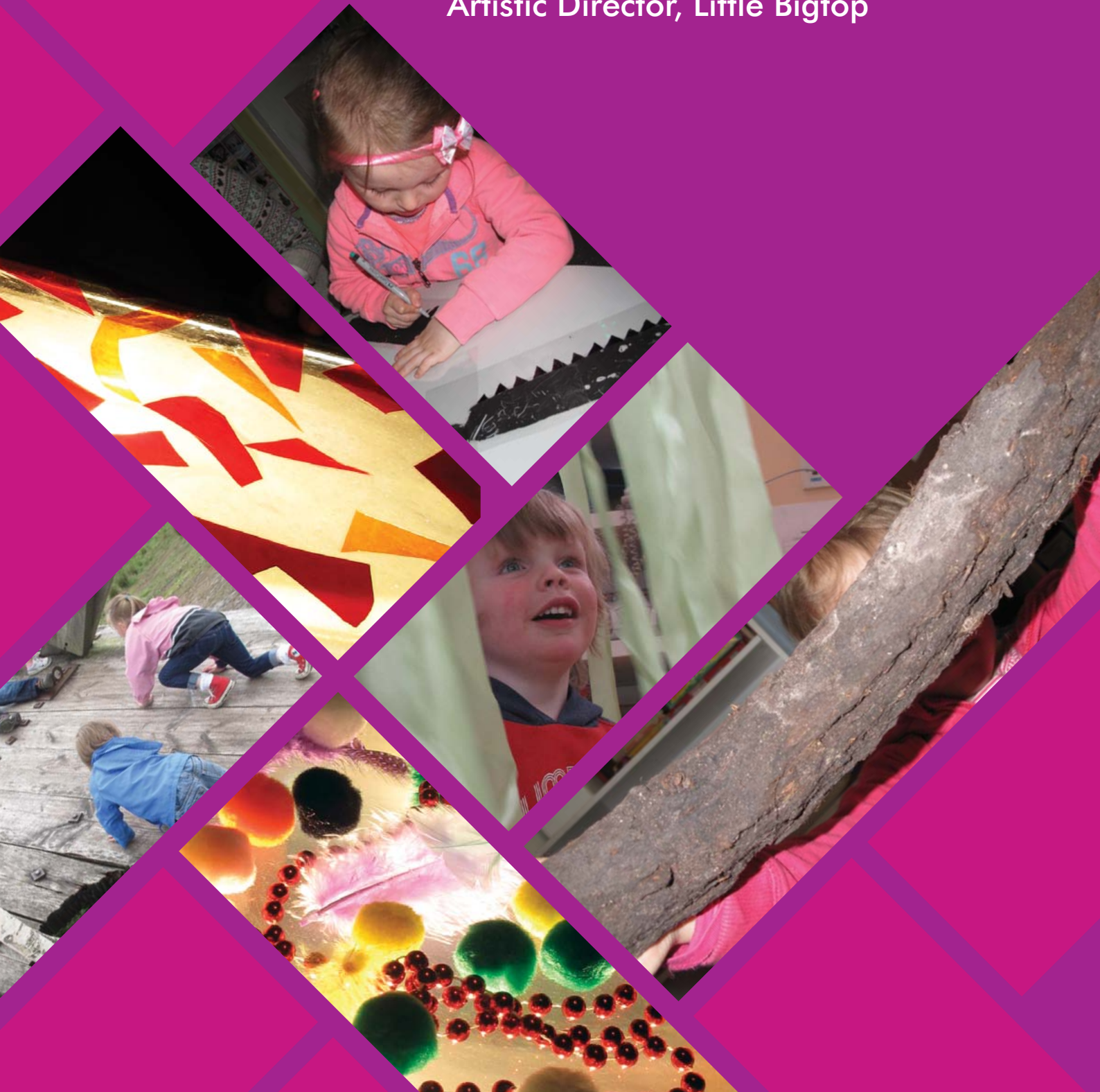


An Early Years Residency

# Little Bigtop Children's Theatre Company in partnership with North Tipperary Arts Office

An account of our approach,  
by Joanna Williams,  
Artistic Director, Little Bigtop



# Preface

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North Tipperary County Council's Arts Office with funding support from The Arts Council and in partnership with North Tipperary County Childcare Committee led this collaborative project with the aim of contributing to the development of arts practice for an early year's audience. The development of practice in this area has been a key element of North Tipperary's Arts Strategies around Education and the Arts in recent years. The project also supports the development of arts organisations based in the North Tipperary area in the development of new work.

This residency project placed Little Bigtop's Joanna Williams and collaborating artists in two childcare centres to work with staff, children and parents to develop a series of projects and creative experiences from March- July 2012.

## **The Arts Office vision for this project was to explore the following objectives:**

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**To explore child led play and learn with staff and parents.**

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**To explore ways to engage with children and create playful experiences which engage all the senses.**

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**To be an investigation into using the arts to engage with the very young.**

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**To inform the creative process by which Little Bigtop will create a new piece of work for early years.**

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A key partner in the delivery of this project was North Tipperary County Childcare Committee who worked with us to ensure the project was meeting the requirements of early childhood development and guided the arts office and artists in identifying and ensuring the project benefitted children's learning and linked creatively with the four themes of Aistear (the curriculum framework for early years) of Wellbeing, Identity & belonging, Communicating & Exploring and thinking. The County Childcare Committee also supported us in ensuring the project met and adhered closely to Siolta, the National Quality Framework across all aspects of practice in early childhood care and education (ECCE) settings where children aged birth to six years are present.

