writing but also with the entire school experience, leading to improved motivation, confidence, self-esteem, pride in creative ability, a greater ability to work collaboratively, and improved literacy. The organisation has expanded its reach significantly since opening its main centre in Behan Square, Dublin 1 in 2009. Since 2019, with the support of the Department of Gaeltacht, the organisation has been providing an Irish language version of the programme; and, with the support of the Department of Education, *Fighting Words* has a formal partnership with Dublin City University to contribute to teacher training and third level education in general. There are now 23 *Fighting Words* venues around the country. Dublin has the main centre at Behan Square in Dublin 1 with the national coordination centre next door, and an additional presence on the Dublin City University campus. *Fighting Words* is also based in Cork, Galway, Wicklow, Kildare, Longford, Kerry, Wexford, Mayo, Donegal, Laois, Clare, Limerick, Louth, Offaly, Tipperary, Monaghan, and in the Gaeltacht areas Conamara, Uí Ráthach in Kerry, and Gaoth Dobhair in Donegal. In Northern Ireland, *Fighting Words* is in Belfast, Coleraine and Derry. To set up and operate these regional venues, *Fighting Words* has non-financial partnerships with libraries, arts centres, theatres and other appropriate local organisations. This, along with a programme of outreach, is in place to expand the reach of *Fighting Words* programmes and ensure the organisation is as inclusive as possible.

Fighting Words operates through a volunteering structure; local workshops are delivered by a network of over 1,000 trained and vetted volunteer mentors. Many of Ireland’s most respected artists volunteer with *Fighting Words*, as do those working in education, design and publishing. This model is further supported by the organisation’s partnerships with key arts organisations and venues, and education bodies. Collaboration, which is at the heart of the *Fighting Words* model, has allowed the development of significant programmes that have included playwriting, filmmaking, publication of anthologies of short stories and graphic fiction, songwriting and more.

Story Seeds – The Full Story

*'It's memories of childhood and going to Stephen's Green on Sunday mornings to feed the ducks with my sister, then going on to visit granda. It's feeling safe walking home from town after dark at night in my teenage years. It's feeling this is where I belong. I'm at home.'*²

The *Story Seeds* programme places a particular emphasis on place and community. The project is especially focused on reaching disadvantaged communities and marginalised groups around Ireland. This has included working with DEIS schools, community organisations, youth groups, refugees and asylum seekers, young people and adults with additional needs, those experiencing homelessness, those recovering from addiction, and young people in detention. Through the *Story Seeds* programme of creative writing workshops, participants are encouraged to engage in positive ways with their local place and space. Stories and comics have been published, plays performed and songs shared. Children in Limerick have claimed their local chipper is the best in the world whereas the chips in Platform Pizza in Bray are highly recommended for aliens visiting the 'oldest seaside town in Ireland.'³ Elsewhere in Wicklow, a character called Arnaud, having grown chocolate wings, finds gold coins in the Sugarloaf Mountain and other locations in the surrounding area. The hunt moves up the coast to Malahide, where the remaining gold coin is discovered in the mint ice cream at Pappagallino's in Malahide. Troublemaking seagulls are a feature in many towns. Goose the Menacing Seagull swipes chips in Bray; in St Stephen's Green a seagull poops on the heads of students from a local school; and in Inchicore a seagull called Emily, accompanied by a gang of fruit, jumps into the basket of a girl's bicycle, making her cycle through a red light.⁴

The places that these characters adventure through, the familiar sights and sounds of local areas, from schools, shops and cafés to football grounds, parks and secret gardens, are all important to the young authors involved in the *Story Seeds* programme. These new stories celebrate and bring their local areas to life. For adults too, the joy and complexity of places both familiar and unfamiliar is uncovered through story. Whether the value of a garden as a shared space between man and nature, the reassurance a familiar neighbourhood shop can provide, or the familiarity of hearing a local accent and wit after a trip away,⁵ writing about place has allowed *Story Seeds* participants to think anew about their neighbourhoods and express their own views of their significance. For one group, this meant changing a story to reflect their understanding of community: instead of opening a security van that had been robbed to find money, they find that it's full of knickers and bras. 'We take them up to the flats,' the group decided, 'and sell them to all the women in the flats. That's community' (*Fighting Words* Staff Member).

² Extract from 'Dear Dirty Dublin' by Antoinette Tonge, Lourdes Youth and Community Services (LYCS), Metropolitan Building, James Joyce Street, Dublin 1. From the collection *Story Seeds: Memories & Reflections – A Collection of Memoirs & Fiction Writing by Adult Groups*.

³ From *Story Seeds: Adventures Across Wicklow & Beyond*, with stories by primary school students from Bray, Wicklow Town, Carnew, Glencullen, Blessington, Valleymount, Kilmacanogue and Ashford. Groups of students from the Dyslexia Association of Ireland from a variety of areas also contributed chapters to this collection.

⁴ From *Story Seeds: Autumn in the City*, written by students from twenty primary schools across Dublin south city.

⁵ These stories feature in *Story Seeds: Memories & Reflections*, a collection of memoirs & fiction writing by adults with additional needs.

Story Seeds – The Origins

‘There had been a few very serious incidents within our area...I was getting feedback from the local community, youth workers and schools that the youth in the area were kind of feeling a little bit forgotten, very scared and very uncertain. There was an awful lot of anxiety around the area at the time’ (Garda Sergeant, Mountjoy Garda Community Engagement Unit).

The *Story Seeds* project was initiated in response to a discussion with the Mountjoy Garda Community Engagement Unit. Sergeant Aoife Reilly was aware that children in the local area had been affected by a number of high profile violent incidents and the negative publicity this generated about the local area. This was compounded by the isolation resulting from a series of COVID-19 lockdowns. Keen to explore ways to have the youth be proud of their diverse area and community Sgt Reilly approached *Fighting Words* in early 2021 about working with local primary schools on a creative project that would promote a positive sense of community and ‘instil pride back into their area.’ More than that, she hoped it might ‘take the anxiety and turn it into something positive.’ From their initial discussions, the concept for *Story Seeds* was sown.

This project engaged primary schools in the local catchment area of Dublin 1 to Dublin 7 – the north east inner city – on a collaborative creative writing programme focused on local community and place. A class in one primary school would write the first chapter of a story and pass it on to another class, in the same or another school, to develop further. Each of the six stories in *Springtime in the North Inner City* has chapters written by different classes from different primary schools, supported by *Fighting Words* volunteer mentors and illustrators. All of the children, teachers and schools involved received copies of the publication, with all children acknowledged in the book for their contribution.

Story Seeds began as a collaborative project that saw *Fighting Words* partner with An Garda Síochána through The Community Engagement Unit Mountjoy-North Central Division. Following their community-driven approach, the unit emphasised the trust building element of the *Story Seeds* project. Aware of the difficulties facing young people in the area, they were keen to ensure that local children would feel safe and have additional opportunities to get to know their local community police. As one local sergeant put it, ‘if we're walking in the streets ... they'll [young people] come over and say hello, and they won't feel intimidated.’ The initial project included children from the Fitzgibbon Street, Store Street and Mountjoy Garda Station areas.

Growing *Story Seeds*

*‘I loved reading the work the *Story Seeds* project produced in Dublin's north inner city, and I'm really looking forward to what gets written by children and young people in other parts of the country when they start making *Story Seeds* their own’* (Roddy Doyle, *Fighting Words*).

