Bridging worlds: New learning spaces for new times
Supplemental Report

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Introduction

The Bridging Worlds – New Learning Spaces for New Times was a cross-sectoral initiative seeking to connect formal and non-formal education. It was originally scheduled to run from September 2020 to August 2021; however, it was extended until December 2021. This extension was primarily to enable support for participants who had yet to implement programmes in their areas of work. A formative evaluation has been undertaken detailing project implementation, participants, and learning outcomes for the main project deliverables up to June 2022 (O'Regan, Brady and Connolly, 2021). This supplemental report has been completed to provide a narrative account of programme implementation activities from July to December 2021. It is divided into the following three parts. Firstly, key project milestones during the period are described including levels of engagement, project successes, and challenges that arose during this phase of implementation. Secondly, a case study is presented to incorporate youth feedback. A number of young people shared their experiences as they participated in a programme made possible by Bridging Worlds. Finally, the report concludes with set of recommendations on next steps for the programme.

1.1 Project Activities

The project activities during this latter phase of implementation remained focused on the four project goals, which were:

- To create a wrap-around model for education — where we support young people, teachers, school leaders, youth workers.
- To link formal and non-formal education partners.
- To respond to emerging needs among teachers and other relevant professionals to scaffold student engagement, in a way that integrates learning both outside and inside the regular classroom.
- To create foundations and conditions to ensure the project is scalable.

Strategically, the project steering group had taken the decision to use this additional project time to create strong foundations from which to grow the project into the future. This was especially important in supporting project participants to implement prosocial youth programmes, as most had deferred their plans to do so due to the impact of COVID-19 in the earlier part of the year. In extending the project, follow-up support could be provided to participants once they had implemented the various programmes, and through this learning could be shared across participants and sectors. Thematically, the project activities during this second phase of implementation are reviewed below under the headings: resource development, support sessions, project dissemination, project successes and project challenges.

Resource Development

This initiative used the skill development needs of both teachers and youth workers to create a bridge to link the two sectors. The skill development areas were blended learning and creating an online learning culture. There was an urgency to provide this support so that both sectors could maintain their links to young people at risk of significant negative impact and isolation due to the disruption caused by COVID-19. As part of the initial project phase, Bridging World participants attended Bridging the Gap training on these topics; they were then supported to attend training on one or more of the following prosocial youth programmes provided by Foróige:
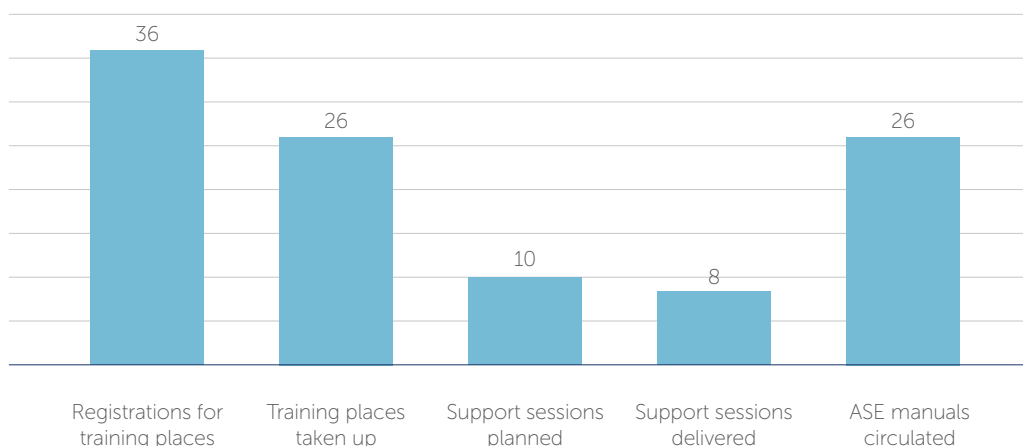
- Leadership for Life
- Sound Surfers
- Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship (NFTE)
- Activating Social Empathy

During this second phase of the project, joint work was undertaken by Foróige staff and a learning technologist to develop an online programme site for Activating Social Empathy (ASE). Developing this online resource was a very useful outcome for the project, as given the ongoing public health restrictions, it provided a valuable set of online programme resources and a range of options in terms of programme delivery, timely in the circumstances. In addition to completing a Google site to host the programme content, the programme manual was reviewed and updated to include both face-to-face (f2f) and online delivery options. This provided role models and exemplars of blended delivery, a key learning outcome for the project. The programme manual was also redesigned to make it more user friendly and accessible to young people.

Support Sessions

The original idea was to facilitate support sessions once participants across both the school and youth work sectors had delivered a programme to young people. As most participants deferred their programme delivery to the autumn term, it was now possible to offer these support sessions timed to support programme delivery. During this term, in the new academic year, contact was made with all participants to offer them a support session in relation to the youth programme in which they had received training. See Figure 1 below for a summary of the sessions provided.

Figure 1 Support Provided Sept to November 2021

Registrations for training places	Training places taken up	Support sessions planned	Support sessions delivered	ASE manuals circulated
36	26	10	8	26

[1] Additional support was provided to participants on the NFTE programme separate to Bridging Worlds as there is a dedicated resource within Foróige to make and sustain connections with trained users of these materials. There is some evidence that since providing access to this programme resource through Bridging Worlds, there is increased demand for the training from other teachers outside of the programme.

Project Dissemination

During this time, the team also focused on project review, planning, and sharing the learning from the evaluation report. A series of presentations on the learning outcomes were made within the project steering committee, Foróige and NUI Galway, and internationally at the 2021 ATEE Conference 'Social Justice, Media and Technology in Teacher Education'. The team also worked with an animator to develop a short video to share project information and as a resource for the future development of the initiative.