Our thanks to all who contributed to this project in any way and in particular all of the children in both centres who participated and shared their play and ideas. Our thanks to our funders, North Tipperary County Council and The Arts Council and to our project partners and organisers; Súgradh Childcare led by Maria Gaynor with Geraldine O'Toole and Louise Higgins; Nenagh Childcare Centre led by Noreen Fogarty with Helen Taffinder and Dawn Williams, Little Bigtop led by Joanna Williams with Mary O'Neill, Aoife Carry and Paul Haswell; North Tipperary County Childcare Committee led by Aileen Healy, Co-ordinator with Edel Condon and Carmel Murray and Rosemary Gleeson, North Tipperary Arts Office.

This report documents the processes and records the learning outcomes from these inter-related projects across artforms and provides valuable learning for further work in this area of practice.

Melanie Scott, Arts Officer,  
North Tipperary County Council

# Introduction

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Little Bigtop, is a children's theatre company, founded in 1999 by Artistic Director, Joanna Williams. The company makes playful, interactive, visual theatre for Early Years (3 – 5 year olds) Since 2010 the company has been based in North Tipperary and is exploring an ensemble approach for performing and creating new work for the very young.

The residency ran for 5 months from March 2012 – July 2012. Little Bigtop worked in two children's centres, Súgradh and Nenagh Childcare Centre, to deliver a series of projects and creative experiences. The project was led by Artistic Director Joanna Williams, with Mary O'Neill, a regular performer with the company and Aoife Carry, director of our existing work. We worked together as an artistic team to deliver these projects.

## **The residency aims were:**

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**To be a joint learning investigation between early years staff and artists aiming to enhance the professional practice of both.**

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**To explore child led play and learn from this approach both as artists and early years staff.**

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**To explore ways to engage with children and create playful experiences which engage all the senses.**

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**To be an investigation into using the arts to engage with the very young.**

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**To inform the creative process by which Little Bigtop will create a new piece of work for early years.**

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There were four projects which made up the residency and each explored different aspects of the techniques and tools which Little Bigtop use when making work for the very young. We explored Shadow Play with Súgradh, Visual Story Making with Nenagh Childcare Centre and then we delivered a project based around one material, Turf, with both Súgradh and Nenagh Childcare Centre, interested in finding out how one idea would develop and possibly take us on different journeys with the two groups.

What follows is the story of each project, the fun we had, the discoveries we made and the challenges we wrestled with. As artists we found the process rich and exciting, there were many magical moments and occasional moments where we questioned what we were doing, but without these we could not have learned and gained so much from the process.

The collaboration with the inspirational staff at both Súgradh and Nenagh Childcare Centre was invaluable, we relied on their guidance and observations with the children to inform and evaluate our practice.

The children we worked with, 16 in Súgradh and 18 in Nenagh constantly surprised us, and their excitement, engagement and willingness to explore the world reminded us exactly why making theatre for this age group is so freeing. Their lack of boundaries and set ideas of how the world should be, of what has to happen next, constantly took us on surprising and delightful twists and turns, something we definitely want to reflect in our work.

I hope you enjoy reading about our adventures with the children and staff.



# Catching our Shadow with Súgradh

## **Creative Team:**

Lead Artist, Joanna Williams,  
Assistant Artists, Mary O'Neill,  
Paul Haswell.

## **Súgradh Team:**

Louise Higgins,  
Geraldine O'Toole

**Over six weeks we explored shadow, movement and music with the children. We visited the nursery for one day, once a week.**

## **Introducing shadow**

By way of introduction we introduced the shadow and the screen with a short performance for the children showing a scene by the sea and journeying under the water. When the performance finished we invited the children to see the projector and the puppets and to use the equipment themselves.

As the project progressed this underwater theme recurred, very much initiated by the children, but we saw how this initial choice, meant as a demonstration resonated powerfully with the children.

## **Finding our shadows**

The children looked at their own shadows and moved to a whole variety of music.

As the children began to relate the movement of the shadow on the screen to their own movement they became really expressive. Their shadows freed them up to move. They were their own audience as they watched their shadows.

**The children initiate a game of musical statues with their shadows. At this point we are no longer using the screen but watching our shadows as they fall on the floor and the ceiling and the walls.**

## **We can be giants**

We used the hand held light to grow the children's shadows. They loved watching themselves become big giants as tall as the room and watching each other grow. Their amazement at seeing themselves so big reminded us how small they are in the world.

**The children love it when the sun shines in the window and they can see their shadows on the walls and floor. Childcare Worker, Súgradh**

## **Colours and textures**

The children choose different materials and colour gels to put on the projector. Small items like feathers, tiny felt balls, net and mesh and coloured gels were enormous on the screen.

Sometimes we used a big screen pegged to a washing line, but we also just let the shadows cover the room, the floor, the walls, the ceiling and the whole space was transformed.

The children lay on the floor to look at the projections on the ceiling. They played in the shadows created on the floor too.

**One child felt he was in a rage with some of the shadows. He saw shadows of a spider web and felt like the spider was going to come down and go into his mouth.**

**Another child saw shadows of leaves and said they were tickling him.**

**The children went down on the floor to touch the shadows, then they noticed that the patterns were on their bodies too. "Look I'm caught in a net!"**

## **Catching shadows**

During outside play on the first week we drew around our shadows with chalk. Later we wanted to develop this idea and took some mobile screens outside so we could catch our shadows.

**One child wants to know why his shadow is doing what he does, its stuck to him, he wants it off.**



There was a boat shaped climbing structure in the middle of the grass in the centre, so we pegged one screen to the boat, this prompted requests for fish. We cut simple fish shapes and stuck them to small sticks, soon the children were directing how they wanted their fish to be.