This initial phase of the *Story Seeds* project was hugely successful. Indeed, Director of *Fighting Words*, Seán Love, notes that it is ‘one of the most successful programmes we have run,’ with the ‘engagement and the creativity of the children...inspirational.’ Consequently, in June 2021, the Creative Ireland Programme of the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media and the What Works initiative, supported by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth and funded under Dormant Accounts, awarded €250,000 to *Fighting Words* to extend the *Story Seeds* programme of creative writing activity to the end of 2022. A particular focus

of the expansion, giving further effect to Action 13 of the Creative Youth Plan, was to develop and expand the *Story Seeds* programme to young people in disadvantaged communities:

'I am delighted to champion the expansion of this fantastic programme to address the needs of children and young people, particularly in areas of disadvantage... Fighting Words is a stellar example of how prevention and early intervention can work in practice to deliver better outcomes for marginalised children and young people' (Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Roderic O'Gorman T.D.).

Story Seeds Aims and Objectives

The aim of funding the expansion of the *Story Seeds* creative writing programme was to enable *Fighting Words* to replicate the project with primary schools and bring it to secondary schools, youth groups and additional needs groups. Over a period of 18 months, the project would focus on seven of the most disadvantaged areas around the country: Dublin west, Dublin south inner city, Dublin north inner city, Cork, Limerick, Bray/Wicklow and Drogheda. Throughout the project priority would be given to working with DEIS schools and community and youth groups in these areas. In carrying out this work, *Fighting Words* would ensure the *Story Seeds* programme provided targeted support to children and young people who are the hardest to reach, and those at risk of marginalisation or disadvantage. *Fighting Words* aimed to work with 120 primary schools, 70 secondary schools and 30 community, youth and additional needs groups during the lifecycle of the programme. To maximise its reach and ensure engagement with the hardest to reach children, *Fighting Words* would leverage existing connections and establish new ones with groups such as First Fortnight on mental health, AsIAm on ASD, Dyslexia Ireland, Down Syndrome Ireland, Traveller Education Service, and Crosscare with refugees/migrants. *Fighting Words* would also liaise with Tusla, CYPSC, and with Garda Community officers to ensure they were connecting with as many community and youth organisations as possible in each region.

In expanding the *Story Seeds* programme, *Fighting Words* aimed to open new and ongoing opportunities for young people in the targeted areas to engage with creative and cultural pursuits. This would include 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. Professional artists from a range of disciplines would be contracted to bring specialist expertise into the programmes, allowing for the development of projects that provide targeted support to young people who need it most and ensuring the engagements are as enriching as possible. In doing so, they would work alongside *Fighting Words* staff and volunteer mentors. The outputs would be in the form of hardcopy and digital books, recordings, film and podcasts – plus readings and performances. The entire programme and outputs would be delivered free for all participants, and the young writers would own the intellectual rights to their own creative material. This would allow them to further develop their material at any point in the future.

In addition to the immediate aims and objectives for the 18 month project lifecycle, *Fighting Words* would also seek to ensure that their presence in the targeted areas and the relationships developed through the *Story Seeds* programme will be established to continue beyond the fixed time frame and focus of the project.

Story Seeds Outcomes

Fighting Words designed the *Story Seeds* programme in accordance with the SLA over July and August 2021. Workshops began in September 2021. The development and design of the *Story Seeds* programme was carried out specifically with disadvantaged and marginalised youth in mind. This

built on the initial phase of the project which was developed with the needs of local children in mind, particularly the anxiety and isolation they were experiencing as a result of high profile violent events in the North Inner City of Dublin, and the COVID-19 lockdowns. *Fighting Words* began bringing the *Story Seeds* programme to primary schools in the target areas. The programme was designed to be facilitated either in the classroom or online, ensuring flexibility in the post-COVID space. Over 120 primary schools, and in many cases multiple classes per school, participated in the *Story Seeds* programme, with over 50% of these being DEIS schools. Some schools, while not having an official DEIS designation, are located in areas that have gained notoriety for their association with anti-social behaviour and crime and the local Garda liaison units specifically requested *Fighting Words* work with these schools. A number of primary schools involved in *Story Seeds* have a high proportions of traveller children in attendance, while others have high numbers of young Ukrainian and other child refugees in their school populations.

Parallel to replicating the primary school programme of *Story Seeds* creative writing workshops, *Fighting Words* developed a series of *Story Seeds* projects and workshops aimed at older participants in secondary school groups, youth and community groups in the targeted areas. Again, the focus was on engaging with DEIS schools and groups that do not traditionally have access to cultural pursuits in line with Action 13 of the Creative Youth Plan, which commits to developing creativity programmes for young people in disadvantaged communities. The programme was designed with the *Fighting Words*' fundamental belief that anyone can be creative and everyone has a story to tell at their core. By focusing on place and community, the *Story Seeds* programme was designed not only to introduce these young people to creative writing, but also to support them as they begin to understand their own life story (their personal, circumstantial and emotional story) and their place (be it geographical, social, imaginative). This made children and young people in some of the most disadvantaged communities in Ireland strengthen a positive sense of themselves, allowing them to reimagine the negatives in their lives and transform their sense of place and possibility.

Drawing on previous *Fighting Words* research, working with teenagers on long-term creative projects was made central to this part of the programme, allowing 'adequate time and space to build trust and to allow individuals to progress at their own pace, building confidence and overcoming fears' (White, 2021: 8). Young people who have prolonged contact with *Fighting Words* through longer-term projects report an enhanced sense of wellbeing (White 2021: 18). Knowing this, ensuring that programmes for teenagers included this long-term engagement was made central to designing this element of the *Story Seeds* project. This was coupled with the contracting of professional artists to work with secondary school and youth & community groups, ensuring the experience is as enriching as possible for the young people involved. This approach made it possible to develop elaborate offerings running over a number of weeks. This built in time to understand and work with the individual needs of students while operating in a wider range of genres including poetry/spoken word, song-writing, playwriting, scriptwriting, journalism/sports-writing. The same approach was taken when working with groups of young people with "additional needs." Throughout, the emphasis was on each and every individual participant having ownership of their creative work and the space to express their own ideas, thoughts and feelings. In developing these programmes, *Fighting Words* has drawn on its relationship with a number of research centres at Dublin City University, most notably the Centre for Educational Disadvantage, the School for Inclusive and Special Education and the Anti-Bullying Centre. This further ensured the *Story Seeds* programme was designed in a manner particularly appropriate for the young people it wanted to reach.

At secondary school level, the *Story Seeds* programme worked with some of the largest DEIS schools in the country, including, for example, St Oliver's Community College in Drogheda with over 1,000 students. To ensure meaningful and enriching engagement with students in these large DEIS schools, a range of classes and years participated in *Story Seeds* projects, with each project lasting six to eight

weeks. Fifty secondary schools participated in the programme, listed in Appendix 2. In many cases the school engagements were with multiple class/year groups and ran over several weeks per project.

The project also worked with more than fifty community, youth and “additional needs” organisations, listed in Appendix 3. These groups are made up of particularly vulnerable children, teenagers and adults, often requiring substantial support to participate in or have access to cultural programmes of any sort. *Fighting Words* engaged these groups again in longer term projects where they could fully engage and participate in creative workshops tailored to individual requirements. These groups included young people with physical and intellectual disabilities, young people affected by addiction, homelessness and poverty and young refugees and asylum seekers. The groups targeted were very varied in nature, including neuro- and gender-diverse teenagers, groups that have fallen out of or are at risk of falling out of mainstream education and those involved in Garda Youth Diversion programmes. In all, the *Story Seeds* programme reached significant numbers of children and teenagers in the targeted areas. More importantly, it reached children and young people with a wide range of needs arising from economic disadvantage or marginalisation.

