IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON CHILDREN'S AND YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE CREATIVE, CULTURAL, AND READING COMMUNITIES IN SCOTLAND AND IRELAND

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Impacts of COVID-19 on Children's and Young Adult Literature Creative, Cultural, and Reading Communities in Scotland and Ireland (April 2022).

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INTRODUCTION

This transnational project explored how the Children's and Young Adult (ChYA) literature creative, cultural, and reading communities in Scotland and Ireland have been responding to the challenges and opportunities posed by COVID-19.

The arts and wider cultural sectors are crucial for Ireland's and Scotland's revival, resilience, and recovery post-lockdowns; literature for young readers provides an especially vital role in children's and young adults' emotional, cultural and imaginative wellbeing, during and as we continue to recover from the pandemic. As part of this project, we created a new transnational network of seven key Irish and Scottish national arts organisations and two academic partners. This network was established to strengthen the exchange of learning and good practice between the Scottish and Irish children's and young-adult literature creative and cultural communities and industries.

The network member organisations comprise **Children's Books Ireland**, **Fighting Words**, **Moat Brae: National Centre for Children's Literature and Storytelling**, **Poetry Ireland**, the **Scottish Book Trust**, the **Super Power Agency**, and **Wigtown Book Festival**. The cultural and creative sectors in Ireland and Scotland share many commonalities, including a shared respect for the importance of stories and vibrant traditions of storytelling across multiple indigenous languages as well as differences in their respective national policy, educational, and publishing contexts.

Bringing together perspectives from a sample of children and teenagers, adult creators of ChYA literature, and cultural organisations in Ireland and Scotland, we investigated these core questions:

1   **What role and benefits has ChYA literature had for Irish and Scottish young people's well-being and resilience during the pandemic, and what barriers exist for young people in accessing ChYA literature?**

2   **How have Irish and Scottish cultural organisations and authors, illustrators and storytellers for children and young adults responded to the pandemic, and what new ways of working have emerged?**

3   **How might these creative communities and young reading communities be supported moving forward?**

The responses to these questions brought up more issues and areas to explore, and suggestions for the inclusion of other key stakeholders. These will be addressed in the next part of this project.

33% of people worldwide read/listened to more books and audiobooks during COVID-19 restrictions
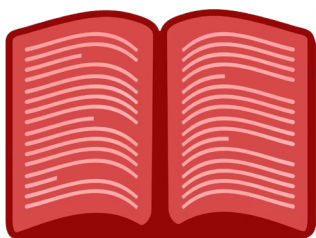
In Scotland,

65% were reading more than they used to during lockdown

The Global Web Index Coronavirus Research (2020) revealed that 33% of people worldwide read/listened to more books and audiobooks during COVID-19 restrictions while the 'Reading In Scotland: Reading Over Lockdown' (2020) report stated that "65% were reading more than they used to". Moreover, the importance of reading and reading for pleasure has become even more crucial for supporting wellbeing and mental health, especially for children and young adults. National and international reports have confirmed the finding that reading has helped young people feel better and helped them "dream about the future" (Clark and Picton 2020), and that "young people's enjoyment of reading improved during lockdown... they had more time to enjoy reading, and that reading improved their mental health during this difficult time" (Topping and Clark 2021, 4). "COVID-19 has shown how essential the arts are in a time of crisis" (Arts Council, 2021, 11); whether it involves seeking and finding distraction or joy by discovering a new author or singer, re-visiting familiar comforts and re-reading a beloved series of books or re-watching a favourite TV show again, or taking agency as a storyteller and creating our own stories or art.

Access to and engagement with books, reading and the arts have taken on even greater roles and significances in this pandemic era. Since early 2020, young readers and adult creators alike have had to grapple with the challenges and impacts of COVID-19 on their daily lives and experiences. The imaginative opportunities that books and live-literature events with artists can provide have helped millions of readers to sustain themselves, to open up the world beyond lockdown limitations, and to reimagine themselves and their realities. COVID-19 has illuminated the interconnected-ness of the world, and stories and storytelling underpin our understandings and expressions of our identities, relationships, and environments: "At the heart of the response to COVID is the development of stories both personal and collective, to understand individual experiences and to empathise with others. This may be reading books, being read to, writing your own stories or simply listening to the stories of others" (Richards et al. 2020, 11).

> **COVID-19 has shown how essential the arts are in a time of crisis**
>
> *– Arts Council, 2021*

It is thus ironic but perhaps not surprising that the creative and cultural sectors have been among the most negatively affected sectors since the pandemic started in Europe in spring 2020: "For the arts... the coronavirus pandemic has created a paradox: they have never been more obviously needed and appreciated; yet neither have they ever faced a more profound existential threat" (Arts Council 2020, 2). According to the 2021 'COVID-19 Scottish Creative Sectors Survey Summary Report', half of organisations and 56% of individual creators surveyed said their estimated losses made up more than 50% of their projected income for 2020. In Ireland, creators faced similar financial losses (Ryan, 2020). The creative and cultural sectors involve a uniquely interdependent and interconnected structure with networks of freelancers and micro-businesses providing creative content and services: "The sudden and wide-spread impacts of the pandemic to this crucial but fragile ecosystem have posed profound challenges to the way that 'things are done', as well as offering crucial opportunities for adapting and creating more sustainable and equitable practices" (Creative Scotland, 2021).

Since spring 2020, traditional spaces of schools, bookshops, festivals, and libraries, where young people and adult creators might come together creatively and in-person, have been in various stages of cancellation, closure, transition and adaptation, blended delivery, or fully online formats. Ireland- and Scotland-based creators have had to navigate disrupted and transformed physical and cultural landscapes and associated logistical issues. They have had to respond to demands for

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56%
of individual creators estimated losses made up more than 50% of their projected income for 2020

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unprecedented resilience and upskilling in digital skills as well as new potential opportunities for digital and virtual engagement and events. Meanwhile, there has been a far-reaching shrinking of access for young readers during lockdowns and COVID-19 limitations to their usual physical access to books via libraries, schools, and bookshops. This has significant consequences for the cultural right of access for children and young people and on young people's autonomy and capacity to choose for themselves what kinds of books they want to read. Supermarkets have remained one of the few spaces in Ireland and Scotland with ongoing provision of access and thus the kinds of books that supermarkets stock and the homogeneity of these books take on even more significance for shaping young people's reading. The damaging impacts that the pandemic has had on general access to books and book culture, particularly the diverse range of less high-profile books, are especially intensified for children and young adults from disadvantaged backgrounds as well as for young people from rural and island communities who might not have an equitable level of physical access to bookshops and book events or broadband connectivity. This makes participating in cultural and creative opportunities – in terms of live-literature events, workshops etc. – very difficult.

This issue of access also connects with the viability and provision of arts programmes and live-literature events with young people and for young people since spring 2020. As the Arts and Culture Recovery Taskforce report (2020, 15) states, "COVID-19 challenges us to re-imagine how we deliver and experience art and live performance, and to re-configure how we measure success". A traditional educational and cultural interface between young people and storytellers, writers, and illustrators for young people has been the in-person school visit. While there have been increasing opportunities for creators and ChYA literature organisations to access schools on once-off as well as sustained bases, primary and secondary schools in Ireland and Scotland were rendered mostly inaccessible for in-person artist visits during 2020 and much of 2021. Since 2020, our research found that school visits by artists have presented a complex litmus test for the re-imagining and adaptation of live-literature events and creative experiences for young people, ChYA literature organisations, and schools.

The provision of equitable access to the arts and to artists is crucial for participatory culture and for young people to be empowered as readers and as creators in their own right. The move to blended and online literary events and visits has potentially widened the geographical reach of audiences for creators and helped access for disabled readers and those with caring responsibilities or in rural and island locations. However, the uneven and inequitable distribution of access must still be recognised and confronted, with many young people unable to fully access creative and cultural opportunities due to the 'digital divide' and socio-economic issues.