**I want a smile.  
Can I have a bigger eye!**

Games emerged with the shadow play and also with the fish as puppets. The children found places where they could see their puppets shadows on walls, the ground as well as our screens.

**At dinner time the following week, four of the children were sitting at the table and the sun was shining on the table – they started making shadows with their hands and heads! Childcare Worker, Súgradh**

**Music**

We'd been using recorded music throughout this project to encourage movement and play with the shadows. We wanted the children to be able to make their own soundscapes for the shadow. Musician, Paul Haswell met the group for the first time. We explored musical ideas of volume and rhythm with play and movement.

We looked at lots of unusual instruments that make different sounds. Everyone took turns to play. We listened to the associations the children made with the different sounds. It gave us a real insight into the children's experiences in the world.

**Transforming the whole environment with music and light.**

We'd observed how much the children enjoyed it when the whole space was transformed by the shadow. This happened whenever we took down the big screen and allowed the shadows to fall on the walls, the ceiling and the floor. The fish and the sea were also strong themes that kept resurfacing. So we decided to explore this theme with music, shadow and play.

**Kabassa**  
*It sounds like rain or sugar  
I think its margarine!  
It sounds like apple bassa*

**Reko Reko**  
*It sounds like a saw,  
It sounds like a pig,*

**Bells**  
*It sounds like an oven*



**The following week a group of children are playing in the construction corner, they make a big circle of magnets with lots of balls inside. They are rolling them about and listening to the sounds the rolling balls make and comparing it to the sound of the sea. Childcare Worker Súgradh**

**The experience has really helped some of the quieter children to come out of their shells, they are also becoming more and more involved in our discussions on what we did and saw. Areas such as their language and social skills are really benefiting from the sessions. Childcare Worker Súgradh**

**Sounds of the sea**

Paul gave all the children shakers to make the sound of the rain, we took turns to make the thunder clap with one of the instruments, the rain got louder and louder, we moved together as a river and finally we all poured out our shakers into Pauls bodhrán and listened to the sound of the sea. The children spontaneously lay down and closed their eyes to wait for the sea sound to wash over them.

**Water and waves**

We used fabrics and other scrap materials to make waves and sea weed. The children had made coloured slides in a previous session to explore colour. They used these slides to cast blue and green shadow around the room. We moved like fish and other sea creatures in our under the sea watery world

**Fish Puppets**

In the afternoon we made Rainbow Fish. The children drew their fish with chalk. The adults cut them out staying accurate to the child's drawing. Together we helped the children add the coloured gels.

The children were really confident with shadow at this stage. They used the projector and the small screen to see the fish shadows, we made a pond with the cloth and swam the shadow fish in the pond. Then children started to place their fish on the projector to see them transformed into enormous fish on the ceiling.

**The play and exploration with the fish is directed by the children. It is amazing to see how well they understand the shadow as they explore and initiate lots of different ways of looking at their fish.**

**Learning and Outcomes**

- Sessions are more noisy and boisterous than staff are used to, it takes time for the team to learn to trust this.
- Flexibility is key, being able to respond to what is capturing the children's imaginations may mean leaving the initial plan behind.
- Learning to really see what was going on for individual children, what we came to call 'being present', made us far more responsive and able to properly allow the children to lead the session.
- Spending time on reflection, discussion and recording observations was as valuable as the time spent with the children. It was only with this that we could really see what was happening and plan follow on sessions that pick up on where the children's enthusiasm was taking us.
- Staffs observations of how the project was influencing the children's play and activities when we weren't there was invaluable, it helped us see what was really resonating with them.
- The nursery is busy, sometimes there are 18 children in our room. We find ways to work with smaller groups.
  - If it's sunny, some of the group can go outside and small groups stay inside.
  - Sometimes we work outside, using the sun for our shadow making.
  - We experiment with transforming the play shed and taking turns with small groups.
- We learnt to be aware of the detail in every choice we made, the children pick up on the smallest details.
  - If we're going outside then part of the experience will be putting on shoes.
  - The theme from our initial shadow show kept returning throughout the project because the children reacted to that.

A photograph of two young children, a girl and a boy, sitting at a table covered with crumpled newspaper and fabric. The girl is on the left, wearing a school uniform, and the boy is on the right, wearing a dark blue hoodie. They appear to be engaged in a craft activity. The background shows other children and a bright, indoor setting.

# Visual Story Making with Nenagh Childcare Centre

Over six weeks we explored story making with the children using fabrics and simple paper puppets to visually transform and stimulate play. We visit the childcare centre one day a week.

#### **Creative Team:**

Lead Artist, Joanna Williams,  
Assistant Artist, Aoife Carry

#### **Nenagh Team:**

Helen Taffinder

#### **Session overview**

Each session began with the whole group, introducing the theme for the day and exploring it with combinations of a story, puppet demonstration as well as movement and drama. Following this we worked with smaller groups in turn using the fabrics and materials as stimulation. In the afternoons we were present in one area of the room amongst other activities and we worked with the children to recreate significant moments from the morning's play in a 'small world' format or to make puppets of the characters from earlier stories.

Feedback from Childcare Staff, Nenagh included the following observations:

**I really liked how the same story was told in 3 different ways.**

**I was amazed that the children had remembered so much of the story because at times they had appeared distracted by the props. I was especially surprised that one child had retained the 'moral' of the story.**

**The children were really excited to see what would be in the middle of the circle when they opened their eyes.**

#### **Drama and movement**

The drama and movement is used each week to introduce our theme for the day. It also helped us to get to know the children and have some time to play together as a whole group. We used most of the room but the children were always free to access other activities during this time.

