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Feature: The Ceol Programme

By Michael Quinn

The working class suburb of Ballyfermot, seven kilometres west of Dublin city centre, is not necessarily the first place you would go looking for musical excellence and educational innovation. Flanked on its northern side by the River Liffey and on its southern edge by the Grand Canal, it is one of the Irish capital's more problematic areas, with social disadvantage and hard drugs giving it the atmosphere of a blighted inner city area.

But recently something remarkable has been happening in primary schools throughout Ireland that has its roots in an initiative launched in Ballyfermot in 1998. Taking its name from the Irish word for music, the Ceol Programme was started by ex-piano teacher Carmel Dunne for the simplest of reasons: a recognition that today's children did not have access to the musical education she herself had enjoyed.

“So, I went back to the area I'd grown up in and got in touch with parties who I thought would be interested in diverting kids away from bad behaviour. And I spoke to the principals of primary schools who were doing basic things but said they weren't confident about teaching music because the available training wasn't adequate enough.”

Ceol's beginnings, recalls Dunne, were “humble: just doing tin whistle on one level in all the schools. But, within a short space of time, all our 8-10-year-olds could play the instrument!” This stage was supported by Derek Fowler, local businessman and Cllr Vincent Jackson, ex- Lord Mayor of Dublin.

The experience contrasted sharply with research findings carried out by Ceol between 2002 and 2005, which alarmingly revealed that half of Ireland's primary level principals and teachers thought music was badly taught and badly resourced in Irish schools.

But emboldened by early success, Dunne, together with Gerard Flanagan of the Vocational Education Committee and Rita Eyre, began offering after-school teaching on other instruments and moved from there into “testing” other platforms, with an early emphasis on childrens' choirs. Low key and localised though the programme was in its early years, its success attracted the attention of Social Entrepreneurs Ireland (SEI), an organisation created to support innovative socially-aware projects through its own network of business and public and voluntary sector contacts. By 2006, when Dunne received an award from SEI in recognition of its achievements thus far, some (3,000) 2,000 children had participated in Ceol's programmes (nationwide) locally. That figure is now well in excess of (4,200) 4,500 children nationwide.

From 2002 on, other organisations – Vocational and Educational Committees, Dublin's Youth Services Board and Drugs Task Force, and the European Union's Urban II regeneration initiative included – were also beginning to take notice of what Ceol was beginning to achieve.

“They could see that children were becoming more involved and interested in music,” explains Dunne. “At the beginning we had one or two teachers going around schools being paid from whatever bits of money I could find for them. SEI’s involvement helped us to take a more business-minded approach and to think on a national rather than just local community scale.”

Happily, that challenge coincided with Dunne meeting Ali Giusti, a professional musician who had experience in developing music programmes for 5-18-year-olds in Wales and who was also author of a primary schools workshop programme for the Dublin-based Waltons New School of Music. Working now with junior-age children, and, crucially, their teachers, Giusti had begun to develop her own classroom programme.

“Within weeks we could see that what she was doing was absolutely magic,” Dunne says delightedly. “I told her to write down everything that was in her head because what she was doing was clearly working. Teachers kept telling me that music had become the centre and soul of their schools.”

While curriculum focused, Giusti’s approach was centred on the child and on fun. Through imaginative graphics and engaging exercises, it introduced adult and child participants alike to rhythm, pitch, form, texture, timbre, dynamics, tempo and the myriad other building blocks of musical awareness. More importantly, it stressed the excitement and enjoyment of involvement, the lessons’ emphasis on performance disguising and enhancing Giusti’s conceptual underpinning. It chimed, too, with Dunne’s longtime notion of a modular and self-reviewing training system.

Closely collaborating, Giusti writing detailed lesson plans and Dunne proofing, editing and organising the strategy, the two developed what became the Ceol Programme. Together, they produced a detailed programme aimed at junior infant teachers and their pupils, and launched the scheme nationwide in April last year. Within three months, 150 teachers from across Ireland had signed up to the programme. Strategic vision and planning has been greatly assisted by a very professional board, including Ger and Tempy Cummins from an organisation called Vision to Reality.