COVID-19 has exposed many ongoing inequities and issues around provision and inequality of access as well as highlighting the stress, anxiety, isolation, turmoil, and loneliness that this pandemic era can induce. Support and sustainability for the well-being of creators, the creative sectors, young readers, and young creators are crucial. Adult creators, ChYA-literature organisations, and young people alike have experienced the loss and shrinking of networks and communities during the ongoing series of lockdowns and COVID-19 restrictions. This project focuses on the Scottish and Irish ChYA-literature sectors and the perspectives and responses of young people, adult creators, and representatives of ChYA-literature organisations to the restrictive as well as empowering impacts of COVID-19 on their reading, creative lives, practices, and access to creative communities.

COVID-19 has exposed many ongoing inequalities and issues around provision and inequality of access

While the findings from our project express the local and national experiences and adaptations of Irish and Scottish young readers, organisations and Irish- and Scottish-based creators, they also resonate with this key finding from the European Parliament's 2021 report:

When thinking about future perspectives for the Cultural and Creative Sectors beyond the COVID-19 crisis, a return to the "old normal" is not considered a viable option. Given the vulnerabilities that characterised the sectors already pre-COVID-19, the Cultural and Creative Sectors are in need of a more systemic transition rather than recovery. The crisis has provided a unique momentum for [these sectors] to re-think dominant structures and practices and to experiment with possible alternatives, often in (intra- and inter-sectoral) collaboration with new partners.

Exploring ideas of the 'normal' and creating imaginative alternatives are at the heart of stories and storytelling. Similarly, collaboration, community, and acting as agents of change are at the heart of creativity and creative experiences for young people, with young people, and by young people. While access to and availability of local and national community and peer networks are important for all creators, they are key for supporting early-career and aspiring creators – especially for creators from socially marginalised groups – in order to support them establish their careers and develop their professional practice. Community and community-building at local as well as national levels are also crucial to establishing and sustaining authentic, meaningful collaborations and creative partnerships and intergenerational exchanges of perspectives and learning between adult creators and young creators. This preliminary project, for example, demonstrates the meaningful collaborations that are made possible when international communities and networks are developed.

Our exploratory findings speak to the importance of community and community-building for and between young people, adult creators of ChYA literature, and ChYA-literature organisations. They also demonstrate the importance of re-imagining individual and collective relationships with creators, audiences, and readers, and co-creating new models of cultural and creative engagement and participation. We hope that the shared learning from this preliminary project, and the next stages of the project, will contribute to the co-creation and promotion of enhanced practices and transformative partnerships for reading, creativity, and the arts for young people and with young people in Scotland, Ireland and beyond, despite the constraints and profound challenges created by the global pandemic.

The Spire of Du
An Túr Solai

l Museum of Ireland - Decorative Arts & History
aem na hÉireann - Na hEalaíona Maisiúla & Stair

The General Post Off
Ard-Oifig an Phois

The Four Courts
Na Ceithre Cúirteanna

Dublinia and Christ Church Cathedral
Dublinia agus Ardteampall Chríost

Dublin Castl
Caisleán Bhaile Áth

St.Patrick's Cathedral
Ard Eaglais Naomh Pádraig

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The following insights are based on focus-groups with primary- and secondary-school students:

▶ **Access to Books:** participants' ability to access books during COVID-19 lockdowns impacted by school, bookshop, and library closures. Participants commented on difficulties navigating online library systems and relied heavily on books already available in their homes.

▶ **Participants' Reading Choices Highlight Dominance of Bestselling Authors:** the majority of primary and secondary-school participants read more during COVID-19, but primary-school students' reading was limited to a small selection of bestselling authors such as David Walliams, Roald Dahl, Jeff Kinney, and Enid Blyton.

▶ **Engagement in Different Forms of Literacies:** participants shared their interest in creative writing and drawing with some participants using the extra time afforded by the COVID-19 pandemic to begin, or develop, their creative writing.

▶ **Lack of Awareness of Live-Literature Events:** the focus-group participants were largely unaware of festivals and events programmed during COVID-19 with ChYA creators.

The following insights are based on interviews with ChYA creators:

▶ **Networks and Community:** established creators typically fared better during the pandemic. Having wider networks and established relationships – with publishers, schools, cultural organisations, and other creators – made it easier to navigate the insecure, pandemic landscape. New and emerging creators, especially those from socially-marginalised groups, missed the organic encounters (e.g. at festivals and events), which help them develop community.

▶ **Online Engagement and Technology:** while online formats helped widen access to events for audiences in rural areas or for audiences with disabilities, creators, at all stages of their career, found it difficult to replicate the interactive nature of in-person events when doing them via online platforms. This created challenges for many creators regarding their engagement with their young audiences, and with the technology itself.

▶ **School-Visit Issues:** the COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions perpetuated and worsened ongoing issues for creators' visits to schools. Many creators experienced difficulties with access, communication, coordination, and lack of engagement regarding school visits.

▶ **Mental Health and Wellbeing:** freelancers lacked support for issues involving mental health and wellbeing. Creators worked more, with fewer boundaries between their home and working lives, alongside increased precarity during the pandemic, often with limited access to sustained support.

In the next stages of this project, our network will collaboratively investigate the following shared concerns and issues for supporting and enhancing the Scottish and Irish ChYA literature sectors

▶ Investigating what barriers teachers face when hosting live-literature events and curating their classroom libraries.

▶ Exploring the barriers that young people, especially in rural or island areas, experience regarding access to books and discovery of book-related events aimed at them.
Including more Scotland- and Ireland-based publishers to examine the role of small-nation publishing for diversifying the books children read (at home and in the classroom) and helping to make the sectors more resilient.

▶ Exploring the relationship between the ChYA literature sector and other creative industries such as theatre.

▶ This project primarily addressed mid-career and established creators and further research would be valuable for investigating the experiences and perspectives of aspiring, emerging, and debut authors, illustrators, and storytellers for young people.

KEY FINDINGS

This report provides a snapshot of the impacts of COVID-19 on children's and YA literature creative, cultural, and reading communities in Scotland and Ireland. Our key findings are based on a sample of readers, creators, and cultural organisations. We intend to expand upon and further interrogate these issues and work with additional stakeholders in the next stages of this project.

The Importance of Collaboration, Community, and Networks

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Kovacs et al.'s (2021) study found that adults' personal and professional networks shrunk by around 16%. While the pandemic isolated individuals and placed great strain on our networks, it also highlighted the value and importance of communication and of developing and maintaining personal and professional communities. In our interviews with arts organisation representatives and creators of literature for children and teenagers in Scotland and Ireland, the necessity of positive professional relationships between arts organisations and artists and opportunities for formal as well as informal networking and community support were highlighted. In communicating with our network partners, the advantages of developing and improving cross-sectoral relationships between national arts organisations were emphasised. Finally, through our establishment of a network of Irish and Scottish representatives from key ChYA literature and arts organisations, we offer our project as an exemplar of the collaborative exchange of learning for supporting creators of ChYA literature, for supporting arts organisations' sustainable and enhanced practice, and for promoting young people's reading and young people as creators.

Kovacs' study emphasises the significant reduction in individuals' networks. This network shrinkage has serious implications for our professional as well as our personal lives. For creators, network shrinkages can make finding jobs more difficult and can inhibit career progress. From our interviews, it was clear that it was often the more experienced or established storytellers, authors, and illustrators who fared better during the pandemic. For creators, established relationships with schools, arts organisations, festivals, and libraries etc. provided a foundation of access and opportunities during the uncertainty of the pandemic: "Because I've been around a long time, I have a huge network of people that I can tap into and that who will phone me or email or whatever" (Vivian French). However, even established authors, like Sarah Webb, were impacted by the reduction in opportunities to network: "I used to go to festivals in the UK and abroad as well – you're making contacts, you're meeting teachers who might like you to do a festival in their schools. The networking side is gone".