#### **Making a story visual.**

We often describe the work *Little Bigtop* makes for young children as 'Visual Story Telling'. We use the colour and textures of different fabrics to visually represent images and create a moving visual picture of the elements of the story. On the first day we tell the children a story and prompted the children to participate in the story by choosing cloths from our box of fabrics to become the various elements of the story.

#### **Making our own stories**

We selected certain fabrics and materials to act as a catalyst for a story. To get us going we simply asked 'What's this?' The improvisation and play began from this point. As the fabric became part of our imagined environment or created a new character we interacted with it. As we played, we used open questioning to develop the narrative, and intermittently retold the story so far to the children.

**It was really interesting to see how the stories developed and what things interested the children. The 'fire' paper was very exciting, the children seemed to love the sound and texture of it (actually I did myself!)**

**The children were very animated as they retold the stories and they were all adding their own bits in. I didn't need to prompt the children at all. They obviously really enjoyed the session.**



I was particularly impressed with the snow story. The children were really interested in the fabrics and I loved the way one girl made a snow angel and then went on to put a face on it. Childcare Worker, NCC

“The pond was a blanket, we waved it really hard when the wind came, I was the wind, I liked that best”

“The pond did go really up and down”

“I liked jumping in the muddy puddles with wellies on, Helen didn’t you get stuck in the mud”

#### The games in the stories

It was from allowing the children to play with the material that the narratives emerged. At times the play dominated and when it ended we told the children the story that we had observed in their play, other times the exact language of the story came from the children responding to our open questions. Most of the time both these things would happen in tandem.

The softness of a big fleecy white fabric instantly made everyone want to lie on it, then one child said she was making a snow angel and suddenly we were in the snow. Another child found some mats and all the children started to scoot across the room on the small mats sledging, the play continued in this way. When we were done we told the children the story of the Snowy Day made from what we observed in their play.

Sitting in a big circle around a blue cloth our questioning with the children created the story of The Empty Pond and the Blow Away Ducks. The language of this story was all directly from the children’s answers. In the re-telling of the story a game emerged which we played many times. The game involved taking turns to be ducks while others billowed the fabric to make waves and used giant paper fans to make the wind, until finally the ducks ‘blow away’. Everyone wanted turns at the different roles so we told the story many times and played the game again and again.

#### Developing a story in a ‘small world’ or ‘table top’ puppetry

In one particular story from the morning play lots of pieces of brown cloth had become muddy puddles and the children had spent a lot of time jumping from one to the next. Later we made lots of small pieces of brown cloth and placed them on one of the activity tables. Children came to join us at the table voluntarily amongst other activities. We recalled the story with the children, using our fingers to be little people jumping in the puddles. From this small world, table top play, the story developed further. We were using stickers to make eyes above our fingers to make puppet characters of the jumping children, when a child put these eyes onto one of the muddy puddles, suddenly the puddles could answer back and really rich additions to the story emerged.

**The most successful part of the session was the puppets and the story of the muddy puddles. The children were mesmerized by it and even though they had acted out the story themselves a good few times, they were really focussed on the story.** Childcare Worker, NCC



**I have never really used puppets in my work but I could really see the value in using them with the children. I liked the idea that they were made out of newspaper, quite crudely, but this did not seem to matter to the children. They were made really quickly so the children didn’t have to wait to see their story come to life. This is something I will definitely try again in the future** Childcare Worker, Nenagh Childcare Centre (NCC)

#### Retelling the children’s story to the whole group.

We took a story developed from morning play and added to in a table top session with the children and decided to make a table top puppet show of the story to perform for the children. The children sat and watched the show, completely absorbed by it. Most of them had been involved in some part of the creation of the story either in the morning play or in the table top recreation of it. We knew they recognized moments in the show that they had been part of creating because they called out and commented as they watched. They asked to see it a second and third time.

On the fourth request to ‘do it again’ we turned the puppets over to the children. They stood around the table cooperating to share the different puppets and roles. After a number of turns doing this they began to play with the puppets and change the narrative. The ideas and the stories enacted with the puppets were rich and the focus and concentration of the children was really intense, they were really inside the world of their story.



#### Textures and touch

The sensual element of our play with the fabrics and materials was really strong for the children. It particularly engaged with some of the younger children and those for whom English was not a first language. We saw that we could make more of this exploration of texture, touch and sound within different themes. Seeds grew into plants made of feather boas, crinkly noisy plastic, ribbons and so on. We put tissue paper on a hoop so children could take turns to hatch from an egg, the tissue paper gave a great sound as they burst through.

#### Building an Installation

The interaction with the different materials and the sensory stimulation they provided was very powerful. So we decided to make a more permanent installation in the shed which built on this so that we could immerse ourselves in a transformed world. The shed was small and although we take small groups there, it always felt too small for the energy, excitement and stimulation being created inside. Keeping this energy safe became my focus and at times took over from being able to follow with the children in their play. We realised that we hadn't thought through exactly how the shed would be used when we created it, we also felt we could have involved the children more in its creation in order to give them a sense of how it fitted into the project.

