



FIGHTING WORDS, FIGHTING WORDS NI & GRAFFITI THEATRE COMPANY

Creative Connections Evaluation 2025

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Introduction

This is an evaluation report for Fighting Words (FW), Fighting Words Northern Ireland (FWNI), and Graffiti Theatre Company (GTC) on their Creative Connections 2024/2025 project. This project was led by FW and FWNI with GTC as a delivery partner and funded through the Creative Youth on a Shared Island initiative.

FW provides free tutoring, mentoring, and publishing opportunities for young people across all forms of creative writing throughout the island of Ireland. Workshops, projects, and creative activities are overseen from the FW headquarters in inner city Dublin and the FWNI headquarters in Belfast. GTC support young people from birth to 18 years old to find their voice and develop their sense of value through innovative and engaging art programmes and are based in Cork City.

FW, FWNI and GTC work in a unique cultural, geographical, political, social, and economic climate. A full examination of these factors is beyond the scope of this evaluation but their potential to influence the success of any joint project is notable. Although the organisations exist in different contextual spheres they operate from a shared artistic and behavioural value base that allows for the ambition of the work to be achieved.

A history of success in delivering projects across the organisations formed a solid foundation for the development and delivery of Creative Connections. The three organisations have collaborated and run young playwriting projects with youth groups and young people for several years prior to the development of Creative Connections.

Creative Connections was designed to engage young people aged between 15 and 24 years from communities north and south through connected, creative writing initiatives across multiple genres. The programme was designed to work at scale with 20 groups and 300 participants over 18 months. Young People's (YP) voices helped shape the project and there was a strong focus on enabling YP from marginalised communities and that are excluded, and/or with additional needs, to participate.

Youth groups¹ were paired or placed in groups of three, each group worked with a professional facilitator for a number of sessions before they were brought together for a shared session/s with the other group/groups in their pair/triangle. Some groups had the opportunity to avail of two shared sessions. At the shared sessions, the participants were asked to work closely on a shared creative writing quest through diverse genres and with outputs or performances that they decided on together. The pairings depended on demographics location and logistics.

A series of up to 10 workshops were convened with each group. The sessions were led by experienced facilitators who worked collaboratively for the shared sessions. The shared sessions happened in Dublin, Belfast, Monaghan and Armagh with a performance held in the Garage Theatre in

¹ See Appendix A for list of all youth groups

Monaghan also. A celebration event was held on October 18th in Dublin to present the work that was created as part of the process.

This evaluation looks at the learning across Creative Connections 2024/2025, how the project reached on the stated aims and objectives and seeks to support the thinking for future projects.



Publication Launch October 2025 with participating groups from Creative Connections

Methodology and methods

The Creative Ireland evaluation guidelines for Creative Youth Projects informed the evaluation approach² and was formative and summative in its approach. The development of the evaluation framework for this project occurred over three phases and was mindful of the resources available for evaluation and the scale of the project.

- Phase 1 (Qtr. 4 2024)- a pilot focus group with YP to gather their views on how they would like to give feedback
- Phase 2 (Qtr. 1 2025)- meeting/discussion with facilitators on proposed methodology and the reshaping of data gathering methods in response to their expertise
- Phase 3 (Qtr. 1 2025) - development of methods and evaluation questions in collaboration with coordinators

The focus group revealed that the YP were in favour of two methods of evaluation, they liked to complete surveys stating, *“it was good when you*

² <https://www.creativeireland.gov.ie/en/creative-youth-evaluation-guidelines/>

didn't have to write your name down". The YP also stated they didn't like long processes to gather feedback because that *"took up the workshop time."* Focus group participants said they enjoyed walking debates also but felt that sometimes it was the people who were comfortable with speaking in front of others that were heard the most.

Following the learning from this focus group, a survey was developed with the intention of that being completed by all participants. The survey was designed to gather feedback in qualitative and quantitative ways and questioning was built to gather evidence on the outputs and outcomes of the project. The Stirling Children's Wellbeing Scale informed the questions on wellbeing outcomes³.

This survey was then discussed with the facilitators at their first training day. A discussion was had as to how feedback from YP with additional needs could contribute appropriately. The survey was adapted to include this feedback, and additional methods were developed for YP that could not engage with the survey. These methods included responses through emoji placing and signalling⁴.

Alongside the data gathering from YP, feedback was gathered from the facilitators and Coordinators of the project. Two online semi-structured focus groups were conducted with the facilitators and those who could not attend had the opportunity to be interviewed. Alongside this, online interviews were conducted with the Coordinators, and one other support person of the programme. Desk-based research formed part of the process, and the evaluator observed the presentation of the work at a showcase event in Dublin on October 18th. One YP was interviewed, that data is included in the Appendix C of this report as additional evidence of impact of the work.

Interview and focus groups sessions lasted between one and two hours and were centred around these questions:

- What worked well?
- What were the greatest challenges?
- What would you change about the process?
- What did you learn?

Overall findings are listed below and categorised, followed by a discussion and observations. Appendix A includes a list of all the groups that participated; Appendix B has examples of feedback from Activate Space

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<https://www.corc.uk.net/outcome-measures-guidance/directory-of-outcome-measures/stirling-children-s-wellbeing-scale/>

⁴ See Appendix B

in Cork city, Appendix C is an account of the interview of the YP from
Youthreach in North Great Georges Street, Dublin.



Participants from Monaghan Youth Theatre and REACT Armagh

Findings

Outputs

- FW, FWNI and GTC worked with 152 participants as part of the programme
- 9 professional facilitators worked across the programme
- 16 community groups availed of the programme
- 27 collaborative sessions were held
- 121 individual group sessions were held
- The work included the making of plays, stories and this [publication](#)
- The project was led by 3 Coordinators
- FWNI resourced the programme with a coordination support alongside the Coordinator
- FW provided additional administrative and budget support for the programme from other staff members alongside the Coordinator

Outcomes

Young People

- YP's writing and storytelling skills improved
- Many YP tried new ways of writing

- Many YP social confidence improved
- Many YP's confidence in their writing improved
- Most YP were inspired throughout the programme
- Most YP were engaged throughout the project
- Many YP were happy while they engaged with the project
- The majority of YP felt safe while part of the project
- Many YP showed a deeper understanding of their peers while on the project
- Many YP people interacted with other young people as part of the project

Facilitators

- All facilitators recognised the inherent value of time as a crucial resource for supporting YP to reach their potential
- Facilitators developed a trusted and supportive peer network through collaboration
- Facilitators navigated nuanced shared sessions with YP through lenses of compassion, humour, expertise, and creativity
- Facilitators displayed high levels of self-awareness evidenced by asking for help in situations where they felt vulnerable
- Facilitators inspired and fostered open mindedness as tools for new perspectives and confidence in YP to emerge
- Facilitators utilised diverse practices to stimulate debate, comfort and engagement for the YP

Organisational

- The project was completed on time but worked with less YP and groups than originally hoped for
- Coordinators valued the support from the CEOs of the lead organisations
- The project allowed for an enhanced collaborative organisational culture that can inform future projects
- The project allowed for the building of experience and knowledge on working with youth groups across the jurisdictions
- The project allowed for greater public engagement as most participants had not engaged with FW before
- Measuring outcomes through a long-term evaluation approach has provided evidence to support and inform future strategy and programming decisions

Unexpected Outcomes

- Some YP identified as writers while part of the project
- The role of the YP's advocate ⁵was crucial to the success of the programme

⁵ An Advocate being a person of trust to the young people that supports them in their weekly youth setting

- Facilitators greatly valued the organisational support provided by the Coordinators and support personnel at FW/FWNI
- Some Coordinators and facilitators expressed feelings of nervousness when workshops diversified to more play-based approaches rather than tried and tested approaches
- The project was flexible to respond to unexpected changes and participation challenges
- The logistical and administrative load of the programme was greater than expected

Discussion

The discussion section is divided in three, the first section discusses the data and insights gathered from the YP⁶. The second section discusses the feedback from facilitators with the third being a discussion off the learning from the Coordinators/ organisational perspective.

Young People

Gathering baseline data from all YP that participated was beyond the scope of the project. In an effort to understand change for YP, questions were designed in a way to gather data that allowed for change to be described. The survey was designed in 5 sections, the first focused on skill development, the second on wellbeing (confidence and resilience) , the third on wellbeing (mood and motivation) the fourth on wellbeing (connection and understanding) and the fifth on additional feedback. The questions were designed to gather quantitative and qualitative responses.