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While COVID-19 impacted creators' ability to grow and maintain their networks, author Dave Rudden talked about the increased sense of urgency to communicate and connect with people during the pandemic: "I think for the first six months and even into the first year, we were all scrambling and I think we were all listening to each other a lot more because we were all so desperate for a solution or innovation that would make things easier. Connections were built in those two years and I think issues were highlighted". During our project interviews, the importance and value of connection and community were repeatedly emphasised. Many of our interviewees identified the potential opportunities enabled by both countries' geographical size and affirmation of community. Author, publisher, and former Laureate na nÓg, Siobhán Parkinson, observed that "This is something where being small nations can really benefit Scotland and Ireland. Irish people are very good at this sort of thing. We understand the value of human interaction... we're really good at community, and we're really good at understanding how important it is. And we don't put a monetary value on it. We know it's a human value and I think that has stood to us hugely in this pandemic... Certainly within the cultural community I think there's been terrific support for each other". Likewise, the Scottish-based creators recognised the affordances that such a relatively small geographical and sectoral context can offer. Illustrator Eilidh Muldoon reflected on the Scottish publishing industry and how "We know that everyone does know each other.... If I was in London, I would have walked door to door with my portfolio to all different publishers.... Here in Scotland, I feel that I have good working relationships with some publishing houses and while I can't relax, I know that I have years of work ahead of me here".

While the pandemic created challenges for all creators and arts organisations, it posed particular barriers for new and emerging authors to build connections and to become part of their cultural communities. These challenges were ironically experienced by our research team during the process of identifying potential interviewees and it unfortunately did not prove viable to reach and interview any aspiring creators of children's or young-adult literature for this project. In addition to this difficulty in connecting with emerging creators, several interviewees who work in arts organisations spoke about the challenges for aspiring creators to connect with and avail of networks and community links. These barriers to connection and community supports are further intensified for socially marginalised creators and aspiring creators. As Dean Atta says: "it's about taking away the barriers for getting involved

in groups, or organisations or workshops, or retreats.... for a lot of us, it's happened by just really informal means, like our friends recommended us...but you can't make those friends, if you don't feel welcome in the spaces to make the friend... or you can't afford to get on the retreat where you might make the friends ... there's a lot of barriers. Some of them are financial, and some of them are confidence. And some of them are just like, there's not enough role models to let people see that someone like them is welcome in publishing".

> **There's a lot of barriers. Some of them are financial, and some of them are confidence. And some of them are just like, there's not enough role models to let people see that someone like them is welcome in publishing**
>
> *— Dean Atta*

The negative impacts of restricted access to creative networks caused by the pandemic were emphasised throughout our interviews with Scottish and Irish-based creators as well as with the representatives of arts and ChYA literature organisations. The importance of effective, cross-sector collaboration for long-term success is accentuated during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of the interviewees recognised the need to work together and bring together cross-functional perspectives to help solve the complex problems and long-term implications facing the ChYA-literature sectors in Scotland and Ireland. A learning that many of our interviewees emphasised is the key importance of collaboration and partnerships for fostering and sustaining professional opportunities and sustainable practice. Many interviewees reflected on the reciprocal benefits of collaboration and working together to share expertise, skills, or understanding to respond to the demands of pandemic impacts and changes, particularly with partners at a community or grassroots level. As Creative Scotland observed: "Partnerships make everything stronger. Absolutely. No one organisation can understand every context or work with every, every person".

In interviews, representatives from arts organisations spoke to the need for collaboration with other national cultural/creative organisations as well as collaboration with partners and stakeholders from different sectors. While the many benefits were affirmed, the interviewees also recognised the intense work involved in such collaborations. Jane O'Hanlon (Poetry Ireland) noted that "We're facing a range of challenges in the next while… quite complex challenges and we need to work on them together. So, it's very important that there's cross departmental cooperation on this between arts and education, never more so needed than now" while Colm Ó Cuanacháin (Fighting Words) concluded that "it would be great if there was more collaboration, but collaboration doesn't happen by accident. It's intensive, it takes time and it's totally reliant on people. Because organisations don't collaborate, it's people who collaborate". Similarly, Creative Scotland commented on the difficulty of initiating these professional relationships and collaborations and the challenges of how to create opportunities to talk to other similar organisations and learn from each other.

In addition to the advantages of collaboration and sharing of learning among organisations within their own countries, our network members have also affirmed the benefits and opportunities of international collaborations. The establishment of this Irish and Scottish network sought to create a space for knowledge co-construction and ideas-sharing. As part of our network meetings, representatives from Scottish and Irish arts organisations which had cognate aims, objectives, and projects formed relationships and agreed to share knowledge and ideas. As Elaina Ryan (Children's Books Ireland) noted, the exchange of information and good practice between Ireland and Scotland can only be beneficial since these organisations are not in competition with each other or vying for the same funding or grant opportunities. Since its inception in September 2021, the network is flourishing, and various member organisations have been connecting with each other to discuss and share plans for their current and future projects. We intend to build upon this in future collaborative projects and to explore further opportunities between Irish and Scottish-based arts organisations.

Conglomeration and contraction have happened throughout the history of publishing. However, Alter (2020) argues that the publishing industry is now "more profit focused, consolidated, undifferentiated, and averse to risk" and "increasingly reliant on blockbusters" than ever before. This means that big-name creators receive disproportionate promotion and are featured more prominently in bookshops (online and physical) and supermarkets in comparison to their mid-list and emerging creator counterparts (Ramdarshan Bold, 2022). This is reflected in the bestseller lists, especially during the pandemic, and in the choices that time-poor consumers (in this case, parents and teachers) make, and the books read in the classroom and at home. The prominence of big-name, often celebrity, authors and illustrators are reflected in the books that our focus-group participants engaged with at home and in school.

A significant pattern across the focus groups was the relatively repetitive nature and limited range of books, series, and creators that these young people have engaged with, read and re-read since spring 2020. While the majority of the primary-school participants in both Scotland and Ireland said that they had done a substantial amount of reading during lockdown periods, they only mentioned and supplied examples of the most popular/bestselling authors: "I started reading Dog Man then I started getting into David Walliams and The Secret Seven…. Before COVID I just read any book I found…. Then I realised I had quite a few David Walliams that I hadn't read so I started reading Gangsta Granny first" (I-3C); "I read almost every single David Walliams. I read like half of them" (S-P7); "I read probably like every David Walliams book during the pandemic just cause I could spend time on it" (S-P7).

What Young People Have Been Reading During the Pandemic and the Bestseller Vicious Cycle

This small sample of young readers' responses reflects lockdown book-buying, particularly on Amazon, which favoured the most prominent, often celebrity, authors. According to Nielsen, David Walliams was, unsurprisingly, the bestselling author, selling 540,886 books to the value of £3.5 million in the first lockdown period (Godwin, 2021; Ramdarshan Bold, 2022). The dominance and visibility of a small number of bestselling authors diminishes young readers' ability to see, choose and read a broad range of texts. The bestseller vicious circle and the homogeneity of these books were issues of concern for some of the interviewees: "A school I went to recently, I was quite shocked at the poor range of books that they had, it was mainly David Walliams, it was mainly the World Book Day one-pound books. It was very old books…. I would like to see more relevant books, more diverse books. I felt really bad for the kids because they just, it's like, this diet of David Walliams" (Maisie Chan).

