## Arts in Education Podcast transcript EP2a - 21\_08\_2024, 13.19

Hello and welcome to the first ever podcast series from the Arts in Education Portal. In this series of two episodes, we present the presentations from the 2024 Arts in Education Portal Regional Conference, which took place at Sligo Education Centre on 25th of May, 2024. In this second episode we hear from teacher Karen Brogan and arts practitioner Leslie Ryan on a project involving five West Sligo primary schools where they explored themes within ecology and heritage through sculpture, sound and visual art. Supported through the Department of Education Creative Clusters Initiative.

The Arts in Education Portal is the key national digital resource for arts, creativity and education in Ireland. Its ethos is about building a community of practice within arts in education and providing a space where both artists and teachers can be supported and inspired.

It is a joint initiative between the Department of Education and the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeilteacht, Sport and Media. It was established in 2015 and is funded under Pillar 1 of the Creative Ireland Programme, Creative Youth.

[00:01:36] **Karen Brogan:** Good morning, as I said, my name is Karen Brogan and I was the lead teacher, I suppose, cluster coordinator on the West Sligo, very first creative cluster that went on from 2019, 2021 to 2023.

Um, I'm a classroom teacher. I suppose I have, uh, I was on secondment for eight years to PDST. I worked in Literacy, Gaeilge and Gesh, and in 2014 I returned to the classroom. I was in a small two teacher school, unfortunately that school closed and I was redeployed in 2019 to Kilglas National School in West Sligo, where I am now.

So, very proud Mayo woman working in West Sligo, you know, has its advantages, can have its disadvantages at times. But the biggest advantage, I suppose, to me is that it has enabled me to be part of this fantastic adventure, that is our Creative Cluster.

[00:02:35] **Leslie Ryan:** I'm Leslie Ryan, a Corconian, living in Sligo, working in Leitrim, and among other places.

But, um, I have been involved with Creative Clusters here at Sligo Education Centre since 2018. So, um, I also work on a creative schools program. I worked as the creative cluster facilitator with Karen's West Sligo Cluster.

[00:03:00] **Karen Brogan:** So, this is geographically, as you can see, this is where we are situated in West Sligo.

And all of the schools are here, very, very close together. I'd say, you know, there's less than five, seven kilometers between each of us. So, you know, we are within shouting distance of each other. And as Leslie said, that made a huge difference. But while we are within shouting distance of each other, none of the schools would ever really have worked together in this manner before.

So this was something that was completely new for all of the schools. And I had the pleasure of being nominated as lead teacher in our school by the principal in our school. And, the first time that we ever actually met, post application being sent in, was online, at the training day that was organized.

And the first time really, that we met as a group, was in that breakout room. And I'll never forget that day because one laptop wouldn't work and I had to run around the house with another laptop to try and get on. So, in a post COVID world, it really contextualized where we were working, you know, that as schools that had never worked together, we were still dealing with the challenges of bringing schools together, bringing children together, but it was still in that post COVID context.

When the application was initially sent in, it was, I suppose, we were looking at everything from poetry to story writing to creating an arts plan with arts lessons and everything beautifully done for a school. Thankfully, Leslie kind of led us very, very nicely along the road that we took. I like to use the word adventure instead of journey because I think journey is a bit hackneyed.

But that it was and it's still in a way, is very much an ongoing adventure that we are working on within our area. And also we are very, very lucky that very central to all of our schools is the fabulous Kilglass House and Woods. And as a result of our cluster, and we say that the work that we are doing, Kilglass Woods and Kilglass House has really become a hub for creativity within our area.

And we kind of naturally, you know, go towards it when we're working. And it has been fabulous for bringing art outdoors with the kids. It really, really is. And we'll talk a little bit more about that as we go on.

[00:05:20] **Leslie Ryan:** I think it's a, as Karen pointed out, and sometimes we forget, the post Covid context was really important and, um, just to give you a bit of background about clusters, if you're not familiar with them as the type of kind of residency they are, generally you'd have primary or post primary schools, there can be three to five schools in the cluster, and they might be looking, what brings them together might be a common challenge or opportunity.