The chance to complete the survey was given to 141 participants, with feedback from Activate Space⁷ in Cork gathered in a different way, the feedback from Activate Space is discussed later in this section. 94 YP completed the survey resulting in an overall response rate of 66.6%. Participants had the option to opt out of the survey at any stage. What follows is the results of the survey and a discussion of the insight gathered from those results.

⁶ All quotes provide are anonymous

⁷ The participant of Activate Space have intellectual and physical disabilities; feedback was gathered through conversation and emoji placing

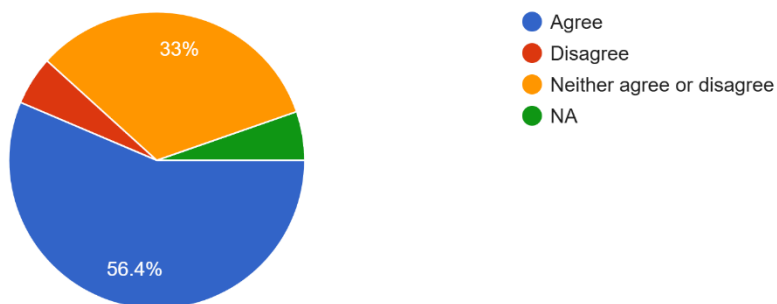


Participants Drogheda Youthreach

Survey Part 1- Skills Development

Part 1- in this first section we'd like you to think about whether you've noticed a change in your writing skills and/or knowledge as a result of being... the end of the project I was a more capable writer

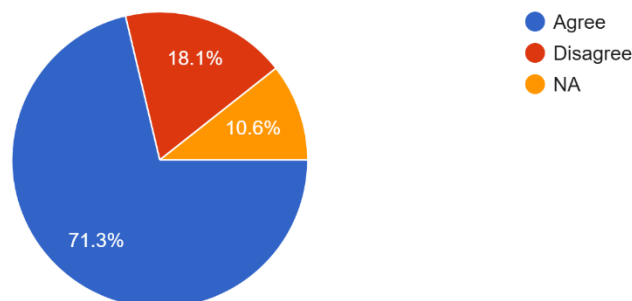
94 responses



In this first section the YP were asked if, by the end of the project, they had become a more capable writer, if they had tried new ways of writing, and if they had gained or developed new skills as a writer.

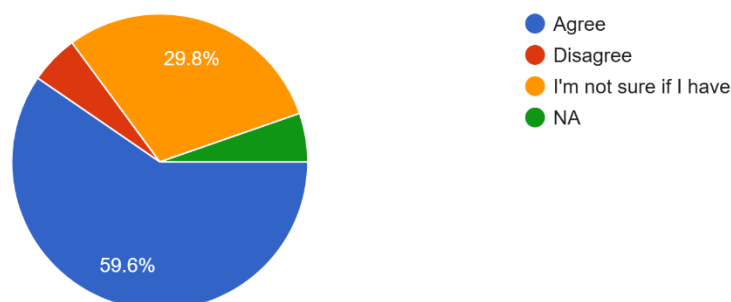
(b) By the end of the project I had tried some new ways of writing

94 responses



(c) I have gained or developed my skills as a writer by being part of this project

94 responses



We can see from the results that the highest level of agreement (71.3%) occurred on the statement **“by the end of the project I had tried some new ways of writing”**, with 18.1% disagreeing with that statement.

This may be a direct reflection of the experience of the cohort of YP involved. Some YP had no/limited writing experience before this project, and therefore any writing would be new, others had a large amount of experience and may not have encountered new experiences.

It may be that a greater level of differentiation is needed for groups of varying writing/arts backgrounds if they are being brought together so everyone is feeling suitably challenged, or, groups of similar experience are brought together, and programming can be devised from a similar start point.

56.4% stated they were more capable as a writer with 33% neither agreeing nor disagreeing with the statement. 59.6% agreed that they had gained new skills.

The second part of the first section of the survey allowed for the YP to give us additional feedback on their skill development. The YP were asked; **Is there anything else you would like to say about your skill development as part of the project?** A number of themes emerged that are evidenced through the quotes below.

New skills, clear evidence of the YP gaining and/or experiencing new skills is evidenced in the quotes below.

“Before I came in, I wasn’t really interested in stories and writing. But when I came out, I was immediately hooked by the idea”

“I developed ways to build characters and be more observant”

“I learned to write in different mediums and through different genres and perspectives”

“As an individual, I don’t think my skills improved exponentially. However, my skills with writing with a group went up exponentially.”

“Better grammar”

We can see that the term “skills” is being understood in a number of different ways. Some YP focused on building traditional writing skills such as grammar and character development and others focused on the experience of being with others or story making through different genres.

No skill development, some YP felt their skills did not improve.

“no skills were developed it was basically just a drama group”

“No I’m good x”

“I don’t think my skills improved”

We can see from this feedback that some YP felt their skills were sufficient before they started and that new skills were not developed. This maybe down to some YP having more experience than others before the project started.

Wanting to work on their own/self-reflection, some YP had a desire to be by themselves and work on their own writing interests.

“I want there to be unsanctioned creative writing”

"It was good, but I would enjoy to write more about things I would know of"

"I feel that writing should be narrowed down to certain styles or stories so that they align with the writers interests or what they want to write about rather than have a random prompt be rushed or poorly prepared for."

"It was grand to be honest, but I could use more emotive language"

We can see from this feedback there is a nuance to balancing group work and the desire from some to work on their own.

New genres, there was an openness and interest in differentiated genres to explore storytelling and writing.

"I loved when we acted on the last week"

"It was cool to focus more on dialogue and stage writing rather than songs or raps"

"getting to listen to people's amazing writing in unfamiliar forms inspired me to try and familiarise myself with them."

"My group realised they didn't just have to write and that stories could be created through music, dance, movement and through live story telling."

It is clear that many YP enjoyed exploring different ways of being with storytelling and writing and that differentiated methods can increase engagement and experience of some.



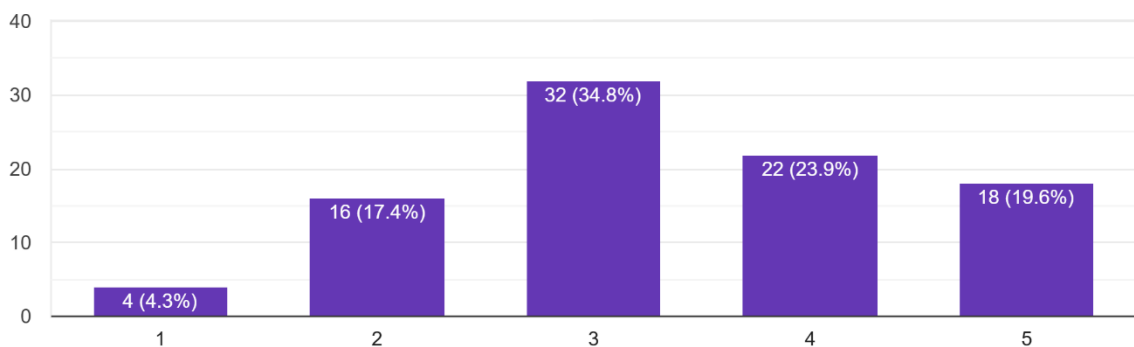
Participants from Monaghan and Armagh 2025

Part 2- Confidence and Resilience

In the second section, questions were devised to understand more about the YP's developing (or not) levels of confidence and resilience.

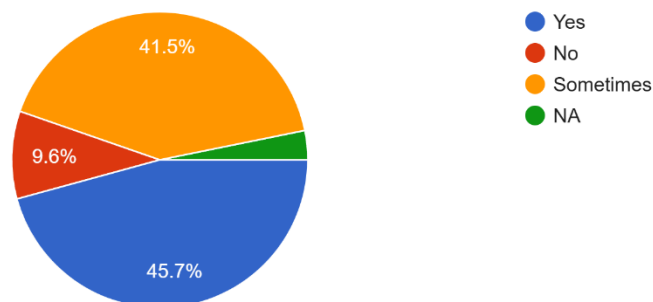
The chart below illustrates where the YP placed themselves on a scale of 0-5 in terms of their confidence in their writing before the project started.

Part 2- In this section we are going to focus on anything you may notice about your confidence and resilience both with your writing and socially by bei...(0= very little confidence, 5= extremely confident)
92 responses



(2/b) Did your confidence in your writing improve by being part of the project?