Reading preferences/books mentioned by our primary-school focus-group participants

Scottish P4s (age 8)	David Walliams (very popular), Roald Dahl, and Julia Donaldson
Scottish P7s (age 11-12)	David Walliams, Diary of a Wimpy Kid, Jaqueline Wilson, The Hobbit
Irish 1st class (age 6-7)	Focus on well-known and best-selling picturebooks e.g. The Tiger Who Came To Tea
Irish 3rd class (age 8-9)	David Walliams, Dav Pilkey, Enid Blyton, Roald Dahl, Jeff Kinney, JK Rowling, and the Beano comics

Creative Scotland highlighted how live-literature programming, aimed at young people, perpetuates the bestseller dominance problem: "we saw [this] when festivals were still running online rather than in person… they were running vastly reduced programmes. And provision for children was significantly cut back. And it will be quite often only the same people, kind of the big, recognisable names being programmed". Simon Davidson (Moat Brae) partly attributed the bestseller books and author popularity to the trends that children themselves create for themselves and among their peers: "I think there are kids who get swept along on waves of commercial sailing and will

> **I think there are kids who get swept along on waves of commercial sailing and will miss out on a whole world of wonderful literature.**
>
> *— Simon Davidson*

miss out on a whole world of wonderful literature. Because they stick with what the mainstream is they stick with what everyone else is reading. And that's understandable. When you're that age, you want to be in the group, you want to know what they're all talking about, you want to be part of the style of feeling". Focus-group participants talked about getting book news from social media. In our network workshop, network members suggested engagement with social media platforms and online reading communities as ways of reaching young people through young people and we would encourage creators and cultural organisations to explore the role and opportunities of these platforms for building young reading communities. For example, teenage participants commented: "That's how I got new books to read. Like from social media… like Instagram… and recently on TikTok… some fandom stuff. Oh, that looks like an interesting book"; and "I used TikTok to get book recommendations – 'if you like this, you might like this too'. TikTok also has jokes about books and stuff. Likes memes of famous books" (S-SS). Chair of the Scottish Youth Libraries Group, Jen Horan, said that many (public and school) librarians have been, "using social media to reach younger audiences. I have seen people doing TikTok videos of their displays, which is probably good for kids who are interested in the online platforms, but also engaging them in the physical libraries more".

Access to books for our primary-age focus-group participants relied heavily on two sources: the books that are made available via schools; and the books that family members buy and provide for them. In terms of young people's reading choices and the impact COVID-19 had on young readers' ability to easily access and choose books themselves, focus-group participants shared their experiences, difficulties, and complaints with buying, borrowing, and ordering books. The levels of reading for pleasure differed across the age ranges and the demographic of the schools. Some children had no access to books at all: "I didn't read any books but it was kinda hard to get them" (I-1C). It is important to note that this participant is from a DEIS school (a school in Ireland included in the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools action plan for educational inclusion) and was not the only child in the group to not have access to books at home. The students in the other two Irish schools did not have this problem as books were part of their home culture.

This was the same for the Scottish schools, where the majority of participants grew up in a reading environment. For example, two of the focus-group participants commented on the selection of reading material available to them in their homes: "My whole family loves reading books, so we have tonnes of books at home, we all have eReaders and then if there were new books that we want to try and get, we'd just order them online. So no, I actually had plenty of access to books" (I-SS); "I guess I just picked up the books that were gathering dust in the house. Before I didn't have an interest in reading but when I started reading I saw these books just lying on the shelves as decoration and I could just pick them up. When you start spending a lot of time at home, you realise that there is already this treasure waiting for you to explore it" (S-SS). However, the closure of libraries, and the limited range of books available in libraries (including in school libraries), was a problem: "I actually really used to enjoy the library but now because of the pandemic they're closed, I just find them online" (S-P7); "No, I don't like the books that they have in school. The books they

have in school are not the types that I like" (S-P4); "Sometimes the library doesn't have any books and there's not a great selection.... sometimes they're damaged and stuff'; "Sometimes the books [in the library] can be a bit – they're so old, their pages are a bit tattered, and they're fragile" (I-SS).

In our interviews with creators, the impact of library closures was a recurring topic of discussion: "one of the things that really grieved me was that the fact that the libraries were closed... libraries are absolutely essential. And there are so many kids who don't have access to books. And during the pandemic, that was completely cut off" (Vivian French). Librarians, "missed out on working with our wee vulnerable readers who treat the library as a sanctuary" (Jen Horan). Those with digital access, however, did not always find the system easy to navigate. Focus-group participants including the teenage participants also experienced a degree of uncertainty around ordering books online from the library: "I was not sure how to access the online systems on the library. Like the Glasgow libraries have this system online where you have to place a request for a book but it was not really clear to me how to use the thing" (S-SS); "I made a library card just for that purpose... but I was not sure how to order the books and when I would request one, it would not be available, so I would be waiting. And once I did find the book was available, I wasn't really interested anymore" (S-SS). The cost of books was an issue for many of the youth participants. Some of the focus-group participants did not have any access to books, which also underscores the prohibitive costs and contributes to this lack of access. If students are buying their books in online retailers such as The Works or in supermarkets, then they will only have access to certain types of books – i.e. David Walliams' books and other bestsellers – especially if libraries are closed: "I would get it from my local supermarket like Tesco's and stuff" (S-P7).

> ## No, I don't like the books that they have in school. The books they have in school are not the types that I like.
> — S-P4

The primary-school participants are typically not old enough to choose and buy their own books, so their responses give an indication of parents' and adults' buying habits for children and what teachers decide to use as class novels and independent reading material in school. For example, one Irish primary-school participant stated that her mother bought all the books that she read during lockdown: "She went in, I think it was just before COVID got quite bad. She went into the shops and she bought 3 or 4 David Walliams books" (I-3C). In the school context, the Scottish Primary 4 pupils have been reading Gangsta Granny with their teacher in class while the Irish participants were also reading David Walliams and Enid Blyton. The significance and impact of adult gatekeepers' role in children's reading and book choices were discussed by Sarah Webb (author and festival programmer): "I think the way you support young readers is you support the gatekeepers. Support the teachers, the librarians, the parents because children aren't going to go to a library without parental assistants, or grandparents, or whoever brings them. Teachers in a lot of cases are the people who bring the kids into the libraries".

Despite this bestseller focus, there was also the desire for more choice. The secondary-school pupils in our focus groups were less likely to read the blockbuster books (that might have been recommended to them – and bought for them - by parents and teachers when they were younger). Autonomy was important to the older participants: "I don't really enjoy reading, if someone just gives me a random book and says, oh read this book, I'm like no, cause I only search for books that I actually enjoy. Like I don't just read any book and have enjoyment from that book" (S-P7). Both sets of teenage focus group participants had a wider range of books, reading interests and genres than our primary-school participants. They demonstrated more confidence and autonomy in making their own choices about the books that they read. The Irish secondary-school students' interests spanned diverse genres by authors including Madeline Miller, Kiera Cass, Rick Riordan, Margaret Atwood, Taran Matharu, Leigh Bardugo, Diana Wynne Jones, and Agatha Christie. Overall, there was a consensus (from the interviewees, and some of the young readers) that there should be more variety in libraries, in schools, and in the free books that are sent to young people.

Our focus-group findings indicate the need for increased visibility of less mainstream authors and more promotion and provision of a wider diversity of genres and books for all young people, especially younger readers. In our network workshop, our network partners shared ways to increase gatekeepers' knowledge and awareness of a broader, and more varied range of authors. Recommendations included: working with teachers and promoting the concept of 'teachers as readers' with events such as 'book discovery' sessions for primary and secondary teachers (the Scottish Book Trust); gifting libraries to schools and supplying recommended library lists (Children's Books Ireland); Wigtown Festival's co-partnered project, 'Reading Teachers = Reading Pupils', which aims to inspire teachers' reading for pleasure through teacher book groups; and Sarah Webb's series of workshops for parents, guardians, "grandparents, aunts, uncles, godparents, whoever is in the child's life" as a way of increasing children's love of books and introducing a wider range of books to children.

