

**Meeting of the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education,  
Research, Innovation and Science, 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2022**

**Roundtable Discussion on Mental Health Supports in Schools and Tertiary Education.**

**Opening Statement by Fighting Words**

A Chathaoirleach, a Theachtaí Dála, agus a Seanadóirí, go raibh maith agaibh as an gcuireadh do Fighting Words chun bheith libh inniu.

*Fighting Words* was founded in 2009 by Roddy Doyle and Sean Love to empower and enable young people to write creatively, and to have fun with imagination and ideas while writing their stories. Our workshops, clubs, summer camps, projects, and publications are delivered from our headquarters in Dublin's north inner-city, and through twenty outlets across the country, where local *Fighting Words* centres operate from libraries, arts centres, and theatres. We collaborate with schools, community groups and a network of creative partners.

*Fighting Words* activities are provided free of charge to participants, and cover all genres – poetry, prose, song writing, graphic fiction, play writing, etc. Volunteering is at the core of our model. We recruit, vet, train and support a network of hundreds of volunteer mentors and illustrators around the country, who support the creative writing activities with children.

Hundreds of workshops are delivered annually from the twenty *Fighting Words* locations around the country. Freisin tá Fighting Words na Gaeilge ag feidhmiú ar fud na tíre anois. We also have a sister organisation in Northern Ireland, founded in 2015. Over 240,000 children have participated in *Fighting Words* activities since it was founded in 2009.

Creative engagement and creative writing bring benefits for young people in terms of education – literacy, numeracy, and oracy. More than that, creativity brings a range of advantageous outcomes where children become more confident and resilient, and benefit in terms of wellbeing, mental health, self-efficacy, and improved social, emotional and communications skills.

The programme includes creative engagement activities with marginalised and disadvantaged communities, minority communities, and children with disabilities, those experiencing mental health issues, and with special educational needs.

In addition, *Fighting Words* has a partnership with DCU focussed on teacher education and research related to creative education and creative writing.

Creativity and imagination have a fundamental and positive impact in terms of wellbeing and mental health. As young people are enabled and supported to find their voice and to express their ideas, they grow in confidence and develop their self-concept. These creative engagements support the mental health and wellness of children.

*Fighting Words* has documented the link between creative writing and the positive impact for children's wellbeing. Research detailed in our written submission illustrates that creative writing gives students an increased sense of confidence and belief in their own creative ability, more positive relations with teachers in school, increased resilience and perseverance and enhanced self-efficacy.

Learning how to be creative improves student achievement in schools. The opportunity to have their voice heard is particularly significant for students experiencing mental health issues. Observations from various stakeholders indicate a range of positive changes in participants' behaviour and attitudes. OECD and WHO reports confirm that engaging in creativity and the arts can be beneficial for mental health and wellbeing.

While the research shows that there is a connection between the arts and wellbeing, this is not generally reflected in national policy in Ireland.

Teachers see the importance of creative writing, including as a benefit for mental health, but there are challenges, for example, in terms of teacher education, curriculum structure, and classroom time.

I would like to acknowledge the emphasis on creativity in education recognised by the Taoiseach; the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media; the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Inclusion and Youth; and the Minister for Education. In our submission we also noted the recognition of creativity in education by the Department of Education, the NCCA and the Teaching Council.

Government commitments and policies exist that provide opportunities to expand the level of creative writing and artistic programmes that support young people experiencing mental health issues.

Building on this positive foundation, it is important to take steps to further integrate creative education models as part of the education experience for young people.

The clear connection between creative engagement and wellbeing should be promoted more with all education partners. It is necessary to provide the specific teacher education courses, continuing professional development opportunities, and the curriculum space and time, to ensure that creative play, creative writing, and creative engagement opportunities are available regularly for children and young people at all levels. While this is important for all children in all schools, considering the interconnection between mental health and issues such as poverty, exclusion, disability, and experience of care it is very important to provide the relevant creative opportunities in DEIS schools and other targeted learning environments.

A Chathaoirleach, I'd be happy to provide further input and advice for the Joint Committee members in response to any questions you might have.

Colm Ó Cuanacháin, Education Director