94 responses



We can see from the pie chart above that 45.7% of YP stated confidence in their writing improved with further 41.5% stating confidence improved some of the time. 9.6% stated it did not improve which may relate to the strong number (19.6%) of YP that placed their confidence number at 5 (extremely confident) in the bar chart above.

We then asked for some more information; **Can you tell us what helped your confidence improve, even if it was only sometimes, or why you think it didn't improve during the project?** A number of themes emerged.

The environment created by the facilitators, the non-judgemental, open, inclusive environment was cited as being key for confidence building.

“everybody had that 'no stupid questions' attitude which helped with writing regardless of if I thought it was good or not”

“feeling included in the group”

“Friendly people to work with”

“The option to (or to not) read aloud and the padlet and the option to have no feedback or opinions therefore being able to choose and select which pieces are shared and which remain private”

“Knowing that everyone else was improving and the non-judgemental environment”

We can see the skill of the facilitator in creating a safe space for the YP is paramount for success.

Group work and group impact, many YP noted that being around new people impacted their confidence.

“Reading in front of all other members”

“Communicating with people I don’t know”

“Seeing the different ways of being able to tell a story and it’s not always about the writing”

“Being surrounded by other writers”

“Being around other writers”

“My confidence improved because I felt I could work off of almost any prompt”

Being around YP and young writers impacted the participants confidence and allowed them to see themselves as a writer and learn from one another.

Praise/feedback, receiving praise and feedback was an important factor in building confidence for YP.

“Reading out my story helped, hearing positive feedback and reactions from audience”

“People complimenting my work”

“Everyone was really nice, and they all really liked what I would write”

“I got some very nice compliments on things I hadn't recognised myself as being good!”

“Sharing it with other people and getting feedback to learn from”

“I think my confidence improves slightly when people feedback on it, but that confidence only lasts for that while”

We can see that YP are seeking external validation from peers and facilitators for their work and that is particularly important to their levels of confidence.

Methodology/pedagogy, YP noted that trying new things and new ways of experiencing writing with other YP helped their confidence,

“Trying new ways of writing helped me improve”

“Being exposed to different ideas”

“Because of the increase in sharing my work it helped me want to share more often and improve my confidence slightly”

“Repetition of writing the same story”

“Reading aloud in front of new people to step out of my comfort zone”

“Trying new styles of writing”

Many YP embraced the newness of the experience and their confidence improved as a result of that experience.

No impact, some YP stated the project had no impact on their confidence.

“it didn’t improve my confidence writing”

“nothing already confident”

“I already had good confidence”

“I may have not improved in areas because some things I already knew about certain techniques in writing so overall there wasn’t much to improve on”

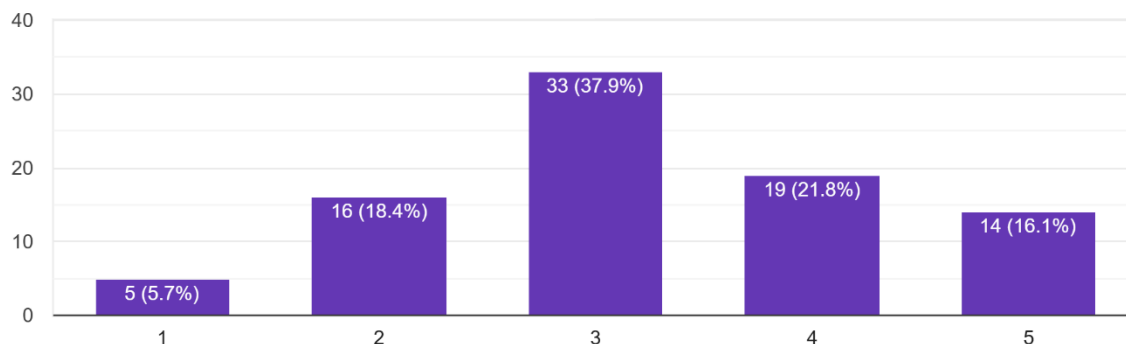
Again, this may be linked to the experience and confidence of the YP at the beginning of the project as being high to start with.

We then asked the YP if participation in the project had impacted their confidence to join new groups. The bar chart below illustrates where they placed themselves on a scale in terms of confidence to join new creative groups before the project commenced.

Creative Connections- Youth on a Shared Island Evaluation 2025

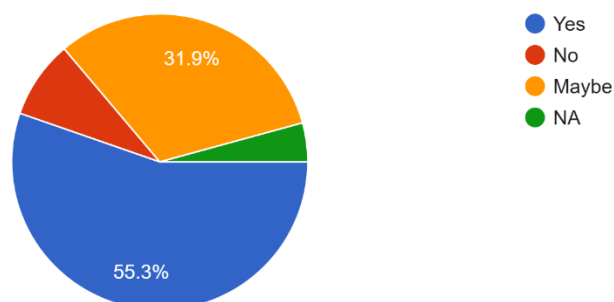
(2/d) Before you began this project where would you place yourself on the scale below in terms of your confidence to join new creative groups/opportu...0= very little confidence, 5= extremely confident)

87 responses



(2/e) would you be more confident to join new creative groups/opportunities now?

94 responses



55.3% said their confidence to join new creative groups improved with a further 31.9% saying that they might be more confident to join new creative groups. A low number said their confidence did not improve. It may be that more time was needed for some of the groups to be together, some groups had more sessions than others which may have supported greater growth in social confidence.

To gain insight into the impact of the project on their resilience, we asked them to think back over the project, **were there any aspects that were hard? If so, how did they deal with that?** Themes that emerged are outlined below.

Social, some YP stated that the newness of people and situations needed a resilient approach.

“yes, I didn’t want to talk to new people, and I had to get over myself and just talk to new people”

“Meeting knew people was difficult, but it was nice”

“First introductions were hard, but I had to get on with it”

“I didn't like reading out my work but everyone sharing their ideas and works made me feel more confident”

“Meeting new people can be hard at times but in the end, they were cool”

Understandably, meeting new people can be a vulnerable situation for YP but the quotes above demonstrate how the YP dealt with that through resilient means such as perseverance and grit.

Writing, the act of writing proved challenging for some YP.

“Starting the writing”

“I felt trying to write it all down in a small-time frame was difficult and stressful, but I tried my hardest to get as much as possible”

“trying to get the ideas flowing while on a time limit, but I got on with it”

A small number of YP found the writing challenging but seemed to overcome that difficulty to engage in the process showing evidence of confidence and determination.

Nothing, some YP experienced no challenges.

“Nothing was hard”

“Only when there wasn't a prompt”

“I didn't really find anything too hard”

“Not at all I enjoy writing, so I do like a challenge I guess working with other people was challenging”

“Nothing was really that hard, so there wasn't anything to stress over about”

It may be that some YP that are experienced writers needed a more challenging programme to stimulate new learning.

Resilience in action, YP asked for help.

“Sometimes I did not understand everything we had to do but I asked my advocate, and she explained discreetly”

“it was hard at first for group projects but got easier over time

“Being persistent”

“I found the first introductions a bit hard, but once I got to know everyone better it became easier for me to talk to everyone and share my ideas!”

“by listening and getting to know everyone, by the end I enjoyed it”

“The group we got paired with were very standoffish and uninvolved, but it was ok”

“Maintaining motivation to write was slightly challenging, but the overall vibe of the project helped with that.”

“Trying to write stuff- I made a plan before writing to help me plan my story”

“When two parties had opposing ideas for how an element of a story should be handled. Whether it’s a character or something to do with world building. In those situations, we found a happy medium”

We can see from this feedback that YP displayed persistence, planned in advance, collaboration, respect, compassion and listening to others as ways of overcoming challenges.



Participants from The Kabin Studio, Cork, New Lodge Arts, Belfast and Youthreach NGGS, Dublin

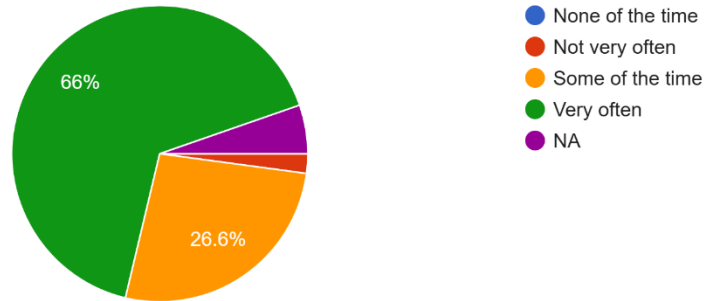
Part 3- Mood and Motivation

This section focused on wellbeing, we described wellbeing as meaning how the YP felt, their mood and motivation. The questions focused on happiness, engagement, connection to others, inspiration, and interest in the work. The results are listed below.