Another recommendation to counteract the dominance of a small, select number of bestselling authors is for creators and ChYA-literature organisations to work with World Book Day to capitalise on the excitement of the event and to promote Irish- and Scottish-based authors and illustrators. All the Scottish focus group participants mentioned World Book Day, which is celebrated in most schools in the UK and Ireland; however, they thought of it as a fun event, and an opportunity to dress up, rather than something related to reading and books.

[There is a] need for increased visibility of less mainstream authors and more promotion and provision of a wider diversity of genres and books for all young people

Centring Young People's Voices: Creation and Empowerment

A key finding from our project involves the intertwined nature of the importance of expanding the traditional understanding of literacy/literacies, which include all forms of reading as well as writing, drawing, and creative expression, and the importance of empowering children and young adults as creators and autonomous cultural and creative agents.

Our network partners and interviewees emphasised the importance of recognising and developing young people's awareness of and capacity with different forms of literacies including reading, writing, and illustrating. A positive finding from the research was that most of the focus-group participants were reading more than ever during the pandemic, often because of additional time due to lockdown and restrictions: "I think I read more during COVID because before COVID happened I was very busy I didn't get much time to read. So that COVID is on I had more time to read because I'm not really busy" (I-C3). Re-reading in the home and outside schools was now enabled by this available time. One focus-group participant's reading was influenced by the books already at home – they "read old books lying around the house" – while lockdown offered the opportunity of rediscovery for another participant: "Because we were at home all day, my mom was like it's the perfect time for spring cleaning so I had to go through all the books upstairs and we were sorting them out like deciding which to give away to my cousins or give away to charity...And found like a lot of books that I bought years before, but I've never gotten around to reading" (I-SS). Other focus-group participants' reading habits changed during the pandemic: "My reading habits changed a

lot. I definitely read a lot more – before the pandemic, one thing I definitely struggled with was trying out new series, stories and settings. I kind of just gravitated towards more or less the same thing all the time, but when the library closed down and there was nothing to do, I finally realised I had the time to just go and grab books that we had in the house that my sister or my parents recommended to me, but I was just I don't know too lazy to ever try" (I-SS).

Alongside reading and re-reading, the appeal, pleasure, and value of creative aspects associated with reading were evident during our focus-group discussions. Several participants discussed how they were inspired by books they were reading to create their own stories: "What I love about reading stories is you get some ideas for your own little stories. I would make a mini book of little stories... I do like writing stories" (I-3C), and "Going into the pandemic I had started writing a bit of fanfiction and I just did that more and more, and that whole thing kind of grew as it all went along and now I'm in the process of writing my own book.... I've done a lot of writing as well as reading, and I've really enjoyed doing both" (I-SS). Participants spoke with pride and engagement about their identities as creators of writing and artwork during the pandemic e.g. "I'm basically an author cause I did publish my own book" (S-P7).

The interviews and focus groups highlighted the important and reciprocal relationship between drawing, writing, and reading for pleasure. Before children learn to read and write, drawing is an important part of their literacy (Kress, 1997). This can continue even as their reading and writing skills develop. One of the focus-group participants, for example, described themselves as bad at reading (considering reading in the traditional sense): "I don't like reading and I'm bad at it. I like illustrations" (S-P4). A significant number of the creators emphasised the importance of visual communication and visual narratives and reflected that young children's engagement with drawing can be undervalued, especially for and with reluctant readers. Vivian French commented that "illustration is a way that cuts through to kids much, much quicker than actual books and writing and words, particularly in the areas where children aren't readers [or] if they come from a background that's not particularly inclusive of books and stories", while Eilidh Muldoon observed that "often children don't feel confident writing and they feel they can express themselves better through drawing and illustration".

The network representatives also recognised the importance of facilitating and encouraging young people's creative writing. In particular, Fighting Words and the Super Power Agency have seen pupils gain confidence from these writing workshops, especially by seeing the works of other young people. Gerald Richards (Super Power Agency) spoke about the dynamic interconnectedness of reading and writing and about the importance of giving young people opportunities to create and to express themselves, especially within educational systems: "You have the freedom to be able to just express yourself on paper, without judgement. And without someone telling you, that's not right. And you are not getting like red marks on their scores or anything like that. Just sort of, like, put it out there… they need that sort of release, especially in school where everything is marked. And everything is assessed". Some interviewees stressed that reading is accessible (as it can be) to young people because it is built into the curriculum in a sustained way, and there is so much sectoral and cross-sectoral focus on reading for literacy and for pleasure. However, there is a clearer need to popularise and mainstream creative writing for young people, particularly in the classroom setting, and also make the complementary connection between writing, drawing, and reading clearer. In the network workshop, there was also an emphasis on clearly defining what creative writing is for adult educators, policy makers, and young people alike. Caitrin Armstrong (Scottish Book Trust) discussed the need to work more closely with teachers to provide them with the tools and confidence to promote and teach creative writing.

Equipping and resourcing adult educators and stakeholders is necessary to support and foster the importance of empowering children and young adults as creators and autonomous cultural and creative agents. Young people have a better understanding of themselves, their peers, and their creative peer communities than their adult counterparts, so it makes sense to engage them as co-creators of the interventions that are designed to support them. Many of the interviewees discussed how to prioritise young people in their work going forward and embedding this into their practices. The interviews and network workshop underlined the importance of involving children – in small- and large-scale projects – in creative and cultural events and projects they partake in, and more broadly, in the cultural life of the community and the nation. In small-scale work with students

in schools and workshops for young people, our interviewees addressed the need to consult and involve young people as co-coordinators and co-creators. Dave Rudden shared his experience with consulting young people to better design and optimise the value of his artist-in-residency work: "One thing that I'm particularly really into is finding ways to... ask them what would work?... I'm in the midst of setting up a creative podcast for a school... and the very first thing we did was talk to them, because I don't even know if teenagers listen to podcasts. So, the first thing we did was get a huge group of them together and ask them how long the podcast should be, should it be podcast, should it be a video and hear what they want". Sarah Webb observed how often traditional power dynamics between adults and young people are assumed and emphasised the importance of mutual respect and a participatory relationship for everyone: "I think people forget to ask the kids half the time. It's really important to ask them what they enjoyed and what they didn't enjoy". Tania Banotti of Creative Ireland spoke about how the consultation of young people is fundamental to their work: "we consider our ourselves best in class when it comes to the voice of the child, so nothing can be done with young people without consulting them first. In theory that's government policy for everybody, but in practise that is an absolute tablet of stone in anything we do".

Beyond schools, young people can be encouraged to participate in the broader cultural life of their community: "I think we have to we have to put our faith in young people a lot more to be able to do things. A young person of 13, 14, 15 years old [might not] be able to programme a book festival. But what they can do is, is review it and tell you what they think of it" (Simon Davidson, Moat Brae). Jane O'Hanlon (Poetry Ireland) emphasised how children and young people "are entitled to participate in the artistic life of the community and of the country, and that it's one of their basic human rights. [How] To begin to actually really make that happen? To create and to fund and to help us to create situations where we can do more and more of that with children

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>
> **– Gerald Richards**

and young people, so that they participate in the cultural life of the country". Chris Newton (Scottish Book Trust) similarly highlighted the need for all stakeholders and agents in the cultural and creative sectors to listen and consult with young people to ensure that "we have young people's voices heard, as part of our processes, and considered... alongside things like the UN Charter... Whether we're programming events, for people, for children, young people, and making sure that they are covering the sort of subject areas that they want to talk about post-pandemic, that they are delivered in ways that they can engage with, and making sure that they are heard".

