

# ARKLINK INITIATIVE IN FATIMA MANSIONS

THE ARK CULTURAL CENTRE FOR CHILDREN, DUBLIN, IRELAND

SUMMARY REPORT\_2007

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*As citizens, the children of Fatima will have the opportunity to engage with child-centred, high quality, cultural experiences, which nurture their creativity, enrich their lives, and help shape the future of their community.*

ArkLink is an initiative of The Ark, A Cultural Centre for Children in the Fatima Mansions area of the city of Dublin, Ireland, a multiply disadvantaged local authority housing estate, built in the late '40s, renovated in the late '80s and demolished and rebuilt from 2005 to 2007. This evaluation reflects on its initial five-year pilot stage to December 2005, funded by Atlantic Philanthropies, the major funder, and the Irish Youth Foundation. The above mission statement emerged in 2003. From the outset this was The Ark's aim when setting up the programme. The Ark's own mission statement is:

*The Ark, Europe's first custom-built Children's Cultural Centre, programmes, promotes and hosts high quality cultural work, which is by children, for children and about children. The Ark is a charitable organisation, founded on the principle that all children, as citizens, have the same cultural entitlements as adults. We work with a diverse range of Irish and international artists to develop original, inspirational and playful programmes for children, aged 3—14 so that they can extend their imaginations and horizons.*

Following the introduction, this report sets out the methodology for evaluation. Difficulties in bringing forward quantitative evidence are outlined, and some is provided. A number of indicators emerged that differentiated the ArkLink child from the non-ArkLink child, with the indicators showing positive outcomes from the ArkLink experience.

This report explores the rationale for choosing Fatima Mansions and the situation within The Ark, an organisation going through transformation at its Temple Bar base from shortly after it entered the Fatima experiment. It outlines an initial problematic start and goes on to review how perseverance brought success.

The regeneration board for Fatima Mansions' 2005—7 reconstruction was able to assert in its Social Regeneration Report (late 2005) that most children and young people in the area now participate regularly in the arts and there are many that are literate and accomplished in multiple art forms. In asserting in the report that one of the most exciting features of life in the flats over the past decade has been how the arts have naturally evolved and become a central means by which the community has chosen to explore, describe and celebrate its particular identity, culture and experience of change and regeneration, the arts is identified as relevant not only to the ArkLink children's lives but to the lives of all in the community.

Crucial to that state of affairs was the role of Fatima Groups United (FGU), the coordination network in the community. From the start, FGU welcomed the Ark proposal and agreed that one of their staff would provide a level of local support.

In its work, and fairly uniquely, FGU was able to seriously and constructively engage with receptive authorities over the regeneration scheme and at the same time enable extensive arts activity to which, as an organisation, FGU were fully committed. Indeed in respect of ArkLink, FGU was important to its progress against a background of transformational change within The Ark.

The report explores how one downside of the project was the inability, for various reasons, to maintain a community-based support group. None had existed initially and the efforts to create a planning, implementation and evaluation group, while initially successful, floundered against a background of other community-based collaborative forums.

By the end of 2005 there had been two very good years of coherent and progressively challenging development.

Indeed, ArkLink now deserves to be recognised as a model of good practice with significant progress made by children, artists, community support staff, parents, community organisations and Ark core staff.

It is argued by the Regeneration Board that participative and collaborative arts practices are integral to most all the progressive educational and community development work in the area. This report indicates that ArkLink has clearly been one of the most important elements in enabling that statement to be made. The Ark's intervention was timely indeed.

**In 2002, through a participative process involving key stakeholders, revised objectives were agreed:**

- Obtaining parents' understanding of and co-option into the process
- Ensuring intensive engagement
- Providing resources, including a base and creating a safe space to try things/aim higher (in small groups)
- Linkage to FGU's annual plan/FGU structure for culture and arts and creating a structure for management of the project
- Contacting those children considered particularly excluded
- Protecting the ethos and values of The Ark
- Finding a way to involve children in the decision-making process
- Developing a model of best possible practice and evaluation

**Revised achievable goals were set for the short, medium and longer term.****Short-term goals** To be achieved by Dec 2002

- Establish the structure to implement the project
- Agree a plan of action informed by the ethos and values of The Ark and the FGU social agenda
- Provide resources and a base
- Explore involving parents, children and schools in participation, decision-making and communication
- Achieve a successful artistic programme staffed by skilled artists
- Monitor, evaluate and feedback

**Medium-term goals** To be achieved by Dec 2004

- External communication
- Incremental development

**Long-term goals** To be achieved by Dec 2006

- Achieve the mission
- Achieve a model of best possible practice
- Achieve a sustainable continuing project linked to both FGU and Ark strategies

- Develop a critical mass of adults (e.g. parents, school staff, artists) who have interest in children's lives and who can influence the mainstream to take account of the outcomes (through change in their own practice/capabilities)

Although the short-term goals were delayed in their achievement, the report reveals success in these goals by the end of the medium term period and all of the longer-term goals having the potential for achievement.

This is shown to be a successful development that deserves to see a fruitful legacy in the community and within The Ark itself.

In The Ark, the model of activity had been projects that involved children for up to a maximum of eight weeks. In ArkLink, a whole new level of commitment was recognised. The actual long-term relationships with individual children led to artists in the community feeling committed to the children, committed to the community and committed to the artistic experience. That commitment was observed by the evaluator and commented on by children, parents, teachers and community workers, indeed everyone consulted.

It took until late 2002 to achieve a situation where the children came regularly most weeks and accepted that, although the project was fun, it needed to be taken seriously.

The adapted flat, 14e, that became available as the year 2003 ended transformed the project. The highlight of that year was undoubtedly a public viewing that was important in showing the quality in the children's achievements. It was also important in communicating with the community and positioning the children in a positive light within their community. This was the launch of their new space and was no simple event, but a complex opportunity to promote children and their place in regeneration. The children were in charge of their own work and of the collective space of the opening.

By the end of 2003, there was a feeling of a new beginning in 14e Fatima Mansions, the home of the project for the next two years and more – until it would be time to release it to the hands of the demolition contractor.

Partly prompted by its experience in Fatima, the acting Ark director at that time argued that working more long-term with children was part of the debate within The Ark in considering its future work. Markers were being set down about The Ark's aims in the process. What they sought in their work was:

- High quality production values
- A structured, well thought-out approach
- An intervention that was 'customised/ calibrated' to the local people

By 2003 noted changes listed below were seen in participating children and these were further explored during 2004 and 2005 to provide widely corroborated evidence of:

- Increasing self-esteem
- Sense that the children knew that they were held in higher esteem at school for their ArkLink activity
- Greater confidence
- Skill development, especially artistic skill, and technical progress, initially slower than with groups of similar age, but then rapidly progressing beyond competencies among the average child of similar age
- Children artistically more competent
- Children not afraid of art or of expressing themselves
- Children could express more complex ideas
- Greater ability to start something and see it through
- Greater ability to help others and be supportive
- From an initial negative attitude to trying, children learned that trying is worthwhile and transferred this learning elsewhere, including to the school environment

- Problem-solving skills improved
- Collaboration between the children increased and was noted in the school environment and in the wider community
- Skills such as ‘cutting’ and ‘manipulating materials’ generously handed on by ArkLink children to others in school
- Children given time to look and to respond to ideas
- Language development has become more elaborate
- Greater feeling that Fatima was a ‘cool’ place to be
- Pride to take artists to meet their parents, have photographs taken with them
- Children expressing themselves better than their peers, especially to adults, and becoming more imaginative
- Greater openness by children in relationship to school teachers
- Parents recognised improvement in their children’s sociability and responsibility
- Some parents recognised their children’s future might be in the arts as artists
- Significant social development, including parents making friends in the estate

- Motivation is a changeable factor and needs to be allowed for in planning the activity
- Developmental arts work for children at their pace is a resource ‘hungry’ activity
- The earlier age at which children can start their arts activity, the better the outcome
- Confidence in arts activity can lead to confidence in other fields, at school and in community leadership, and in dealing with adversity

All of this evidence was corroborated by more than one source, often by multiple sources and reinforced by regular evaluator observation.

The process was seen to be about ‘nurture, kindness and art was in there’. ArkLink was ‘vital to the stability and development’ of these children.

**By the end of 2004 the project was already viewed as a very considerable success and the agreed key factors in this success story were:**

- Artists who knew how to work in a context of social change and social engagement, and who were open to learning more about these skills on-the-job
- Capacity for the artists to work without many of the resource struggles that are the norm. (Artists in the community with space, resources and freedom to get on with the task are not the norm)
- A child-friendly approach reaching a genuine cross section of the community
- A project manager in position who was comfortable with the child-oriented philosophy and had the time to support the artists, the children, their parents and community connections (artists don’t usually have that help)
- Local parents as support workers, prepared to have a go and who valued the process for the children and for themselves; and who had become able to run workshops on their own (indeed they were also able to show leadership to school teachers in teacher training sessions)
- Strengthening support emanating from The Ark that was able to extend opportunities and add resources
- The Ark becoming more flexible and comfortable with its outreach work
- Strong community support, particularly from key players in Fatima Groups United (FGU) who accepted art as a tool and took it for granted in relationship to everyday life, not some mysterious great leap forward
- Practical integration of the project with other services dedicated to 4 to 12 year olds who liaised with each other and supported children’s attendance to all (ArkLink, Fatima Youth Initiative, Homework Club, Fatima Youth Club)
- Extensive exposure of the children to art and creative thought, to a remarkable extent and variety for children of this age
- Development of children themselves so that in projects, according to teaching staff, where they interacted with other children from other areas in a schools context they ‘nearly wiped the floors’ in how they used the experience and they ‘frequently led others in group sessions’
- Development of links to the schools, where the main developmental out-of-family experiences for the children were taking place
- Achievement of a common sense of ownership of the initiative

Towards the end of 2005, one teacher was not at all surprised that it had taken ArkLink or the community some time to reach where they were now. She saw that the community needed to learn how to trust people who were coming into their community. She felt that everything was much more solid by then. What she identified as the key ArkLink methodology that was proving successful was that the child was treated with dignity and respect and that each was treated as an individual. In addition, ArkLink staff were seen as passionate and caring, especially the project manager. 'When children know you're passionate about them they will do anything'. The evidence presented suggests that the conditions that contributed to the success were:

- Clearer objectives within the promoting organisation, The Ark
- Agreed objectives that were understood locally within community networks
- Good funding over a prolonged experimental period
- Mostly consistent and supportive project management
- Experienced and talented core artists with provision for similar artists for shorter-term or shorter time-input
- A friendly and accessible base, fit for purpose
- Quality materials and resources, good community networking and schools support for the work

By the end of 2005, the artists felt that they were only halfway through the process. Working in a project that was clearly a medium-term pilot project (3 years initially) the artists felt this should always be recognised as something for the long-term. They argued for, and there is significant strength to the argument, children's continued exposure to numerous arts programmes in which the visual arts play a major part. As a new future unfolds there are some concerns among stakeholders that there could be the loss of the complex and highly educational processes that emerged and functioned well here. There was something of the whole world coming into the children's lives, the artists argued. In an hour the children would often discuss many topics that they would not discuss in a day elsewhere. The artists had watched the children develop a responsibility for their selves, for each other and for their community. The children's work had become a 'keystone' in the community structure. Confidence 'breeds creativity and creates the healthy mind which controls the body', argued the artists.

This was a well-funded intervention. The artists were aware that future financial realities might lead to reduced funding for their work in the community. Their concern was not felt to be for themselves but for their work and the children. The artists posited that with more funding they could do even more. They felt their experience was evolving their own artistic work as they learned and adapted, and that new information and experience was now available for the artistic field.

By the end of 2005, the primary school children attending ArkLink were seen by the artists, and corroborated by the schools, to be in the artists' words, achieving 'amazing' and complex results using varied techniques. They felt that 'some secondary school pupils in their first year could not even begin to conceptualise' such techniques. ArkLink children could now 'see a finished product in their minds'. In even quite short times, children could make 'incredible progress', asserted the artists. Those children that had been attending longest were now seen to be confident in understanding context, secure in their competence and didn't fear spending time thinking. As there was little pressure of time in the process the children knew they had time to ponder over days or even weeks. They were keen to explore other art forms. Their journey was really only starting.

As with the children, the artists felt that their learning and growth was enormous. The artists and children were able to work in an experiment over an extraordinary historical period, a time that the artists felt they would find difficulty recreating.

A record of the journey, that some children had been on for over five years, was reflected in the annual calendar produced by the ArkLink project for the community.

By 2005's end, ArkLink had been able to suggest good practice concepts in inter-agency work, partnership, parental involvement, school-community collaboration and working with children, at times by overtly delivering the good practice and at times by exposing the project's shortcomings.

This report asserts that this community-based project with its values, its methodology and increasing commitment to training, needs more time on the ground in Fatima. This supports the view of most stakeholders. The lessons being learned here have wider relevance in Ireland and further afield.

This report also asserts that ArkLink has proved that well-resourced arts activity makes a difference to children's lives, even in a most difficult environment. It proves the benefit to society of such investment. It proves that the arts sector has much to learn from this kind of methodology and its outcomes, and some artists/arts institutions may need to rethink their own convictions/ practice. It shows to group workers that in this practice there is much technique that can be utilised constructively in a multitude of situations, particularly in health and education. It shows to each of us as individuals that we have in us a great deal in creativity that perhaps through earlier neglect has not been allowed to flower.

The experiment also has something to say in the wider debate on educational achievement in children and the question of whether the arts can boost academic performance. This report did not set out to prove this but it does

raise questions in this area of research. If the outcomes of this project include such significant levels of skill development, increased creativity, language development, confidence and broadening of thought and learning processes, and if schoolteachers are saying that they see progress in such subjects as mathematics and Irish language, then it is perhaps time to look more deeply at these outcomes. Perhaps it is not the case that the arts per se produce better academic performance (although this could yet be seen to be the case), but perhaps this raises the possibility that this type of arts approach does have something to contribute to improved academic performance.

This report raises questions about the future continuation, leaving to those on the ground the choice that is theirs to make, and to funders the choice of what they will or will not support. The report argues that continuation in a form that protects the underlying principles of success is the key objective.

It is suggested here that risk-taking benefactors such as Atlantic Philanthropies and the Irish Youth Foundation, who bravely supported the project through more difficult times, can now integrate the learning into their own strategies. In supporting this project they got to the core of some educational, health, social and community issues that they may not have touched by more conventional means.

It is hard to imagine that the work developed by children in 2010 will be achieving the outcomes currently being achieved if some means of retaining priority focus on the arts is

not maintained. That was what was missing from Fatima children's lives and that is what has been clearly highly successful once introduced to their lives.

There is a need for the process and focus that has been particularly successful in 14e Fatima Mansions to be the core of any future initiative. That, it is argued, is what is in the child's interest and what appears to also be in the interests of The Ark as it learns from its experience here and plans its future, including its work with children in disadvantaged circumstances.

Finally, it is recognised that this is a lengthy document and is not seen as the only evaluation document that should emerge. It is lengthy as it is aimed to provide as much firm evidence as could be collated and to properly reflect the outcomes of so many people's endeavours. The model is significant and so should be promulgated widely in order to influence policy and inform learning.

Local arts groups, the wider artistic community in Ireland, government and local government policy-makers, other agencies and professionals still need to benefit from The Ark's experience with ArkLink.