Creative Connections- Youth on a Shared Island Evaluation 2025

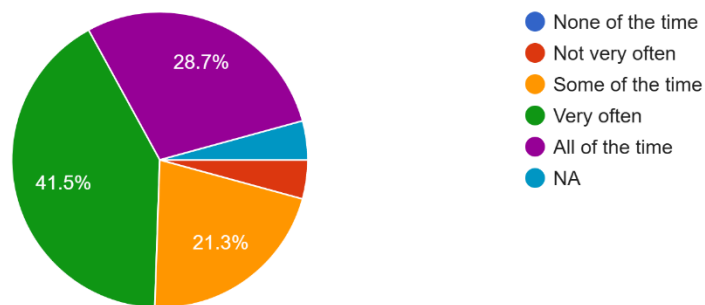
Part 3- In this section we are going to focus on your wellbeing, by wellbeing we mean how you feel, your mood and your motivation (3/a) During my time on this project I felt happy

94 responses



(3/b) During my time on this project I felt engaged

94 responses

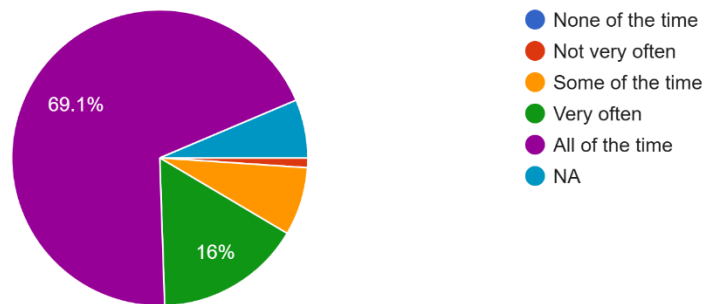


The majority of YP felt happy and engaged while participating in this project, a small number of YP chose not to answer these questions (NA answer) which may indicate that they didn't understand the question or opted out of answering.

Creative Connections- Youth on a Shared Island Evaluation 2025

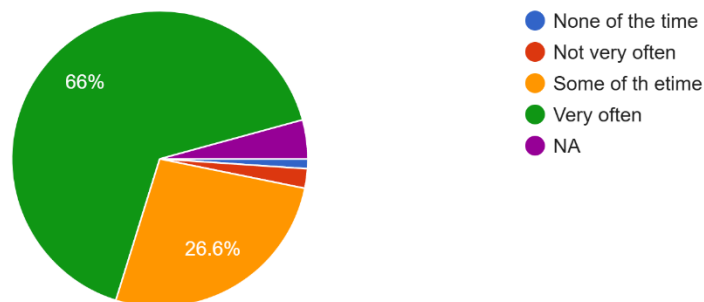
(3/c) During my time on this project I felt safe

94 responses



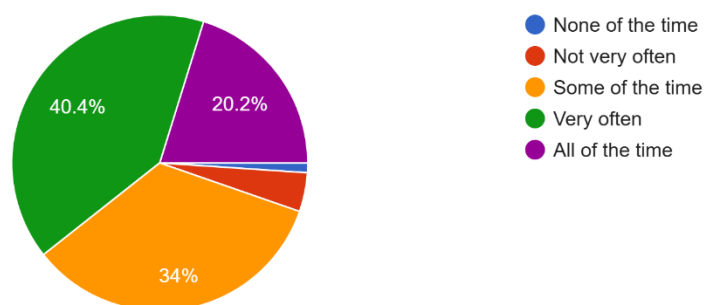
(3/d) During my time on this project I enjoyed the company of other people

94 responses



(3/e) During my time on this project I talked to other young people

94 responses

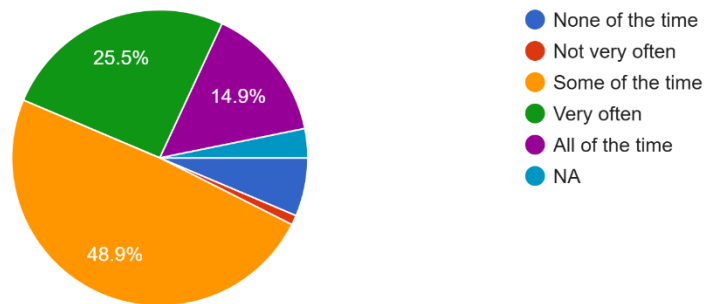


The majority of YP felt safe and interacted with other YP on the project which correlates with the earlier feedback that the facilitators created a non-judgemental environment, again reinforcing the need for highly skilled facilitators to deliver this work and create spaces that are psychologically safe for YP to flourish.

Creative Connections- Youth on a Shared Island Evaluation 2025

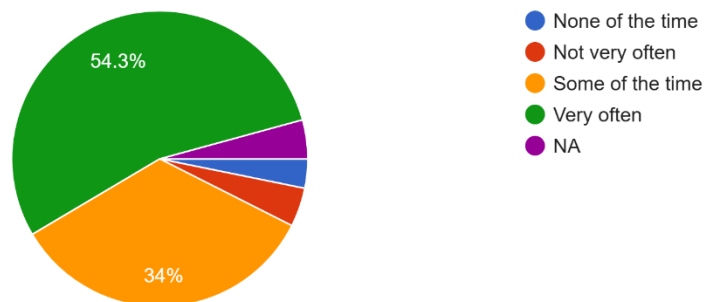
(3/f) During my time on the project I was inspired

94 responses



(3/g) During my time on the project I was interested in the work

94 responses



We can see from the two charts above that the majority of YP were inspired quite often, there is no doubt that inspiration can feel different for everyone, a further exploration of what inspiration means for the YP was beyond the scope of the evaluation.



Youthreach North Great George's Street Participants

Part 4- Understanding Others and Connection

In section 4 we were interested in exploring the YP's experience of connection with and understanding of others, especially as YP people were paired with other YP from varying geographical and socio-economic backgrounds.

We asked the YP to **tell us one (or more than one) thing they learned or that surprised you about the group they partnered with for this project?** 64 YP responded to this question. A number of themes emerged that are outlined below.

Skill recognition, YP recognised varying skills in other YP

"They are fantastic singers and musicians"

"All of them are extremely talented"

"How different people can take a brief and create completely different things"

"I found out that the creative writing group in Armagh is very talented at writing stories etc."

YP displayed capacity to recognise and acknowledge talent and different approaches in their peers building compassion and social connection throughout the project.

Cultural differences, YP noticed difference and similarities in new places and new people.

“Dublin people are louder than us”

“They are very extroverted! Their writing was really good, and they seemed very confident”

“I liked and was surprised when we worked with other people from different places”

“I learnt about Newry”

“How different things are for people so close to Dundalk”

“They had different accents, even though our towns were pretty close”

“Different politics and cultures”

“Some northern people are actually nice”

“The majority of the people from Dublin seemed to be a lot more extroverted than the majority of people from the Belfast group. However, I found this to not be a problem and end up making for a fun and exciting visit! Interestingly, many of them had never been to Belfast before, but almost - if not all - all of us had travelled from Belfast to Dublin before”

YP improved their understanding other others and of other places throughout the project and were curious about the characteristics of their peers.

Emotional awareness, YP noticed what was easy for some other YP and what was difficult for others and showed compassion.

“I learned that many people can be assertive when they are asked to be as such”

“They were amazing and very kind and I hope to work with them again in the future”

“The way the other group worked with their connections and attitudes towards each other as they maintained a comical and joking relationship between them (it was amazing)”

“they also did theatre, so it was easier to connect with them”

“Everyone was super kind”

“I learned how to write while looking at things in a different perspective”

“How cool they were (also the fact that I shared interests with a couple other people)”

“We’re all creative in various different ways of interpretation. Some of us are very natural performers whereas others are natural writers”

The quotes above evidence a depth of emotional awareness by recognising creative difference, relationships, humour, and shared interests.



Sense NI, Activate Space and YAP Participants with Mentors

Part 5- Additional Feedback

In the final section we gave the YP you a chance to write down any other feedback they wanted to add. 55 YP replied to this question, much of the feedback asked for the project to continue with some requesting more free time to write and others suggesting a residency approach in the future.