The flexibility of the *Story Seeds* programme has contributed greatly to its expansion and inclusivity. Teachers cite the benefits of having *Fighting Words* artists, volunteers, illustrators and staff come and work with students in their classrooms and school libraries. This has made it much easier to ensure that larger numbers of their students can engage in the *Story Seeds* project. Some of the largest DEIS schools in the country have participated in *Story Seeds*, and by having the project teams come to them rather than choosing only one or two groups to bring to another location, it is possible to include a wide range of classes. In the case of *Story Seeds*, creating stories about place and community has been supported by holding them in a location that is a significant part of a young person’s life. The school, for example, is often the place where friendships are forged and where young people spend a large amount of their day. 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.’ It added to the sense of respect and value the artists and facilitators place on the students and their voices. By facilitating projects within schools, teachers were supported from a logistical perspective, with less need to organise cover for other classes and supervisions while they were off the premises. It also provided an opportunity to make the project and its outputs more visible to the wider school community. For example, in many cases teachers were able to organise celebratory events, performances and readings in the school, ensuring that more people were aware of the *Story Seeds* programme and enjoyed the stories and creative outputs of the workshops.

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. Hence the partnerships around the country with libraries and arts centres. However, with *Story Seeds*, and the restrictions of Covid-19, the model had to be adapted so that *Fighting Words* would be equipped to deliver programmes directly to the schools via either live or online workshops, or a combination of both, and this capacity has further contributed to the inclusive nature of the *Story Seeds* programme. As the programme was starting, COVID-19 lockdowns remained a feature of life. Even as schools returned to in-person classes, arranging trips away or having visitors to the school remained impossible. Most workshops for the *Story Seeds* programme in 2021 took place online because of these restrictions. Being able to engage young people through online workshops was important, particularly due to the adverse effects of the lockdowns on children and young people. Research by the ESRI (Dermody et. al, 2020) has demonstrated that the lack of face-to-face interaction has had a direct effect on children’s lives, with those from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with additional needs impacted the most. Inequalities have grown as a result of the pandemic, and child wellbeing has been adversely affected. By offering online and in-person workshops through the *Story Seeds* programme, *Fighting Words* could mitigate some of the isolation experienced by young people living in difficult situations. The

workshops were successful and timely. The accessibility of online workshops were also important for young people with “additional needs.” Young people with mental health concerns, for example, often prefer to engage in a workshop from a familiar place rather than deal with the potential struggles that going somewhere new could entail.

Through *Story Seeds*, *Fighting Words* has created a programme of creative writing and storytelling for children and teenagers around the country who are experiencing significant levels of disadvantage. By taking a flexible approach and running programmes in the classroom and/or online, *Fighting Words* ensured the *Story Seeds* programme is as inclusive as possible and recognises the various ways that different young people like to participate. They have also demonstrated that creativity is not limited to a certain type of person or place, it is accessible and possible for everyone. Beyond this, the organisation has built up and forged important connections and partnerships that will allow for further collaboration to take place in the areas targeted as part of the *Story Seeds* programme. This ensures a continued *Fighting Words* presence in these locations and the expansion of programmes offered.

Key Participants

Children and young people in the seven targeted regions around the country, especially children experiencing disadvantage and marginalisation, have been the key participants of the *Story Seeds* programme. By building on existing partnerships and creating new ones, *Fighting Words* has developed the original *Story Seeds* programme into 10,000 engagements with primary school children, predominantly in DEIS schools. This included piloting the project with ten primary schools in Gaeltacht areas, at the request of teachers and schools themselves. The Gaeltacht project is known as *Scaip na Scéal*, and two booklets of stories were published. In addition to children in primary schools, *Story Seeds* also engaged children from special needs schools, including working with Child Vision, the Dyslexia Association of Ireland, young refugees and asylum seekers, young travellers and neurodiverse children. A full list of engagements at primary level is available in Appendix 1. A new programme of *Story Seeds* workshops has been designed for secondary level. Again, the target has been predominantly DEIS schools across the identified regions. These projects have been deliberately designed as longer engagements, working with each group over a number of weeks. These repeat engagements, according to teachers and workshops facilitators, have been important in giving young people the time and space to build their confidence and develop more substantial pieces of work that were celebrated and shared. In total, over 5,000 engagements with secondary school students have taken place, working with fifty secondary schools. The *Story Seeds* programme has also worked with fifty community, youth and additional needs groups, totalling over 4,000 engagements. This includes with, among many others, the Central Remedial Clinic, ChildVision, the Irish Deaf Society, the Peter McVerry Learning Centres and the Crann Centre in Cork for people with neuro-physical disabilities. It also includes many newly arrived Ukrainian refugees during 2022. In total, the *Story Seeds* programme had over 19,000 engagements with participants around the country.

The Ukraine Programme

The timing of the *Story Seeds* programme coincided with the arrival of unprecedented numbers of refugees from Ukraine, including large numbers of children. They became a pressing focus for the *Story Seeds* programme. In addition to working with schools with large numbers of Ukrainian children, a special programme of workshops was set up at the Irish Red Cross Ukraine Hub. This ensured Ukrainian children and families could participate in a space already familiar to them. This removed the necessity to negotiate travelling to a new location. Ukrainian children attended these workshops alongside local children, providing a space for integration through creative participation. A staff member at the Irish Red Cross describes the project as working ‘just beautifully.’ The children started interacting quickly by looking at one another’s stories and illustrations. These works marked a starting point for further interactions, quickly making the *Story Seeds* programme ‘the heart of the centre itself.’ An event at Vicar Street to share and celebrate the work included teenagers singing songs, performing short plays and reading poetry and prose, all of which they had written themselves.

The cross cultural element of this programme was, according to staff working with Ukrainian refugees, ‘invaluable.’ It provided the space to share and, on some level, start ‘processing what is going on in your life.’ Many Ukrainian women also participated at the workshops as volunteer mentors, helping with language. This engagement with Ukrainian children and adults continues across the country. Ongoing projects have been established in Rathmines, Howth and Wicklow. These continue to expand, and further projects are in the process of being set up in other regions. These include a range of workshops for children and teenagers, and a memoir writing project for adult women. Over 1,000 engagements, have taken place with Ukrainian refugees (children, teenagers and adults) thus far.

Story Seeds Team

Through the project funding, *Fighting Words* engaged two dedicated project coordinators to manage it across the different regions. The coordinators, engaged in a fulltime capacity over eighteen months, liaised with teachers and group coordinators, artists and facilitators, managing the full schedule of *Story Seeds* workshops. The funding also provided *Fighting Words* with the resources to contract a range of professional artists. This included writers, visual artists, musicians, playwrights, comic book artists and poets. These twenty artists designed and facilitated specialist programmes aimed at teenagers and groups with special needs, including adults with special needs. They each provided over one hundred hours of support to the *Story Seeds* programme and played a significant role in engaging marginalised groups. The primary school programme was facilitated by trained and vetted *Fighting Words* volunteers and a team of volunteer story illustrators. The *Story Seeds* funding also provided for more behind the scenes support from a range of professionals who supported the compilation of the programme outputs. This included graphic designers and printers for book publication, filmmakers and podcast editors. Throughout the *Story Seeds* programme, project coordinators, artists, facilitators, illustrators and volunteers were supported by the wider *Fighting Words* staff and staff from a range of partner and stakeholder organisations. Some of these include Dublin City University, the Irish Red Cross and An Garda Síochána. Teachers and other group coordinators are key partners, particularly when it comes to understanding the specific contexts and needs of their groups. Ongoing partnerships with local libraries and arts organisations in all of the target area are an important element of ensuring that the *Fighting Words* presence will continue and the *Story Seeds* programme has not been a one off experience for the groups that have participated.