The ArkLink pilot action research initiative arose in response to feedback on The Ark's performance as a building-based children's cultural centre in central Dublin. The Ark wanted to reach out during out-of-school time to some of the children it was occasionally meeting during school hours, those from more disadvantaged geographical areas. Initially a three-year initiative set in one of the nationally recognised, multiply disadvantaged communities in Dublin; it became a six-year initiative. At the beginning of 2006 the project appeared to be moving towards a new locally managed, sustainable future.

Against a degree of debate in the wider society around the role of arts in society, the aim was to help develop a set of young people, rich in imagination, that would feel that their creative skills had been developed and would last. Firm evidence was sought that would prove that quality arts experiences when children are young can make a real difference both for the individual and the community. Evaluation of the project was to contribute the firm evidence of what is being achieved and why. And it was to provide evidence to inform where the initiative should lead.

The project was set against a background of both multiple disadvantages within the chosen community, Fatima Mansions, and a long-term crisis in the physical structure of that community that was leading to a major Dublin City Council regeneration initiative in partnership with the community. That partner was the local networking group Fatima Groups United (FGU).

#### **The key interest groups benefiting from this process were to be**

- The children of Fatima Mansions
- Children more widely who could benefit from the findings
- The Ark board
- The Ark staff including their artists active in the community
- Fatima Groups United
- Parents
- Local teachers
- Fatima Regeneration Board's sub-group on culture & recreation, a body formed to contribute to the regeneration process
- Other local arts groups
- The wider artistic community in Ireland
- Other agencies and professionals that might benefit from any learning from the project
- Government and local government policy makers

ArkLink was not the only arts project that was active in the area over the period. It was, however, unique in the area in that it was planned as a serious long-term intervention among primary school children, mainly in an out-of-school context. Concurrent with the ArkLink project but unconnected was a wider 'Creativity in the Classroom' scheme placing artists in schools.

Evaluating projects such as ArkLink presents challenges. It is not possible to establish a control group that does not receive the opportunities of this project to compare that group over time with those that do get involved. However, to some extent, particularly through collaboration with the schools, it was thought possible to identify evidence of differences arising out of participation and non-participation. Parents also would have an important role in identifying what was changing.

The regeneration project was happening concurrently with The Ark initiative. This was to see the eventual demolition and regeneration of the physical fabric of the estate. Specific challenges arose from this factor in determining the causes of change in the children.

As this six-year pilot programme ends, it is possible to continue following the paths of some of these children, their families and community over a longer period, for example through the children's teenage years as they approach adulthood. For some of the participants, teenage has already arrived.



Evaluation commenced after The Ark had begun this exploration of the contribution of arts activity in child, parent and community development in Fatima Mansions. The evaluator commenced work in 2001.

The chosen evaluator has a background in arts management, community development, education, research and politics. He had evaluated a number of other projects in the arts in Ireland and had also been involved in cultural research in the area around and including Fatima Mansions. Although from outside Ireland, the evaluator had developed local knowledge and also had earlier connection with some Ark and FGU personnel.

The evaluator has a past and continuing history with some of the personnel involved in Fatima Mansions and the surrounding area. This was a transparent factor and every effort was taken to ensure that as much objectivity as possible was in practice and that any prior relationships did not impinge adversely on assessment of outcomes. Indeed this is only part of the wider difficulty that each evaluator brings to 'objective research'.

In the 'Educational Researcher' (May 2002) it is argued that *whether overtly, or as a result of the presuppositions that are inevitably embedded within ways of thinking that inform practice and so often remain beyond question, the decisions that are made about theory, methods, methodology, ethics and politics are now open to routine scrutiny. Particular ideas of neutrality, such as the maintenance of objectivity through positioning the researcher as nothing but a passive instrument of data collection, are now*

*exposed as falsehoods that seek to mask the realities of the research process. The knower (as researcher) is now implicated in the construction of the known (the dynamics and content of society and social relations).*

This evaluation lasted for five years, a fairly uncommon evaluation experience in the arts and it is clear that the accumulation of the research and the researcher learning were factors in the progress of the project.

As the project progressed from 2002, annual written analysis of the project was presented to be used by The Ark and other stakeholders to aid reflection and development planning. The evaluator was provided with written material and other records, which from time to time included tape recording, video and other artistic product.

A review of other research both in Ireland and abroad revealed that there was little that was unique and new in this action funded by Atlantic Philanthropies and the Irish Youth Foundation. Indeed work with similar age groups was simultaneously going on in the nearby Irish Museum of Modern Art's 'Breaking the Cycle Project' and in the National Gallery of Ireland's 'Learning from Art'. What was different with ArkLink was that the funders ensured that lack of adequate funding over a long period would not be a reason for project failure or shortcomings. This is unusual in the arts sector, and in the field of children's out-of-school arts, pretty unique. To have the proposed freedom and security that this project wished to provide was something fairly unique for the children themselves.

All of the participants in the project were of primary school age. This presented limitations to the evaluation process and assessment of impact relied heavily on the adults involved.

## To implement the evaluation process, the evaluator was involved in:

- observation visits to activities
- meetings with participants
- meetings with staff
- attendance at meetings of the local stakeholders
- discussion with and involvement of the local schools
- discussion with representatives of outside agencies
- examination of records
- design, implementation and evaluation of questionnaires

The evaluator's visits, while providing a basis for ongoing evaluation, were as much to do with helping with forward planning and adjustment of plans, as with documenting what was happening. Thus, through contact with the evaluator during the process, the arts workers and other key personnel were able to constructively consider their work to date, their options for the future, and any changes that they might wish to make to their strategy. Added to this there was, from the evaluator, an acceptable degree of facilitation of planning processes during the early stages of the project and an element of support or mentoring for the project manager as the project developed. Neither of these was allowed to interfere with the objectivity brought to the project by the evaluator.

## The aim of this document is to reflect analytical issues that were agreed with stakeholders including:

- clarity of project objectives, both creative and social;
- understanding of and support for the objectives among participants and partner organisations;
- extent to which the objectives have been met, or are being met;
- quality of partnerships developed;
- commitment gained from public and community sources;
- integration with other social programmes;
- realism, flexibility and clarity of planning;
- involvement of participants in planning process and setting objectives;
- openness of the projects aims and principles;
- quality of artistic process and outcome;
- effectiveness of management;
- response from other professionals;
- realism and precision of objective(s);
- indicators and benchmarks for success;
- effectiveness compared to other forms of intervention;
- quality within the project of its evaluation process.

The Ark's involvement in Fatima commenced in 1999 following a planning process within the organisation. This had reviewed the first years of The Ark, A Cultural Centre for Children. There was a feeling that The Ark had already experienced a very successful start as a new Dublin city-centre facility. It was confidently up and running and already working near to its building-based capacity. It had gained recognition in Ireland and further afield as a progressive centre stimulating children's creativity. Indeed, from abroad, visitors were coming to examine the successes of the facility and its services.

The Ark had been part of an exciting new development that brought new life to an inner city area, Temple Bar, along the south bank of the river Liffey. Cultural approaches were numerous in the new Temple Bar with other developments such as the Irish Film Centre, Meeting House Square, galleries and a plethora of restaurants and bars. The Ark provided a children's oasis amongst what was otherwise a fairly 'young adult' environment.

This opportune location allowed a concept of safe and well-resourced premises for children. These premises had the capacity to open up the back wall creating a theatrical proscenium arch and interaction with Meeting House Square where other providers were showing open-air films and running street markets. Like many locations there were downsides to the location, but in many ways it was an ideal environment, and continues to be, providing for a wide range of children. Most of these children travel to the venue, rather than coming from the immediate environs. It is a city based resource rather than a local community resource.

As The Ark reviewed its progress, many strands of thought about the future were forming. Not least was recognition of the building's vulnerability in reaching out to more disadvantaged communities. Staff felt that The Ark was not reaching out sufficiently to children outside of school, the factor that brought most to The Ark. The Ark was not connecting enough with parents. It was apparent the children from some backgrounds didn't often come through the doors.

There were signals and signs that suggested that if The Ark was to seriously work with more disadvantaged communities it had to get out of its geographically limiting building and meet with young people in their own communities. Interestingly, some of these signals were given to Ark employees who were visiting Mountjoy Jail and meeting with inmates, fathers of young Dublin children. They looked on The Ark as 'not for our kids', only for 'posh' kids. These prisoners were keen to give The Ark staff a piece of advice that if they really wanted to make progress

outside of their own walls they needed to get into the communities where their work was really needed.

A number of these prisoners came from Fatima Mansions, just outside the city centre. They suggested The Ark could do worse than start there. The Ark was also picking up anecdotal evidence of levels of poverty, the gaps between 'haves' and 'have nots'. A storytelling session within The Ark exposed information that some children were not having good experiences with even simple activities like going to bed.

Traveller kids arrived one November wearing no socks. The poverty of some children was quite striking. It became impossible for staff at The Ark not to seek a response in their work.

The Ark already knew the Rialto area in which Fatima Mansions is located. The Ark (founder) Director had previously worked on a project in Fatima. The Ark's initiative would by no means be the first arts initiative in this area. Indeed the area had experienced many diverse initiatives as the local community, authorities and voluntary sector tried to address the multi-faceted challenges of a disadvantaged 'urban village', as it was described in the Rialto Area Action Plan 1995 to 2000.

Rialto lies beside the Grand Canal, a historical water route into the city. Fatima Mansions is one of two areas within this 5,000 population 'urban village'. Built in 1947, there were considerable aims of providing quality homes for working people. In mainly Catholic Dublin, the name 'Fatima Mansions' must have reflected high aspiration.

However high the aspiration, the reality became much different. The decline is deemed to have started in the 1970s. High unemployment, low income and severe challenges from drug and alcohol misuse became a reflection of the reality. The crime rate was five times the national average. By 1991, nearly 40% of family units were led by a single parent. It was a higher proportion by the start of the ArkLink initiative. What was absent was any sense of life chances: the homes had been exciting architecture and still were. However, they had become very run down. As often in such situations, individual local residents created and maintained a living for their families as best they could.

Among the community there is real pride, reflected in the way many people took pride in their homes and continued to fight against years of neglect.

A Rialto planning process in 1994 aimed to attract new resources and improve conditions. The plan was to involve the whole community. All ages were to benefit. Both art and children's activities were part of the plan. In 1994 no real thought was given to the idea that Fatima Mansions would be demolished. The aim was to improve the physical, environmental and landscape qualities of this park-side flat complex.

By 1999 the situation had changed. The Government was funding partnership boards across the country to lead regeneration. Rialto became part of the area of the Canal Communities Partnership Board [CCPB]. CCPB carried out research, introduced innovative new services and encouraged

community participation. Its initiatives included looking at the arts as a motor for regeneration. Out of that work a new local arts generator had been established : Common Ground. In the early days, Common Ground was able to help with the concepts that The Ark had begun to explore within its own internal planning.

Another significant change was the fresh air brought by a new Dublin City Manager who entered into a process with the CCPB of exploring areas of common interest. He, CCPB and the local community were interested in finding out what had gone wrong in Fatima. How could it be that a community that was given a £5 million refurbishment 12 years before had now deteriorated so much? Despair and danger were quite prevalent feelings of tenants who had suffered much in a fairly desolate environment. There was early agreement that demolition had to be seen as a real option. It was agreed that Fatima Mansions was to go and new housing would be built. From its then reality as a council housing estate, Fatima would become a mixed-tenure community.

The Ark had recognised that it had to move out into the community. Fatima Mansions was only 20 minutes away by bus. A new arts organisation, Common Ground, was in place that could support a child-oriented approach. The Council was planning extensive regeneration. The local community network structure, Fatima Groups United, could be supportive. If The Ark were to move out, Fatima would be a good bet. The decision was taken to establish the children's arts initiative in Fatima.

Prior to finalising Fatima as the location, the director and three colleagues met with Fatima Groups United (FGU), the networking association of local groups. In this meeting, the FGU representatives happily agreed to see this project come into their community, recognising the value of the resources and activities this would bring. They also agreed to make one of their own personnel the contact with The Ark. With hindsight, what was recognised as not having been done was the setting out of clear responsibilities for FGU and The Ark. By default this meant that the formal responsibility largely rested with the originator of the project, The Ark.

In 2005, the Fatima Regeneration Board published its social regeneration plan *Great Expectations*. Notable in this plan was its use of artistic images, some coming from ArkLink, all from a healthy artistic environment in the community. It is a message of great hope, and in setting the overall scene for the current stage of the ArkLink initiative, it is significant.

The report was issued soon after the first tenants of the old Fatima had moved into their new homes (October 2005). The plan gave statistical information revealing that, whereas in 2001 there had been 685 residents in 241 flats, by January 2005 there were 388 residents in 147 flats. The 2001 figures followed a rapid decline in population from 1996 when there had been 820 living on the estate. The decline over the period of the project was reflected in the child population with the 2001 figure of 98 in the 6 to 10 years (original ArkLink target) to 60 in 2005. The 2005 figure for 0 to 10 years was 110.

A decline in single parent families is also reflected in the report, reducing from 44% to 37% (106 families down to 53 families).

2001 research in Fatima Mansions by Claire Collins and Suzanne Lyons exposed a persistently high level of early school leaving and low participation in higher education. Only 14% had left with a Leaving Certificate or higher qualification, compared to 32% in Dublin and 51% nationally.

On the health front, overcrowded housing, poor heating and poor external environment all contributed to health statistics showing poorer

health than national figures. 45% were active smokers compared to 31% nationally. Asthma and chest complaints were the biggest health problem.

By 2005 the Regeneration Board was able to assert in its report that *most children and young people in the area now participate regularly in the arts and there are many that are literate and accomplished in multiple art forms. The report asserts that one of the most exciting features of life in the flats over the past decade has been how the arts have naturally evolved and become a central means by which the community has chosen to explore, describe and celebrate its particular identity, culture and experience of change and regeneration.* So the arts are identified as relevant not only to the ArkLink children's lives but to the lives of all in the community.

Crucial to that state of affairs has been the role of Fatima Groups United (FGU), the coordination network in the community. Fairly uniquely, FGU has been able to seriously and constructively engage with receptive authorities over the regeneration scheme and at the same time enable extensive arts activity, to which FGU as an organisation have been fully committed.

When The Ark 'gave birth' to ArkLink, it did so with the confidence that it knew what it was doing in its core work. It was respected internationally and locally for its work, had clear direction and a staff that worked well together and enjoyed doing what they were doing. The staff wanted to broaden out what they were doing to reach new communities, especially the disadvantaged. This was in line with The Ark mission which included developing programmes in partnership with other cultural institutions in Ireland and overseas.

The Board supported the staff but the Board's knowledge of the artistic and child development issues involved was perhaps limited. That was in 2000. That was the picture that attracted the sponsors of the ArkLink project, one of four new innovations for The Ark being funded on an experimental basis. The funders for ArkLink were Atlantic Philanthropies (although their involvement was not generally known until well into the project) and the Irish Youth Foundation, funded through The Ark Trust.

It had been a rapid journey to achieve the position of a stable and exciting arts base for children and then create four exciting new outreach initiatives. In any circumstances the Board and staff would have been challenged to see this next phase through. Staff leadership within The Ark, introducing the new initiative, moved on at an early stage in ArkLink life. This led to a process of transition within The Ark that impacted on the ArkLink initiative in Fatima. The repercussions of this organisational change were considerable.

The Ark had created a post of Project Manager for ArkLink and one of their programmers was transferred to this work, initially part-time but eventually full-time. She had an especially difficult task by virtue of some design faults in the initial approach.