There's something that they might kind of like to work on together. And as Karen pointed out, we were kind of coming off of COVID, certainly in terms of things that they wanted to explore, they wanted to explore working in different, with artists in different art forms, but also we wanted to, you know, safeguard against another moment or wave of COVID. We started looking at kind of art and ecology, actually the outdoors. What was the common thread between all of us? We were all on the wild Atlantic way and not really having the space to kind of connect, but what extraordinary natural resources that we all shared, to be able to explore through the cluster.

[00:06:34] **Karen Brogan:** while maybe the application might have been very diverse and very broad when it went in, when we came together as a group, we soon realized that, you know, our local area was really, really important to us and that whole ecology, biodiversity, and that sense of history and that sense of place.

So I think that's where our name came from - Dúlra agus Dúchas - The Ties that Bind Us. And that's really what we were exploring. Again, very ably and capably led and gently nudged when needed, by Leslie, who was absolutely fantastic. Just a little bit more context as well. My school is a five teacher school. Um, one of the other schools was a three teacher school at that time.

And then the other schools were two teacher schools. So we had a mix there. And I suppose one of the challenges that faced us was, okay, how are we going to, on a very practical level, organize this within our schools? So again, on our committee, it was myself, Leslie, and four principals. So there used to be great craic, because the principals would be saying, did you hear about this? And did you hear about this? And they'd, - Karen, how did you not hear about that? And I go, um, principles, non principles, you know!

But one of the things that I think worked very, very well for us within our group was that, I suppose, three of us would have kind of known each other, okay? And then, just as a group, there was great trust between us, great friendship from the word go, and we really, really, um, I think our hearts and our commitment from each of the five schools was very much into the cluster, and we really wanted to use the cluster in the best way possible for the advantage of the children, particularly, as Leslie has pointed out, in that post Covid world.

[00:08:23] **Leslie Ryan:** So, so how are we going to do that? I suppose identifying artists would have been one of my roles, as a cluster facilitator, it's just to listen and hold a space for the groups, but also maybe to connect them and to do a little bit of nudging and to try to make the right connections in terms of artists and facilitators.

So, Kari Cahill was an artist that was known to me who worked out of the Model, is now down in Tasmania but whose practice was very much rooted in the outdoors and rooted in art and ecology. And I thought, really would speak to the kind of conversations we were having with the cluster.

Um, so, um, we approached Kari, and Kari was delighted to talk with us and Kari similarly actually invited the cluster teachers up to the model to her studio. So one of the days we were meeting here in the education center, we took a half a day to go up to Kari and to just really get a sense of her materials, her practice, the kind of, the range of it. They were able to really kind of have hands on discussions about what might be possible, what kind of might work. I also have to say about Kari, she's also extremely organized as an artist, extremely organized, kind of responded, after many conversations, but came back with a number of responses to the kind of brief and the conversations we were having.

So, she didn't come back with kind of, an option, you know, there was kind of almost like a suite of options in terms of directions that we could go next, explorations we could have, you know. And similarly, just to talk again about the artists, there are many artists involved in the Cluster within the five schools over the two years, many!. Because the Cluster has been extraordinary; to be able to animate and to, all of the other art and education opportunities, I suppose, that they, because networking and discussing and sharing, now everybody's got a BLAST, and everybody's going for TAP, and everybody is, you know, connecting with heritage and schools. And that's very powerful when you think about it, and having seen the map there, of those schools in that location, what that does, on the ground, in a very, very real, real way is, is kind of being felt now actually, because it's three years down the line, you know.

[00:11:05] **Karen Brogan:** And I suppose the enthusiasm that we had at the beginning is still there. That enthusiasm within our cluster has not waned. And it's funny, when Leslie and I were preparing for the presentation, we were, you know, having many conversations. And I say, you know, Do you remember this? And do you remember this?

And we laugh because we had, we've done so much, but there were so many ideas that we had at the beginning and we're just coming around to those now. But I suppose there was a huge commitment and buy in from day one. And I think as a cluster, we worked very, very well. And Leslie was absolutely fantastic.

Like really, the facilitator, the cluster facilitator is such a vital cog in the whole machine because Leslie was listening to us and she was able to say, well look lads, there is this artist and that artist and the other artist and she led us very nicely you know. And not as in Leslie making the decisions but with us, and when Kari came up with that whole suite of ideas we kind of go, yay! we can do this, this, this and this and then we kind of went ,Okay!, we need to get a little bit more realistic about this.