However, these ways of consulting and collaborating with young people have to be sustainable and not just tokenistic or superficial. Peer networks between creators and young people as well as networks between creators and arts organisations are key. As Creative Scotland observed, meaningfully incorporating the voices, experiences, and interests of young people requires "time and resource and capacity" in order to "support over the long-term development of better programming skills and opportunities for people working with younger audiences... That's a space where things like that can happen independently of us, as well as kind of through us". Creating and sustaining these relationships and practices involves fostering and resourcing peer and intergenerational exchanges of knowledge, and the network representatives emphasised the importance and benefits of training young people to equip and empower them as leaders, coordinators, and creators. Adrian Turpin (Wigtown Book Festival) summarised this simultaneous dilemma and opportunity thus: "how do we move beyond these conversations into action? We really need to focus on how we put these conversations into practice". The next section presents our findings about the realities of creators' practices since spring 2020 and the logistical and collaborative challenges as well as new opportunities posed by the pandemic.

Logistics and Access

In the UK and Ireland, people spent more time online and were more dependent on digital communication during the pandemic than ever before (Ofcom, 2021). All the creators interviewed discussed various limitations of online provisions, with many interviewees struggling to develop the digital skills required for adapting to online and hybrid formats and the personal and professional challenges of sustaining their work practices. For example, Maisie Chan "had to learn a whole new thing about technology and how to do videos that are engaging… how to present yourself on videos and online, that's been quite a steep learning curve". With virtual and digital work, creators are now taking on more work for the same amount of money (with the extra time it takes often not being factored in). Elaina Ryan (Children's Books Ireland) noted that, especially in the early stages of the pandemic, "there was a real, real lack of understanding of how long it took to make something, and what you have to do to [make] it".

Some creators realised the virtual format posed too many difficulties: "I realised I really don't want to do this…. You can't make eye contact with a child, you're making eye contact with everybody. You can't direct attention around the group. I find it better than nothing, but having done a couple of live events recently, I just think, oh, I don't want to do any more online stuff" (Mary Murphy). For some creators living in rural locations, virtual events and school sessions were made more difficult and more stressful due to poor WI-FI: "up until this summer I lived somewhere rural, well I still live somewhere rural, but where I used to live had had quite poor Wi-Fi, so there was a lot of anxiety that it might give out in the middle of a session. That produced quite a bit of anxiety" (Sheena Wilkinson). For some arts and ChYA-literature organisations who already had the infrastructure for online provisions, there was a degree of optimism, and focus on sharing these skills. Lucy Juckes (Barrington Stoke) said that "when the pandemic hit, we introduced live chat, we introduced webinars, Zoom

webinars... we built on it... we've introduced Instagram and BookTok. So we really upped our game, and it's just fascinating. So things like, we would have spent money probably printing endless brochures and leaflets. But now we spend more, that same about of money we're investing it, but it's invested in the digital package". Colm Ó Cuanacháin (Fighting Words) said their organisation was "prepared and ready... luckily because of our reliance on the website as a major channel [as] we had... a full-time in-house IT person who had built a website that had the full range of tools that you would need to pivot online. And... we were able to very quickly get up and running". Our network member organisations such as Children's Books Ireland and Poetry Ireland informed us of the training programmes they organised to help upskill authors and illustrators since spring 2020, and our interviewees emphasised how these training and professional-development opportunities are crucial for supporting and sustaining creators and creative communities at both local and national levels. As Chris Newton (Scottish Book Trust) affirmed, "I think that's the key is kind of upskilling the authors and illustrators and providing them with examples from our own experience of how things can work and can be done".

Schools are crucial partners, audiences and markets for creators, and lack of access to schools has significant impacts on creators as well as cultural organisations.

Schools are crucial partners, audiences and markets for creators, and lack of access to schools has significant impacts on creators as well as cultural organisations. Siobhán Parkinson discussed the key role that schools play for the income, work and access to readers for many creators of children's and young-adult literature: 'our main channel of access to child readers would be school. So, when schools were closed, we have no access to the child readers". For Simon Davidson (Moat Brae), the series of lockdowns and restrictions in Ireland and Scotland since spring 2020 imposed "an instant physical barrier between us and our key audience... So all of a sudden Moat Brae's magic was, was lost. And we, we tried a number of different things. We arranged for video fly throughs, interactive fly throughs. But it's not the same".

Creators and organisations invested time and effort into training and upskilling but getting access to schools during lockdowns and COVID-19 restrictions became difficult. Schools have been working under exceedingly difficult conditions and with overwhelming constraints during the pandemic (Fotheringham et al., 2021). Many teachers have felt stressed, exhausted, and demoralised, and have even considered leaving the profession (Weale, 2020). We acknowledge these difficulties and the fact that author-illustrator visits are not a priority during the pandemic. However, it is clear that schools and teachers need support with how to work with creators and host creator visits. Simon Davidson (Moat Brae) described schools becoming "very, very cagey about engaging with us at all. Because of the safety measures... it didn't matter what risk assessment we presented them with, or how much space and distancing we could provide. They just wouldn't do it... we lost a lot of our direct engagement with schools, and that just kind of stopped overnight".

Even well before the pandemic started, many of the creators reported difficulties working with schools for artist visits and creative events. Author-illustrator, Debi Gliori, said that she "used to really enjoy going into schools, it was, it would kind of wake me up to what I was doing, what put me in touch with the children that I was writing for. But of late, it's an awful lot, the sort of events in schools and libraries... you feel like a piece of meat being thrown at lions. And... that's not great for the children. And it's certainly not great for the author". While all the creators acknowledged how overstretched teachers and schools have been, it is evident, however, from speaking with the creators, how difficult it is to create a positive creative environment in such chaos. Creators spoke of school visits where they had prepared for a particular class and age of young people only to be told upon arrival at the school that their session would be with a completely different age group or mixed age-groups. Creators, such as Dean Atta, also have had experiences of school visits and online events where "the teacher that's actually got the class isn't the one that organised the event and so they don't quite know what's going on, and they don't know the book, and they... are just kind of trying to manage crowd control... rather than... engaging with the topic itself".

Working with young people through online events or workshops brought up specific problems around engagement and interaction both for creators and young participants. While some authors talked about the increased engagement of students in online creative writing workshops, others commented on the strained environment of online creative-writing sessions which, in Dave Rudden's experience, can make "humanising the idea of writing" difficult as an online event

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>
> **– Sarah Webb**

could involve "15 students on 15 different Zoom connections, in which case they feel really on the spot if you ask them a question, some of those Zoom connections could be poor connections, and therefore you don't want to put a kid on the spot when they don't have a good microphone, or they can't exactly hear what you said. You're always trying to avoid that like dead air that is such a killer for - it's a killer for live events and it's a killer for Zoom events...what I've noticed since COVID began, online events run a much larger risk of those sort of friction moments. Those moments that slow down enjoyment and get in the way". Debbie Thomas's work with children and young people in Direct Provision centres in Ireland was made particularly difficult by COVID: "it is very difficult on Zoom, that particular environment is more difficult because you've got people coming and going, kids come in like halfway through the workshop".

Festivals and school visits are traditionally performative and interactive, and this can be difficult to replicate and sustain online. Authors and illustrators talked about the difficulty in replicating the interactive dynamic and energy of a live event: "So there were no live events – you didn't go anywhere, you just stayed put and did it on screen. It's a very different experience, you don't get any buzz from the crowd, it's very hard to get into mode. Also you don't have the trip there and back, when you change your state of mind for the event. You literally just get up, go into your room, look at a computer screen and then you're just 'on', which I still find hard to get used to. It's still unusual – you also can't read the crowd very well, you can't really tell whether you need to go faster or slower or louder or whatever. So that was major change, really major change. I don't do this for the performance stuff, but I imagine if somebody did, if they're a professional storyteller, it would be really hard" (Oisín McGann).