Story Seeds Outputs

Contributing to the numerous and varied *Story Seeds* engagements is the acknowledgement and value placed on the stories created by project participants. Sharing and honouring the work created throughout the *Story Seeds* process has been a key element of the programme. This validation of all participants, their voice, their ideas, their thoughts and their place, has far reaching effects. This has taken place through the publication of 13 anthologies of stories, a comic book, a podcast series and film recordings that include young people talking about their experiences of the *Story Seeds* project and readings of their work. Further celebratory readings and performances have taken place for each completed project, in the participating schools. Generally, as well, having the local Garda Community teams delivering the books to the primary school children in their schools brought the house down - especially when they ordered the teacher to cancel homework that night! An end of programme event was held at Vicar Street in conjunction with the Irish Red Cross for those projects for young Ukrainian refugees. These events have seen singing, dancing, dramatic performances of plays and musicals, stories read and poems shared to local audiences. A number of *Story Seeds* pieces were included in the 2022 edition of *The Irish Times/Fighting Words* magazine of new young writing, published on 17th May. 80,000 copies of this annual supplement, featuring work created by children and teenagers, is distributed free to 3,200 primary schools and 700 secondary schools countrywide,

with each school receiving 15-20 copies. The supplement is also distributed in every copy of *The Irish Times* newspaper and available online:

<https://www.fightingwords.ie/publications/irish-times-supplement-2022>

Valuing the work created throughout the *Story Seeds* project has contributed significantly to the wellbeing and programme participants' sense of self. They are being taken seriously and treated as authors with something important to say. The effects of this are clear watching the film footage of children receiving copies of their books and celebrating their status as published authors. In addition to being a moment of joy and excitement, this contributes to the sense of pride they have in their achievements, and, in the case of *Story Seeds*, in their town or community. Local Community Gardaí have accompanied the *Fighting Words* volunteers delivering books to the children, further highlighting the community element of the *Story Seeds* project and the range of partners, and also adding to the excitement for the children. The Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth presenting their published books to the children in one Dublin west primary school further underlined the value and importance of their work and ensuring their ideas are recognised.

Along with being affirming, this element of the *Story Seeds* programme represents seeing something through to completion, noted by teachers as supporting confidence building and resilience. Teachers have also spoken about the value of preparing work for sharing and publishing, with students learning about the editing process and understanding that it includes adding and taking away from what is already on the page. For students, it is a strong reminder that they can simply go ahead and write whatever they want, they can change the details later. Most importantly, particularly for young people from the targeted groups, they feel heard and have an 'increased sense of their own agency' (DEIS Secondary School Teacher). An editor at *The Irish Times* emphasises the value of publishing the work of the *Story Seeds* participants, noting that it acts as an 'endorsement' of the work, or showing the 'value of the work.' Research also suggests that this is important 'particularly those from lower socio-economic backgrounds who tend to be voiceless in society, the opportunity to discover and realise their own creative power, to think critically, and to express themselves in their own voice' (White, Lorenzi & O'Higgins Norman, 2018). The *Story Seeds* programme has certainly achieved this through the numbers of marginalised and disadvantaged groups of young people it has worked with and through sharing and celebrating their work, ensuring they feel valued. The following section of the report highlights some further key findings, demonstrating how the *Story Seeds* and wider *Fighting Words* models ensure these positive outcomes, contributing in particular to inclusion and wellbeing for their young authors.

Findings: The Creative Joy of *Story Seeds*

'It changed the conversation and that was really important' (DEIS Secondary School Teacher, Drogheda).

'Story Seeds encouraged participants to consider alternative perspectives on places that they might take for granted or know really well' (*Story Seeds* Facilitator, Cork).

The *Story Seeds* programme is focused on place and community, with participants invited within workshops to engage with the theme in a variety of ways and through a variety of creative genres. The project has uncovered information about an infamous seagull residing in Cork, known to workshop participants, teachers and *Fighting Words* staff alike, the seagull being something that groups across the city discovered they have in common. In some cases, finding what is common has involved going first 'on a global adventure,' explains one staff member in Cork. One class travelled in story through Poland, Afghanistan and Ukraine, learning more about where their classmates come from, then setting their story in their school, a familiar place for all of them. Local places that are important to *Story*

Seeds participants are represented throughout the stories, and often highlight important community links. ‘Big Granny’ making a *TikTok* in Moyross Library is one such example, with the children bringing their local library into the story they created.⁶ Through story and place, connections were forged across cities and schools. Young people were particularly excited to be invited to talk about their lives and engage with and continue stories that originated in another local school. For one secondary school student from Blakestown Community College, the experience of *Story Seeds* was an interesting and enjoyable way to learn more about a neighbourhood and school she was new to. She describes enjoying hearing about the area from her classmates and learning more about her new friends.

Through *Story Seeds*, young people who don’t often see themselves represented in children’s books and literature, have had the opportunity to feature characters who look like and talk like them in their stories. One teacher in the North Dublin Muslim School describes how much it meant to everyone in her class, indeed in the school, to see a girl in their story cycling her bicycle wearing a tracksuit and a hijab. That this is happening against a backdrop of locations that are familiar and visited frequently by the children makes it all the more powerful for them:

‘It was really lovely for them to be able to see illustrations of themselves in the finished books...it meant so much to the girls in the class because they don’t see illustrations of hijabs with a school uniform...to see someone in a school tracksuit with their hijab on made their day. It was amazing.’

Across the regions included in the *Story Seeds* programme, teachers have observed positive changes in their students that they attribute to participation in the creative workshops. One teacher, working in a DEIS school, gives an example of a first year student who, having struggled considerably with literacy and writing till then, ‘threw himself into the podcast recordings,’ which *Story Seeds* offered as one among a variety of ways for young people to engage with story and creativity. Returning to school after the summer holidays, the same student approached the teacher to let her know he had been working on a story himself, an extended piece in two parts, and asked if he could share it with her. This is one example the teacher offered to support her opinion that being involved in this project has opened young people up to new possibilities and to their own abilities.

Project coordinators report that the ‘celebratory nature’ of the *Story Seeds* theme was evident throughout the project, and the positive effects have been noted by stakeholders nationwide. A teacher who works in the largest DEIS school in the country says the *Story Seeds* concept ‘couldn’t have come at a better time for a town like Drogheda’. She was referring to the suffering experienced among local communities through gang activities in the area. The teacher also reports getting positive feedback about the project from parents.

Fun and Positive Atmosphere

‘The girls absolutely loved it. They were falling around the place laughing... Myself, the facilitators, we were all skitting laughing and the teacher was skitting laughing. It’s just that sense of fun and freedom that keeps you coming back’ (Story Seeds Workshop Facilitator, Cork).

Central to the success of the *Story Seeds* programme is how much fun it was for all involved. Teachers, participants, facilitators and volunteers all refer to the positive atmosphere and fun that has marked their *Story Seeds* experiences. Secondary school students from CBS Westland Row, discussing the *Story Seeds* workshops in edition two of the *Fighting Words* podcast, highlight the

⁶ The stories by children in Limerick feature in *Story Seeds: Adventures Across Limerick and Beyond*.

significance of having fun and its role in building confidence: ‘I was nervous at the start but the more we did I got less nervous and excited to do more...because you’re having fun.’

<https://www.fightingwords.ie/publications/fighting-words-podcast-story-seeds-edition>

Their enjoyment of the *Story Seeds* project also contributed to a change in their perception of creative writing and its role in self-expression:

‘Normally people think writing’s boring but doing this you realise that it’s fun and you can enjoy doing it... It’s like when anything pops into your head and you say it, you can’t really do anything wrong because it’s what you’re thinking and what you have to express [yourself]...’