**These might be identified as:**

- Absence of community development and child development expertise within The Ark team
- Absence of a suitable practical arts activity base within the chosen community
- Lack of a clear person specification for an artist-in-the-community

The ArkLink project in Fatima had an inauspicious start with upheaval in the home base, lack of clarity about aims and methods, lack of a suitable venue and thus severe programming difficulties, and no clear artist specification to ensure artistic appointments with best fitness for the initiative.

It is to the credit of The Ark Board that they have been prepared to support the project on the ground during a period of organisational change.

From 2004, work on a new Ark Strategic Plan (2005 to 2010) was progressing.

From initial difficulties, ArkLink very successfully concluded 2005 and entered 2006. There have now been three years of coherent and progressively challenging development, with the last two showing the most significant outcomes. ArkLink now deserves to be recognised as a model of good practice with significant progress made by children, artists, community support staff, parents, community organisations and Ark core staff.

All are showing that despite the early difficulties there has been a very positive outcome. It is argued by the Fatima Regeneration Board that 'participative and collaborative arts practices are integral to most all the progressive educational and community development work in the area'. ArkLink has clearly been one of the most important elements in enabling that statement to be made.

While significant good work developed in the early years, it is not useful to dwell as much on those first years as on the later years, the first years being undermined by:

- A need for clarity of the project objectives
- Lack of understanding of the objectives among participants and partner organisations
- Lack of realism, flexibility and clarity of planning
- Lack of involvement of participants in the planning process and objective setting

It is, however, the nature of innovation that these factors arise. The project opened with a less than confident team in an unsuitable base in the local Parish Centre, a room in the premises of the local church. This room had to be shared with other activity. It was in the wrong place, across a main road, outside the target community, and it provided an uninviting environment for creativity. Things later improved with more understanding of the task and the recruitment of new artists both with the necessary experience and the right attitude.

Through a facilitated development process involving key stakeholders to address the shortcomings and opportunities, the following emerged in 2002 as the agreed key issues for future development:

- Creating and broadening a planning and monitoring group to consolidate and strengthen the capacity for progress, and for the transfer of learning into the community and the wider society
- Introducing mentoring provision to support the professional development of the key Ark worker supervising the development of the project
- Setting and implementing the annual development plan for the next year within the context of a longer-term plan

The decision-making in respect of the above agenda was carried out through the first few months of 2002 and implementation continued through the year. This was a very positive area of progress. Key factors identified through this process were:

- The need for an operational base to be up and running so that The Ark could become part of the furniture of Fatima Mansions
- The need for confidence in The Ark in what it does
- That the change that was going on in children's lives was huge and The Ark was trying to support the children to have a sense of ownership of that change
- That The Ark was making a commitment to a generation of children
- That The Ark was seeking a deeply respectful relationship with the kids
- That this deeply respectful relationship was respected above all others, and therefore adults should change and organisations should change
- That the project aimed to be child led
- That the work aimed to get away from work that was reactive
- Recognition that all involved would change as a result of the process
- The need to monitor any change in the attitude of adults to children
- That the starting point was that there were limitations in what comes from the kids' experience of the arts as currently taught in schools
- The need to put more value on the processes
- The need to have the time for a worthwhile venture with no givens and no demands
- That people were getting to know The Ark people
- That already there was positive feedback from the children
- That parents didn't really know what The Ark was

**There was agreement at that time on what The Ark wanted from this project:**

- Child centred activity (one generation for five years)
- Quality arts activity
- Enrichment/confidence building/self-awareness in children's lives
- Co-operation and integration, especially in the context of the unique regeneration project
- Social inclusion of children
- The Ark becoming a learning organisation, partly through this project and through development of a model of practice

**Key objectives were agreed as:**

- Obtaining parents understanding of and co-option into the process
- Ensuring intensive engagement
- Providing resources, including a base and creating a safe space to try things/aim higher (in small groups)
- Linkage to FGU's annual plan/FGU structure for culture and arts and creating a structure for management of the project
- Contacting the particularly excluded
- Protecting the ethos and values of The Ark

- Finding a way to involve children in the decision-making process
- Developing a model of best possible practice and evaluation

*A 'mission' was agreed: As citizens, the children of Fatima will have the opportunity to engage with child-centred, high quality, cultural experiences, which nurture their creativity, enrich their lives, and help shape the future of their community. Goals were set.*

**Short-term goals** To be achieved by Dec 2002

- Establish the structure to implement the project
- Agree a plan of action informed by the ethos and values of the Ark and the FGU social agenda
- Provide resources and a base
- Explore involving parents, children and schools in participation, decision-making and communication
- Achieve a successful artistic programme staffed by skilled artists
- Monitor, evaluate and feed back

**Medium-term goals** To be achieved by Dec 2004

- External communication
- Incremental development

**Long-term goals** To be achieved by Dec 2006  
Achievement of the mission

- Achieve a model of best possible practice
- Achieve a sustainable continuing project linked to both FGU and Ark strategies
- Develop a critical mass of adults (e.g. parents, school staff, artists) who have interest in children's lives and who can influence the mainstream to take account of the outcomes (through change in their own practice/capabilities)

Work developed on the ground. Projects in 1999 had first introduced The Ark to Fatima. There was a range of activity covering literature, theatre, music, visual arts, photography and an environmental project.

In 2000 there was a literature and visual arts project, theatre, music and other visual arts projects. 2001 saw projects in spoken arts/literature, theatre, visual arts and music. Trips took place to see Russian Ballet and to look round the Irish Museum of Modern Art, the latter situated at Kilmainham, close to Fatima Mansions.

The 2002 projects were in theatre, music, visual arts, sculpture and storytelling. Trips took place to an animated film, to theatre at Tallaght Civic Theatre and for the children to be interviewed for RTE Open House.

It is very clear that the wide-ranging opportunities were appreciated and generally successful. Standards were generally high but not always so. Quality was insisted upon and there was no wish to compromise on this aspect. The pressure was there to generate work and be successful, but this very aspect, which proved successful, conversely prevented there being enough time for strategy development, which undermined progress. When the project became more strategically focussed in late 2002, it became much better placed for co-ordinated future development.



Where artists were most successful was in their easy way with the children and their community. The best appointments had not always been made, and there is evidence that someone very skilled in the context of working in The Ark in Temple Bar would not necessarily have the skills needed in the community. In such a situation it was draining for the project manager to try to inculcate in the artist a sense of the approach that arts in the community required.

In The Ark, the model of activity had been projects that involved children up to a maximum of eight weeks. In ArkLink a whole new level of commitment was recognised. It was argued that this commitment was crucially important. The actual long term relationships with individual children led to artists in the community feeling committed to the children, committed to the community and committed to the artistic experience. That commitment was observed by the evaluator and commented on by children, parents, teachers and community workers, indeed everyone consulted.

If sufficient commitment was not shown it needed to be challenged, and in an isolated circumstance where this was the case, it was not. Some children on a few occasions voted with their feet and stopped attending. By the end of 2002, with a good team of artists in place, this ceased to be an issue of concern.

Artists argued that workers needed to have empathy and care about local people, and feel they are equals. It can happen that, in society and in the arts, some people look down on those in more disadvantaged situations. There can be no place for this attitude was the ArkLink mantra.

It took until late 2002 to achieve a situation where the children came regularly most weeks and accepted that although the project was fun, it needed to be taken seriously.

The children could and did get very excited about the work that the artists were stimulating. There was now a more confident and 'community-friendly' child-centred approach in place.

With this there was a noticeable change in the children. Initially when they arrived at The Ark in Temple Bar for a performance the children would always arrive late and be 'hyper'. At times they would bring younger children of unsuitable age. Now they arrived on time, didn't bring any siblings that were too young and were very relaxed coming into The Ark. They stayed to the end, which was also a change.

They started to sit together to work out the children's rights and responsibilities in this venture. Building of relationships by the workers with parents was also proceeding. Parents never had this experience themselves and some said they would always have thought of the arts as for 'viewers'. Now they were beginning to think 'doers'. One worker felt that initially, some parents might have been embarrassed about a child's work, from a perspective that it would be awful to get something 'wrong'. Now they were

certainly relaxed about art, claimed the same worker, and showed pride in all of their children's work.

A challenge for the next phase was to make parents more a part of what was going on.

Perhaps they might also try the cartwheels. Following a visit to the ballet, the level of exuberance of the children was such that they came out doing pirouettes and cartwheels in the theatre foyer. They put a smile on the face of the rest of the audience who missed the subsequent singsong on the bus.

By the end of 2002, clear progress was discernable. Organisational difficulties in The Ark played a large part in ArkLink losing its Project Manager. This member of staff was 'head-hunted' to return over a year after giving her notice to leave and it was not to be until 2004 that the project was really achieving its full potential on the ground with a base of its own, artists who were well settled in a developing routine and practice, and the support of a project manager with a safe pair of hands.

2003 was a year of slow consolidation and some interruption. In the first half of the year there were many workshops, which showed the potential and connected well with the children. After the summer, apart from some storytelling there was little visible activity until late on through loss of the activity space in the Parish Centre. There had been an expectation of an autumn restart in a newly converted flat provided by Dublin Corporation. Despite the children's expectation of a resumption in September, it was December

before their expectations were to be realised. It was clear from the adults involved that the children were interested – there was 'loads of interest'. The children had been asking about resumption but delays accentuated by the absence of a project manager meant that they were frustrated for a few months.

With a new activity space – a disused flat – coming available as 2003 ended, things were seen as 'looking good'. The highlight of the year was undoubtedly a public viewing, which was important in showing the quality in the kids' achievements. It was also important in communicating with the community and positioning the children in a positive light within their community. This was the launch of the new space and was no simple event, but a complex opportunity to promote children and their place in regeneration. The children were encouraged to play a full part, to the extent that a chief guest, the Lord Mayor of Dublin, could not get away as the children quizzed him on many topics. The children were in charge of their own work and of the collective space of the opening.

At the end of 2003 there was the feeling of a new beginning in 14e Fatima Mansions, the home of the project for the next two years or so – until it would be time to release it to the hands of the demolition contractor.

Partly prompted by its experience to date in Fatima, the way in which The Ark was working with the children was being re-evaluated. Markers were set down about the Ark's aims in the process. **What they now sought was:**

- High quality production values
- A structured thought out approach
- An intervention that was 'customised/ calibrated' to the local people

This was partly a reassertion of their earlier values and approaches, but the seeking after a 'structured thought-out approach' was new. In the future this might protect them from entering into projects where they could openly recognise that the 'end point was unknown' as had happened with ArkLink. While a certain amount of uncertainty would essentially be present in any innovation, these new ground rules could at least make clear what was the area of uncertainty and what were the basic principles.

By the end of 2003 and within their developing programme the artists did perceive real progress. For them the key was to have a programme that was alive and valid to the children's lives.

**Among the changes noted by the artists in participating children were:**

- Increased self-esteem
- Sense that they knew they were held in higher esteem at school for their ArkLink activity
- Greater confidence, at times developing through one-to-one interaction with the artist
- Skill development and technical progress, but perhaps slower than with groups of similar age
- Greater ability to start something and see it through
- Greater ability to help others and be supportive
- Greater feeling that Fatima was a 'cool' place to be
- Pride to take artists to meet their parents, have photographs taken with them

The artists reported very positive feedback from parents attending the launch. These parents, and there were many, were uniformly pleased that their children were attending ArkLink, and they recognised how keen their children were to attend. The children liked the artists as 'people', and saw them as 'real' persons.

The artistic approach embedded by now was to allow freedom. The artists wished to avoid any sense of rush. There were differing views on the validity of 'product' driven work, one of

the artists feeling it was not appropriate, while the other accommodates this kind of work. Both agreed that time was essential for the children's experimentation. Reactive work to the regeneration agenda or community agenda could be added, as the new flat was to be open more. Other personnel, including volunteers, could service this work that was reactive to community needs.

Artists were confirmed in the view that what shuts children down is a lack of ownership of the activity, or when they do not want to do it at 'that' time but come back to it later. Children should be able to complete and engage in their own time recognising that motivation can change. This view has important relevance in planning artistic activity for children, and it needed to be recognised that the method is resource-hungry.

By the end of 2003, it was recognised that working with younger children should also be an aim. This could have real benefits by the time the children were older and then as older children, they might be happier to experiment. It was agreed that two age groups could be addressed within ArkLink – 4 to 7 years, and 8 to 12 years.

Also by the end of 2003, some community work professionals in the area saw this as a unique art-in-the-community project, built on experience and about process and high quality work. One such professional articulated that, in his experience, he was not aware of such a well-resourced project that allowed dedicated group work with a small-scale arts group over such a consistent period of time.

Already one other Fatima-based project had seen some of the ArkLink children move on to help out with summer activity for younger children. The skills and confidence, felt the worker concerned, had to 'have come from the ArkLink project'. Even if such children faced future adversity, these were skills that she saw as having 'the potential to carry them through their lives'.

This was an example of significant progress at the end of the more difficult ArkLink years. Interestingly, the parallel and unrelated experimental programme in the arts, 'Creativity in the Classroom', took about six years to really begin to work properly according to some educational sources.



Demolition of the flats, which had started in 2003, continued through 2004 and after the summer the first of the new houses began to take shape, with rafters of the lower rise buildings already in place by the end of the year. Residents began to raise their hopes as they saw 'light at the end of the tunnel'. Where there had been considerable pessimism and scepticism about the future housing arrangements, this was gradually being replaced with optimism and feelings that the residents were not going to be let down this time. The new light railway line (LUAS) passing on the north side of the Fatima estate opened in autumn 2004 and was an immediate 'hit' with local people who enjoyed a new rapid connection to the city centre, and in the opposite direction, out to Tallaght. It proved a boon for travel between The Ark and ArkLink. Various community initiatives continued to support residents and with The Ark project manager once again in place, the Ark initiative became much more directly involved in community life.

At the local primary schools, Mater Dei and Basin Lane, there was an increase in the direct relationship with The Ark in Temple Bar.

Mater Dei in particular continued to be an important source of information on the changing profile of children in the area, and their connection with arts initiatives including ArkLink. FGU continued to be the key on-the-ground player and with the project manager in place, ArkLink was able to play a fuller and more strategic role. ArkLink was connecting with FGU strategies for:

- Culture and art
- Children and young people
- Design and development of the physical infrastructure

These strategies were seen both locally and by the city authorities to be working.

The general environment was one in which ArkLink felt comfortable and in which the community felt comfortable with ArkLink. On the ground in Fatima, the 14e Fatima Mansions base saw an uninterrupted full year's work in 2004 and 2005 and was well used throughout each year. Having the flat was a key element. It made real difference and there could be no comparison between what could be offered in previous years and what could now be offered. Children, parents and neighbours soon became comfortable with this new community facility with its welcoming and open approach.

By the end of 2004, The Ark and ArkLink were both in a much healthier state than they had been at the start of the year. By the end of 2005, both had made further progress and ArkLink was very much part of the community infrastructure.