Many creators spoke about the unique and mutually energising atmosphere of an in-person creative session and how challenging it can be in online formats to conjure and maintain the relationship between the artist and the young participants, especially with younger children. Author Vivian French observed "the children that I'm talking to, and I'll change gear, depending on their reactions as I serve them. And that I can't do when I'm doing a video, guess at it. And it's a bit

like talking into an empty space. It's okay, but it's just not the same". Similarly, Maisie Chan commented that "when you're in front of a class of children or young people… you can work off what they're giving you as well. So… you prepare your timings and everything on zoom or online…. Because it was recorded videos, I didn't even get to see the children. So there's no one to… interact with. So you're just hoping that they're doing what you're asking them to do…. [In person] you talk and then you give an activity, and then you walk around the room and engage with students, and you praise and encourage them as you're there. But you can't really do that on Zoom".

Furthermore, there was a significant lack of engagement or even awareness of live-literature and creative events among our focus-group participants. The primary- and secondary-level participants did not recall author or illustrator visits in their schools or going to author or illustrator events. In fact, some of the teenage participants thought that this only happened in primary school: "I think it probably mostly happens with people when they are in primary (school)" (I-SS). Many of the young participants were not aware of big festivals, such as the Edinburgh International Book Festival, or that many of events aimed at them were free to attend. It is clear that more creative approaches are needed to engage these young audiences, and, from, the focus groups and interviews, it is evident that young people were less engaged during the pandemic with online creator events and creative sessions. How, then, might levels of young people's engagement be fostered and sustained?

Our interviewees suggested various ways for creating and maintaining levels of engagement in online and hybrid formats. A key ingredient for successful connections and creative workshops with young people involves giving young people more autonomy and empowering them to co-construct the session. Sarah Webb shared her practice of appointing a class ambassador for her online school visits and how these children would mediate between her and the rest of the class

rather than an adult teacher assuming this role: "it's a different dynamic with the kids doing it. So I got the kids to sit up with the computer… [and] they were the ones who were interacting with me and we were doing a writing workshop together… Then they had to feed back all the info from their class to me, and that worked really well". At our network meeting, we discussed ways to develop communication and sustain three crucial forms of professional relationships: between arts organisations, schools, and teachers; between creators, schools, and teachers; and between arts organisations and creators. In addition to creating professional-development opportunities for primary-school and secondary-school teachers with artists, the arts, and the promotion of creativity and reading, there is also the need for partnership across the educational, creative, and cultural sectors to improve the supports for in-person live-literature events as well as for virtual school visits and creative events in order to alleviate the stresses placed on creators as well as enhancing the children's and young adults' participatory experiences. The next section addresses the importance of supporting creators' as well as young people's mental health and wellbeing.

Mental Health and Wellbeing

The increase in mental-health problems has been one of the consequences of COVID-19 and the ensuing lockdowns (Banks et al., 2021). In the UK, over two-thirds of adults with existing mental health problems reported a decline in their mental health during the pandemic (Mind, 2020). Young people have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic and various lockdowns. In a recent survey of young people,Young Minds charity reported that 80% of respondents said that the coronavirus pandemic had made their mental health worse (Young Minds, 2020). These negative impacts are compounded by inequalities in digital access.

The problem of digital exclusion for the poorest and most vulnerable in Scotland and Ireland was apparent throughout the interviews. There is a clear link between poverty and digital exclusion (Homes and Burgess, 2021). Children in disadvantaged families are less likely to have digital devices and be online which restricts these children's access to home learning and live-literature opportunities.

The impact of the pandemic on individuals' mental health and wellbeing was a concern for each of the communities addressed and interviewed in this project. Elaina Ryan talked about the considerable strains that COVID-19 placed on arts organisations: "The kind of employee side of things, like mental health and wellbeing, was a huge, huge thing because some of us, once lockdown hit, were juggling childcare and working funny hours. And we said yes to everything in 2020. Everything. So we were slammed, and the workload was enormous". Within the creative community, creators shared their personal as well as professional struggles and feelings of isolation, not just because of COVID-19 but because of the nature of their work. Laureate na nÓg, Áine Ní Ghlinn, reflected on the benefits as well as challenges for artists during lockdown and pandemic restrictions: "There are days when a writer can manage their time really well, and there are days when the isolation gets to a writer, because writers are working in isolation anyway but their souls are kept fed by the workshops, by the literature events, by the contact with their audience, and suddenly that was gone for so many people". Many creators spoke about the sense of purpose they have through their work with festivals and school visits and about the profound impacts of losing connection with their in-person audiences, their professional networks, and associated income streams. Dean Atta summarised some of these emotional and financial vulnerabilities of creators for young people: "we're still expected to keep up a level of productivity, despite… all the challenges of the pandemic and weren't given much sympathy or leeway…. the wellbeing of the people that work at the publisher is kind of taken into account,

but the wellbeing of the author, and… the extra challenges they might be facing [are] not always taking into account…. who's HR, who's… health and wellbeing…. who is looking after us?".

Authorship is a precarious profession at the best of times. Most authors cannot sustain themselves from writing alone and so have portfolio careers (which also involve school visits, live-literature events etc.). However, not all creators have the time or the energy for school visits and the pandemic has exacerbated this for a significant number of our interviewees. For example, James Robertson said that he has not done any school visits since March 2020 (the start of the pandemic in Ireland and Scotland) and does not intend to have them as an integral part of his career: "All my outreach work has basically stopped, and it hasn't restarted". Additional demands on the emotional energy and ICT preparation required for digital and blended delivery can detract from what creators want to do and what they want to create: "I didn't necessarily feel like I had… an hour or two hours in the day… [for] the tech check. And there's the comedown from it as well like afterwards. So it can take the majority of a day out with you" (Dean Atta). Online events themselves can be stressful for creators who do not want to have to also sell their book at these events or school visits or feel guilty about their young readers not being able to purchase their books: "I suppose we don't want to be selling, it's kind of tainting the experience. The school might very well want to buy books…you're asking kids to bring in money if they want to buy the books themselves and that's another thing the school is asking parents to do…it's something that we can look at changing… you kind of want to be subsidising it or doing it as part of the charge for the session or something so it's an easy way in" (Oisín McGann).

Amidst the uncertainties, event and project cancellations, and changes created by the pandemic, both creators and cultural and creative organisations faced significant reductions of income and concerns about the risk and

viability of taking on new projects, new works, and debut creators. Eilidh Muldoon discussed how "the pandemic has made the publishing houses a bit nervous of picking up new work and new titles" which has compounded what "was already a very challenging industry to break into". This is particularly concerning for newcomers to the industry who do not have access to information, networking or established support networks and partnerships, and who face barriers to accessing professional-development and career-building opportunities. Many creators also spoke about a perceived lack of value in being a creator for children and young adults and an associated lack of understanding of the complexity and skill of this creative profession and creative professionals. Dean Atta stated the importance of raising awareness around the craft and workload involved in writing and illustration for and with young people: "we need to demystify what YA and middle grade and such is because I think it's seen as... almost like a specialism... but it's just... writing... with an audience in mind. It's not necessarily like different writing". Creative Scotland have seen this undervaluing of ChYA literature in applications for their funding: they do not get many applications from children and YA creators and are working towards remedying this in their future funding calls: "there's a misperception of a lack of prestige, and a misunderstanding of the amount of work that goes into it.... And the general perception from outside is to look down [on children's and young-adult creators]. To say, oh, it's easy. There are fewer words, so it's less hard work and, and, oh, it's easy for illustrators to draw it's easy to just stick the words in".