**We loved the seed work and the flower growing in the pot. The children were very keen to have a turn, and they all had a chance to have a turn.**

**"My favourite part was making the flowers"**

**"We turned into spiky flowers"**

**"I liked making the flowers, we needed rain and sun"**

**"We were pretending to be seeds"**



**"It's full of apple trees and you can shake them and the apples fall down"**

**"There's a wiggly thing and it changed to a butterfly, it was a caterpillar"**

**"There's loads of grass, so you have to take your shoes off"**

**"And there are trees with leaves on"**

**"It's got loads of plants growing everywhere"**

**"We used telescopes to find treasure"**

**"I was a monkey"**

#### Learning outcomes

- We saw the impact of giving young children the chance to have their voice heard, this was really brought home to us by the level of engagement the children had any time we retold or performed their stories back to them.
- We learnt to be one activity amongst many, this allowed the children choice and freedom, and offered the option to opt out as well as in. Great work happened in these moments as the children who were there, were there because they were really engaged with the activity.
- The value of play and games was reinforced, and we learnt how to really watch what was happening in the play which was stimulated by our interventions, we learnt to observe.
- We saw the strength of using the visual and sensual to overcome language barriers.
- When working in small spaces we learnt to keep it simple, and not to create over stimulation in these spaces.
- We experienced the value of reflective time, particularly with staff as well as artists.



# Stories from the Turf with Súgradh

#### **Creative Team:**

Lead artist: Joanna Williams,  
Assistant artists: Mary O'Neill  
& Aoife Carry,

#### **Súgradh Team:**

Louise Higgins,  
Geraldine O'Toole

**We explored one material,  
Turf. We visited the nursery  
for 5 days, once a week.**



#### **Discovering the turf**

Our first morning begins by placing 3 pieces of turf on one of the tables in the construction area. We wanted to share the discovery of the turf with the children, so rather than presenting it to them formally we waited for them to discover it for themselves. Most of the children were familiar with turf and we listened to their observations.

Two children begin hitting the turf on the table to make drums, bits of the turf crumble.

#### **Look, you can hear the crumbs**

You can make chocolate with melted turf, put water on it and smash it up and stir it around

The turf is doing fire lighting, it comes from the fire and the chimney.

We laid a trail of turf that led us to the play shed, where we had a huge mound of turf. Then we waited for the children to discover it. There was huge excitement as the whole group found the trail, picking up the pieces as we went and finally coming upon the huge pile of turf in the shed.

#### **Making stories**

We let the children play freely with the turf. We observed their play closely and as themes established themselves we began to interact, we asked them about the environments they were building and used our skills with object manipulation to make 'puppet' representations of the characters they introduced.

Stories were wide and varied.

**This is a volcano, an angry hot volcano. A flower grows on the top. Chop, chop, chop the meanie chops it down. More flowers grow and are destroyed by the meanie until a Crocodile snaps up the meanie.**

**A bridge takes us on a journey to Africa where we meet a snake and a lion who tries to eat the snake but eventually settles for some sausages.**

**A pod of whales, being chased by a shark, are led by a friendly octopus to his castle, a big triangle fire castle. There they are looked after by the babysitter!**



**This egg is a chicken's egg!  
The bones are from a dinosaur.  
They are from a skeleton  
or maybe a giraffe.  
Look, the necklace fits me!**

### Meeting Maura

We wanted to talk about the idea of how old the bog is and how the things that are found and preserved in the bog have a story to tell. In our research about the bog locally we found the story of the bog butter.

In order to introduce the idea of 'a long time ago', we created the character of old Maura. We prepared the children to meet Maura the day before. We told the children that Maura is old and that she would love to meet them. She can tell us what the bog was like when she was a little girl.

We transformed the play shed into Maura's home. The children helped her with her basket of turf and followed her inside. In a very conversational style Maura told the children about turf, and visiting the bog when she was young and then she told them the story of the day she found the bog butter.

**We have butter in fridges now,  
a long time ago is before fridges!**

**There's frogs in the bog too**

**You're very old maybe  
fifty a hundred.**

Maura tells how she carried the turf on her back in a basket  
**Oh that's like my school bag.**

Maura lifts out the pot of butter, what is it?  
**We need torches, because if we  
have torches we can see what it is.**

### Finding Objects

When the conversation with Maura was over she taught the children how to stack the turf to dry. In doing this task, stacking all the turf, each group found an object which they take back with them.

It was a nice day, so during playtime outside we displayed all the found objects in dishes at the picnic table. We also introduced our puppet Turf Man, he's as old as the bog itself and knows all the stories. The children come and go, interacting with the puppet and the objects.

### A day in Lough Boora

We went by bus to the Lough Boora Sculpture Park. The children shared cameras and took pictures of the things they saw. We observed what captured the children's interest. Sometimes it was the big sculptures, but often it was small details like a snail, or having wet socks, or having a go with the camera. We saw how our previous work with them impacted on the experience. The first time we were in an area with exposed turf they dig to see what they can find and they recognise some plants from our display. Their interaction with all of the sculptures was very physical, climbing and jumping as well as interacting with the sounds they made.

### The children's response

We projected the children's photos on a large screen in their room and looked at them together recalling the trip together. The children's perspective of the trip was really captured by the images they took, demonstrating their view point of sculptures and lots of pictures of friends and small details like puddles or insects were captured.

We also had a visit from Maura, she asked about their trip and the children told her their recollections but they are also keen to tell her the stories they made with the turf in previous sessions too.

Looking at projections of the children's photos  
**Triangles are for standing on and  
for making noise by standing on.**

**That's the train and it's stopped  
because the wheels don't work.**

**That's the crane pointing up.**

A standout moment was when one child stood in front of a large picture of the sculpture the children call 'The Crane'; she has used some of the playgroup construction materials to make a replica and she spent a long time in front of the image getting the angles just right on her sculpture.