#### Key ingredients of the development of the project were:

- Flat 14e Fatima Mansions provided a base to house an increasing number of children aged 4 to 13 years and facilitated a developmental approach (in contrast to the more ad hoc previous experience)
- 14e was converted by knocking two larger rooms into one to provide a good sized arts space
- Project Manager in post with an office within the art base
- Two core artists doubling their time commitment to provide a four-day workshop programme
- Local parents joining the staff team through the Fatima Community Employment Scheme and playing a significant part in developing and expanding the project, including developing their own skills in leading workshops

#### Other factors of significance included:

- Additional artists involved bringing new skills and opportunities, e.g. film making
- Consistent support from The Ark staff
- Expansion of schools work
- Exploration of The Ark as a mentoring resource for children taking interest in particular areas of arts-related work (e.g. one child learning lighting and other technical skills)

An increasing number of the children coming were seen as more 'on the edge': more significantly in need. This was a further advantage of the base at 14e. From staff experience and judgment, ArkLink estimated around 50% to be in significant need. These children were seen to need and were given 'endless' support. Some were seen by some of the staff to be left to their own devices on a fairly consistent basis, while others were seen to have a very stable home life. For most, their lives were very focussed on Fatima Mansions with few attempts to go outside their territorial area.

The list of projects and themes during 2004 reflected a very intensive and varied experience at the centre of children's lives. It also reflected the significant programme that could be delivered with premises of their own for the first time, and a full team working to clear objectives.

**Best Friends Calendar** – Launch in January of the children's work on this annual publication

**Horticulture** – Seed planting in the studio and along the line of the new LUAS light rail line

**Superheroes** – 3D model making creating heroes with super powers

**The Firebird** – A play based on a Russian fairy tale using a wide range of media

**Vox Pop** – Attending shows and workshop as critics at the 4th International Dance Festival

**Visit to Abbey Theatre** – Rosas dance performance

**Botanic Gardens** – Plant study and photography

**Visit to National Gallery** - Two exhibitions, 'Accession States' and 'Children in Paintings'

**Visit to the grounds of the Irish Museum of Modern Art** – Easter egg hunt

**Visit to the seaside at Skerries** – Train trip, conversation, picnic and fun

**Musical games** – Workshops on percussion, music and song

**Sock puppets** – From a variety of materials making puppets (one session included making Rice Krispie cakes)

**It's a Jungle Out There** – A week of activity on a jungle theme

**Clowning Around** – Face painting, making balloon animals and doing simple magic tricks

**Clown Show** – Short show in 14e

**Hip Hop** – Dance at the community centre

**Inklings** – A visual arts/storytelling programme extended from The Ark out into Fatima

**Summer Video Diary** – Project with Katie Lincoln

**Video Diary** – A project with Kieran Doyle O'Brien documenting the ArkLink experience

**Paradiddle Sound Making and Percussion Workshop at The Ark** – One child attended

**Hands Up Puppet Making Workshop at The Ark** – A group from Fatima worked in a wider group

**Plant an Idea Mosaic Workshop at The Ark** – Three Fatima children participated

**Travel Notes, a musical experience of world cultures at The Ark** – Workshop on flamenco rhythms

**Make The Video, a music video making workshop at The Ark** – A one-week workshop for Fatima children

**Portofino Ballade at the Dublin Theatre Festival** – A one man show from Switzerland

**Buffo at the Dublin Theatre Festival** – A very funny French one-man show

**Envelopes and Packages** – Another French one-man show

**Christmas Party** – Activity over a number of weeks leading up to the event making decorations, cards, crackers and candles; and the event involving parents and the wider community

**Schools Programme** – Workshops for parents and other adults in the community in order that they too can have an experience similar to the children

**Sound making and percussion** – workshops for children in the Fatima Day Care Centre

A typical ArkLink session would see the children arriving after school, knocking on the front door and after being admitted making their way quickly to seats round the communal table. The walls would be decorated with their work. Some tables and windowsills would also display work including work in progress. In the storeroom would be resources to be brought out, including work in progress.

At the start of a new project there would be more dialogue between artist and children, and also at the introduction of any new theme or new technique. Visual tools would be there to stimulate the children's thinking and creativity, and rather quickly work would start. There was a conversational approach that was allowed but rarely used as the children concentrated on the work in hand.

Every session emphasised the fun of being creative. Every session encouraged every child to be creative.

The whole session would have the feeling of a well-structured event but allowing for innovation and divergence, as the tutor would flexibly respond to new ideas. One day the children would be talking about the balance of the colours, on others about the texture of materials, on others about perspective. Discussions would take place as a group and with individuals about how to achieve the subject of their plans.

The tutor would maintain the focus on the plan, ably assisted by the other adult participants. All the adults present, community helpers, project manager or evaluator, if present, were also

engrossed round the table in the work at hand. The adults, including the evaluator, were generally carrying out the same tasks as the children. Each week there was new vocabulary being learned, new techniques tried, and some new ability progressed.

Different materials were used, with the children encouraged to experiment with tools used in unusual ways, e.g. painting with sponges, block printing with available items. This showed how a whole range of unusual effects could be achieved through experimentation.

There was intensive discussion some weeks, little discussion other weeks. Each week, at the end of each session, there were snacks and drinks, with this aspect an equally important aspect of the process – and a time for chat.

Visits away also had the feeling of carefully planned ventures. Cameras were taken if documentation were needed. People were organised to meet the group at their destination and the children became comfortable in their questioning of the adults they would meet. The children grew to understand the skills of being observant while out and about, and how to spot aspects they would normally miss. They understood that research and enquiry is important, and at times vital.

A further description of the model of work taken from a facilitated discussion between the core artists and the project manager is in Appendix 1.

Work in 2005 continued along similar lines, with the children facing new and exciting challenges.

Connections with the local schools were maintained throughout the time of the ArkLink project, initially fairly informally and later more formally. Efforts were successfully made to increase linkages between the two key primary schools and The Ark venue in Temple Bar. The foundation for a developmental programme between ArkLink and schools was never fully laid and would have required more work for an effective programme to be delivered. Notwithstanding, staff in both schools were very enthusiastic observers of their pupils as they reacted to the ArkLink exposure to the arts.

The local schools were a continuing location for the gathering of corroborative information on child development. This was important, along with parental and community feedback in validating the experience of ArkLink staff.

In one class at Mater Dei, it was possible to get very positive indicators of continuing progress during 2004. Out of a class of 24, ten were involved in ArkLink. From the children, the teacher was hearing about the ArkLink work 'all the time'. She was impressed by what she heard. The ArkLink work lead to a lot of chat within the school community so was seen as of some significance to the school children's lives.

The teacher was able to describe the progress of three children. In particular she would have felt some children would not have progressed within school without ArkLink. Children A, B and C had learned many new skills and had been clearly exposed to many new stimuli. C, who suffered from depression, used to copy everything she did but now her confidence had grown and she could deliver her own work.

Formerly, two of this small group used to have a love/hate type of relationship and regularly two would isolate the third. It is the process they have been seen to go through in ArkLink that was identified by the teacher as the process that has ended the isolation of the third child. One was identified by the teacher as 'terrific at art', really gifted. These were among children recognised within the school as in need. The teacher recognised that the basic ArkLink story 'is one of taking such children in out of the rain, giving them some food and then doing art'.

The children were generally conscious of the teacher's knowledge of the ArkLink project and this helped the teacher to plan the dynamics of classroom activity. **Key outcomes of ArkLink that this teacher identified were that**

- Children are artistically more competent
- Artistic skill has been developed
- Children are not afraid of art or of expressing themselves
- Children can express more complex ideas
- There was no way that these children could do these things last year

One pupil, D, had commented in school 'I'm so much more happy this year – I'm not the worst in the world – I'm quite good at art – I may be an artist when I grow up'. Now D had become used to receiving positive affirmation. In the past she had mainly experienced battling against attitudes and negativity.

Generally, 'I can't' was seen as a common child reaction to being asked to do something more challenging in school. This was especially seen in mathematics and Irish language teaching. Now those children from the ArkLink project, who might not have done so, would try. 'I can't' was not used. What the teacher felt had changed was that the children felt that 'trying is alright', whereas the year before, their attitude to trying was completely negative.

It was noticeable to school staff that collaboration between the children had increased. In the past, where art materials were put out, there was a tendency by the children to grab everything. Now the children from ArkLink saw that they did not need to hoard or be greedy, as they knew they had consistent access to quality materials through ArkLink. One example was given of child E who had been particularly greedy in the past and who, in response to a request from F, came out with 'it's kind of killing me but you can have it'.

This teacher was not at all surprised that it had taken ArkLink or the community to reach where they were now. She saw that the community needed to learn how to trust people who came into their community. She felt everything was much more solid now. What she identified as the

key successful ArkLink methodology was that the child was treated with dignity and respect and that each was treated as an individual. In addition, ArkLink staff were seen as passionate and caring, especially the project manager. 'When kids know you're passionate about them they will do anything'.

#### **Other strengths of the process identified by the school were:**

- Children are given time to look and to respond to ideas
- Their language development has become more elaborate
- Skills such as 'cutting' and 'manipulating materials' are being generously handed on to others in school by ArkLink children
- ArkLink has very skilled artists who have 'been around the block' and who know how to pitch it according to the appropriate child development stage
- ArkLink has artists who are very good at and willing to talk with, rather than at, the children
- In 14e, significant social development is being aided

The process was seen to be about 'nurture, kindness and art was in there'. ArkLink was 'vital to the stability and development' of these children.

Teachers were very happy to 'pinch' ideas and pass them on to other teachers. Having more artists input in schools, teachers asserted, paid dividends, as teachers are always looking for new ideas. The Firebird project, a longer-term performance and multi-media project that demanded consistent attendance was encouraged by the school. The project grew through storytelling and imagining situations, through visual arts activity, costume and play acting, on completion into a performance on stage at The Ark's theatre space.

In general the schools had found it difficult to get parental support and it was viewed as near impossible in most cases. Two out of twenty two parents turned up for one parent-teacher session in one school. 'Yet, ArkLink is engaging with the parents', said the teacher.

For the children, their varied programme of stimuli has clearly been significant in their lives, particularly against a background of a multiply disadvantaged community, and one going through total regeneration.

For the artists, the Firebird project had been an opportunity to 'hook' the children onto a developmental longer-term project. This worked very well and showed a worthwhile model. As a result the artists saw that model as a useful way of contributing to organisational and aesthetic development. The artists felt that as artists they were achieving real progress, helped by the structural changes to the project situation.

With some of the children, the artists felt they were providing a real solid base for support and progress, while with others they had not yet found the solution. The artists continued to emphasise that their approach of allowing choice within a fairly structured approach worked best – if a child was not in the mood they could work through their feelings and return to creative endeavour when the child was ready, on occasions with a little encouragement. The artists felt that this practice suited the needs of the children. The artist needed to understand subtle differences of temperament and accommodate these.

Through this approach the artists were finding they could be much more relaxed about letting the children grow in their own time and at their own pace. They didn't worry about a child not finishing or destroying work, as this was recognised as a phase a lot of children go through. This was no longer seen as a setback but as part of the growing process. The artists also learned over time of factors that might influence the child's lack of completion. These factors could often relate to a family problem that was preoccupying the child.

Conversely, some children always kept in touch and wanted more and more challenging involvement. The majority were in between. One went through periods of inactivity then burst into activity, but always kept in touch. For three years, this one was always hanging around if not totally engrossed. However, this one and another child helped the staff team with the youngest children one afternoon of each week.

For the artists, working with the smaller children was a new experience in 2004. By the end of that year they were into a routine and could concentrate for the 40-minute session. Also, they would know what they wanted. The youngest group came every time and couldn't wait to get in. They commented a lot on each and every thing.

But all children increasingly conversed. For example, while preparing decorative frames for the 2005 calendar, one 7-year-old expressed the opinion that this activity is 'like doing the Book of Kells'. When asked by the artist whether she knew that the monks who created the Book of Kells would put their initials into the decorative page frames, the child responded, 'yes, I've already done it'.

Artists watched as the children grew in visual awareness and visual vocabulary. The world of school came much more into the discourse and the children made more connections between these two different aspects in their lives. The world of the schools was still a fairly unknown territory for the artists but both core artists recognised that the children consistently made connections between what they did at ArkLink and at school. The children recognised that what was happening at ArkLink was much less structured than their schools experiences.

With 'Creativity in the Classroom' running alongside the ArkLink project it was possible to look at outcomes from that experiment, but more closely to look at teacher perceptions of differences between 'Creativity in the Classroom' children and the smaller group of ArkLink children.

#### **'Creativity in the Classroom' had been seen to:**

- Create a climate in schools that was open to the arts and creativity ('cleaners to head teachers')
- Bring vibrancy into class activity
- Bring in a culture in schools of willingness to make things work
- Create understanding of arts
- Create trust in the arts as a vehicle for education with total acceptance that the arts activity is a 'journey'
- Create more confidence in many children, especially among those seen as most multiply disadvantaged
- Create leaders among children

Where ArkLink children were experiencing both projects, those that stood out within 'Creativity in the Classroom' activity correlated with the ArkLink children. The ArkLink children were more likely to be the ones showing leadership in the classroom arts context.

These were often the ones seen to express themselves better to adults. Even in some cases where literacy might be poor, the arts skills provided the means for these children to communicate more confidently and better. These children opened up more before the teacher so both the child and the teacher were learning. One educationalist noted that the ArkLink children knew that the teacher does not have all the answers, whereas she felt that other children would be more likely to view the teacher as expert. She felt the point was that the children were demonstrating their resourcefulness and recognising that they could come to 'the answer' by their own actions.

The ArkLink artists were clear that the children had progressed enough to be able to work faster and more innovatively in their projects. Also, the artists reported very positive reactions from the community and from the children who felt at home in their new arts setting. Parents have reported to the artists that ArkLink has made a marked difference to their children's attitudes and discipline at home, comments corroborated in meetings of small groups of parents. Parents expressed being very pleased at how much better behaved their children had become. (This does not mean that they will always be well behaved.)

In early days the artists felt that many of the children didn't respect any rules. Through their involvement in ArkLink they had come to accept that there have to be rules. Agreements were reached on issues such as not talking about other participants behind their backs. They agreed they must not fight. Misbehaving children were asked to 'please leave' and come back when prepared to accept the rules – a sanction that was rarely used.

The artists came to recognise that the parents had become much warmer about what was going on in ArkLink, but for some parents there was still shyness about contacting the project. Other neighbours without children were also making the effort to be warm towards 14e activity, even some who, according to staff, were viewed locally as an anti-social element. The artists came to feel really rooted into the community.

Always aware that they were, to a certain extent, working in the unknown against a background of flats demolition and rebuilding, one artist argued that what was then being done against that background was actually happening at a 'golden time'. The artists could not see the 2004-5 level activity lasting in the same form. 'I love this time', said one of the artists and she was keen to get on with the work while this time lasted, as she recognised it wouldn't be the same ever again.

#### **By 2004, both artists identified a number of factors in the children's work and approach:**

- Confidence
- Application to the task
- Speed of engagement
- Increased skill levels, especially those with three years involvement
- Greater manual skills
- End to the major difficulty of keeping focussed, ability now to work on longer projects, stay with them and complete
- Expressions of frustration among some children that they are not as good as the artists
- Awareness that they have to work hard and that we are all artists
- Voicing opinions, 'a great step forward'
- Deeper and deeper relationships forming
- Ability to take unprompted creative initiative

The artists credited the contribution of the adult helpers as being particularly effective. They had been recruited through a local employment scheme. These helpers were keen to have a go and provide a local role model to the children in the process.

In one session towards the end of 2004, one child was messing about and articulating 'I can't do it'. When asked, why give up so easily; the child responded 'our parents tell us to give up if we can't do it'. The artist's response was that if you give up easily you don't win.