Having overcome any initial reservations, these teenagers now confidently offer advice for others who might be nervous about embarking on a creative project. ‘Try and enjoy it,’ they suggest, ‘it doesn’t have to be perfect at the start. You can work on it more, it can get better the more you write...Don’t be scared to express your own ideas.’ These teenagers’ experiences of the *Story Seeds* project demonstrate the importance of the fun that underpins the workshop model. There by design, it contributes to, and is an enabler for, many positive outcomes for project participants. Dr Irene White (2021: 7-8), writing about the *Fighting Words* model emphasises the importance that fun plays in the creation of a psychosocial space that marks a welcome break from the top-down formal school environment. This fun aspect, White notes, contributes to the creation of a climate that encourages thinking and exploring processes. Ensuring that the workshops are designed for children and young people to enjoy builds their confidence and self-belief, allowing them to explore new ideas and engage in a different way than they might do otherwise. One teacher, who saw students in a different light while participating in *Story Seeds*, speaks of how one child they had ‘never seen...engage so enthusiastically in any lesson,’ offered ‘an amazing plot twist to the story.’ By the end of the workshop the ‘child was beaming and the teacher was so happy as well.’ This importance of fun is echoed and recognised by stakeholders across the *Story Seeds* programme; as one workshop facilitator and long term *Fighting Words* volunteer puts it: ‘fun is absolutely essential.’

Freedom and Creative Autonomy

‘Having that space that was theirs ... that they could do whatever they wanted. Every idea was going to be considered, I think that was just hugely valuable’ (Story Seeds Artist, Drogheda).

*‘You get there and write whatever you want on the page, just have fun with it’
(Secondary School Student)*

Story Seeds, as with the wider *Fighting Words* model, is designed to be non-prescriptive and offers participants freedom in their approach to creativity and creative writing. A volunteer in Limerick emphasises that ‘the children’s ideas are the most important thing within the workshops.’ It is workshop participants who decide the direction of the story. Speaking on the *Fighting Words* podcast, one secondary student talks about the value of their *Story Seeds* work not being graded: ‘your ideas, what you’re saying, you can’t be marked wrong.’ This was freeing for the students and allowed them to develop their confidence and voice. Discussing this element of the *Story Seeds* project, one DEIS secondary school teacher describes how this approach and the freedom that comes with it ‘removes some of the day-to-day rigidity’ for the students. Research into the *Fighting Words* model highlights the importance of this freedom of expression to both workshop participants and to the teachers that accompany them. In their 2016 evaluation of the *Fighting Words* model, (White & Lorenzi, 2013:34) find that ‘freedom of creativity – being able to write what I wanted’, ‘being allowed to do our own thing’ and ‘nobody judges you’ were cited by the young people interviewed as the most valuable

aspects of the programme. Similarly, teachers state that one of the benefits of *Fighting Words* for students is the ‘sense of freedom generated by being allowed to write their own stories’ (White & Lorenzi, 2013: 39).

For one artist in Cork, this freedom in particular was a key positive of being involved in the *Story Seeds* project; while there was a theme, it was broad enough and inclusive enough for all stories to fit and to apply to anyone within the groups they worked with. This marked *Story Seeds* as different from projects where a theme might be decided by a body disconnected from the work happening on the ground. This can result in young people having to work on something very specific and often results in workshop participants being detached from the theme. 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. In the story, anxiety comes across a haunted house and writes a poem to connect with joy. One of the functions of this group’s regular meetings is to discuss their personal experiences and offer one another support. For them, ‘where I live’ is as much an emotional experience as a physical one, something which they were able to capture within the *Story Seeds* programme of workshops.

Story Seeds Artists and Facilitators

‘They [Fighting Words artists and facilitators] are just so open and enthusiastic... They show the breadth of the arts, that the arts are living and breathing outside 9.00-3.00 in the classroom’ (DEIS Secondary School Teacher, Drogheda).

Central to being able to support the fun and freedom that marks the *Story Seeds* programme are the skills and experience of the artists, facilitators and volunteers involved in the programme. Teachers and facilitators alike note the significance and the value of having someone other than the teacher come and work with the children and young people. ‘We aren’t their teachers,’ explains one facilitator and volunteer, ‘we’re here to bring everybody’s creative experience to the forefront, not to teach and to lecture... We are asking them [workshop participants] to give us their ideas and their ideas are driving the workshop.’ The value of this approach as an entry to creative writing and in allowing young people to find their voice comes through in a 2022 research report, ‘Let the kids express themselves’ (Saloão Filho and Ó Cuanacháin, 2021: 4-15). One teacher elaborated on the influence this approach has on both their teaching and the students’ work:

‘I feel much more liberated in my teaching of literacy and creative writing. I can understand the importance of voice and flow, and ideas, and not forcing children to be bogged down by following the rules/ grammar/the mechanical side of writing. Once the ideas flow, the rest will follow. What is most important is that children feel confident in their voice.’

The *Story Seeds* project has allowed more students across the country the opportunity to work with *Fighting Words* facilitators and established writers and artists. Teachers suggest this plays an important role in opening the eyes of students and broadening their horizons. Most importantly these wide-ranging engagements open up an array of opportunities for diverse students with a variety of interests. Working with a sports journalist and local football club, for example, opened up a new angle for students in one school, showing them a ‘real life’ application of creative writing they had not expected, allowing them to see that 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.’

Story Seeds funding not only allowed the project to expand across the country, it also provided resources for artists to work with groups of students on longer term engagements. Many projects were developed over a number of weeks, which was particularly important for artists and facilitators as it enabled the building of trust and relationships. This was particularly true for teenagers who benefited significantly from having the time and space to engage with the creative process and develop more substantial pieces of work. It also further contributed to the building of confidence among project participants. A *Fighting Words* staff member and graduate speaks of its importance:

'you could tell they [the students] had really built up a relationship with the artists, which was really nice. They were just so comfortable talking to them on the podcasts about the experience and how much being given that creative space had meant to them...with the continued engagements they've really been able to develop work and also develop their confidence.'

Referring to the facilitators on the *Story Seeds* programme, one teacher states that she would really like all her colleagues to experience their workshops and their approach. Realising this wish is increasingly possible as the model expands around the country with the *Story Seeds* programme. Even teachers familiar with the *Fighting Words* model and who draw on it in their own classes see the additional value in having *Story Seeds* artists visit their students. The skill and experience of the *Story Seeds* facilitators, and the support they receive from *Fighting Words* and other partners and stakeholders contribute significantly to the success of the programme. This is what ensures they can create and hold space for participants from such a variety of backgrounds, encouraging them and supporting them as they find their voices.

Inclusion

'The whole structure is very accessible' (Special Needs Teacher, Cork).

The positive and fun atmosphere within *Story Seeds* workshops and the creative freedom that participants experience contribute to the inclusive nature of the programme. The very design of the workshops, focused on being participant led, ensures that inclusion is inbuilt. One librarian in Limerick describes how, within a *Story Seeds* workshop, all participants 'get equal respect.' This is evidenced, as previously noted, through experiences across *Story Seeds* workshops. For *Story Seeds*, inclusion ensures access for individuals and groups who might otherwise be marginalised or excluded from such projects. Inclusive design is a fundamental feature of the programme itself. Through the openness of the workshop model and the acknowledgement of all ideas, the *Story Seeds* approach ensures that individual needs of different participants are met. *Fighting Words* has devoted much time and resources to ensuring that the most disadvantaged communities have access to creative writing programmes, and they are reaching some of the most marginalised communities in the country. They do so without labelling or "othering" anyone while capturing the diversity that exists in neighbourhoods across Ireland. One writer and facilitator, describing her long term relationship with *Fighting Words*, explains: 'it's just the energy in the building and everyone that you encounter...I feel like everyone is made feel like they can write; there's no exclusion or anything like that...It's just effortless, but I know a lot of work has gone into it.'