And again, because it was post COVID that it was very, very important that I suppose everybody's safety, including Kari's was, you know, very much, to the forefront. So where did we go? So, first thing we did, first time the five schools got together, we spent a day on Enniscrone Beach foraging with Kari for materials that we were going to then use at a second workshop where we made ink and pigments using the materials that were foraged.

Now, it was impossible for Kari to have the kids from the five schools on the beach in one go, so again, we got very inventive and we got very collaborative in the way that we worked the nuts and bolts of this. So we were saying, well, okay, uh, can two groups maybe, you know, be on the beach first and another group do something else.

So one of the other teachers said, you know what, let's do a scavenger hunt. I have one. So we all converged on the beach, but at different, in different places. And we'll say three schools went off with Kari for the first part of it. And then the other two schools, we went off separately on our scavenger hunts.

And we had such a great day. I will never forget the kids excitement at actually being out on the beach and being with other schools. Oh my God, we're meeting other schools. I play football with him. I know her. It was just amazing. And it just lit something I think within the children's souls that they were able to do that. And it was really important I think as well that it was local, that it was on our doorstep, that it was for everybody.

That meant an awful lot to us as teachers and also to the kids.

[00:13:53] **Leslie Ryan:** I think as well, on the beach, you know, this was an, it's an environment that they're all very, very familiar with. They go there after school, but very, very different context, being there with the artist and actually gathering materials.

And again, post COVID when, you know, you're enabled to read the landscape differently, to make your art materials from the landscape, to be able to apply them. Do you know, it was, very powerful, I suppose, thankfully, we didn't have another wave of COVID, so they didn't have to test, you know, but they would, again, relate to their ordinary everyday, uh, just very differently.

[00:14:33] **Karen Brogan:** So from that then, in the five schools, okay, we worked with Kari on a pigment and ink making workshop, okay, and again, as Leslie said, this was such an eye opener for the kids, that you could make materials, you know, to paint with that didn't come out of a bottle. You know, that they could make it themselves.

So much so that the kids who had done this, Kari explained about, you know, using buttercups and dandelions and everything else, that the kids actually went home. And these were boys who were very involved in science. They'd be very scientific thinkers, but they got the science of it. And they went home and they said, Oh, Ms Brogan, I went in and I was looking for copper in dad's shed.

And I was saying, God, I might please, you know, right. And you see, teacher, look there, the butterflies in the fields next to the yard. These were conversations on yard duty. Could we go in now and collect a load of those? And could we go into the staff room and start boiling them up? You know, and I'm kind of going, this is just amazing.

It was just fantastic. because the kids saw the art and, and as the teacher, like Kari was fantastic because as she had explained the procedure to the kids, then she was writing down the steps. So straight away, the link into procedural writing, the link into explanation writing. This is what we love as teachers as well, that we can see that these links can be made seamlessly. But the links into science were unbelievable, you know, and these were the boys, they would be kind of going; paint, right! You know, but because it was the science part of it, they just loved it. They really, really did. They took it to heart.

And that's just, you know, uh, again, Kari, gifted each of us with a piece of copper and we had the water and vinegar solution. And that bottle came home with me and was topped up for the whole of the summer. And then had to come back to school again in September to be checked. Uh, teacher, how's the copper doing? You know, how's our ink coming on, you know?

[00:16:28] **Leslie Ryan:** I think it's important as well, and was important for Kari, in terms of her own practice, her own professional practice, and being able to, I suppose, be true to it and kind of break it down in terms of working with children and young people.

Just to note, under the creative clusters, Kari didn't have much experience of working with children and young people. That was actually a bit of a risk we took. We had discussions about that. But she was really interested. She had absolutely done a number of socially engaged projects and work in the community, but not specifically with children. For her it was obviously also very important that it was in keeping with her own practice and that it would inform her practice.

[00:17:21] **Karen Brogan:** So then one of the things that I really really wanted to do was not only you know, bring the children in the different schools together, but bring the teachers together.