In the lead up to Christmas 2004, when it was agreed that 14e needed to be decorated, Two children teamed up together and took on the entrance hall, and quite suddenly transformed it, not in any planned style and unsupervised. Others followed suit so that there were several small teams working away. 'This could not have happened a year before'. Examples began to be seen of the children refusing to move onto a further piece of work until they were satisfied with the standard of what they had achieved. This was another progression. One example was refusal, while creating masks, to leave these until entirely happy with the paintwork.

The artists felt they could be much more relaxed with the children as a result of their own growing confidence in their practice and as they could sense the real aesthetic advances now happening. This confidence allowed the artists to allow the children to fail. The children were now allowed to go so far in what they were creating - they could even destroy it - and learned that this was also all right. The children no longer simply



thought the tutors were looking for 'products'. The children learned that 'half way' to what they are trying to create may be beautiful. They learned that they could then choose whether to go on and perhaps destroy that beauty. Children increasingly were being encouraged to trust their judgment and to develop better judgment.

One example of children's judgment was in 'The Firebird' performance. N was allowed to take on two parts because she insisted she could do both. The artist knew she had the capacity to do it but not enough time to change costume between acts. She pointed this out to the child. N insisted to the point of coming up with a clever solution where she would wear both costumes in layers. In the end she was allowed to do so because, since the beginning of the year she had been very 'moody' with a lot of attention seeking and generally ended up destroying her beautiful artwork. The artist judged that it was better for the child to find out for herself rather than be met with a straight 'no', which would possibly have caused more 'moodiness'. During the action of the play and in front of the audience part of the top layer of the costume would not come off quickly enough.

M pushed her out on stage with only the half costume on. Afterwards when complimented that 'you were really good' N said 'no I wasn't, I ruined it'. There was a change in both children and instead of moaning about things, children now had become more likely to find constructive things to say. That year N came to show greater maturity, greater skill and she no longer 'destroyed her artwork'.

As earlier indicated, parents became very positive about the ArkLink work. They quoted examples of children showing more care for the younger children. They saw children that were more positive in their attitude to themselves and to their environment. Children were all very positive about going to the ArkLink programme, indeed much more enthusiastic than about going to much of their other activity. Much other activity available was not of this quality and generally had not lasted. Parents saw that the ArkLink activity had these results:

- Children love coming to ArkLink
- Builds confidence
- Makes children more thoughtful
- Children have learned to encourage each other
- More bonding between children
- Children more relaxed
- Behaviour better
- Helped a child that thought she was 'crap' to recognise she is 'good'
- Takes kids to places that parents can't
- Parents can now give paper at home on a rainy day and the children will be engrossed
- Children's manual skills better
- Children more imaginative
- Children make 'beautiful' things
- Children now more confident in school and the parents are told this by teachers

- Four out of five children in one family attend and all 'love it'
- All the work is very practical
- Gives a 'buzz' in the community
- Gives the community as well as the children a sense of achievement
- Removed barriers on the estate (before 14e, some parents would not allow children to cross the road divide that separated parts of the estate)
- Parents meet more because children meet more
- Allowed friendships to develop between parents across the divide in the estate
- All of this was seen against parental comments that the schools were less able to get the children's enthusiasm going.

One child who had been attending bereavement counselling had greatly improved after a difficult time. The counsellor had been using arts unsuccessfully to try to encourage expression of feelings. The counsellor was surprised to find sudden change and strong and skilled expression through the arts by the child. The counsellor asked the parent where this was coming from and learned of ArkLink. The parent was sure it was ArkLink that helped the daughter get by. Now she was more attentive to reading and writing at school.

There is a general feeling among a number of parents that going down the 'imaginative' road helped with reading and writing in school.

Parents became aware that their children liked the art classes at school, as they were able to display real ability. Parents now felt very positive about the arts. Before, none would have considered their children might develop an artistic career – now they all could see that was an acceptable future and some could see their children doing just that. When asked about their child's potential to become an artist, one parent asserted and the other parents agreed that five years ago they would not have understood the question!

Parents also wished they'd had something like this in their young days. Summing up what it is all about, one parent said we know they're safe, we know they are using their brains, we know they are mixing well and we know that if anything is wrong we will find out through ArkLink staff. Parents also valued the occasional visits from 'foreign' visitors to 14e, and felt it was great that their children met people from other places. The artists have 'the patience of a saint' was another popularly endorsed comment. 'We'll be protesting if ArkLink does not continue!' said parents.

The parental views are corroborated by what they have said to other professionals working in Fatima. Other professionals working with parents in the community got totally positive feedback from parents about how strongly they were in favour of the experiences and support their children were getting through ArkLink, and of its positive outcomes.

**By the end of 2004 the project was already viewed as a very considerable success and the agreed key factors, among the various stakeholders, in this success story were:**

- Artists who knew how to work in a context of social change and social engagement, and who were open to learning more about these skills on-the-job
- Capacity for the artists to work without many of the resource struggles that are the norm. Artists in the community who have the space, resources and freedom to get on with the task are not the norm
- A child-friendly approach reaching a genuine cross section of the community
- A project manager who was comfortable with the child-oriented philosophy and had the time to support the artists, the children, their parents and community connections (artists don't usually have that help)
- Local parents as support workers, prepared to have a go and who valued the process for the children and for themselves; and who were now able to run workshops on their own (indeed they were also able to show leadership to school teachers in teacher training sessions)
- Strengthening support emanating from The Ark at Temple Bar that was able to extend opportunities and add resources
- The Ark becoming more flexible and comfortable with its outreach work
- Strong community support, particularly from key players in Fatima Groups United

(FGU) who accepted art as a tool and took it for granted in relationship to everyday life, not some mysterious great leap forward

- Practical integration of the four services dedicated to 4 to 12 year olds, who liaised with each other and supported children's attendance to all (ArkLink, Fatima Youth Initiative, Homework Club, Fatima Youth Club)
- Extensive exposure of the children to art and creative thought, to a remarkable extent and variety for children of this age
- Children themselves developed. According to teachers, in projects where they interacted in school with other children from other areas they 'nearly wiped the floors' in how they used the experience and they 'frequently led others in group sessions'
- Developing links to the schools, where the main developmental out-of-family experiences for the children were taking place
- Achievement of a common sense of ownership of the initiative

By the end of 2004 the 'prize asset' emerging from ArkLink was a concept and a practice that could be promoted widely. Findings from ArkLink activity would complement findings from other innovative arts projects around the world and nearer to home.

One continuing downside of the project was the inability for various reasons to create a community-based support group. None existed initially and the efforts to create a Planning

Implementation and Evaluation group (PIEG), while initially successful, floundered against a background of other community-based collaborative forums. In the community there were many forums as involvement in the regeneration programme increased and the focus on social regeneration came to the fore. Among these was a working group for children and young people, which was a clear priority in the community.

The PIEG group was influential for a time as the project refocused, but the loss of active involvement of key personnel, particularly of the project manager, meant continuity was lost. There are differing views on whether the loss of the group was acceptable. There should probably have been some such group from the outset in 1999 to see the project through its entire pilot phase, to assist planning and evaluation, while leaving implementation to the staff. This failure was recognised by an FGU representative as one area in which they had to share responsibility.

In 2005, the concept and practice was developed and refined further. The summer 2005 'book project' is an example of greater ambition and concrete outcomes. The ArkLink project allowed children to design, create and bind their own individual book. Building on earlier skill building and the child's own research and enquiry – and this with some children who had quite significant literacy problems. To adult observers, the project made a significant difference in children's attitudes to books. On return to school this change was recognised by teachers.

Previously, one child would huddle in the corner if asked to read in the Homework Club. Now that child's attitude has transformed. He was proud of the book he created and developed an interest in books. This was seen as an exemplary practical example of significant progress by both school and Homework Club.

There were also examples in the street. Through 2005 a number of arts projects targeting other age groups were in progress in the community. High visibility activity included the work alongside the new light railway, the LUAS, and within the flats environment itself. Here the children from ArkLink could see older people involved in arts activity, reinforcing that this activity of theirs was not just child's play. Some of the ArkLink children got into discussion with the older people about the work they were doing. They understood the work, they understood what it should be and they wanted to do it. They were completely comfortable with the vocabulary needed to discuss the work. They came to such discussion with skills, knowledge and confidence that was not present in other children enquiring what was happening.

Community workers in Fatima recognised that these children had grown up more, in one way or another, and that the whole community was more aware of its children and held more respect for its children than would normally be the case. Indeed, they felt that the community placed great confidence in these children and had great expectations of them. In the summer 2005 community festival, the children played important roles and what they did they did with 'supreme' confidence.

The ArkLink project is taking place in one of the most 'observed' communities in Dublin, a focus for many who have studied the outcomes of multiple disadvantages. In planning the evaluation of ArkLink outcomes, it was agreed from the outset that no way had been found for intensive quantitative study if the project were to be allowed to meet its key aims of fitting naturally into the community. At that juncture it was a choice of what was possible and what was not.

As indicated earlier, finding a 'control' group that did not undergo the experience would be impossible, and indeed the nature of the experiment would not allow for the same groups being followed unaltered through the years of the experiment. Children left for many reasons and new ones joined. The demolition programme on the estate would ensure some left the flats forever, while others stayed to be re-housed.

Against this background, the main corroboration found was in the stories and reports of the children themselves, their parents, their schoolteachers and their community workers.

Finding a means of implementing a questionnaire approach was difficult, not least because of the slow start to the project. Once it was up and running as a viable project, efforts to locate school classes where a large enough number of participants and non-participants existed in one class proved difficult by the time a questionnaire might be effectively put before them. Another comparison needed to be found and the revived Homework Club was chosen. The children from the same flats, undergoing the same physical regeneration scheme and attending the same batch of local schools were in attendance at the Club. Whether ArkLink attendees or not, most children on the estate were in attendance.

The group chosen for the end of 2005 survey were the 10 to 12 years age group, the oldest group eligible for ArkLink, and the group most able to contribute to the approach by written questionnaire. The Homework Club staff administered the questionnaire. Children were required to give their age, their sex and whether they attended ArkLink. They were also invited to respond to six requests for information on:

- Arts activity attended
- Attitudes to the estate
- Attitudes to school
- Attitudes to art
- What was best in their lives
- What they were better at in skill over the previous year

It was hoped that something useful could emerge, but as a result of the sample size (18) being small, and the process within the Homework Club being not fully 'water-tight' in its application, some caution is needed. It may be that the results would have been better for ArkLink had the process been more rigorous. Some interesting results emerged.

Of the 18 sampled, 4 were 10 years, 9 were 11 years and 5 were 12 years. Of the 18, 11 were boys and 7 were girls. 56% attended ArkLink. Had all the children attending ArkLink responded, 10 boys and 9 girls would have completed forms.

Visual Arts was the core arts activity of ArkLink and clearly the attendees should have shown a greater level of attendance at such activity, which was the case. Only 1 of the 8 who did not attend ArkLink attended art workshops during the year.

However, when it came to film and theatre a closer attendance pattern emerged, but even here there were differences. 33% of the children surveyed had not attended a theatre performance in the year, with only 2 ArkLink children not attending while 3 non-ArkLink children did not attend. When it came to theatre attendance of between 2 to 5 times in the year, 5 out of 10 ArkLink children fell into this category whereas 3 out of 8 of the others were in the category. For those attending only once in the year, there were 3 ArkLink children and 1 non-ArkLink child in this category. No one attended more than 5 times in the year.

With film, the strongest attendance figures emerged with 100% attendance, and only 1 ArkLink child registering a single attendance. 7 ArkLink children and 7 non-ArkLink children attended over 6 times, while 2 ArkLink children and 1 non-ArkLink child attended from 2 to 5 times.

When asked about attendance at a music workshop, 14 responded in the negative. Of the 4 who had attended a workshop, 2 were from each group. 1 non-ArkLink child had attended only once, the other attending from 2 to 5 times. 1 ArkLink child had attended music from 2 to 5 times, while 1 had attended over 6 times.

These responses do clearly indicate that most of the children are having cultural experiences whether attending ArkLink or not, but that those attending ArkLink are having the richer experience, and that attending ArkLink makes it more likely that a child would have a richer theatre experience. ArkLink children are marginally more likely to benefit from diverse cultural experiences but when the art class activity is added, there is a significantly wider gap.

Children were asked to insert words reflecting how they felt about where they lived. Only 4 were negative about where they lived, with the ArkLink two being clearly negative ('filthy/in bits/playground' and 'dirty/not a good place to live/rough'), while the other 2 were very negative ('brutal/shite/a dump' and 'stupid/crap/-').

8 in the ArkLink group and 6 non-ArkLink children were positive about where they lived, a high and noteworthy proportion.



**Positive words used in the two groups were:****ArkLink –**

Good / Exciting / Fun  
 Flats / Playing in the block / My ma's home  
 Good / Very Good / Excellent  
 My Home / New houses / My family  
 Flats / New houses / Swimming Pool  
 Love living here / Playground / Football pitch  
 Portuguese word / Nice / Fun  
 Is the best / Is knocked down /  
 Rules other places

**Non-ArkLink –**

The best / Peaceful / Fun  
 Good / Best place / Brilliant  
 Brilliant / Exciting / Great  
 The best / Home / Fun  
 The best / A laugh / Home  
 The best / New houses / Fun

There is some difference in the overall responses of the two groups with the ArkLink group showing a little more complexity in what is covered. But the majority view of their situation is positive and it is a reflection of commitment and contentedness.

Next asked to state how they felt about school, half the children felt better about school than they did the year before, while 5 felt worse and 4 about the same as the year before. 5 ArkLink children felt better and 3 worse. 4 of the others felt better and 1 worse.

In an effort to explore vocabulary when the word 'art' is used the children were invited to put in three words they think of when they hear the

word 'art'. Overall in both sections, the word 'art' evokes positive responses, with only one non-ArkLink child being partly negative in the response ('don't like it/some times good/don't like drawing').

**The responses were:****ArkLink –**

The Ark / Pictures / Different Kinds of Paint  
 Deadly / The best / Clay  
 Very good / Stained glass / Painting  
 Pictures / Good / –  
 Fascinating / Encouraging / Pictures  
 Sculptures / Creative / Enjoyable  
 Colouring / Fun / Enjoying myself  
 Cool / Imagination / Creative  
 Drawings / Paintings / Colours  
 Clay / Enjoy / Fun

**Non-ArkLink –**

Fields / The flats / Painting  
 Like it / Painting / -  
 Pictures / Colours / Animals  
 Fun / Entertaining / Happy  
 Big drawing / Good painting / Artists  
 Portrait / Clay / Painting  
 Clay / Music / Fun

Although difficult to generalise, the two sets seem to suggest the vocabulary used in the ArkLink group of children is more varied, and shows more complicated concepts.

The children were invited to suggest three things that were best in their life at the time of the questionnaire. Grouping the responses revealed:

Family –11 / Sports – 7 / Arts – 6 /  
 New house – 5 / Friends – 4 /  
 Homework club – 4

ArkLink was mentioned by one and The Ark by one. Asked what they felt better at this year than they did last year the responses revealed:

Sport – 14 / School and school subjects – 12 /  
 Arts – 5 / Life skills – 4

100 (67) % of the girls and 67 (60) % of the boys in ArkLink identified being better at a school subject or in school generally. The respective figures for non-ArkLink children are in brackets.