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. One musician and facilitator drew heavily on what she describes as 'the beauty of song writing for inclusion,' developing a project with a group of young people 'that gave everybody the opportunity to get involved... They [the participants] were all engaged.' The group included refugees and those experiencing homelessness, many of whom spoke little or no English. The project, running over a number of weeks, evolved to incorporate playwriting with song

writing, with the group developing a musical. This provided space for everyone to contribute in different ways, whether through music, song lyrics, dialogue or the creative direction of the piece, allowing participants to engage on their own terms in a way that suited them. The artist explains: ‘it was a nice way of including everybody in different ways.’ Throughout the project the direction was determined by the participants who had ownership of the piece. The facilitator notes that being open, valuing the participant’s voices and the direction they want to take contribute to the sense of inclusiveness, ultimately allowing all participants to engage with the project in their own way. She notes that a number of the participants were shy at first, recalling in particular one young boy who didn’t have much English and would quietly smile through the workshops. By the end of the project, he felt comfortable enough to open up and sing, and the group discovered he had a beautiful singing voice:

‘It was amazing to see the reaction of the other children when they finally realised they have this little bit of talent in their lives that they didn’t know about. So that was really nice...that’s the beauty of a slightly longer project where they actually get [the] chance to come out of their shell a little bit... That was nice to see that and to see the kind of enjoyment you know, the smile on the face.’

Contributing to the inclusive nature of the *Story Seeds* programme is the infrastructure that has been put in place to ensure that increasing numbers of children and young people around the country have access to the project. This includes all workshops being free of charge for any group involved, a key element of the wider *Fighting Words* structure. The funding for *Story Seeds* provided additional resources to expand the work and bring it to locations and groups that had not necessarily been in a position to avail of the workshops previously. As a key objective of the *Story Seeds* programme, the organisation has been successful in leveraging existing partnerships and forging new connections with organisations around the country including Dyslexia Ireland, The Irish Red Cross and CYPSC and with Garda Community officers to ensure they are reaching marginalised groups and expanding their reach in targeted areas. A teacher in Drogheda notes the value of having *Story Seeds* facilitators come to the school and engage students in projects that lasted a number of weeks, something that was not possible for the school to do previously. This has been of huge value to their students and the school community, with quieter children finding their voices and children who struggle with the school routine finding other opportunities for engagement.

The funding provided for *Story Seeds* has provided thousands of children and young people, particularly those from disadvantaged and marginalised communities, with access to the scheme. This is underscored by *Fighting Words*’ commitment to building on their work with *Story Seeds* to establish a more permanent presence in the areas the project focused on, ensuring they can continue to work with young people in these areas. One artist, who worked with students in an inner city DEIS school, remarks on the importance of this: ‘the more doors it opens up the better, it democratises it [access to creative writing] for everyone.’ The expansion possible through the *Story Seeds* programme has provided large numbers of children and young people access to a programme that is ‘informed by a democratic and inclusive ethos’ (Lorenzi & White, 2013: 94). At the core of *Fighting Words* is inclusion through the creative practice of writing and storytelling that facilitates children and teenagers from all backgrounds to become resilient and creative young people who are able to successfully shape their own lives.

Wellbeing

‘You didn’t have to worry about anything that was next, you just relax and have fun’ (Secondary School Student).

There is a significant wellbeing element to the *Story Seeds* programme, as evidenced through the words of a number of teenagers on the *Story Seeds Podcast*. They refer to enjoying the workshops, feeling relaxed and not having to worry about the rest of the school day, subjects they find challenging and classes that they might find stressful. Another secondary school student describes his experience of the *Story Seeds* workshops:

'I didn't know I could write all this off the top of my head...it really helped to think about things and slow down, and not have to worry about other things. I know I was going into class to just sit down and write and have a bit of fun.'

The link to wellbeing has been noted by post-primary school teachers who flag the potential to integrate the *Fighting Words* model into the 400 hours allocated to the NCCA's "Guidelines for Wellbeing in Junior Cycle" (Saloão Filho and Ó Cuanacháin, 2021: 34). The inclusive nature of the *Story Seeds* programme, and how the workshops break down barriers for young people who might not feel confident about their ability to write, contributes to this sense of wellbeing. A secondary school student talks about discovering he could write and tell a story: 'I never knew I could do that [write a story], I just wrote out what I did in a day with my little brother.'

The Creative Ireland Programme recognises the positive impact that participating in creative and cultural activities have on health and wellbeing. The expansion of *Story Seeds* has contributed to increasing the access that members of some of the most marginalised and disadvantaged communities have to creative writing workshops. The funding from DTCAGSM and DCEDIY also made young people feel valued, with a *Fighting Words* staff member in Cork noting that children commented on this. They were impressed by their stories being funded by what they see as important bodies and this contributed to them feeling cared about. A librarian in Limerick also noted the importance of the memories children will have from their *Story Seeds* engagements, particularly 'how it made them feel.' This is especially important in light of the *Story Seeds*' target groups. Most participants of the programme experience disadvantage of some kind, often contributing to reduced levels of wellbeing. The *Fighting Words* approach is one that favours co-operation and fosters respect for all voices. It has, in particular, 'given a voice to those students with poor language skills, students with mental behavioural issues and students at risk of dropping out of school' (Lorenzi & White, 2013: 94). This is especially true of the *Story Seeds* programme, with the theme and focus on place contributing to a sense of belonging and connection. A DEIS secondary school teacher outlines the value of this for her students:

'They cared, they were proud, they were included, they were part of something, they have possibilities... Their voice is valid, their town is valid' (DEIS Secondary School Teacher, Drogheda, referring to students' participation in *Story Seeds* and the work they created).

Conclusion

'It was kind of crazy in a way, how all this is in Dublin...because it's your own neighbourhood and you're so used to being there you wouldn't notice that there's so many buildings' (Secondary School Student).

Whether writing about six-legged dinosaurs hiding in a secret garden in Inchicore or reporting on local football matches in Drogheda, *Story Seeds* has offered children and young people around the country a creative way to engage with their own life stories and their place. They have been given the opportunity to explore and transform their sense of place. The project has successfully been shaped to cater to the needs of children at risk and living in difficult circumstances. Insights from the *Growing Up in Ireland* study (Smyth, 2016) have shown that while participation in cultural activities is increasingly recognised within policy as valuable for children and young people, participation levels

tend to be lower among migrant children, children with “special needs” and those from lower-income backgrounds. By targeting DEIS schools and young people with “additional needs” through a programme of free creative writing, *Fighting Words* has developed a model that promotes inclusive arts engagement for those who need it most. With over 19,000 engagements with children and young people taking place as part of the *Story Seeds* programme, the reach has been extensive. Significantly, *Fighting Words* has established ongoing connections in the target regions to ensure the work of *Story Seeds* can be built on and continued, something they are focused on sustaining. Partnering with schools and working with students in their schools has been a crucial avenue for ensuring inclusivity and has proven to be a successful way to roll out the *Story Seeds* programme. This is in addition to partnering with libraries and local arts organisations and making provisions outside the formal education system for youth groups and other groups of vulnerable children and adults.

The *Story Seeds* programme has afforded a voice to marginalised children and young people around the country. They have told their stories – personal, emotional and imaginative – through the spoken and written word, song, dance, playwriting, poetry and film. All of these projects have been expertly tailored to meet the needs of the young participants involved. The *Story Seeds* programme has built confidence in its young participants and contributed to their wellbeing, bringing joy and pride to communities across Ireland who need it the most. This supports the emphasis on wellbeing in school policies and within the Creative Ireland programme. *Fighting Words* has certainly, through *Story Seeds*, created the space for marginalised young people across Ireland to have their voices heard through a programme of creative writing, giving them the ‘opportunity to become creative, active citizens’ (Creative Ireland Programme).