Conversations with Maura  
**We found treasure  
and we ate stuff.  
chocolate sandwiches**

**We made a king  
octopus.  
We followed the turf  
Mary was pretending  
to be an old lady  
She can't lift the basket  
Her name was Maura**

On the bus  
**We just sat down  
watching stuff  
I fell asleep**

**We didn't see any  
turf at the bog  
We saw a train  
We saw triangles  
Water came out like  
melted turf (squishing  
feet into the bog )**

**We found numbers**  
(Reference to the LOVE /  
PEACE white bags in turf )

**We saw bean  
bags, and they  
were numbers  
and hopscotch**



### Re-telling the trip by making the sculptures

Prompted by the replica of one of the sculptures we spent a morning sitting at the construction table while the children came and went and together we remade many of the sculptures we saw at Lough Boora, using bricks, tiles, toy trains and other toys. It really demonstrated how well they remembered the sculptures and gave us an opportunity to hear their responses to them in a really natural way.

### Re-telling our stories from the turf with shadows

It was clear when the children recounted their memories to Maura that their stories from the turf were still very strong memories and experiences so we decided to help them retell those stories in shadow. The children have a strong relationship with shadow as that was the subject of the previous project. One comment from the previous project had stuck with us, *When are we going to make a story with the shadow?*, and so it seemed really fitting for this to be the final activity for our turf project with the children.

We used transparent images of the turf, to make the puppets with the children. The children worked with us in their groups from the storymaking sessions around a table. Together each group recalled their story, and we decided which characters to make. We worked with the children to make them. This round table discussion with the children also added and developed the stories further.

The artists used these puppets to perform the stories back to the children. The children really connected with their story, and were really engaged as it is brought to life. We finished by allowing the children to play with their puppets in the shadow, some re-enacted their story, others took the characters on a whole new journey.

### Learning and Outcomes

- This project was richer and more responsive by incorporating our learning from the first project.
- We learnt how to take a significant moment, initiated by a child and use it as a starting point for the next day's activity, this really made us understand what it meant to be child led. On this project it was how one child's response of making a sculpture from the previous days trip led to a wonderful table activity recreating our trip with other children too.
- In the vivid way that the children recalled their stories, we saw how affirming it was for them to have their voices and ideas heard in this way.



# Stories from the Turf with Nenagh Childcare Centre



**We explored one material, Turf.  
We visited the nursery for  
5 days over one week.**



## **Discovering the turf**

In the morning when the children arrive there is some turf on one of the activity tables.

## **It's made out of wood and mud**

## **I found a root**

**It has roots, this one is a caterpillar and the big one is a king caterpillar**

**This is wood, you have painted it black. It's like a bridge, a bridge over the water.**

## **It's for the fire**

**We have a fire at home, we just press the button and it comes on.**

**It has spider webs in it.**

**It's been dirty places in the bog. They let it dry and it turns into coal.**

**It looks like a plant**

**It looks like the green bit of a plant**

**Snack is here!**

## **Stories from the turf**

Later in the day the children found the trail of turf we had laid and were really excited to follow the trail to the shed and find the huge pile of turf. We let the children play and build with the turf and then began to ask what they had made, this began the story. As we joined in with this game the children's imaginations created new characters to appear in the story and we used the turf to make 'puppet' representations of the characters. The children created the dialogue and the action, often taking over the puppeteering too.

**The artists really engaged a child with special needs encouraging participation in some of the activities with the other children in a group setting. This child hadn't really joined in during the first sessions and I think it was that the unbroken week long programme allowed for this child to become more familiar with the artists over a concentrated period of time.** Childcare Worker, NCC

Stories were wide and varied and very detailed, reflecting the children's confidence with building narratives from the previous project.

**A bridge took the children to a spooky rainbow house where a bear lives. In the garden there is a crocodile asleep. The crocodile eats all the lettuce in the bears garden, so the bear is cross and gobbles up the crocodile!**



**The Land of Many Castles features lots of different castles with different characteristics, a Giant helps the children over a wall to get to the castles. The children explore the castles, when they see monsters in the last castle they jump back over the wall!**

**The Story of the Lonely Shark and the Smiley Boy starts with a journey on a boat, everyone is scared of the Shark except a Smiley Boy on the beach. The Shark is delighted to finally have a friend but when the Boy sees he's a shark, his smile turns upside down, the Shark is so upset to lose his friend that his eyes fall out!**

**Looking at the Plants**

We made a nature display of lots of plants and mosses found in the bog. To get the children really looking at them, we used pastels to draw and we looked at the fern on the big screen using shadow. The girls joined this activity for far longer than the boys, but when the children recalled the project with their teacher, it is interesting that it is one of the boys that recalls the activity.

**“Making green leafy thing pictures and red ones”**

**Meeting Maura**

The children were excited to meet Maura. They helped her bring the turf into her house and listened to her stories about collecting turf when she was young and how she found the Bog Butter. Then the children helped Maura stack all the turf to dry it and each group found an object.

**I liked Maura, she was funny and her stories were funny**

**Making a story with our found objects**

We place the objects on one of the activity tables and children join us to talk about them. We introduce the children to Turf Man and he told them that the egg had been in the turf for one hundred years. This began their story of the Magic Nest which used all three objects. We helped the children make shadow puppets and they performed the story for the rest of the group.