As cautioned earlier, care has to be taken in what is extrapolated from these figures, the sample being small, and the accuracy not being guaranteed. However, it can be argued that a sufficient number of indicators are emerging that differentiates the ArkLink child from the non-ArkLink child. One interesting dimension is that although the parents identify the ArkLink experience as of vital importance in their children's lives, this is not being named as such by many of these children. Without asking them why this is the case, it is not possible to do anything other than hypothesise.

As the children clearly appreciate the experience, are learning and growing through it, and have products to display that show skill beyond many of their years, is it perhaps that ArkLink is now so embedded in their lives that it no longer stands out? Were this to be the case, it would be another marker of success and of successful engagement with their lives.

Whereas gathering quantitative data proved difficult, the gathering of extensive qualitative information was not problematic. Extensive corroboration was available through the years with feedback from all stakeholders in the venture. Even when the project was performing less well in its early stages, this revealed that progress was being made. There is no doubt that the absence of an appropriate arts base in the community was seen by everyone as the greatest inhibitor of early substantive progress by the project and the children.

Once the base at 14e was in place, everything became more tangible, and even although the base was considered to be in a less than ideal block for some parents, there is no evidence that there was long-term resistance to children's attendance. In a community with a significant level of anti-social activity, the best locations for activity would be in or adjacent to the main community facilities in the centre of the estate.

ArkLink was not the only project to have to compromise and develop its more permanent activity in a difficult social environment. Their challenge was no different from that of stable families in the same block facing a similar challenge and succeeding. What emerged was that the ArkLink studio at 14e became a haven for positive expression and positive images. Everyone viewed it positively and as it became established the wider community that showed interest, not just the families that saw their children attend. So the elderly resident living alone also showed interest, as would the teenager who came to help if something went wrong.

It was a very healthy relationship with the community, created and sustained by the time and effort of the project manager who built open and transparent relationships, while the team of artists got on with the job of helping with the children's development.

In many instances where development clearly did occur, it was hard to determine or measure exactly what the level of progress had actually been. Big changes have been observed both by the various stakeholders and through external evaluator visits.

The children have developed broader outlooks. Individual success stories are significant. One child, recognised by the parent and school of below average performance and placed in a 'special' school, had his life transformed through the ArkLink experience. His artistic development and aptitude resulted in him being given a place in a different kind of special school. He was able to command a place in a College that works on a basis of learning through the arts. Prior to this, he had been bullied and lacked confidence. The arts activity at ArkLink gave him the confidence he needed, reassuring him he was good at something, and thus played this huge role in transforming his life. He has not looked back.

Children themselves became more articulate in speaking approvingly and constructively of the experience within 14e, and on its visits outside. Trips were one of the key attractions in broadening understanding and knowledge. The children recognised that they could experiment in all directions, even to interviewing the President of Ireland on film, or getting to drive in a large

limo as part of making a film. They moved with confidence from their visual arts work into almost any other arts field made available. Some preferred to begin to look at film, others at music. All the time they described these solidly healthy and educational activities as 'fun'. Many said it helped them with their artwork in school and some appeared at the top of their class in a subject for the first time. Some clearly wanted to be artists and their parents recognised this as a viable future.

The children expressed confidence and affection for their 'great leaders', the ArkLink staff. They expected that ArkLink would always be there. They have been doing things that are not the norm for children their age. They have also been taking more control. When RTE came to do a fly-on-the-wall television piece, they were really after a feature on the ArkLink member that had become a bit of a celebrity in his earlier filmed exchange with An Taoiseach.

This new piece ended up as a broader sweep of what was going on, with the 'celebrity' member of ArkLink getting himself out of the limelight and behind the camera helping with the shooting! This piece had been chosen by RTE for broadcast in Christmas week 2005 as a 'feel good' item. Indeed, changed days for Fatima, a community much maligned in the media over the years.

**That such exposure was possible was down to a range of factors, reviewed, corroborated and confirmed as present or learned from the outcomes of ArkLink:**

- Increasing self-esteem
- Sense that the children knew that they were held in higher esteem at school for their ArkLink activity
- Greater confidence
- Skill development, especially artistic skill, and technical progress, initially slower than with groups of similar age, but the rapidly progressing beyond competencies among the average child of similar age
- Children are artistically more competent
- Children are not afraid of art or of expressing themselves
- Children can express more complex ideas
- Greater ability to start something and see it through
- Greater ability to help others and be supportive
- From an initial negative attitude to trying, children learned that trying is worthwhile and transferred this learning elsewhere, including to the school environment
- Problem solving skills improved
- Collaboration between the children increased and was noted in the school environment and in the wider community

- Skills such as ‘cutting’ and ‘manipulating materials’ are being generously handed on to others in school by ArkLink children
  - Children are given time to look and to respond to ideas
  - Language development has become more elaborate
  - Greater feeling that Fatima was a ‘cool’ place to be
  - Pride to take artists to meet their parents, have photographs taken with them
  - Children shut down when they do not ‘own’ the activity
  - Motivation is a changeable factor and needs to be allowed for in planning the activity
  - Developmental arts work for children at their pace is a resource ‘hungry’ activity
  - The earlier age at which children can start their arts activity, the better the outcome
  - Confidence in arts activity can lead to confidence in other fields, at school and in community leadership, and in dealing with adversity
  - Children expressing themselves better than their peers, especially to adults, and becoming more imaginative
  - Greater openness in relationship to school teachers
  - Parents recognising improved attitudes in their children and discipline and marked improvement at home in how they behave
  - Some parents recognising their children's future might be in the arts as artists
  - Significant social development is being aided, including parents making friends in the estate
  - The key ArkLink methodology was that the child was treated with dignity and respect and that each was treated as an individual
  - Skilled ArkLink artists are seen as having ‘been around the block’ and know how to pitch it according to the appropriate child development stage
  - ArkLink has artists who are very good at and willing to talk with rather than at the children
  - Choice for the children within a fairly structured approach works best
- The cumulative outcome of this extensive list suggests that the quality of life of the regularly participating children improved greatly, their skills developed and the community derived great benefit from the strengths created in their children. This is significant achievement of ArkLink supported by a complementary multi-agency approach of which ArkLink was an integral part.
- Yet the artists felt that they were only halfway through the process. While recognising the medium-term reality of a pilot project, to the artists the aims were being realised with a long-term vision, and they felt that needed to be recognised. They argued for, and there is significant strength to the argument, the children's continued exposure to numerous programmes in which the visual arts play a major

part. They argued that there was something of the whole world coming into the children's lives. In an hour the children would often discuss more topics of all descriptions otherwise not discussed in a whole day.

The artists had watched the children develop a responsibility for their selves, for each other and for their community. The children's work had become a ‘keystone’ in the community structure. The artists argued that ‘confidence breeds creativity and creates the healthy mind, which controls the body’. One indicator was the general lack of sickness being observed and that even when sick, children would often turn up.

Against a background in which future financial realities might lead to reduced funding for their work, the artists posited that with more funding they could do even more. Their experience was also developing their own artistic practice as they learned and adapted. They felt new information and experience was available now in the artistic field.

One of the artists, who has viewed many portfolios of secondary school leaving certificate applicants for third level arts college entry, was confident to assert that these portfolios didn't display the same level of imagination, confidence or sense of composition as some of these older primary school pupils within ArkLink. This is her judgment, but coming from an experienced professional, it is also powerful evidence.

By the end of 2005, ArkLink children were achieving ‘amazing’ and complex results using varied techniques, which according to the same

artist some secondary school pupils in their first year could not even begin to conceptualise. They can now ‘see a finished product in their minds’. In quite short times, the children could make ‘incredible progress’. Those children that have been attending longest are now seen to be confident in understanding context, secure in their competence and unafraid of thinking time. They know they can get back to any work they are pondering over the following week.

They are keen to explore other art forms and their journey is really only starting.

The annual ArkLink calendar is a record of the journey that some children have been on for over five years. This shows confident development culminating in the 2006 calendar, which was a complex interpretation of children's ideas and a vehicle for ambitious artistic exploration.

Considerable artistic challenges were faced and realised in the calendar's completion. With strong graphical support from Dublin's Public Communications Centre, work was produced that stands up to comparison with refined professional standards.

Six calendars have been produced, one at the end of each year. Each of the images below excludes the lower part of the calendar, normally the monthly grid. Each month has its image. Excerpts from the calendars follow to illustrate the development.



2001

### What I would wish for

The calendar project commenced with a poet-led creative writing project. Next came transformation of words into images led by an artist/graphic designer. The 'hands-on' making of the calendar involved a variety of materials and techniques. The children attended at the artist's design studio to watch the final process.

*'I would wish a playground in the square, lots of new house in Fatima' – 'I would like central heating, more space in the flat and to have lot of fun' – 'I'd like a new football pitch, a new house, a nice place to live in'.*



2002

### A few of our favourite things

This one began with hands-on workshops in the Ark at Temple Bar, firstly talking with the artists about friendships and exploring notions of imaginary friends and magical powers. The children then took the photographer to where each child involved was photographed in her / his chosen place.

*'I like playing with tennis balls and I like playing on the wall under the arch. I can juggle two balls but I want to juggle three balls'.*



2003

### All of us

By the third calendar issue, reports were coming in of it adorning walls from the Dáil to Delhi, from Inis Oirr, smallest of the Aran Islands, to downtown New York. The 2003 calendar had a similar approach to the previous year, working with the same photographer on the theme 'All of us'.

*'Now its 2003 and things are starting to get better. New playgrounds are getting built. Kids are getting a chance to see things changing for the better. I am hoping to see a happy and new life in Fatima'.*



2004

### Best friends

The calendar dwelt on the 'twilight of the old Fatima' and the transformation ahead. Black and white photographs by a local artist/photographer documenting the demolition process were juxtaposed with collaborative art works by the children. Also in this calendar the photos of the children appeared in the day square of each one's birthday.

*'The leaves turn brown and start to fall'.*



2005

### 14e and beyond

Different aspects of the arts work from the first full year in Flat 14e were the images for each month. The December pages showed boxes from the Pandora's Box project.

*'The last thing to come out of Pandora's box was hope'.*



2006

### A New Beginning

In this year's approach, the artists adopted a more holistic approach to the development of the calendar, maximising the greater conceptual and technical capacities of the children and capturing their greater ambition. The collage approach aimed to capture something of the 'changing landscape of Fatima suspended between the old and the new'.



This project was an innovative intervention by The Ark, with a clear purpose that the process should lead to learning among all those involved. One of the strong plusses has been the nature of the strong relationships that emerged from the project.

**After its hesitant start, significant and laudable progress was made under much improved conditions. These are:**

- Clearer objectives within the promoting organisation, The Ark
- Agreed objectives that were understood locally within community networks
- Good funding over a prolonged experimental period
- Consistent and supportive project management
- Experienced and talented core artists with provision for similar short-term or shorter time-input artists
- A friendly and accessible base, fit for purpose
- Quality materials and resources
- Good community networking
- Schools support

Little of that agenda was available when the project was established so it is far from surprising that it was a lengthy process to develop the good working model that emerged.

The experience of the Fatima Homework Club provided an interesting comparator. It ran from

1994 to 2004, provided for 25 children and was under-resourced and under-achieving in terms of community needs. Re-opened in 2005 with better resources and a better base, it then catered for 100 children, indeed most children in the community. The Homework Club staff estimate that in 90% of the homes, there was no suitable place for school homework. This suggested a similar difficulty in terms of the Ark's field of activity. Now the Homework Club is exploring the extent to which the arts could be a tool for education and it wished to experiment in education through the arts – what was seen as a 'big opportunity and a big challenge'.

Why the ArkLink project achieved significant success, and is now looking forward with some prospect of a sustainable but altered future, is probably down to the clarity of the message that the project developed. This was that ArkLink is:

- Primarily about commitment to children and young people
- Its primary strategy is arts-based
- Its primary approach is through partnership

Future development should also see stronger links with the schools, especially in communicating what is going on in and out of school. With such a project creating new communication patterns between child and adult, schools need to recognise the value of this and be ready to accept a changed relationship to the one more familiar to them.

It is also the case that new difficulties out of school might arise as children begin to see a bigger and more interesting world. Parents and community need to be aware that the sense of freedom created among their children, while largely for the good, also has the potential for new problems. Confidence is being built up and the situation is, rightly, not totally controlled. Also, adults involved have to be mindful of the effects on the child of this kind of development and the potential there is for exploitation of these developing talents, which can be good or bad.

It appears that ArkLink has been one significant contributor to very healthy community relationships against a background where the exact opposite could have been the case. In the course of the community upheaval through the area's regeneration, there was the risk of problematic transformational change.

There is evidence from this project that deprivation is not only about money. Artists emphasised the nature of great experience of Fatima children such as at the Botanic Gardens in Dublin, achieved at low cost compared with the range of potential more costly children's experiences.

The capacity of Ark staff to work effectively was constrained and delayed by lack of knowledge in child development, community development and clear understanding of how to create a coherent infrastructure for solid development. Too often in the early years these problems surfaced and were not addressed, rather than being seen as challenges to be turned into opportunities.

Parallel to this, the failure to address training needs, apparent at project conception and exposed during the project, was a continual factor in restricting the project from being more proactive.

The Ark Board and FGU were not able to work as well together at the beginning as they might have because they did not develop a common language until quite late in the process when the Ark came to fully recognise that empowerment at the local level was their preferred and realistic route to success. The partners did then work together but it took time to achieve the strong and confident partnership that emerged.

The organisational structure was eventually designed through inter-agency collaboration at the local level, informed by growing confidence in the ArkLink team about its capabilities and its role. The experiment with a planning, implementation and evaluation group should have been persevered with until a solution was found. However, the Ark Board, the FGU, and the Fatima Regeneration Board did work together to strengthen a collaborative relationship: the formal interagency structure achieved by 2005 was a learned methodology.

Schools are such a large part in children's lives that the relationship with the schools could have been more central to the plans and actions. It is clear from the outcomes that the ArkLink activity was having significant influence on children's school conduct and performance and in that context significantly better communication should have been put in place. There are discussions about approaches in out-of-school activity between the Homework Club and ArkLink at the moment. This discussion is desirable and should also be used to build stronger links with the schools, and between parents and schools.

ArkLink has shown that parents will attend and participate in discussion about their children's future, and even participate in arts activity to better understand the processes and experience through which their children are going. Schools should also explore this model to see how they can learn to communicate constructively with more parents than they currently do. It should be a two-way process as schools can also be a source of serious input into the work of projects like ArkLink.

It is necessary to keep the uniqueness of the ArkLink experience: small group/high quality/art-focussed.

ArkLink became a place for professionals to visit. Once, five adults walked into the room to visit. Normally children would react in such circumstances but the children were engrossed. There was no reaction to the visitors at all.

In Fatima, a common philosophy has developed among different groups working with the same

children – Rialto Youth Project, Homework Club, and ArkLink. In 2005 ArkLink saw a slight drop in consistent attendance against a background of finer and more adventurous ArkLink work. This was due to a combination of reasons, such as families moving, the increased influence of the Homework Club and boys interested in sport. This change has been comfortably accommodated within this inter-agency collaboration.

At the same time, the programme has adapted from its initial heavy reliance on visual arts to seek more appropriate forms for differing interests. This is a sign of growing confidence and improved responses to the children's needs. Good relationships have also been developed with the crèche, a whole new area for ArkLink focus. Through their visits to ArkLink, crèche workers are learning new arts skills and the creative agenda in early pre-school education is being more thoughtfully addressed.