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Appendix 1: Primary Schools Participating in *Story Seeds* Programme

All of the primary schools listed participated in the *Story Seeds* programme. The total number of primary school engagements in *Story Seeds* was over 10,000.

1. Castaheany Educate Together, Ongar Village, Dublin 15.
2. Castleknock National School, Dublin 15.
3. Ladyswell National School, Mulhuddart, Dublin 15.
4. Presentation Primary School, George's Hill, Halston Street, Dublin 7.
5. Sacred Heart of Jesus National School, Hartstown, Dublin 15.
6. Scoil Bhríde Boys National School, Blanchardstown, Dublin 15.
7. Scoil Bhríde Girls National School, Blanchardstown, Dublin 15.
8. Scoil Choilm Community National School, Porterstown, Dublin 15.
9. Scoil Mhuire Sin, Mulhuddart, Dublin 15.
10. Scoil Nais Mhuire Sois, Mulhuddart, Dublin 15.
11. Scoil Oilibher, Coolmine, Dublin 15.
12. Scoil Thomáis, Laurel Lodge, Castleknock, Dublin 15.
13. St. Ciaran's National School, Hartstown, Dublin 15.
14. St. Mary's Primary School, Dublin 7.
15. St. Patrick's Senior National School, Corduff, Dublin 15.
16. St. Paul's Primary School, Brunswick Street, Dublin 7.
17. St. Philip's National School, Clonsilla, Dublin 15.
18. Stanhope Street Primary School, Dublin 7.
19. Griffith Barracks Multi-Denominational School, South Circular Road, Dublin 8.
20. Inchicore National School, Dublin 8.
21. Loreto on the Green Junior School, St. Stephen's Green, Dublin 2.
22. Muslim National School, Dublin 14.
23. Our Lady of Lourdes National School, Inchicore, Dublin 8.
24. Our Lady of the Wayside National School, Dublin 18.
25. Scoil Chaitríona Baggot Street, Dublin 2.
26. Scoil Mhuire gan Smál, Inchicore, Dublin 8.
27. Scoil Treasa Naofa, Donore Avenue, Dublin 8.
28. St. Audeon's National School, Dublin 8.
29. St. Catherine's National School, Donore Avenue, Dublin 8.
30. St. Christopher's National School, Dublin 4.
31. St. Conleth's College Junior School, Dublin 4.
32. St. Enda's Primary School, Whitefriar Street, Dublin 8.
33. St. Kilian's German School, Clonskeagh, Dublin 14.
34. St. Patrick's Boys National School, Ringsend, Dublin 4.
35. St. Patrick's Girls National School, Ringsend, Dublin 4.
36. Star of the Sea Boys National School, Sandymount, Dublin 4.
37. Warrenmount Primary School, Blackpitts, Dublin 8.
38. Central Model Senior School, Marlborough Street, Dublin 1.
39. Christ the King Boys National School, Cabra East, Dublin 7.
40. Christ the King Girls National School, Cabra East, Dublin 7.
41. Gaelscoil Bharra, Cabra, Dublin 7.
42. Gaelscoil Choláiste Mhuire, Parnell Square, Dublin 1.
43. Gardiner Street Primary School, Dublin 1.
44. Glasnevin National School, Dublin 9.
45. North Dublin Muslim National School, Dublin 7.
46. Lindsay Road National School, Dublin 9.
47. O'Connell's Primary School, North Circular Road, Dublin 1.

48. Scoil Caoimhín, Marlborough Street, Dublin 1.
49. St. Columba's National School, Dublin 9.
50. St. Laurence O'Toole's Boys National School, Dublin 1.
51. St. Laurence O'Toole's Girls National School, Dublin 1.
52. St. Mary's Primary School, Dorset Street, Dublin 1.
53. St. Peter's National School, Phibsborough, Dublin 7.
54. St. Vincent's Girls National School, Dublin 1.
55. St. Vincent's Boys National School, Dublin 1.
56. St. Vincent's Primary School, Dublin 11.
57. St. Columba's National School, North Strand, Dublin 1.
58. St. Joseph's National School, East Wall, Dublin 3.
59. Marymount National School, Ballsgrove, Drogheda.
60. Presentation National School, Ballymakenny Road, Drogheda.
61. Scoil Aonghusa, Sunday's Gate, Drogheda.
62. Scoil Mhuire gan Smál National School, Sandpit, Drogheda.
63. Scoil Naomh Feichin National School, Termonfeckin, Drogheda.
64. St. Brigid's & St. Patrick's National School, Bóthar Brugha, Drogheda.
65. St. Ita's Special School, Crushrod Avenue, Drogheda.
66. St. Johns National School, Rathmullen, Drogheda.
67. St. Joseph's CBS National School, Sunday's Gate, Drogheda.
68. St. Mary's Parish Primary School, Bryanstown, Drogheda.
69. St. Paul's Senior National School, Rathmullen, Drogheda.
70. St. Peter's National School, Bolton Square, Drogheda.
71. Tullyallen National School, Drogheda.
72. Blessington Educate Together National School, Wicklow.
73. Blessington No. 1 School, Wicklow.
74. Bray School Project National School, Wicklow.
75. Carnew National School, Wicklow.
76. Gaelscoil Ui Cheadaigh, Bray, Wicklow.
77. Glebe National School, Wicklow
78. Jonathan Swift National School, Dunlavin, Wicklow.
79. Kilmacanogue National School, Wicklow.
80. Nun's Cross National School, Ashford, Wicklow.
81. St. Andrew's National School, Bray, Wicklow.
82. St. Fergal's National School, Bray, Wicklow.
83. St. Joseph's National School Valleymount, Wicklow.
84. St. Joseph's National School, Manor Kilbride, Blessington, Wicklow.
85. St. Kieran's National School, Bray, Wicklow.
86. St. Patrick's Loreto Primary School, Bray, Wicklow.
87. St. Patrick's National School, Glencullen, Dublin 18.
88. St. Peter's Primary School, Bray, Wicklow.
89. Wicklow Montessori School, Wicklow.
90. Scoil Íosagáin, Farranree, Cork.
91. Ballyhass National School, Cecilstown, Cork.
92. Blarney Street CBS, Blarney Street, Cork.
93. Glasheen Girls Primary School, School Avenue, Cork.
94. North Monastery Primary School, North Monastery Road, Cork.
95. Scoil Aiséirí Chríost, Knockpogue Ave, Farranree, Cork.
96. Gaelscoil Peig Sayers, Cork.
97. Scoil Bernadette, Montenotte, Cork.
98. Scoil Mhuire agus Eoin, Mayfield, Cork.

99. Scoil Padre Pio, Churchfield Terrace, Churchfield, Cork.
100. South Abbey National School, Youghal, Cork.
101. Scoil Réalt Na Mara, Cork.
102. St Anne's, Charleville, Cork.
103. Curraghagalla National School, Kilworth, Cork.
104. St. Vincent's Convent Primary School, St. Mary's Road, Cork.
105. Strawberry Hill National School, Blarney Street, Cork.
106. Corpus Christi National School, Moyross, Limerick.
107. Our Lady Queen of Peace National School, Janesboro, Limerick.
108. St. Mary's National School, Bishop Street, Limerick.
109. Thomond Primary School, Ballynanty Road, Limerick.
110. Bishop Harty National School, Ballinree, Tipperary.
111. Scoil Iosef Naomh, Corville, Tipperary.
112. St. John the Baptist Boys National School, Cashel, Tipperary.
113. St. John the Baptist Girls National School, Cashel, Tipperary.
114. Scoil Bhríde, Leitir Caladh, Co. na Gaillimhe.
115. Scoil Colmcille, Leitir Móir, Co. na Gaillimhe.
116. Scoil Náisiúnta, Thír an Fhia, Co. na Gaillimhe.
117. Scoil Rónáin, An Trá Bháin, Co. na Gaillimhe.
118. Scoil Náisiúnta Leitir Mealláin, Co. na Gaillimhe.
119. Scoil Cholmcille, Ros a'Mhíl, Co. na Gaillimhe.
120. Scoil Cholmcille, An Tulach, Co. na Gaillimhe.
121. Scoil Sailearna, Na hAille, Co. na Gaillimhe.
122. Scoil Éinne, An Spidéal, Co. na Gaillimhe.
123. Scoil Náisiúnta na bhForbacha, Co. na Gaillimhe.