I suppose I'm a huge believer in teacher CPD because I've been designing and delivering and facilitating teacher CPD for donkey's years. So I really felt it was so important that we could get all of the schools together. So we managed it. We had a cyanotype workshop with Kari and all of the teachers, well almost all of the teachers and the SNAs from the five schools came together in my classroom, and we had the most amazing afternoon making the cyanotypes.

But we decided that while this was really important, you know, professionally, that also the social aspect of it was really important. So we organised food, and we just had the most marvelous afternoon. And it did, not only did the teachers leave with something that they could bring straight away back to school, but it also worked on, I suppose, developing relationships, that the relationship that we had as a cluster committee, now had started moving out among the other teachers in the schools as well. And remember, this was, would have been the first time in a good few years that we would have actually come together as a group of professionals. So it was well worth it, and we had a fabulous day.

[00:18:41] **Leslie Ryan:** I, I think as well, just, uh, about the teacher CPD is massively important, particularly around clusters, or as artists, you have a huge opportunity. You might be having a conversation with a teacher about a class or a particular project but actually, like, feel free to open up those conversations, suggest things like CPD because there are budgets there for them through clusters and things to do CPD. And what they don't know they will not ask for, you know, and that's really important because there's scope and once they attend a CPD and have, you know, get the benefits and enjoy it, the bug is bitten and, you know, the buy in and visibility and everything lifts within the school. The culture can change within a school.

[00:19:26] **Karen Brogan:** Absolutely. And it was, you know, that day, everybody was so tentative initially, and by the time that the workshop was finished and we were sitting down, I mean, you couldn't, typical teachers, you couldn't hear yourself think with the noise, but that was a really, really good sign, and it was fabulous.

That was year one, and then into year two, one of the things that we had looked at, I suppose, is because we were in a rural situation, we wanted to make the children aware of galleries and that art was out there as well. So luckily, we have the Model Niland on our doorstep, and thanks to Leslie coordinating with Marie Louise, we managed to organize a day where all five schools went to the Model Niland for a visit.

It was amazing. Uh, Andy was so very kind because Andy opened up his studio for us. Lorna Watkins also facilitated a workshop with us as well. So we just had, the kids had a fabulous time. Again, there was a bit of organizing the nuts and bolts, but like, you know, a WhatsApp group is amazing and what you can do where there's a will, there's a way.

You know, and our cluster meetings, we have a number of cluster meetings a year and really those cluster meetings for the committee are so vital because we, you know, we talk on the WhatsApp group, but when we get together, it's such a sociable event, but we really look at, okay, where are we going to go from here?

What would we like to do? And maybe on the day we don't make all of the decisions, but then through the WhatsApp, we kind of work the decisions from there. WhatsApp and Zoom have been fantastic for us. you know. So just to add on from a teacher point of view is that one of the things that we were looking at in school with the primary languages curriculum at that time was the whole area of disciplinary literacy.

So because we wanted the children to get the most out of their visit to the gallery. I put together a reflective booklet. So before we went, you know, that the children, we had all of the, I suppose, the terms. Um, a little bit about the Model Niland, a piece about Andy, a piece about Lorna. So that when the children went there, that they knew, they had some knowledge and that prior knowledge is hugely important.

And then just, there were loads of different ways for the children to reflect afterwards. So things like, you know, sentence stems, pick out three, your three favourite things, respond, drawing a picture. And then there were a whole lot of different ways, responding, you know, writing poetry, writing a little piece.

So again, to give the teachers and the pupils something, to, you know, work on with the children beforehand to make it more meaningful. And also, this was a very good way of capturing the children's voice. We were very conscious of that throughout the whole adventure, of finding different ways of capturing the children's voice.

And this was one of the ways that really, really helped because it was on paper and we had it. And with the group that were in my school, they each had a sketchbook and that sketchbook became their reflective diary that they were able to write or draw or sketch after each event that happened and captured that learning along the journey and they loved it.

Those sketchbooks were so precious, you know.

[00:22:44] **Leslie Ryan:** The visit to the gallery actually was very important in many ways, just in terms of developing a literacy and a confidence with the kids as well about, you know, you're looking at finished exhibitions. You're actually in a studio with an artist and seeing how, and talking with him in terms of how, what his working day is and discussing his work. And you're doing a workshop then down on the floor with Lorna Watkins.