Loved the entire experience and made a lot of friends through the experiences, would definitely recommend, and really really hope that this project continues

I want unrestricted free creative writing next time

I would have liked to collaborate with the other group more often

I really hope that this group continues on after Christmas

I really enjoy doing these projects, it's nice to talk to other people and to have a space to write

I felt that there could have been more structure to the sessions, with a clear end goal at the beginning. It would have been nice to achieve an exchange of writing between the two groups.

It was a great experience! I do think it might be an idea in the future to almost do a residency type situation with the groups with 2-3 consecutive days of writing instead of 6 bus journeys to and from Dublin, otherwise it was great to be a part of!

I really enjoyed this, and I think more stuff like this in the future would be amazing

I was very happy I joined this group and (facilitator) was brilliant and I liked that my Advocate joined in.

Feedback from Cork group, Activate Space.

Participants from Activate Space in Cork city took part as part of the first triangle that worked together. Activate Space is based in GTC and is a youth theatre project designed for young people with physical and intellectual disabilities. To ensure the voices of these YP people were heard we gathered feedback in two ways, a conversation lead by their

facilitators and emoji placing⁸ around certain themes/questions. The conversation was based around the following prompts.

- What was the best part about this project?
- Did you do anything new as part of this project?
- What parts of the project were hard?
- What did you do when you found things hard?
- Tell me about the new people you met through this project; did you get to work together?
- What did you learn about writing a story?
- Would you like to write another story?

Feedback from the participants of Activate Space was aligned with the feedback from the other participants across the programme. The YP enjoyed the social aspects of the programme, playing new games, eating pizza, being on the train without their parents and discovering new ways of making stories with other YP collaboratively. Participants creating stories, they enjoyed acting, one participant stated he enjoyed being the “bad guy”, other participants stated they enjoyed writing new stories. Many participants from Activate Space indicated they wanted to write more stories and collaborate further. The trips to Dublin were noted as being a particular highlight. The social impact was strong for participants, they enjoyed sharing food and meeting new people and described the project as a “new adventure.”

⁸ See Appendix B



Drogheda Youthreach Participants in Navan Fort, Armagh

Facilitators

All facilitators had the chance to provide feedback through interviews and focus groups. The qualitative data revealed the following themes.



Creative Connections Facilitators and Coordinators

Time

All facilitators agreed that it would benefit the work greatly if more time were given to developing relationships with the groups that participated. This was especially evident for the first triangle of youth groups that were brought together in January 2025. The first triangle seemed particularly pressurised for facilitators, the groups involved were Activate Space from Cork city, Youth Advocates Programme in Dublin and Sense NI Carrickfergus. The facilitators felt strongly that those YP needed more time to be together as collaboration was new for them. The facilitators also felt that they needed more time together to plan and shape the work in response to the YP's needs. The specific needs of the group members resulted in more time being needed to plan between facilitators to ensure the best possible experience for the YP.

Time to build relationships with the YP, with the key workers or advocates that were working with the YP and with each other as facilitators was a key need articulated by all facilitators. More time to plan together, document learning and reflect was also a key request articulated by facilitators and something the majority felt they would ask to do differently if they were working on the programme again.

Training

Most facilitators noted that trauma informed training would be helpful, in these contexts going forward. YP were coming from such a varied background that some facilitators felt they needed additional training to help support YP to have the best possible experience. Some facilitators stated they felt vulnerable at times and out of their depth. Others noted that they were more experienced with working with marginalised YP and that caused friction between facilitators at times as ideas on how to collaborate were coming from different ways of working and understanding.

Facilitators noted that there were a number of highly experienced facilitators on the panel that they turned to for help and guidance when faced with challenges during the project. Experienced facilitators felt they had more to give in terms of supporting the planning and delivery of the project and were curious about using this expertise to support applications and roll out processes in the future.

Practice

Facilitators described their practice in a number of ways; some described the practice as a socially engaged way of working. Those facilitators worked from a value base of social inclusion, equity, YP centred and often YP led, and alongside story telling outputs, were building the experience to allow for social development as their priority.

“For these YP, turning up and taking part is a successful outcome”

Other facilitators described their practice as pedagogy and seemed more educational in their approach. Language such as “teaching the YP,” “writing outcomes” and “workshop plans” were used more often to describe this practice. These facilitators noted the artistic development/skill of storytelling was undermined at times due to lack of time and the writing experience of YP.

“are we doing enough here, is this artistic or just a nice experience, is this enough?”

Some facilitators described starting out with a typical FW workshop plan and realising that they needed to move to a more playful pedagogy to meet the YP where they were at on the day.

“The workshop didn’t go to plan; I needed to change things quickly”

There seemed to be some confusion at times as to what was required as an output at the end of the collaboration between pairings. Some facilitators stated they didn’t want to use the term *writing* as that would be a barrier to YP that could not write. Some facilitators preferred to use the concept of storytelling, as that allowed for multiple ways of developing and telling stories that included writing but allowed for drama etc also.

Experience of Facilitators

Some of the artists were more experienced with working with YP with additional needs or from marginalised backgrounds than others.

“ I was nervous , I hadn’t done this work before”

This caused a feeling of vulnerability for some artists that were placed with groups of YP that sometimes did not want to engage with more traditional workshop methods. Some facilitators were surprised by the level of need the YP presented with and others had limited experience working with YP that had come through the care system or judicial system. This resulted in high stress levels for some facilitators.

“It was very challenging, they (YP) didn’t want to engage at all”

Amount of groups

Most facilitators felt they would have preferred to work with a smaller amount of groups over longer periods of time to allow for greater impact and relationships to develop.

“We’re scratching the surface; we need the chance to do more long-term deeper work with these YP”

Group expectations and pairings

The facilitators noted that the expectation of groups with experience in writing cannot be the same as the expectations for those who are new to writing and coming from marginalised backgrounds.

“my group was challenging, it constantly felt like an introductory session, as a freelancer, that felt tricky”

Advocate support

All facilitators noted the significant contribution the YP’s Advocates made in the space for the YP. The advocates were described as being key to the success of the work and were described as being active participants.

“the support I felt in the room from the YPs advocate was immense, I felt lost at times and like I was failing the YP, but the Advocate assured me we were on the right track and even though progress was slow it was enough”

Impact

All facilitators had distinct examples of standout moments for themselves or the YP as part of the project. Facilitators described with great joy YP travelling on their own without parents for the first time, YP reading their work in front of others having refused to do that before, YP bringing work to the group that they had created independently between sessions, YP in flow during drama workshops, YP seeing themselves as writers for the first time, YP writing and making brilliant stories.

“it was just magic, she (YP) just got up and read on our last session, she had hardly said a word up to that, I couldn’t believe it”



Creative Connections Facilitators and Participants from Activate Space, Cork

Organisational Learning

The Coordinators from all three areas and the person that provided coordination support from FWNI had the opportunity to give their feedback, the learning is reflected under the following headings below.

Lead in time

The lead in time to the first pairing in January was short and some of the opportunities to gather feedback from the YP were lost as the project found its feet. The learning from this initial stage however was quickly adapted into the coordination approach, additional support was put in place to allow for planning and data gathering. These lessons in flexibility and adaptability were prominent throughout the rest of the delivery and served the programme well.

Recruitment of groups

Historically FW has worked with schools and not with youth groups. The recruitment of youth groups was more difficult than originally envisaged and was significantly harder for FWNI to recruit, engage, and sustain the relationships with new youth groups. Some groups dropped out, and others had to be found quickly. There was difficulty in building relationships and understanding of the project with youth groups that were new to working with Fighting Words and this caused stress for the Coordinators of the project. In response to this the Coordinators displayed

resilience, belief in the work with a flexible, positive, and adaptable approach throughout.

Experience of facilitators

Some facilitators were brand new to FW and others had experience of working with FW in the past. This allowed for challenges and opportunities to emerge in equal measure. Challenges included the resourcing of additional support in the room by Coordinators when some facilitators felt vulnerable with groups of significant need, and the occasional tension in shared sessions when facilitators of varying experience were working together. Opportunities were abundant however, these included peer learning opportunities, new ideas, experiencing different pedagogies and genres for storytelling and developing a comfort with the unknown of the process.

Human resource

The coordination of the project was resourced in different ways across the 3 organisations. GTC were delivery partners and responsible for the administration of the Cork groups. It is completely understandable that the coordination support looked different across the two main organisations (FW and FWNI) as they are different organisations in different jurisdictions. Sometimes however, this caused some misalignment for the smooth administration of the project. Work flow and timelines were tricky at times as people operated different work schedules. It is clear that these challenges were overcome and a sense of pride and togetherness was clearly observed at the final event on October 18th across all three organisations.