**Once upon a time there was an egg, it had been in the bog for 100 years. We watched the egg and watched the egg and watched the egg. The egg was in a gold nest because someone put magic powder on it and made the nest gold. It was a Dinosaur who sprinkled on the magic dust. The Dinosaur had spikes and was full of magic. Now the egg can grow and hatch, and out of the egg there comes a baby chick, and a baby rabbit and a baby lion and a baby dinosaur!**

**Trip to Lough Boora**

We went on the bus to Lough Boora Sculpture Park. The children shared cameras and took pictures of the things they saw. We spent the day really listening and observing the children's reactions. Again we are struck by how even the smallest details, putting on wellies or eating sandwiches had as much impact as the bigger moments like running in the willow maze or climbing on sculptures.

The children's interaction with the environment and the sculptures is physical, it would have been a very different experience for the children if the adults had not been comfortable with this. We kept the children safe while allowing them to explore.



**It was great that the children brought a second set of clothes on the trip because it meant that the children could get as wet and dirty as they wanted and we didn't have to tell them not to jump in puddles or splash in the mud”**

Childcare Worker, NCC

**The trip was great and not what I expected. It was fantastic that the children could climb on the sculptures.**

Childcare Worker, NCC

**Things we hear on the bus**

**‘That’s my house’**

**‘Where’s your house?’**

**‘I feel sick’**

**‘This is like the middle of nowhere’**

**Things we hear on the trip**

**‘I don’t like triangles, I prefer hearts and diamonds’**

**‘We found a snail’**

**‘Can we climb a little bit?’**

**‘I’m not climbing I’m only walking’**

**‘I’m driving, I was here first’**

**‘No I’m driving’**

**Recalling the trip**

We looked at the children's photos on the large screen to recall the trip together. It was a very sunny day so staff were keen for the children to go outside. Because we were outside we gathered the children's responses by joining in with the things they were doing like drawing on the chalkboard.

Maura sat on the bench so the children could tell her about their trip. Having Maura positioned so that the children could come and go and interact with her voluntarily worked well. The children's experience of Maura from the previous day meant that they knew that things were very different when she was a girl, this prompted them to explain things in great detail for her.



**We wore wellies, wellies are made of plastic, they keep the water in and they keep the water out!**

**We had triangle sandwiches and yoghurts with spoons in.**

**There were lots of puddles**

**The train was broken in real life, I pulled the brake and my brother fell off!**

We also used the big chalk boards in the playground to draw the things the children remembered from the trip. A group of children drew the train together.

**'I'm drawing the sculpture with the tree in it'**

**Making a show for the children.**

This project took place over one week and by Friday we could see that the children were tired. We'd been recording the children's responses and were really struck by the wonderful language and phrases they used when talking about their experiences. We decided to make a show for the children using all the things they told us about their trip. All the language of the show was from exact phrases and words that the children had used to describe their experiences. The show incorporated all the details they remembered, passing their own house on the bus, wearing wellies that keep the water in and keep the water out, the bus journey, the sandwiches and the sculptures, no climbing allowed on the pyramid!

For us the process of creating a script and a show in this way felt really exciting, it gave us a beautiful way to present the story of the trip to Lough Boora that was really true to the children's experience and far richer than anything that we would have made without the insight the children gave us.



**The shadow show was my favourite part as the children's reactions showed me that they remembered the whole week and everything that happened."**

Childcare Worker, NCC

**"The puppet show was great, it brought together the whole week and the children were really interested and obviously enjoyed the week."**

Childcare Worker, NCC

**"The train in the bog. Oh and when I saw the snail that said "I'm driving the bus" silly snail driving a bus.... " lots of laughing**

**Learning and outcomes**

- We became far more comfortable and prepared to respond to the unexpected, allowing the plan to change. Often it was when we did this that the most valuable and magical moments happened.
- By using a drawing activity with our 'nature display' we were able to get far more engagement and attention to the details of the plants and pictures we wanted the children to see.
- We saw how introducing a character from another time gave us a way to talk about ideas like 'a long time ago'
- We learnt the importance of having the confidence to let children explore while keeping them safe. On the trip, getting muddy, jumping in puddles and climbing on the sculptures was a huge part of their interaction with the place. It was essential that we could explore the world of the Sculpture Park in this physical way.
- Using the children's language in our own performance made it really relevant to the children.

# Linking the Artist in Residence Project to Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework

Aistear is the curriculum framework for children from birth to six years in Ireland. It provides information for adults to help them plan for and provide enjoyable and challenging experiences, so that all children can grow and develop as competent and confident learners. Aistear presents children's learning and development using four themes. These are:

- Well-Being
- Identity and Belonging
- Communication
- Exploring and Thinking

The residency began with the adults observing and questioning the children. Based on the children's responses, the adult introduced materials, questions, and opportunities that provoked the children to further explore the topic. Throughout the artist in residency project the adult was considered a co-learner and collaborator with the child and not just an instructor. The adults facilitated the children's learning by planning activities and lessons based on the children's interests, asking questions to further understanding, and actively engaging in the activities alongside the children. As partner to the child, the adult was also actively involved in the learning experience. The children were also given opportunities to make connections between prior and new knowledge. First reading a picture book about a seed growing, then taking turns to use the puppet flower in a pot, planting a seed, watering it and making it grow and finally bringing in drama and movement to be seeds and grow into all sorts of types of plants. This links with **Exploring and Thinking Aim 2** *'Children will develop and use skills and strategies for observing, questioning, investigating, understanding, negotiating, and problem solving, and come to see themselves as explorers and thinkers'*. The children were involved in lots of meaningful, hands-on experiences. The children used their hands, ears, eyes and whole bodies to explore the objects, materials and their environment – *"One child felt he was in a rage with some of the shadows. He saw shadows of a spider web and felt like the spider was going to come down and go into his mouth", 'Another child saw shadows of leaves and said they were tickling him'*.