And so those experiences and other BLAST and other residencies that have happened, the kids who are involved, their exposure and their language and confidence is building all the time, actually from, from just being part of the cluster.

[00:23:23] **Karen Brogan:** And then out into the community as well. A parent in our school came up with this idea of, what about a scary woods walk?, but that could happen during the day for smaller kids, because there would have been one in Ballina that was a night time one and it was absolutely fabulous. But the smallies couldn't go because it was too, so she came to us with that and straight away the cluster kicked into action.

And all of the schools in the cluster said yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. And nearly every school within a 10 mile radius got involved and we created, in Kilglass Woods, this fabulous walk. Now it's an annual event. Yeah, it's become an annual event. Bigger and better.

[00:24:04] **Leslie Ryan:** The Scary Woods Walk by kids for kids. Yes. In Kilglass House.

[00:24:09] **Karen Brogan:** Yeah. And again, with the whole idea of ecology and biodiversity, and we're all green flag schools, we were all looking at, you know, recyclable materials, things that could be reused, and we were thinking, well, if we do it this year, can we use it again next year? And we did.

So that is how it has moved out into the community, and which led us on to, I suppose, the absolute highlight of our Cluster Journey was working with Tom Meskall on a beach installation on Inniscrone Beach at Sunset, where Tom worked with each of the five schools based on the legend of the Selkie, the seal who, you know, the seal person who can shed their seal coat, come on land and become a human being and then put the seal coat on and go back again. Again, it was through contacts that Leslie had that, you know, we were able to get in touch with Tom, but we formed such an amazing working relationship.

[00:25:07] **Leslie Ryan:** Directions we were going, we knew we wanted to get back onto the beach again and we were discussing artists that we could use or work with to, that would help us to be able to continue with that cycle. And Tom was working on Longford Lights at the time and we just thought, uh, we made contact with Tom to come on board.

And we have been kind of discussing some, one of the other schools, Rathlee was working also on the mermaid's beds. They were doing coastal walks with the artist Jo Lewis on one of their BLASTs. And they were doing big charcoal drawings based on the mermaid's beds. And Tom suggested, Um, what about the Selkies?

And we were doing a bit more exploration and that there was actually an extraordinary story we unearthed about the Selkies and Enniscrone Pier. So, we kind of looped it back again and we began to kind of explore, um, also, Song of the Sea, looking at the work of Cartoon Saloon, looking at animation, and being able to kind of bring those into classroom lesson plans and that.

[00:26:13] **Karen Brogan:** And we wanted to finish with a splash. I think we always had this notion from our very first meeting, that at the end of our two year journey, we wanted something, whether it was an exhibition or whether it was something in Kilglass Woods, that we wanted something that was big and bold and made a splash.

And again, as Leslie said, we were so lucky that we were able to come full circle back to Enniscrone Beach again. So Tom worked with each of the schools. Each school made, um, four of the selkies. So in our school we made jellyfish. The kids also made lanterns with Tom. And then other schools made, like, rocks.

Uh, one of the small schools made a huge lighthouse. So we had a whole kind of story going on, a whole backdrop. We worked with Rossa Ó Snodaigh then, who came in and put a soundscape to the whole show, so that there was a performance aspect. Every school had, we had chosen Amhrán na Farraige, and every school had taught that to the children, and then Rossa came in and he worked on putting a soundscape with that.

This all happened within a very short time frame. This all happened within about four to six weeks. And then on the 14th of May, I loaded up the car, as did all the other teachers, and we brought everything to Enniscrone Beach, at sunset, and like this was our performance space. Leslie and I both feel that there's something very Neolithic about this, kind of newgrange-y.

Um, we had documented this. So we had two photographers and we also had video drone footage made and we're going to show you the video at the very end. And then you see here the lanterns, every single child in every school was involved. So Rossa worked with every class in every school working on the soundscape for the performance.

And then every single child made a lantern using a glass jar. So it was a project that Tom had done with Cavan Arts during lockdown. So we did it in every classroom, in every school, so that there was like a pathway of light into the performance area. And then we all gathered on the beach. There was great fun choosing tides and dates and everything else. And then communions, GAA matches, hurling, the whole lot. It was great fun.