Reflective and reflexive practice

Coordinators were committed to reflective practice as part of their role. Some Coordinators described feelings of nervousness at times e.g. when groups dropped out or when some groups expressed dissatisfaction while other Coordinators embraced a playful pedagogy easily. There was evidence that some of the Coordinators believe strongly in the FW workshop methodology that has worked so well in previous programmes.

Some Coordinators occasionally found it difficult to see facilitators veer away from that methodology to use more play/drama-based ways at times and away from more tried and tested ways of working. This nervousness was feedback during Quarter 2 of 2025, by the final event in October 2025 Coordinators that were nervous earlier in the year reflected on that journey and articulated how the opportunity for play/drama-based working had contributed greatly to the YP's experience of the programme. Coordinators displayed deep reflective and reflexive capacity throughout the programme and this trait allowed for a continuous learning environment to develop.

Logistics

The administrative load was high as the project worked at scale with new youth groups and new facilitators needing to be recruited. The logistical and administrative load was heightened by the different digital office systems in use across FW (Google) and FWNI (Microsoft) which caused problems for sharing documents and folders.

Evaluation support

The scale of the project meant that Coordinators often had to lead on the administration of the evaluation survey for YP, this was an additional administrative task that may not have been originally planned.

Legacy

Stories of legacy are emerging since the project ended, these stories are often held by the Coordinator and include descriptions of one YP who was so proud when they stepped off the platform at Heuston Station, and she stopped in awe at the fact that she had made it to Dublin independently. This YP is now regularly visiting the office asking when the book will be published and when she will get to Dublin again. The enthusiasm with which she embraced her independence of travelling to Dublin was something her parents also mentioned.

Another story tells us that after the completion of the project one of the young people from the group applied to be part of the Young Playwrights Programme in Cork, she was accepted and is currently writing a play which will be performed on the stage of the Everyman Theatre.

Included in Appendix is a transcript of an interview with a YP from Noth Great George's Street Youthreach programme. This interview transcript displays evidence of the distinct impact on the participant and expresses her views on how she reconnected with childhood creativity and formed greater confidence by being part of the project, stating the non-judgemental environment of FW's as a key factor to her successful engagement.

Celebration event

On October 18th, the groups involved came together in Portmarnock Resort for one final time to celebrate their work and to mark the publication launch. Young people shared their work and there was a live musical performance from The Kabin Studio. Roddy Doyle launched the Creative Connections book. Footage of the event can be found [HERE](#) .

There was a noticeable level of excitement from the YP, and it was clear to see and hear their joy at reconnecting with one another and their facilitators. Feedback was gathered and the quotes below demonstrate the atmosphere in the room on the day.

“I found it quite emotional to be in a room with so many creative minds. What can be achieved when the environment is created is quite remarkable and never ceases to blow my mind” .

“Hearing all of the wonderful work from the young artists really nurtured my creative spirit!”

“Today made me realise how much I love writing. When we got here, I just started writing, while we waited to get started and now that it’s over I am at least ten pages into a short story. “

The event brought a level of visibility to the scale of the work that may not have been clear to everyone involved as the project unfolded throughout the year. This celebration gave the opportunity for those involved to honour the work, be joyous and be together.

Observations

The following is a list of observations that may be considered in the development of future projects of a similar nature,

- That a focus is placed on building relationships with a smaller number of additional needs/marginalised youth groups for long term work of a similar nature
- That additional time is given for planning, documentation, training, and reflection as part of facilitators contracts
- That consideration is given to forming regular opportunities for facilitators working with FW to connect through a Community of Practice
- That experienced facilitators are called on as appropriate to contribute to the planning of programming with YP that have additional needs or are from marginalised backgrounds
- That consideration is given to developing a simple and efficient method for gathering feedback/evaluation from every YP and facilitator working on FW projects to build a strong evidence base for the work

Conclusion

Creative Connections delivered a high-quality experience for those who participated with the vast majority of all aims and objectives being met. This evaluation, formative in its nature has acted as scaffold for the learning to emerge. Staff, facilitators, and participants had the time to reflect on the success of the programme but also to explore the challenges and possibilities.

This evaluation has found that FW, FWNI and GTC are in a unique position to work at scale and have built on their shared values and ambition to enable impactful work.

The buy-in and enthusiasm present at the final celebration event was palpable, with a clear ask for more opportunities of this nature from the YP involved. Facilitators have formed strong connections as a result of the work, and the Coordinators across the three organisations have themselves learned and practiced flexibility and determination to bring the full project to fruition.

New methods, people, genres, and pedagogy have allowed fresh perspectives for FW, FWNI and GTC emerge. The learning from these new experiences alongside the commitment of the team that make up FW, FWNI and GTC has the potential to inspire the highest quality experiences for YP in the future.

Appendix A

List of groups that participated⁹

⁹ Shared Sessions occurred in other ways and venues e.g. Write Quest, Dublin and NI meeting in Connswater in 2024. Navan Fort with Give and Take Armagh and Drogheda Youthreach meeting in Louth. The group from Droichead Youth Theatre travelled to Magnet Youth Centre for a workshop with Magnet in Newry. M.A.D from Dundalk headed to Bosco Youth Group in Newry. Monaghan Youth Theatre visited the space in REACT on Thomas Street Armagh.

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Group Name	Geographical Area	Group Description	Paired with	Number of participants	Number of sessions	Number of shared sessions
Write Quest	Dublin	Young people who are neurodivergent and part of the LGBTQ2+ community.	Write Quest Belfast	8	9	2
Youth Advocate Programme	Dublin	Young people supported by YAP who often face challenges in education and community participation, suffering with mental health issues and who are vulnerable,	Belfast (Sense NI) and Cork (Activate Space)	8	6	2
Youthreach NGGS	Dublin	Youthreach North great George's Street, consisting of young people seeking asylum, vulnerable young people	The Kabin Studio, Cork and New Lodge Arts, Belfast	10	9	3
Droichead Youth Theatre	Louth	Young people with a strong interest in theatre and performance	Magnet, Newry	10	8	3
Drogheda Youthreach	Drogheda	Young people outside of mainstream schooling	Armagh Give and Take	13	9	2
M.A.D. Youth Theatre	Louth	Young performers who thrive in devising and ensemble work	Bosco Youth Group	12	10	4
Group Name	Geographical Area	Group Description		Number of participants	Number of sessions	

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			Paired with			Number of shared sessions
Monaghan Youth Theatre	Monaghan	Dynamic group of young theatre-makers who are curious, creative, and passionate about using drama to explore ideas and stories	REACT Youth group	10	7	3
Write Quest	Belfast	In house (FW and FWNI) Youth initiative dedicated to creative writing	Write Quest Dublin	9	9	2
New Lodge Arts	Belfast	New Lodge Arts supports young people through arts-based youth work, offering programmes in drama, music, art and more.	The Kabin Studio, Cork, and Youthreach NGGS	9	5	1 shared session (joined pairing late after original group dropped out)
Magnet Young Adult Centre	Newry	Magnet is a youth arts and community space in Newry that empowers young people through creative programmes.	Droichead Youth Theatre	9	8	2
Give & Take Project	Armagh	Give and Take works with young people who have experienced challenges in education, wellbeing, and community engagement.	Drogheda Youthreach	7	6	2
Group Name	Geographical Area	Group Description	Paired with	Number of participants	Number of sessions	Number of