In the ArkLink experiment, it may be that The Ark had not properly developed its leadership in the field, being focussed on its own change process. It is now better placed to take action in this area and should take the advocacy project forward. This is an exemplary project, probably among the best work that The Ark has achieved to date, and provides an argument for better funding of interventionist arts in areas of disadvantage.

That there is now a transition planning group on the ground in Fatima is the best course of action, and they should be rewarded with success for the continuation of an initiative that they clearly jointly own. The group consists of six people from The Ark, Fatima Groups United and the Fatima Regeneration Board. The Ark has given a commitment to the project manager post being there throughout 2006 and arts funding from the Irish Youth Foundation is in place for the first half year. The Fatima Regeneration Board argued strongly that arts activity in the community has been hugely beneficial as the community's knowledge and skill has grown and matured. 'It has helped people make sense of change. It has helped explore the strengths in people – other literacies'.

This community-based provision with its values, methodology and increasing commitment to training needs more time on the ground in Fatima, but the lessons learnt here have wider relevance in Ireland and further afield.

ArkLink in Fatima has proven that well-resourced arts activity makes a difference to children's lives, even in a most difficult environment in potentially traumatic transition. It proves the benefit to

society of such investment. It proves that the arts sector has much to learn from this kind of methodology and its outcomes, and some artists/arts institutions may need to rethink their own convictions and practice.

It shows to group workers that there are many techniques in this practice that can be utilised constructively in a multitude of situations, particularly in health and education.

It shows to each of us as individuals that we have a great deal of creativity in us that perhaps through earlier neglect has not been allowed to flourish.

For the wider community, the cautionary note would be to not allow such positive outcomes to unbalance how child development is seen. For too long, the arts have probably not been given their proper place. There needs to be a good balance in children's lives and as the questionnaire shows, the children see sport as important in their lives also and it too has its important role in child development. The issue is balanced lives.

But for society, there is the challenge – this work is seen to be 'hugely, hugely valuable' in the eyes of the stakeholders. It needs to be seen in a mainstream context. It needs to be mainstreamed without losing the integrity brought by its focussed attention to innovation, magic, small group work, long-term sustenance and community partnership. The arts have put excitement into the lives of Fatima children and they can recognise that now most of that excitement comes from within them. These

children have changed. The arts can change people. 'If you change children, you also change their children' argues a local educationalist.

What will they take up as teenagers? What would they have been doing had ArkLink not entered their lives? What would an alternative current lifestyle cost? These questions are asked locally. The answer given is that the arts encourage people to question and take an interest, and to become more politically and socially aware. Children that learn each time to question the materials they use in an arts activity are learning to question everything. This is surely a healthy and educational way out of disadvantage.

This experiment also has something to say in the wider debate on educational achievement in children and the question of whether the arts can boost academic achievement. This report did not set out to prove this but it does raise questions in this area of research. If the outcomes of this project include such significant levels of skill development, increased creativity, language development, confidence and broadening of thought and learning processes, and if schoolteachers are saying that they see progress in such subjects as mathematics and Irish language, then it is perhaps time to look more deeply at these outcomes. Perhaps it is not the case that the arts per se produce better academic performance (although this could yet be seen to be the case), but perhaps this raises the possibility that this type of arts approach does have something to contribute to improved academic performance.

Questions now arise over the future development of ArkLink in Fatima, and there is no easy answer to what that future should be. There are pros and cons to a number of forward paths. Already there are physical solutions being put in place with an arts space in the new centre, which should be a 2007 reality.

There is no one answer to the organisational shape of this continued ArkLink-type activity. It is up to those who will take the work forward to come up with an appropriate way forward. In seeking a sustainable future it is the well-resourced/child-focussed/small group/arts-led/community partnership model that needs to prevail. That is what has been successfully demonstrated.

Stakeholders, including the key funders and future funders, are now addressing themselves to that task.

Also, it is the time for risk-taking benefactors such as Atlantic Philanthropies and Irish Youth Foundation, who bravely supported the project through its learning and experimental times, to integrate the learning into their own strategies. In supporting this project they got to the core of some educational, health, social and community issues that they may not have touched by more conventional means. This is a good project that could usefully influence out-of-school policy.

It is hard to imagine that the work developed by children in 2010 will be achieving the outcomes currently being achieved if some means of retaining priority focus on the arts above other pursuits is not maintained. The characteristics of

the working model need to be preserved. There is a need for the process and focus that has been particularly successful in 14e to be the core of the future initiative. This is where the value lies.

This is what is in the child's interest. It is also in the interests of The Ark as a learning organisation, learning from its experience here and planning its own future.

This is admittedly a lengthy document and is not seen as the only evaluation document that should emerge. It is lengthy as it aims to provide as much firm evidence as could be collated and to properly reflect the outcomes of so many people's endeavours.

Local arts groups, the wider artistic community in Ireland, other agencies and professionals and local government policy makers still need to benefit from the Ark's experience with ArkLink.

The model is significant and so should be promulgated widely in order to influence policy and inform learning.

To the community of Fatima and all those who work there that have contributed to this evaluation I wish to express appreciation.

Also, thanks to the Ark Board and staff and personnel from other agencies for their contributions. All freely and willingly gave of their time, some over a five year period, to try to ensure that what was being achieved on the ground was truly reflected in the reporting, and that a wider audience could learn from the collective experience. Most of the key adults are named in Appendix 2. To those who are missed, I offer my apologies.

**Alan Tweedie**

**Context** The artists (Jole Bortoli, Kieran McNulty and Katie Lincoln) and project manager of ArkLink (Bernadette Larkin) underwent a facilitated discussion with Liz Coman, Visual Arts Officer at The Ark, with the aim of articulating key elements of the 'model' – artistic growth, outcomes, relationships, logistical elements, staff roles, organisational roles.

The following questions aimed to portray project issues and outcomes based on specific examples drawn from the artists involved in ArkLink and its project manager.

### 1. How does the ArkLink programme define artistic growth?

Exposed to stimuli, artistic growth in children happens at different ages and in different ways at differing ages. The following list of how ArkLink sees artistic growth is valid across age groups, but the complexity around such growth issues is greater as the children grow older.

- Visual awareness
- Visual vocabulary
- At ease in the space with the artists
- Appreciation of quality materials
- Art skills
- Understanding quickly what is required of them
- Capacity for artistic development of a project over time
- Seeing a project through from beginning to end
- Willingness to have a go – absence of artists having to coax children to try out and experiment with art.
- Children upping the ante from project to project. Increase in expectations of materials, challenges involved with the project and provision of greater challenges for the artist. (The artists work with this expectation and are open to be challenged as they want the children to grow as artists).

The idea of 'artistic growth' allies itself with the children growing. They grow up so quickly – physically, emotionally, intellectually, spiritually. This is reflected in their art as they mature as artists as well as people.

### Examples: Kieran McNulty's work

1. January to March 2005  
Ages 8 to 10 years and 11 to 14 years  
Theme: Myths and Mysteries Project  
'Pandora's Box'

#### Project Overview

The aim was to introduce the theme of myths and use the stories from different cultures to spark new projects. The myth chosen for this project was the widely known story of Pandora and the 'Sealed box'. The intention was to familiarise the group with the story and then proceed to develop individual and personalised boxes adhering to the core elements of the myth (see programme notes, page 53)

2. Date - various  
Ages 5 to 7 years  
Theme: Time and space as a 'settling in period.'

#### Project Overview: The aims are

- To see children at ease in the creative arts space
- To get them used to experimenting in the space and with different art materials
- To allow them to play with texture and colour

- To allow them to fail and succeed by doing or not doing
- To begin using art terminology and language
- To complement school development, especially developing visual literacy
- To enhance visual artistic development as parallel, but equally important, developmental phase in the life of young children
- No emphasis on producing an artwork as the value is in 'being there' and having the time and space to experiment.

This early stage quickly distinguishes the children in the ArkLink project from other children. Feedback from teachers, parents and community members quickly highlights that the children are different in the ArkLink environment rather than at home or at school. They are engaged in artistic discussions and acts that are central to their lives and therefore relevant to them. They are engaged and stimulated and therefore behave differently than in other environments. They quickly grow towards a sophisticated (ability to deal with themes and ideas on many levels) sense of art; this growth comes from the nurturing relationship of acceptance and respect in how they are treated in the project. The children's opinions are taken on board and are taken seriously, they feel ownership of the space and they feel comfortable and relaxed in the space. At this stage it is hard for the artists and project manager to tell what they are absorbing. But they usually hear them telling somebody else i.e. parent/child about their work and so the artists get excited when they hear this. It is a direct and most true indicator of what the child is experiencing in ArkLink.



#### Example: Jole Bortoli's work

January to June 2005

Ages 11 to 14 years

Theme: Bestiary, a theme on animals

#### Project Overview

The theme was chosen as a natural 'follow up' from the previous year's work based on the tale of the 'Firebird'. During that time the children had been working on specific elements like flowers, water and animals. The characters of the animals in particular (Chestnut Grey Horse, Gray Wolf and the Firebird itself) had magical powers and this offered the artist the perfect link to start on the new programme (see programme notes).

With the older children their manual skills are growing but the impact of The ArkLink project is holistic. Artists spend time assessing the different effects or reactions of a range of media on children. As the children develop as artists they are able to look at themselves from the outside as practicing artists do. The children are not fazed by working with new people and in new contexts. They are confident and informed without being cocky. Artistic language has become part of their daily vocabulary and discussing artistic decisions is becoming routine. They also are realising the value of each role in the artistic process and to respect and value what each child and artist brings to the table.

#### Examples: Katie Lincoln's work

Dates: Various

Ages 11 to 14 years

Theme: Working on film production through a Film Club

#### Project Overview

The children are now open to dealing with complex issues such as censorship and community identity. The children work with the artists and project manager on opening their awareness to the wider consequences of their actions. The trust and relationship between the children and the project manager and artists is crucial for meaningful discussion to take place. The children know that they will be supported through their decisions even if other grown ups disagree with their choices. For this type of negotiation to take place consistency of approach is key. Artists and project manager put the children at the centre of decision-making.

The artists or project manager does not use the children or their issues as a vehicle for their own ideas/products/political or organisational agendas. There is an inherent belief between artists and project manager that how the children solve issues and make artistic decisions will be fresher than if the artist/project manager did it (see programme notes).

#### 2. What kind of products are produced in ArkLink?

The children produce a great amount of product, which is exhibited on site at the end of the school year. There are also end-of-term open days and members of the local community and arts community are invited to attend. Products such as DVDs, the calendar, exhibitions, etc are valuable for gaining awareness and respect for the project. The calendars are owned within the community and the children are proud of their involvement with them.

**Issue: Product –v- Process** Product does not dictate outcomes from the ArkLink project. This is what mainly distinguishes the model from the routine work of its parent, The Ark. As the child goes through the process-driven workshops in ArkLink they may or may not be interested in an end product. This allows the children an openness to go in any direction that they choose, under the supervision and guidance of the artists.

This approach is similar to art college i.e. students in the National College of Art and Design - the emphasis on product/exhibition at the end of the year may help to focus and motivate but time and space during the year is vital for ideas to formulate and emerge. If the children understand the relevance of, or are committed to the product, they will work hard towards it. Products are the manifestations of how the children have seen a project through from beginning to end. It is also a means by which the children receive external feedback and experience audience reaction, which is a vital part of being an artist.

#### 3. How do the artists and/or project manager judge artistic value?

The artists and project manager base their artistic values and judgments largely on their own experience as artists and practitioners. A level of focus and concentration is very important to Kieran - how immersed the children are in the concept and practice. Being lost and engaged in what you are working on is a strong part of his practice and so he brings this value to how he judges success or failure within his workshops.

Jole is interested in free flow conversation. She also values when the children react/comment /make links with other things not necessarily related to what they are doing. She enjoys how the children challenge the artists in how they make decisions – which you have to prove to them 'how' you are an artist by showing research or physically demonstrating skills. The young children are curious to know 'how' she is an artist. But for Jole it is important that although she shows them how she is an artist and how she practices, she also tells them how she appreciates their work and the value of their work as a person and artist.

Katie likes the sense of adventure of working with the children. She enjoys the loose structure and being guided by them. She has learned to trust in the process and judge the moment when to let go of guiding the structure and let the group take over. She likes to key into skill building – informing them how to take shots, talking about light/composition, how to prompt. Katie enjoys not know what is going to happen, the sense of excitement and responding to the

changing environment that is the same when she is practicing as a documentary maker. She enjoys talking and analysing the work with the children.

Bernadette (Project Manager) early on in the project had to adapt thoroughly to the community of Fatima from her experiences of structuring workshops at The Ark. She was aware that she was engaging in much closer, challenging and even a frightening way with children's artwork. She values the imperfection of children's art and how it goes against the perfection that is demanded in society. She is aware of the child's achievements and failures within the context of knowing the family and circumstances of where they are coming from. However, within the context of ArkLink, she refuses to allow the child be constrained or defined by those circumstances.

### 4. What are the outcomes of ArkLink in the context of child development?

The artists articulate a list of outcomes

- Greater self esteem
- Confidence
- Skills development
- Cognitive stimulation
- Socialisation
- Analytical skills
- Problem solving
- Concentration/application

- Language development
- Communication development
- Resilience
- Positive impact on their environment
- Choice making
- Aesthetic judgment
- Skill of looking after each other
- Compassion towards each other
- Attitude changing toward environment and peers
- Greater sense of responsibility

### 5. How does ArkLink compare to other youth programmes? ArkLink –v- Homework Club

This comparison is between two programmes that the artists and project manager feel very positive about.

#### ArkLink

- ArkLink is purely arts lead
- Child development is not the primary aim but emerges through practice
- Access to high quality arts provision
- Children choose to attend
- ArkLink performance is distinct from academic performance
- Children develop literacy around multiple art forms

- Links are provided between community and schools through arts
- Broadens access to The Ark through schools

#### Homework Club

- School syllabus related
- Task orientated
- Based on academic performance
- Children choose to attend but parents see benefit in a more practical way - children get a meal and homework is done
- Would it exist if school didn't create homework?
- Links with schools through curriculum

Both programmes are positive and necessary environments focused on the well being of the child. However, the homework club has more provable outcomes whereas ArkLink outcomes are much more difficult to prove. The ArkLink programme embodies all the struggles and challenges in articulating how the arts are a catalyst for social growth and change and yet the evidence is ever present in the daily commitment of the children who come by choice on a regular basis to the programme.

### 6. How does the structure of ArkLink work?

There are lots of positive aspects in the practice for the children:

- Capacity to be loose and evolve within a structured programme

- Freedom in programming
- Freedom to experiment
- Constantly evolving
- Two-way learning
- Constantly presenting opportunities
- Trips to cultural institutions and other venues broaden experience and begin to break down historical barriers regarding access

#### Possible negatives:

- Accessing a relatively small number of children could more children be accessed with more resourcing – time, funding and support?
- Increased resourcing may or may not address this problem. A major challenge exists in selecting artists who will work with the same agenda as artists in ArkLink. Also, a major challenge exists in including more children. Does opening up to more numbers mean diluting the quality engagement of the child? Does opening up dilute the artist's ability to change and respond to children's growth and changing preferences?
- Quick turnover in the helpers from the community – living and working in same place difficult may be difficult but local knowledge is vital
- Local knowledge about the history of individuals and families could be a potential problem regarding objectivity – this aspect needs to be watched and managed

### 7. What is the Role of the Project Manager?

The Project Manager is the community/organisational liaison worker. She works on committees in the community. She addresses issues of funding and advocacy. She has input into the creative/ artistic direction of the project. She works with the evaluator and with local schools. Her priority is ensuring the interaction with the children is of quality standard. The project manager interacts with the children and their families in a different way than do the artists. She is the main face of the project. Everybody in the community knows her and there is a high level of trust necessary. She knows something of the history and circumstances of each of the children. The consistency of her presence is a touchstone for the project.