[00:28:43] **Leslie Ryan:** But then we got to the beach. I'd just like to say as well that, um, this happened on a Sunday. So all of the teachers, everybody involved, all of the parents, they were not in the duty of care of their teachers, they all came, the community, it was absolutely extraordinary.

Like to see everybody out, and my memory as well is, this weekend was actually flanked by two big GAA events in West Sligo, that West Sligo teams were involved in. So it was extra special in my mind that schools out in West Sligo are very poorly served by the arts. They, you know, they have to go to Ballina, they have to go, you know. Unless they have, they're engaged with a program within their schools, it's not going on. You know, it's not going on.

So like, it's really so impactful, like, and what, what it has meant. And, uh, being in the community myself, I would normally never get to hear the kind of on the ground talk about Cluster Creative Projects because I'm geographically too far away from it. I was hearing it everywhere; in the shop, by the coast. Everyone, people, people wouldn't have a clue I had anything to do with it or knew anything about it. ‘...and did you see that? And oh my god, we were at this the other night, oh my god..!’ There were people coming up to me on the beach that night who were just out for a jog, normally. And, you know, were really taken aback because it was very subtle. It doesn't look very subtle, but actually all of this happened over about an hour and a half.

Not, maybe not the setting up, but it happened at dusk. It was sunset. It is a light installation and it, it came and it went. So all of the people involved there now, like Tom and Carmel was involved, Karen, all of the teachers, the teachers and all the staff members who set it up and that. But the kids were invited for an hour with their parents.

They came and they explored it, they kind of participated in it and then they went home, you know, and then it vanished. I think that's very powerful when something like that happens in a community.

[00:30:45] **Karen Brogan:** And there was complete buy in, from every parent, from every child, in every school, in every class. It was fabulous.

[00:30:52] **Leslie Ryan:** Tom's up there now, I think, just to mention, he was so important in terms of being the right artist to, to be able to work with the cluster at this point. His practice is, he is so experienced in community arts and socially engaged practice that he gave the teachers great confidence, being able to hold a space for something where you can have 300 people at it and loads of kids and kind of free, you know, in, in terms of like, it's such a skill.

I think a very different way of working as well, a very different kind of an artist to work with and fabulous. Yeah.

[00:31:29] **Karen Brogan:** He's just, you know, and again, the friendships that developed were not only amongst ourselves, but with the artists as well, with Rossa who worked with us. He brought another element to it because he's a Gaeilgeoir and so am I, so when we were in school, we were speaking Irish together. When we were on the beach, we were speaking Irish together. When we texted in our WhatsApp group, there was always the bits of Gaeilge going on.

[00:31:55] **Leslie Ryan:** I never had a clue about it!

[00:31:57] **Karen Brogan** She did. She only pretended! But there were so, so many layers. And again, You know, um, in, in our schools, the big thing about this, that in each of the schools, creativity is front and center. It's not a sideline. It's there. So much so that my post of responsibility in the school is creativity. You know, that's how valued it is. Yeah. That's how valued it is in our school communities, you know, and that even now we've had a change of personnel in some of the schools. And even now, you know, I get phone calls saying, look Karen, you know, I'm applying for this, what do you think? …do you know?’ - it's fabulous.

I suppose another unintended outcome is that last August I took a chance and I applied to be a Teacher Creative Associate and I have been since last September. So, you know, personally, it has meant an awful lot to me, as well as all of the seeds that are planted in all of the kids.

And in just the different ways of working, and I was very taken, Triona, about the way you spoke about, you know, the children and how they reacted, because in each of our schools, whatever the circumstances, we would have a lot of, you know, broad range of neurodiversity and the fact that involving all children, no matter, you know, at all ages, at all levels, that you just get to see the child that something sparks in their soul and the child who might never offer an opinion, or put a hand up, or talk.

Anna, you saw it when you were with us, that those children get leadership roles and you can just see the shoulders going back. I can't express enough how much of a difference that makes to a child, and that's what it's all about. That's what it's all about, and that creativity is a springboard into so much more, right across the curriculum, and I suppose we've tried to develop that from the teacher point of view as well.