The children were allowed the freedom to explore and to do things for themselves – *'Children will develop and use skills and strategies for observing, questioning,*

*investigating, understanding, negotiating, and problem solving and come to see themselves as explorers and thinkers'*. Active learning was central to the residency and allowed the children to explore, try out, make mistakes, discover and create their own theories about how things work and why, so that the child can be independent.

There was enormous respect for children's own theories and hypotheses. *'You can make chocolate with melted turf, put water on it and smash it up and stir it around'*. Adults were not quick to intervene at every obstacle the children confronted. Instead they allowed the children to make mistakes in their quest to solve problems which is fundamental to the learning process.

**Identity and Belonging – Aim 4** - Children will see themselves as capable learners. In partnership with the adult, children will be motivated, and begin to think about and recognise their own progress and achievements. Children will have a sense of group identity where links with their family and community are acknowledged and extended - *'We have a fire at home, we just press the button and it comes on'*.

Children are able to share personal experiences about their own families and cultures, and come to know that there is a diversity of family structures, cultures and backgrounds'. The adult seeks to know each child as an individual person and to create a trusting relationship in which learning can take place. The adult strives to support and encourage the child on the learning journey, encouraging them to reflect and to question. The adult is also a researcher into the ways in which children learn.

**Communicating** - Retelling the children's stories verbatim – All of the language from the show was from exact phrases and words that the children had used to describe their experiences. Recalling the trip and previous day's experiences. Using open ended questions – 'I selected certain fabrics and materials to act as a catalyst for a story. To get us going I simply asked 'What's this?' Links with Communication Aim 2 – Children will interact with other children and adults by listening, discussing and taking turns in conversation. Throughout the Residency project the children had endless ways and opportunities to express themselves; through language, body language, movement, music, dance, shadow play, sculpture, drawing, mime, story-telling and

role-playing - *'As the children began to relate the movement of the shadow on the screen to their own movement they became really expressive. Their shadows freed them up to move. They were their own audience as they watched their shadows'*.

**Well-Being Aim 3** – Children will be creative and spiritual. *'The drama and movement was used each week to introduce our theme for the day. It also helped us to get to know the children and have some time to play together as a whole group. We used most of the room but the children were always free to access other activities during this time.'* It is important that children have opportunities to lead their learning through self-initiated and self-directed learning, and to be involved in decisions about what they do. At other times, the adult leads through planned and guided activities and increases or lessens the amount and type of support as children grow in confidence and independence. Holistic learning and development - Children learn lots of things at the same time. Think about all the areas of the child's learning and development and the opportunities which were provided for the children in the services – cognitive, creative, emotional, linguistic, moral, physical, social and spiritual development. The learning environment (both indoors and outdoors) influenced what and how the children learned. The trip to Lough Boora Sculpture Park encouraged and helped the children to explore and to take advantage of opportunities for fun, choice, freedom, adventure and challenge.

The themes of Aistear are heavily reflected in the services. This is evident in the partnerships between adults and children, their everyday interactions and play, the environment and the curriculum planning. Creative Arts are an integral part of early childhood education. Arts experiences in services not only contribute to children's artistic and creative development but also to a wide range of skills in other areas, including perceptual, cognitive, language, and social skills.

## Linking to Siolta The National Quality Framework

Siolta is designed to define, assess and support the improvement of quality across all aspects of practice in early childhood care and education (ECCE) settings where children aged birth to six years are present.

Siolta is comprised of three distinct but interrelated elements: Principles, Standards and Components of Quality. The 12 Principles provide the overall vision of the Framework, while the 16 Standards and 75 Components allow for the practical application of this vision across all aspects of ECCE. The standards define quality practice within the Framework. These are translated into everyday practice in collaboration with the Aistear framework.

Although the two frameworks share the majority of the principles, some principles vary slightly in wording or are unique to one framework. For example, Communication and Language is not a principle in Siolta. In contrast, Aistear focuses exclusively on learning and development where

communication and language is an important element. As Siolta focuses more broadly on quality, it doesn't single out particular aspects of learning and development like communication.

Siolta challenged the practitioners at Sugradh and Nenagh Childcare Centre to think about the quality of the experiences which they provided for the children. Both Siolta and Aistear were used in collaboration by the staff to enhance their early years practice and to encourage them to be reflective practitioners.

While Aistear supported the staff to implement many, if not all, the Siolta standards it also gave particular support in the case of the standards related to the Rights of the Child, Environments, Interactions, Play, Curriculum and Identify and Belonging.

[Staff of North Tipperary County Childcare Committee](#)

Aistear	Siolta
Equality and Diversity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Equality</li> <li>Diversity</li> </ul>
Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Relationships</li> <li>Role of the adult</li> <li>Teamwork</li> </ul>
Parents, family and community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Parents</li> <li>Relationships</li> </ul>
The adults role	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Role of the adult</li> <li>Teamwork</li> <li>Relationships</li> </ul>
The child's uniqueness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The value of early childhood</li> </ul>
Children as citizens	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Children First</li> </ul>
Play and hands-on experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Play</li> </ul>
The learning environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Environments</li> </ul>
Communication and language	
Holistic learning and development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Welfare</li> <li>Children First</li> <li>Pedagogy</li> </ul>
Relevant and meaningful experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Pedagogy</li> </ul>
Active learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Pedagogy</li> <li>Play</li> <li>Children First</li> </ul>

## Contact us

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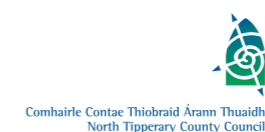
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