The findings from our project strongly refute this misperception that literature for young people is a lesser artform and a lesser cultural and creative experience. It is clear from the evidence gathered during this project that books, reading, and opportunities for interactions with creators play an important and enriching role in Irish and Scottish young people's cultural, educational, and imaginative lives. However, our findings also identify a range of factors which undermine the richness and enriching possibilities of creative experiences for young people and with young people being actualised and optimised. In addition to the benefits of the arts and creative opportunities for young people's wellbeing, the creators, and arts organisations we interviewed emphasised the need for more support for sustaining creators' own wellbeing and resilience.

The findings from our project strongly refute this misperception that literature for young people is a lesser artform and a lesser cultural and creative experience.

NEXT STEPS

This project brought together a unique network of Irish and Scottish arts organisations with academic partners to investigate our shared concern with how the pandemic has impacted young people's reading, ChYA creators, and creative organisations.

Our findings emphasise the importance of collaboration and community-building at local and national levels for creators as well as young readers, increasing access to a wider range of authors and genres for young readers (including promoting Irish and Scottish creators), centring young people's voices and reading choices, empowering young people as creators, fostering relationships with schools and other partners for supporting school visits and live-literature events for young people, and developing supports for sustaining creators' wellbeing and resilience.

Beyond the formal end of this preliminary project, the network is committed to collaboratively investigating the shared concerns and issues of the Scottish and Irish ChYA literature sectors. From this initial research, we have identified the following stakeholders and areas to explore in the next stages of this project:

- **Children's and YA Literature and Events in the Classroom:** investigating what barriers teachers face when hosting live literature events and curating their classroom libraries.

- **Young People's (Lack Of) Awareness of Live-Literature Events:** exploring barriers young people face in accessing to and discovering book-related events aimed at them.

- **Small-Nation Publishing:** including more Scotland- and Ireland-based publishers to examine the role of small-nation publishing in diversifying the books children read (at home and in the classroom) and helping to make the sectors more resilient.

- **Cross-Sector Collaboration:** exploring the relationship between the literature sector and other creative industries such as theatre.

- **Aspiring and Emerging Creators:** this project primarily addressed mid-career and established creators and further research would be valuable for investigating the experiences and perspectives of aspiring, emerging, and debut authors, illustrators, and storytellers for young people.

- **Wider Geographic Scope:** the participants, including the schools, were based in central parts of Scotland and Ireland. In the next stages of this project, we will conduct focus groups with more schools and include young readers from less central areas of Ireland and Scotland.

METHODOLOGY

This research project created a new network of seven Scotland- and Ireland-based cultural and arts organisations that focus on Children's and YA (ChYA) literature, reading, and culture:

Children's Books Ireland, Poetry Ireland, Fighting Words, Wigtown Book Festival, the Super Power Agency, Moat Brae: National Centre for Children's Literature and Storytelling, and the Scottish Book Trust, alongside scholars from the University of Glasgow and Maynooth University.

As noted, the purpose of the study was to explore pandemic impacts on young people's reading and how the ChYA literature cultural and creative sectors in Ireland and Scotland have been responding to the challenges and opportunities posed by COVID-19. As such, this project used an action-research and engaged-research approach – using qualitative methods – to undertake a process of inquiry into professional interactions and practices within the ChYA literature communities in Scotland and Ireland, with the intention of creating shared solutions and co-creating a framework for enhancing and sustaining practice and resilience in both sectors. This process was collaborative and undertaken with the network members who are key stakeholders in these communities with a commitment to knowledge exchange and construction. This collaborative process included co-identifying an interviewee shortlist of twenty-four creators of literature for young people and representatives of arts organisations based in Ireland and Scotland in addition to network member representatives being interviewees; co-constructing and finalising questions for interviews as well as the focus groups; and co-reviewing findings and establishing key messages and recommendations for this report.

This report is based on findings from semi-structured focus groups with primary-school and secondary-school pupils and semi-structured interviews with cultural organisations, authors, and illustrators undertaken between October and December 2021. Six focus groups (three in Scottish schools and three in Irish schools) were conducted with convenience samples of 6–8-year-olds, 9–12-year-olds, and 15–16-year-olds. A total of 28 pupils took part in the focus groups. Twenty-four semi-structured interviews (twelve in Scotland and twelve in Ireland) were conducted with a purposive sample of cultural organisations and creators of children's and young-adult literature based in Scotland and Ireland. As noted above, this sample was co-created with the network members based on several factors, including type of organisation, experience, stage of career, genre of writing etc. The researchers

presented the initial findings to the network members during a workshop in January 2022 and augmented the findings based on discussion and problem-solving activities during the workshop. Findings from this project have also been contextualised within research from other related national and international reports and studies.

There were, of course, limitations to the research, and logistical and methodological challenges during the project. Ironically, in a project about the impact of COVID-19, the Omicron variant meant that we were unable to undertake the school focus-groups across Scotland and Ireland as originally planned: the Scottish focus groups took place in schools in Glasgow and the Irish focus groups took place in Galway and Tipperary; the interviews took place via Zoom; and the scheduled in-person network workshop had to take place online due to travel restrictions. Additionally, there were school closures in Galway due to Storm Barra which meant that the school focus groups in Galway had to be online. In the next step of this project, we intend to widen our geographical remit, engaging with communities across the whole of Scotland and Ireland, and to speak with other key stakeholders such as teachers and librarians.

## Keys to focus groups with children and teenagers

IRELAND	SCOTLAND
1st Class Primary School – (I – 1C)	P4 Primary School – (S – P4)
3rd Class Primary School – (I – 3C)	P7 Primary School – (S – P7)
Secondary School – (I – SS)	Secondary School – (S – SS)

Table of Interviewees

NAME	ORGANISATION	COUNTRY
Viccy Adams and Alan Bett	Creative Scotland	Scotland
Dean Atta	Author (YA, middle-grade, and picturebooks) and poet	Scotland
Tania Banotti	Creative Ireland	Ireland
Maisie Chan	Author (middle-grade)	Scotland
Simon Davidson	Moat Brae: the National Centre for Children's Literature and Storytelling	Scotland
Vivian French	Author (YA, middle-grade, and picturebooks)	Scotland
Debi Gliori	Author-Illustrator (picturebooks)	Scotland
Jennifer Horan	Youth Library Group (Scotland)	Scotland
Lucy Jukes	Barrington Stoke	Scotland
Oisín McGann	Author and Illustrator	Ireland
Eilidh Muldoon	Illustrator	Scotland
Mary Murphy	Author-Illustrator (picturebooks)	Ireland
Chris Newton	Scottish Book Trust	Scotland
Áine Ní Ghlinn	Poet, Author and Laureate na nÓg	Ireland
Colm Ó Cuanacháin	Fighting Words	Ireland
Jane O'Hanlon	Poetry Ireland	Ireland
Siobhán Parkinson	Author and Publisher (Little Island)	Ireland
Gerald Richards	The Super Power Agency	Scotland
James Robertson	Author and Publisher (ItchyCoo)	Scotland
Dave Rudden	Author	Ireland
Elaina Ryan	Children's Books Ireland	Ireland
Debbie Thomas	Author	Ireland
Sarah Webb	Author and Programmer	Ireland
Sheena Wilkinson	Author	Ireland

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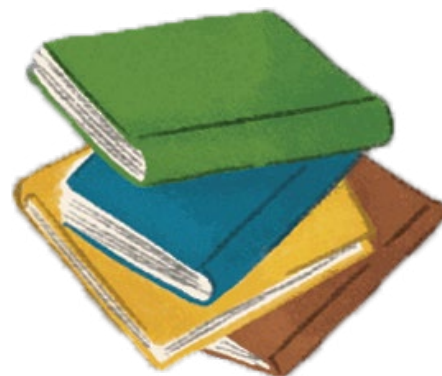
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