The Project Manager introduces the artists to the project and to the ArkLink philosophy. She ensures that the team of artists works cohesively in programming of ArkLink activity. Without the Project Manager, artists could be thrown in at the deep end. There could be less control of structure/number of children attending/age group suitability and less consistency of experience for the children. The Project Manager is responsible for the site – keeping the location cosy and warm and welcoming, ensuring materials and food are in stock. Liaison with the community would be much less embedded were there no project manager.

### 8. What have the artists learned from working on ArkLink?

#### Key learning outcomes for the artists included

- In Fatima many pre-conceived ideas of work practice have to be adjusted
- Considerations of what is success are adjusted according to the children with whom the artist is working (e.g. sitting for five minutes can be deemed a success, silence can be deemed a success)
- Flexibility
- Knowing when a child can make it for him/herself and knowing when to step in
- Trust in the process and the time
- Opportunity to work with the same children over years gives valuable insight into their way of thinking and how they work
- The importance of a dedicated, well-resourced space
- The importance and appreciation of the programme manager's role
- The recognition from parents gives motivation to carry on
- What the community helps bring and how they relate to children is of great importance

### 9. What does The Ark bring to The ArkLink project?

#### The Ark brings:

- Expertise and connections
- The stamp of quality (people want to be associated with The Ark)
- A mandate to work with children in quality arts engagement
- Professional expertise in setting up structures and budgets
- Technical expertise and production back up
- Translating The Ark model to Fatima (a major endeavour and challenge)
- Good financing and quality of materials
- Access to a range of cultural activities
- A familiar place to visit
- Children feel at home in a cultural institution from an early age

### Programme Notes

Myths and Mysteries Project 2005  
'Pandora's Box' 8 –10 years  
Kieran McNulty

**Project Overview** The aim would be to introduce the theme of myths and use the stories from different cultures to spark new projects. The myth chosen for this project was the widely known story of Pandora and the 'Sealed box'. The intention would be to familiarise the group with the story and then proceed to develop individual and personalised boxes adhering to the core elements of the myth.

**Workshops** Story: Using a book of mythical stories (Greek Myths for younger children—Walker Books) as the source material. Reading of the myth. Discussion of what happened, trust, temptation, curiosity, cheating, evil, horror. Looking at the illustrations from the book. What are we going to do with the idea contained within the myth, the core elements of good and evil?

**Shoeboxes** Like jewellery boxes – lavishly decorated on the outside. Covered the outside to remove the shoe box graphics, logos etc. Hinged the lid. Covered the outer surfaces with beads, glitter shapes, sequences, fabrics and exotic handmade papers.

**Discussion** Mid-project discussion to refresh the intention and try to focus the group into the shift in thinking from the beautiful to the grotesque; search and shared ideas, possibilities and what would be great but impractical (within 14E).

**Inside** Made a list of the main contents that would be placed inside the box. The group made the vast majority of items placed inside the box but there were a few items brought into the project that justified the intent or desired effect needed. A lot of invention came about in relation to how best to maximise the effect of the opening of the lid.

**Finishing** Generally I will allow a final session for the finishing of any details needing attention (i.e. re-sticking, strengthening, and refreshing)

**Outcome** An opportunity was given for each member of the group to look at and open the other boxes. Whilst the myth of Pandora describes untold horrors been unleashed from the opened box, naturally enough the young people's realisation of this reflected their ages such as spiders being one of the more disturbing elements contained inside. Which is a poignant reminder that real horrors are an adult invention.

**Exhibition** We all agreed that these boxes would be ideal to put on display for others to see. Final pieces were photographed and used in the 2005 calendar.

Myths and Mysteries Project Jan-Mar 2005  
'Icarus' 10-12 yrs old. 6-8 sessions. 1 hour (of which 45 minutes work time)  
Kieran McNulty

**Project Overview** The aim of this project is to continue with the overall theme that I am exploring for the term September 2004 to June 2005 which is 'journeys'. For this, the group will experiment with the making of kites. It is

intended that these kites will be functional. As for inspiration and motivation we will use the Greek Myth and the fantastic story of Icarus and the idea of flight.

**Workshops** Story - Using the book (Greek Myths for Younger Children – Walker Books) which is part of the library of books ArkLink has at 14E (also being used simultaneously with other groups). We began our project by reading the story and following that we had an informal discussion of the main elements of the story, the making, the flying and even the ultimate failure of Icarus. Interestingly we spoke briefly around the idea of failure, the fear of, and whether or not it should prevent one from trying. The story was beautifully illustrated in the book so we spent some time looking through the images.

**Kites** The practical work on the project began with me presenting a few different (simple) kite types, drawing their attention to the traditional diamond shaped kite as the type that we would attempt to make.

A lightweight fabric (white) would be used for the kite and 2 sessions spent designing and creating an image for the shape. This was established by showing a selection of images of Chinese kites and their designs. To focus them within this we chose to create individual dragon motifs onto the fabric. The sessions allowed for the structure (rods) to be cut to size and secured in place. A final creative touch was added in the form of the ribbon or tail of the kite which each member of the group individualised in a variety of ways. Everyone then made the long string and card to tie to the kite structure.

At this point the anticipation of flying kites was palpable, some couldn't wait and impatiently attempted flying theirs outside 14E with obvious disastrous results without wind or space. A discussion was held as to where we thought would be a suitable space to try and fly our kites. An agreement was reached and was within walking distance.

Our final project session was to walk to our flying site and attempt to fly our motley crew of kites in the sky. As luck would have it there was little or no wind that day, coupled with the fact that our kites were a tad short on precision. What resulted was much running with very little kite flying, some flew, some crashed, some spun irrationally, some collapsed, but great fun was had. So in some strange way we failed like Icarus even though we had no sun to worry about.

#### Workshop Materials

Storybook – Greek Myths for Younger Children (Walker Books)  
Images – Researched/copied images of kites etc.  
Fabric – Lightweight nylon (white)  
Rods – Davel rods (8mm)  
String – Nylon cord (100 metres)  
Design Various graphic materials, markers, chalks, crayons etc.  
Repair Kit – Tape, string, glue, plasters.

Bestiary 2005  
4-7 years old  
Jole Bortoli

The January to June 2005 programme was dedicated to the theme of 'Animals'. The theme was chosen as a natural 'follow up' from last

year's work based on the tale of the 'Firebird'. During that time the children had been working on specific elements like flowers, water and animals. The characters of the animals in particular (Chestnut Grey Horse, Gray Wolf and the Firebird itself) had magical powers and this offered me the perfect link to start on the new programme.

'The younger children of the Thursday groups have also been working on the theme of 'Animals' but in a much looser way. We dipped in and out of the project responding more to their needs as they were arising. This was my second year working with this groups but, as they join in the classes when 'they come of age', most of my work is spent in getting to know them, adjusting to their personality and artist's temperament.

#### The year's work comprised of the following:

**Clay birds** / Workshop: 3D work.

After 'discovering' a bird (made of clay) hidden in a box, each child worked with clay for a while shaping and re-shaping the clay and just enjoying the experience.

#### Funny animals

Aim of this workshop: to develop listening skills and visual memory.

I asked the children to draw an animal I have been dreaming about, a funny animal with stripes, dots and spots, legs and wings, horns etc... Could they give it a name? Secondly, if they could transform themselves into a strange

fantastic animal, what would it look like? Could they describe it in turn? Could they remember the description and draw it? The children had no problem with this exercise and produced very good work.

Material: wax crayons on white paper.

#### Visit to the zoo

Aim of this workshop: to develop description skills and visual memory.

As I wasn't part of the visit to the zoo, the following week I asked the children to talk about it. What animals did they see? What did they look like? Could they draw them?

The children drew the zoo animals on big sheets of paper taped to the walls. They worked with great concentration while making a lot of comments on their shapes and colours. A child took a long time discussing the colour of the water in the pond where the hippo was. One of the staff reminded her that the water was muddy-brown, but the child not being happy with that colour painted it blue and then asked for help in transforming it into a snake.

Material: Chalks on black or white paper.

#### Painting with sand

Aim of this workshop: to experience different textures.

When the children arrived they found bowls of sand on the tables. They immediately started to

play with it, spooning it over and over and feeling it between their fingers. They mixed it with colour taking pleasure and painted with brushes, hands and fingers. 'How does it feel?' 'I like it'. 'It's strange'. 'This is so weird, it's really weird'.

Material: sand and paint.

#### Chinese Dragons

Aim of this workshop: to develop fine motor skills.

When the children saw the paper dragons that the older groups were making they immediately asked to do the same. With help from the adults in cutting and gluing, they produced their own dragons and brought them home.

Material: coloured paper, glue, and sticks.

#### Illustrating stories

Aim of these workshops: to develop storytelling and story making.

First workshop: each child worked on a personal booklet made of different coloured pages. The children were illustrating parts of a story I was telling, they would also contribute to the story commenting on it or wanting to change it if it didn't conform to their expectations, 'It must be a dragon, not a tiger!'.  
Second workshop: each child was encouraged to tell a short story invented by them which all the other children would then illustrate. They all managed to do it and some had very beautiful and original images.

Material: wax crayons on coloured paper.

#### Let's paint!

Painting is definitely their favourite thing and they ask for it over and over. They don't need encouragement and any theme will do. When they paint they are the most concentrated and get into a real dreamy mode. They get lost in the colours and love exploring and making up new colours. So, sometimes we do just that.

#### Visit to Airfield Farm

A visit was arranged to Airfield Farm in Dundrum. It was a guided tour, which the Airfield staff organised especially for us. Jeanne, the farmer, took us around introducing the animals, allowing the children to pet them, asking and answering lots of questions. She was most impressed by the children's behaviour, attention and curiosity. We had a picnic and a great day altogether! The following week the children painted a creative response to their visit to the farm.

They are a very dedicated bunch of children. They come regularly and they knock at the door anytime they see the external metal door open. 'Can I come in?' 'Can I help?' 'Is my club on today?'

They are demanding, watching constantly what the older children do and wanting to do the same, wanting to move up, 'I am a big five now!'. Most of the work I do with them is aimed at developing basic skills, establishing routines and encouraging them to be as independent as possible.

#### The ArkLink Fatima Mansions Film Club

The lead in to the Summer Festival 2004

8-14yrs - workshop sessions introducing the children at ArkLink to filmmaking. June/July 2004. Katie Lincoln

Through a series of workshop sessions at 14E the children were introduced to the camera equipment. The children simply talked to camera, handled it and became comfortable with its presence. They then interviewed each other. They learned the basic skills of carrying out an interview. They took turns working in different roles. In this way they began to understand how to conduct an interview. It was a hands-on experience for them from the outset. The skills learned in these first few workshops formed the essential base from which the children would go out into their community the following month and make a video diary of the summer festival.

#### The Fatima Mansions Summer Festival

Shooting a summer video diary August 2004

The children went out and about with their basic filmmaking skills and documented the festival in their community. They were thrown in the deep end but in a good way. They were suddenly taking responsibility for camera gear and allocating 'goes' to all the other children who crowded around the camera. They continued to revolve the jobs. One or two children would film at a time and so they individually gained experience at operating the camera, listening to the sound and interviewing people.

The festival provided a focus of ongoing, unfolding things for the group to film. They became very good at approaching adults for interviews – everyone from their Dads to the local ice-cream man to the lads playing soccer. I was a constant presence with the camera for the week of the festival and so the children could come and go as they pleased. There was usually one of the ArkLink children filming – so they all contributed to the footage as the week progressed. Each child would decide what to point the camera at so they led the direction of the filming.

**The ArkLink Fatima Mansions Film Club Autumn 2004** During the autumn of 2004 the ArkLink Fatima Mansions Film Club was begun. It was held from 10.30am – 12.30pm every second Saturday morning at 14E. It provided a dedicated time for meeting and concentrating on filming. Each member of the club was given their own visual diary and at the start of each session ideas were jotted down. The children really took pride in their diaries – some would draw – some would write others made collages. They were encouraged to brainstorm and get ideas out via their diaries.

I acted as catalyst when the banter with the diaries was going on and filming ideas would come from the discussions about whatever was going on for them at the time – be it the excitement of Halloween preparations, Kirsty playing records or Mrs. Gavin heading to the market. They began to take ownership of the club around this point.

They also became more and more confident about going in front of the camera themselves. They became more polite when interviewing people and began to work well as team. There were fewer fights over who got to be on camera and who got to do sound. They worked it out fairly between them. They were quick to discuss ideas together. They generally became much more confident and eager to learn more. As a group they pushed themselves. They evaluated the footage they had shot at the end of most sessions and as a result they strived to get better and better footage. An example of this would be the way Amanda became so tuned into the sound and was constantly calling 'cut' whenever a plane flew over or there was too much background noise.

The older members of the group were patient with the younger ones and passed on the skills they had picked up to them.

**The lead in to Cinema Fatamiso Spring 2005** The group spent a few Saturday sessions viewing the footage that had been shot over the different Film Club sessions. There were then discussions in the group about favourite moments filmed or funny bits that should be used. These sessions and discussions were the only input that the group had in the editing part of the process. I then went away and edited the material together - and the DVD of their work was compiled.

**Cinema Fatamiso The Fatima Mansions Summer Festival 2005** Cinema Fatamiso was a make shift cinema on site in Fatima Mansions for the week of the summer festival. The Film Club group helped to run the cinema while it was

in place. They sat in on meetings about it, they contributed their ideas, they made the tickets, they allocated the tickets to the audience, made speeches, handed out popcorn and helped to clean up afterwards.

They turned up on time and were extremely reliable for the duration of the running of the cinema. They got the opportunity to show their now edited films to an audience. All of the local children and their friends and family attended. There were hairy moments when other children in the flats were messing and throwing stones at the container in which Fatamiso was housed, and the group really worked together to keep it calm and under control. This experience allowed the group to understand the final part of the filming process and exposed them to the challenges involved in showing work to an audience.

#### The Ark

Project Manager	Bernadette Larkin
Core Artist	Jole Bortoli
Core Artist	Martina Galvin
Core Artist	Katie Lincoln
Core Artist	Kieran McNulty
Director 1995–01	Martin Drury
Director 2001–03	Eric Fraad
Acting Director 2004–05	Belinda Moller
Director 2005–	Eina McHugh
Production Manager	Mark Rooney
Technician	Henry Broekhoven
Technician	Michael Higgins
Programmer	Avril Carr
Programmer	Dara Carroll
General Manager	Avril Ryan
Finance Officer	Siobhan McKay
Evaluator	Alan Tweedie

#### The Community

Support Workers	Paola Catziona
	Ellen Guerin
	Nuala Keeley
	Anne Marie Kenny
	Deirdre Reid
Planning Implementation & Evaluation Group	Joe Donohoe
	Aine Geoghegan
	Melissa Hogan
	Niall O'Baoill
	Joe Tulie

Fatima Regeneration Board John Whyte



**The Ark**

A Cultural Centre for Children  
*Lárionad Cultúir na Leanaí*

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