Other Primary School Groups

124. Dyslexia Association of Ireland – Wicklow, various locations.
125. Dyslexia Association of Ireland – Dublin, various locations.
126. Dyslexia Association of Ireland – Cork, various locations.

Appendix 2: Secondary Schools Participating in *Story Seeds* Programme

The secondary schools projects generally ran over several weeks. Often, multiple class groups from schools participated in projects. There were over 5,000 engagements with teenagers from secondary schools as part of the *Story Seeds* programme.

1. Ard Scoil La Salle, Dublin 5.
2. Belmayne ET Secondary School, Dublin 13.
3. Coláiste Mhuire, Dublin 7.
4. Fingal Community College, Swords, Co Dublin.
5. Marino College, Dublin 3.
6. Mercy College, Dublin 5.
7. Mount Carmel Secondary School, Dublin 1.
8. O'Connell's Secondary School, Dublin 1.
9. St. Paul's CBS, Brunswick Street, Dublin 7.
10. St. Vincent's Secondary School, Dublin 11.
11. Beneavin College, Dublin 11.
12. Trinity Comprehensive School, Dublin 11.
13. CBS Westland Row, Dublin 2.
14. Clogher Road Community College, Dublin 12.
15. Presentation College, Warrenmount, Dublin 8.
16. Collinstown Park Community College, Clondalkin, Dublin 22.
17. Loreto College, Dublin 12.
18. Sandymount Park Educate Together Secondary School, Dublin 4.
19. Blakestown Community School, Dublin 15.
20. Luttrellstown Community College, Clonsilla, Dublin 15.
21. Mount Seskin Community College, Dublin 24.
22. Tallaght Community School, Dublin 24.
23. Edmund Rice College, Dublin 15.
24. PMVT (Peter McVerry Trust) Learning Centre, Lucan, Co Dublin.
25. Firhouse Community College, Dublin 24.
26. Oberstown Detention Campus, Co Dublin.
27. St. Oliver's Community College, Drogheda, Co Louth.
28. Our Lady's College, Drogheda, Co Louth.
29. Ballymakenny College, Drogheda, Co Louth.
30. Sacred Heart Secondary school, Drogheda, Co Louth.
31. St. Mary's Diocesan School, Drogheda, Co Louth.
32. Drogheda Grammar School, Drogheda, Co Louth.
33. Scoil Ui Mhuire, Dunleer, Co Louth.
34. Ardgillan Community College, Balbriggan, Co Dublin.
35. Bremore Educate Together Secondary School, Balbriggan, Co Dublin.
36. Glenart College, Arklow, Co Wicklow.
37. Loreto Secondary School, Bray, Co Wicklow.
38. Cabinteely Community College, Dublin 18.
39. Woodbrook College, Bray, Co Wicklow.
40. North Wicklow Educate Together Secondary School, Bray, Co Wicklow.
41. Presentation College, Bray, Co Wicklow.
42. Coláiste Cill Mhantáin, Co Wicklow.
43. Coláiste Bhríde, Carnew, Wicklow.
44. Avondale Community College, Wicklow.

45. Coláiste Craobh Abhann, Kilcoole, Wicklow.
46. St. Killian's Community School, Bray, Co Wicklow.
47. St. Catherine's Special School, Newcastle, Co Wicklow.
48. Scoil Bernadette, Cork.
49. St. Aidan's Community College, Cork.
50. Ballincollig Secondary School, Cork.

Other Secondary School Groups

51. Dyslexia Association, - various locations in Dublin
52. Dyslexia Association – various locations in Wicklow
53. Dyslexia Association – various locations in Cork

Appendix 3: Community, Youth, Ukrainian and “Additional Needs” Groups Participating in *Story Seeds* Programme

A focus of the *Story Seeds* project was on engaging youth and community groups, and all age groups with additional needs - those who are especially vulnerable or marginalised. All projects with these groups took place over a series of sessions, to build up trust and confidence among participants. 4,000 engagements with these groups took place during the *Story Seeds* programme.

1. Central Remedial Clinic, Clontarf, Dublin.
2. Central Remedial Clinic, Coolock, Dublin.
3. ChildVision Lifelong Learning Group, Dublin.
4. City Connects, Dublin 1.
5. Crann Centre for People with Neuro-physical Disabilities, Cork
6. Dóchas Centre, Dublin 7.
7. Early Learning Initiative, NCI, Dublin 1.
8. EPIC, Dublin 7.
9. Finglas Youth Resource Centre, Dublin.
10. First Fortnight - Mental Health Services, Dublin 8.
11. Foundations Project – CDET, Dublin 1.
12. Gheel Autism Services, Dublin 3.
13. Grow Mental Health, Ireland.
14. Henrietta Adult and Community Education Service (HACE), Dublin 1.
15. Irish Deaf Society, Ireland.
16. Kilbarrack Coast Community Project, Dublin 5.
17. Leixlip Youth Service, Co Kildare.
18. Mid-Louth Youth Service, Louth.
19. Praxis Care, Clongriffin, Dublin 13.
20. Travact, Darndale, Dublin 17.
21. Irish Wheelchair Association Lifeskills Group, Drogheda.
22. Little Duke Theatre Adult Group, Drogheda.
23. Mosney Direct Provision Centre.
24. National Learning Network, Ballymun, Dublin.
25. Prosper Fingal, Dublin.
26. Saol Anois Day Service, Bray, Co Wicklow.
27. Bray Youthreach. Co Wicklow.
28. Blessington Youthreach, Wicklow.
29. WALK, Walkinstown Association for People with Intellectual Disabilities, Dublin.
30. Ballybane Library Senior Group, Galway.
31. Daughters of Charity Community Services, Dublin.
32. Drumcondra Triangle Residents Association (DTRA), Dublin.
33. Lourdes Youth and Community Services (LYCS), Dublin.
34. Sophia Housing Association, Dublin.
35. Walkinstown Library Senior Group, Dublin.
36. PMVT Learning Centre, Dublin.
37. Streetline, Dublin.
38. Crosscare, Dublin.
39. Trinity Access Programme, Dublin.
40. Mountjoy *Pathways* Programme, Dublin.

41. Boomerang Youth Project, Drogheda.
42. Boyne Youth Project, Drogheda.
43. Cable Youth Project, Drogheda.
44. Drogheda Youth Reach.
45. Southside Youth Project, Drogheda.
46. Mallow Youthreach, Cork.
47. Macroom Youthreach, Cork.
48. Crann Centre, *Breaking Barriers*, Cork.
49. Traveller Visibility, Cork.
50. YMCA, Cork.
51. Irish Red Cross/Ukraine Action Ireland, Vicar St Community Centre.
52. Irish Red Cross/Ukraine Action Ireland, Rathmines Community Centre.
53. Irish Red Cross/Ukraine Action Ireland, Hotel, Church of Ireland Centre, Howth.
54. Irish Red Cross/Ukraine Action Ireland, Hostel, Glenree, Wicklow.