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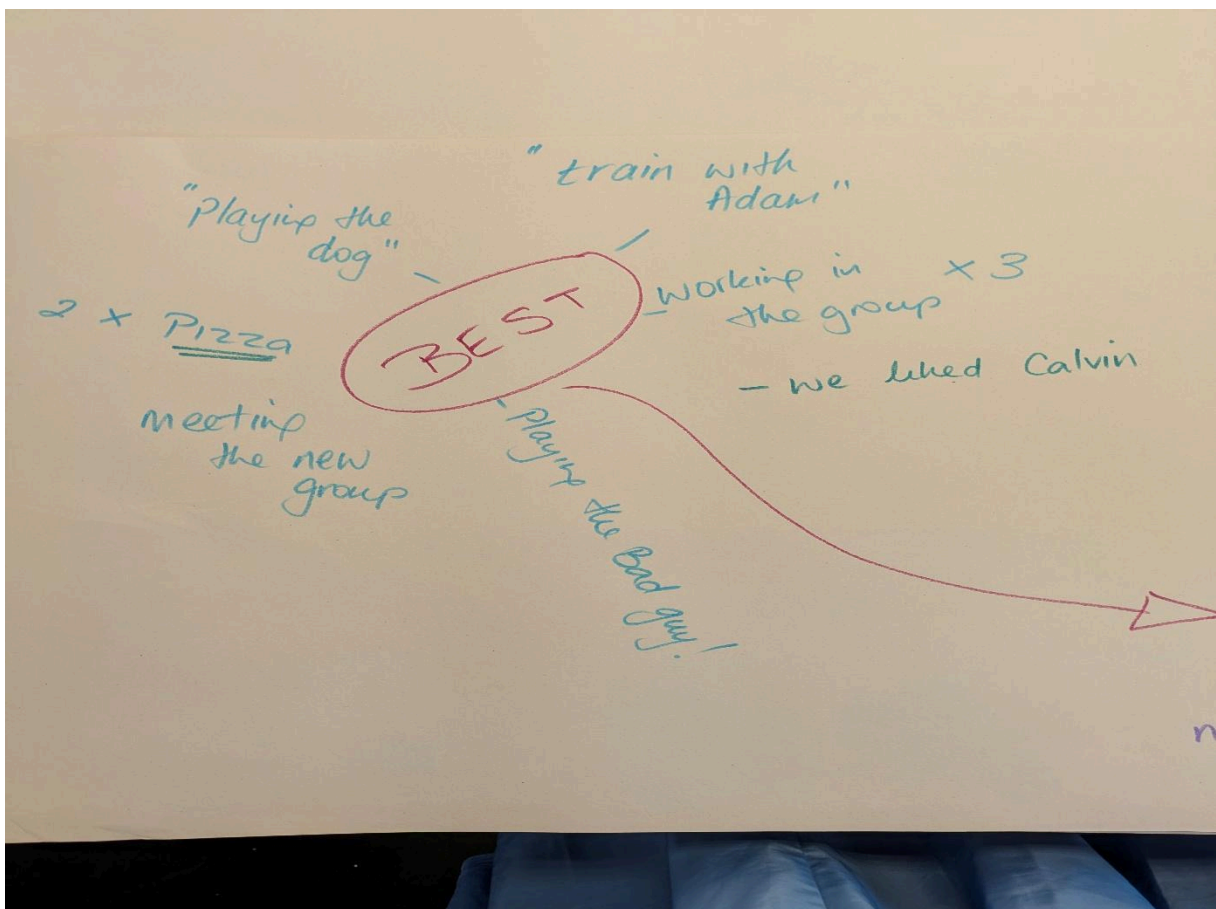
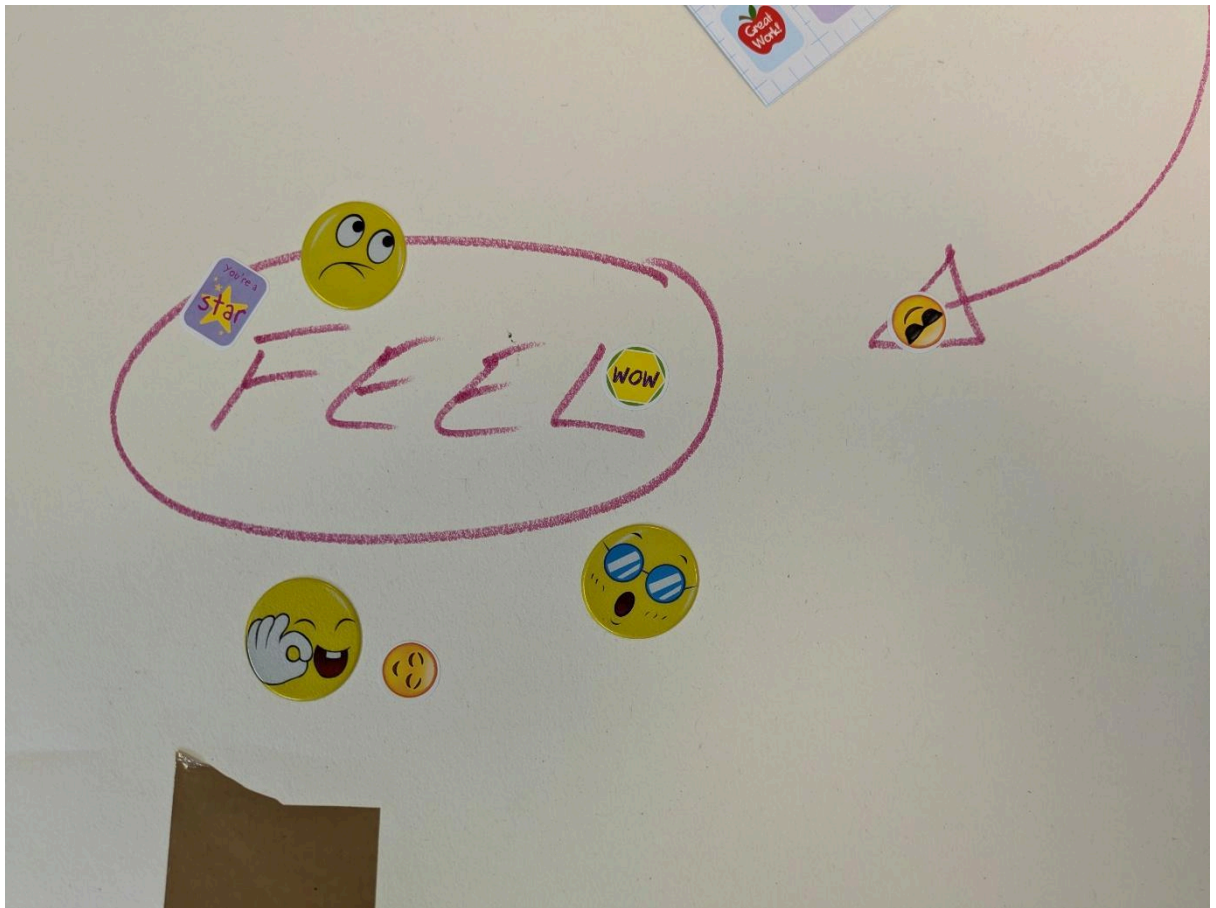
						shared sessions
Bosco Youth group	Newry	Bosco Youth Group provides drama, music, and arts opportunities for young people in the Newry area.	M.A.D Youth Theatre, Louth	10	8	2
R.E.A.C.T.	Armagh	REACT supports young people across Armagh through programmes focused on personal development, creativity, and community participation.	Monaghan Youth Theatre	7	6	3
Activate Space	Cork City	Youth Theatre project designed for young people with physical & intellectual disabilities	Belfast (Sense NI) and Youth Advocate Programme	8	6	2
The Kabin Crew	Knocknaheeny, Northside Cork City	A crew of songwriters, rappers, musicians, creatives, volunteers, and participants of all ages who believe in the power of making music and being creative	Youthreach NGGS and New Lodge Arts Centre Belfast	13	9	3
Sense NI	Belfast	YP with complex disabilities supported by Sense NI	Activate Space and Youth Advocate Programme	9	6	2

Appendix B

Activate Space Feedback Examples







Appendix C

Overview of interview with Kasey¹⁰

Can you tell us a little bit about yourself.

My name is Kasey Kearney. I'm from Finglas and I've always wanted to work with children. So I'm going to go to college to be a primary school teacher. That's my goal because I love working with kids.

And then when I heard about Fighting Words, I jumped straight on it. It was literally perfect. You know, I mean, I work in Penney's for the last year now, literally just over a year.

And yeah, I have four siblings and live at home. And just I'm just like a basic girl.

And tell us, Casey, so you got involved with Fighting Words. You said you heard about the Fighting Words project and you jumped right on it. Tell me a bit about that.

So I left school around this time last year, actually, because I was sick with my mental health and I had been in hospital. I missed a lot. So school just wasn't for me. But I want to go to college, and I want to make something of myself, you know what I mean? So I like me and my mum, we went looking and looking and looking and we found YouthReach eventually. I'm really like found out that I was basically the same equivalent as a leaving cert. And I can go on to college straight after, like any normal student, without actually having sitting exams, you know what I mean? So we literally, I think it was in March and my mum emailed Ger here and straight away he brought me in for a meeting. And he was like, yeah, like starting on Monday. Amazing. Yeah.

And I kind of like just slid right in, like I fit in perfectly. I made loads of friends here straight away. Like there was no judgement. Everyone was just everyone was in the same boat. You know what I mean? Like having left school for some reason or whatever. And it just like I just fit perfectly right in, you know what I mean? And all the teachers said it like you were like, it feels like you've been here forever.