Participating teachers are coached by Ceol’s three trainers under Giusti’s guidance. In groups of 10, they are taught the programme’s methodology over a period of six weeks during a 2 hour session that covers the coming 6 weekly lesson plans, at the end of which they receive detailed step-by-step (lesson guides) 6 weekly lesson plans. This process is repeated every 6 weeks, totalling 5 times over the year. “It’s designed to ensure that they’re always a step ahead of the children,” explains Dunne. “It’s all intended to build incrementally, with each of the year’s 30 weekly lessons clearly mapped out.”

Ceol also provides its own resource materials for schools. Books, illustrative aids and DVDs (CDs) aimed at the child all complement the programme’s pedagogic imperatives. It’s a package unlike any other, says Dunne from the perspective of a 30-year career as described by a retiring principal. “I’ve never seen anything like it. Nobody’s doing this the way we’re doing it.”

Although still in its own relative infancy, Ceol has already produced two tiers of its programme, the first aimed at junior infants, the other at senior infants. They represent

the start of a long-term project, due to complete in 2015, that will map out musical provision across the full eight-year span of primary schooling in Ireland north and south and in Irish and in English.

While the educational response to Ceol has been wholly positive, government engagement has worryingly inconsistent. Despite receiving funding of (€170,000) £157,000 from the Department of Education over the past two years, Ceol can expect nothing at all from them next year. Nor has any minister or civil servant ever formally spoken to Dunne about the venture despite its fast-developing profile.

Currently, Ceol survives on grants from various bodies drawing on Dublin's municipal purse, and from sales of its programme materials, which cost schools (€375) £350 for every participating teacher, equivalent, says Dunne, "to about (50 cents) 45 pence per child per week, so it represents real value for money".

Certainly, the Ulster Bank seemed to think so in 2008, when Ceol picked up one of its Business Achievers Awards in the Community/Social Entrepreneurship category. Ceol won the All-Ireland Award on Thursday 12th March 2009 – Ulster Bank.

Perhaps the greatest strength of the programme is that it requires no prior ability from children or teachers. Instead, in what are described as "bite-size chunks that slowly build to give an extensive musical foundation", it introduces participants to performance, composition, listening and responding to music in a progressively structured plan that aims to "bring the music curriculum to life".

The response from teachers who have encountered Ceol has been unanimously enthusiastic. Ena Morley, Principal of St Ultan's National School, in Dublin's Cherry Orchard, hails it as "undoubtedly the most exciting classroom-based project. In one sentence what has it done for us? It has enabled teachers to take the music curriculum books and transform them into a dynamic, lived curriculum".

To another school head, Ann Dempsey of St Conleth's Infant School in Newbridge in County Kildare, Ceol is "the most fantastic and comprehensive music programme which prepares and encourages even the not-so-musically inclined teacher to teach music with confidence on their return to the classroom". Dempsey has also noticed improvements in participating children across a wide range of skills and other lessons, not least "Gaeilge, art, oral language, phonological awareness, listening and drama".

Though the scheme's profile is steadily increasing, with some 7,000 teachers across the island as potential participants, there is considerable room yet for growth. Interestingly, parents are beginning to ask for the Ceol Programme to be implemented in their children's schools. Currently Dunne, Giusti and their colleagues have a packed diary of presentations to schools across Ireland in anticipation of the new academic year that will begin in September.

"Those principals and teachers who are using us are saying that we are the best there is," says Dunne. "We're in schools with profoundly disabled children; in schools for the deaf; in schools where a significant number of children are not native English speakers – the 'New Irish' offspring of a growing immigrant population; in separate, multi-denominational,

and all kinds of schools, and the programme is flexible enough to accommodate all of them.”

Looking ahead, Dunne is preparing a move into e-learning, with plans for an interactive programme that can be delivered digitally, and into territories outside of Ireland. Already, the Scottish Assembly has expressed an interest in implementing Ceol in its schools and Dunne has copyrighted the programme and is Trade Mark protected in 27 countries.

“We’re a slow burner, but we’re dynamic and evolving, and at the moment we’re growing through word of mouth. We’re passionate and constantly developing and planning to cross the border into Northern Ireland and cross the sea into Wales, England and Scotland.

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