But it's only been like two months, you know what I mean? So I'm like so glad that I came across this place because it has changed everything about me, you know what I mean?

And so what age were you when you joined your Youthreach then?

¹⁰ Questions in bold

I had literally just turned 17 in February, and I joined in March then.

And so are you thinking of going, hopefully getting into some kind of primary school teaching or something like that next September?

No, I want to go and do a PLC course first, just to get the grades up to level 5. Level 5, yeah, yeah. I'll be able to go to, I'm hoping to go to Pats in DCU because I did it when I was in school, I did a course in DCU. So it was like I got to like shadow students and everything to see what college life was like.

And I kind of have an in there if I want to go there, you know what I mean? So that's what my plan is to go there. And of course, it's near enough to you if you're in Fingers as well.

It's near enough to you, isn't it? Yeah. Amazing. OK, so loads of ambition. So tell me then, you said you jumped on the Fighting Word Project. What do you mean by that? Tell me. So what did you read or what was it that made you want to do it?

Yeah, so I kind of knew a bit about it because my little brother had gone to his school and he loved it. Like he came home and talked about it for a week. Because do you know the way they print out the booklets of the stories that the kids write? And he had brought it home and he was reading it every night. And he had me write a little review on the back and everything. And he loved it. So I was like, what is this place? I've never heard of it. So I actually looked up and was like, oh, sounds good. And then I came here then and straight away after I came here, because they had the project, I had joined and they had the project half, not half, a bit way through. They had done two or three sessions already.

And they had said to me, one of the teachers here said to me, do you want to go? I was like, yes, straight away. Like, yeah, I know where I'm going. So I went over and I just loved it straight away.

Like all the people that work over there, they're just so nice and they're so welcoming. And it's like just a chance for you to explore a different type of imagination. It's a safe space for your own creativity, like no judgement or anything, you know.

So that's what I really liked about it.

And tell me, so who went over with you and tell me what you did. Like what were the best parts of the project as far as you're concerned?

Yeah, so there was me and the teacher Anto that's here. And then I think Linda came a few times. And then just I think like four or five other

students here that were in my class. And we went over, I remember going over and I was like, what do we even do here? Like I felt so confused.

I was like, what? And then we had sat down, and I think it was Mark or, yeah, it was one of them anyway. They had explained like, or Conor, it was someone anyway. They had explained what it was and what we were going to do.

And I was like, right, this is exciting, like I'm excited for this. So we had sat down, and we started writing a story and talking about our own experiences to put into that story. And then we wrote a story together and then was able to, literally like the same way to kind of deal with the kids, you know what I mean? But it was more like less childish if you get me.

Yeah, yeah, of course. And did you spend time then with like any groups from Cork or any groups from the north or?

Yeah, so I, they did their workshops on Saturdays, but I work every Saturday. So I was able to make it when they did the workshops in Fighting Woods. But that conference that was in Portmarnock Resort, I went to that. And oh my God, it was actually such a good day. I saw you there. It was such a good day and the kids from Cork and everything like it was such a good day. Like I really, really enjoyed it.

Would you have seen yourself as a creative person before?

When I was a kid, like I was like, I used my imagination so much. Like I was always like I wrote songs. I made up stories. Like I tried to write a book. Like I used to write songs and perform them for my family. Like I was never really shy in that kind of way. That's why I felt like I was OK getting up to do the reading. Yeah. Like obviously I do have a bit of nerves. I was shaking or whatever, but that's normal, you know. Well, yeah, I feel like I was always so creative, but I had lost that a bit.

And then another reason why I wanted to go to Fighting Words, because I feel like the older you get, the less you use your imagination. You know what I mean? And I was like, I'd love to touch on that again and just feel like a kid again. And being able to be in Fighting Words, it was like if there's no judgments, you can literally just think and say whatever you want.

You know what I mean? And that's what made me like it even more. The fact that you can just use your imagination and you can be a kid again, you know.

And tell me, were there bits about it that were hard at all?

The most challenging thing would probably be like starting off the creative writing. Because I'm the type of person, like I'll need a push, you know what I mean? So like I'll need a sentence to start me off and then I can ramble for my heart's desire, you know what I mean? But I knew, like my full ability, I knew I was able to get there and I was able to get there. But just the bit of pushing, you know, I didn't have that.

Like the second I asked, can I have a bit of help, like it was given straight to me, you know what I mean? And then I was able to go on and go on forever, you know? Like I wanted a space where I was able to do that and fight towards it, you know what I mean? Which was amazing.

Any other challenges, do you think?

No, I don't, like it was such a smooth process. It was literally just getting started with the writing, that was all that.

And now I can, I feel like I can sit down, it'll take me five minutes to think of something when I can, you know what I mean?

And so do you think, like can you notice an impact that the programme has had on you in terms of even like just how you feel about yourself, but maybe like what your belief in yourself or whatever?

I definitely think that it pushed me to be more myself in a way of like, because I'm an outgoing, loud, fun person. And like that's what you can be in there, you know what I mean? And so I definitely feel like it pushed me and then it pushed me closer to the students here as well, because I was able to just be myself in the space, you know what I mean? I feel like it did, like definitely, because I talk about it all the time and everyone's always asking me questions about it, like it did actually really have a really positive impact on the way I think about things and like especially what it made me want, because I did work experience there as well.

Tell us a bit about that.

Yeah, so I remember like, because I was kind of a bit stuck for work experience and then there was like, go to Fighting Words, it's perfect for you.

I was like, yeah, I'll just go, give it a go. And I mean, I loved it, like Sarah and Louise asked me and my friend to go back and be like proper volunteers.

Tell us, like how does that make you feel?

It definitely feels so good because I was like, they actually can see like the potential I have to work with kids, you know what I mean? So that makes

me believe and want to push myself that I can actually go and be a teacher, you know what I mean? Yeah.

And do you think, have you done much writing since you finished up kind of the programme?

Yeah, I kind of do a bit of writing every night, to be honest. It's just a way of like, just letting all your thoughts onto a page and like whether you want someone to see it or not, you know what I mean? Just do whatever you want and it's free, you know what I mean? You don't have any, no one telling you what's right or wrong. You can just do what you want.

So is that non-judgemental piece seems quite important?

Yeah, because I feel like in school, like I did have a tough time growing up, like being bullied and I never felt like comfortable really anywhere. And that's a big part of why I left school as well, because it was all about not feeling comfortable, feeling judged, like, you know, and nobody wants that, you know what I mean? So when I came here, all of that was gone. And then it just, it felt like having a place that you can be no judgement, you can be it, because I feel like everyone deserves to be themselves, do you know what I mean? Like if you have to hide or put a mask on, like you should be allowed to be yourself with no judgement, you know, and I'm like a very outgoing, loud person, like, you know, so like when I am able to be that type of person, I can be fun and I can be funny.

And I just like; I'd like to get along with everyone. And, you know, I don't like judgement because I wouldn't do it. I don't want to judge people at all, because you never know what really someone's going through, you know what I mean? Like you could walk past someone down the road, and they could be having the worst day of their life and you'd never know, you know? So I wouldn't like that being done to me. So I don't like doing it to other people, you know?

And tell me if, so say for instance, you came into YouthReach , if Fighting Words hadn't been involved with your centre or you didn't know about it or your younger siblings hadn't done it in school or anything, what do you think you would have missed out on anything? Would you think you'd be writing every night, what do you think?

No, 100%. Like it impacted me in such a positive way. Like me and my mum talk about it all the time, like I tell her how much I love it.

It's just, I can't find the words, it just makes me happy even talking about it, because it did have such a positive impact on me, you know? And like if they asked me to go back, I'd go back there any day, you know? Yeah, I mean, it sounds like, from my perspective, it sounds like, so that place of

non-judgement allowed you to like feel really safe, which is really important for us all. And that has allowed you some way to tap into this creativity that you kind of recognised from when you were little, you know, and that playfulness and that, everything gets so serious. It gets more serious and more serious and like everyone needs to chill out, you know? We could learn a lot from five-year-olds and six-year-olds, couldn't we?

Yeah, I know, and they're so compassionate, lovely, and straight-talking as well. What I'll do is I'll type all of that up and include it in the report.

There's no problem. I love sharing my story because I do have a story, do you know what I mean?

Absolutely!

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Publication Launch October 2025



Performer from The Kabin Studio at the Publication Launch