Project Successes

It is notable that despite the ongoing disruption and uncertainty due to the pandemic, the project did maintain links and engagement across the cohort of participants into the second academic year. Participants were very positive about their engagement and the sharing of updated programme resources was particularly welcomed. Both teachers and youth workers were interested in learning about the new programme resources, in trying out programme materials and in sharing experiences about programme delivery. The development and updating of the Activating Social Empathy resources was a particular highlight of this phase of the project. This programme resource is a significant legacy for the project. An unexpected but positive outcome was that the participants reported being able to use these materials during face-to-face teaching, using the visual resources to better match the learning preferences of visual learners in the classroom setting. This finding provided a tangible example for teachers and youth workers of the benefits of using a blended approach in a traditional setting.

Another notable aspect of this project was the collaborative working across organisations, sectors and expertise. The combined expertise across the project supported the delivery of an adaptable and flexible set of supports that were highly valued by participants as they worked hard to maintain both formal and non-formal education supports. The completion and roll-out of the ASE Google website and updated manual is a product of this cross-sectoral engagement across Foróige and Learning Technology.

Project Challenges

Programme participants, both teachers and youth workers, reported dealing with a high volume of work during this second period of project implementation, an issue exacerbated by the ongoing pandemic. Teachers reported receiving large amounts of email communication and usually relied on a follow-up phone call from the project coordinator to prompt them to sign up for programme events. Youth workers too were under additional strain in maintaining hybrid support prior to the resumption of full face-to-face group work. When group work was permissible in person again, it did take time to redevelop connections with young people and work out suitable group arrangements to meet individuals' interests and preferences.

A significant challenge for the project coordinator during this time was to be as adaptable as possible. Support sessions were offered at a range of times during school, at lunchtime and in the evening. Communication and follow-up was an active and ongoing process to make sure participants were facilitated as much as possible to engage fully in the support sessions.

A further challenge that emerged at this point was that some teachers who participated in the first round of the project had moved jobs or role within the school into this second academic year. In some cases, this meant they were no longer in a position to implement the programme as planned. However, some teachers in this situation did report that they planned to maintain contact with Foróige and wanted to implement the programme once their role in the school allowed them to do so.

A final challenge was how best to secure youth feedback on the Bridging Worlds project. As implementation of the programme activities in both schools and youth groups had been delayed until this phase of the project, it was not possible during the evaluation to collect feedback on the initiative from the young person's point of view. It was a key aim of this phase of the project to address this gap. The project coordinator engaged across the participants and worked to find ways to collect this feedback in as seamless a way as possible. As a result it was agreed to incorporate a case study of how the Bridging Worlds project led to a number of young people having access to a new programme as part of their Transition Year experience. An account of this feedback is set out below.

1.2 Youth Feedback: A case study

As many of the project initiatives working with young people directly were delayed due to the ongoing restrictions, it was not possible to include feedback directly from the young people in the main evaluation report. Instead, as part of this supplemental report, a case study is presented illustrating how as a result of the Bridging Worlds Project, a group of young people were supported to access the Activating Social Empathy programme as part of their Transition Year.

What happened?

Two teachers from an urban secondary school had attended the Bridging Worlds training. They had participated in the Bridging the Gap training, where they attended online training alongside a number of youth workers from their area. The training had focused on blended learning, creating an online learning culture and the role of the non-formal versus formal learning sectors. Subsequently, they had participated in follow-up training on the Activating Social Empathy (ASE) programme. As with the earlier training, this was delivered online to groups of teachers and youth workers together. The ability of both the teachers and youth workers to implement the 10-week programme in their school and youth group was disrupted during the last school term of 2020/2021 and over the summer months. However, when the Transition Year planning got underway for the following academic year, 2021/2022, the teachers recognised that a number of their secondary school students might be interested in participating in the ASE programme. The teachers contacted local youth workers, who confirmed they would be able to offer the programme during the school day as a Transition Year activity, delivering the programme on site in the local arts centre. Six young people agreed to attend a one-and-a-half-hour weekly session each Monday. By the end of the first term they had completed half the programme and three of them agreed to meet the researcher to provide feedback. The three respondents were young males about 16 years old; they attended the youth club to meet the researcher at their regular weekly session and discussed their experiences of the programme so far.

How did it go?

Initially, the young people reported that they were not sure what the project involved and that it took a few sessions to get to know the youth workers and the new venue and to understand the programme focus.

> *We didn't really know what to think of it, we just knew we were going to the arts centre, that's it (Student 2)*

The students hadn't been involved with the youth club previously; they hadn't known there was one in their local centre. The youth worker reported that once they attended for the first couple of sessions, they were much more relaxed and open. Having completed the first part of the programme, while they said they hadn't thought much about empathy before, now they understood it more, saying:

> *We learned the difference between empathy and sympathy (Student 1)*

> *We learn what to say to people if they are feeling down (Student 2)*

The young people reported that they didn't have any other subject like this within the current Transition Year programme. They also felt it was easier to talk about this type of subject outside of school, working in a small group, with less distractions:

> *It's just easier to learn than if you are just sitting in a class taking notes. Better, like I would say like than writing something down (Student 1)*

> *So easier to learn here, you get distracted easier in school with people walking outside, stuff like that (Student 2)*

Finally, the young people shared some experiences of online learning. The three young people had not enjoyed the experience of online education in the previous school year. At that point, they would have been in an exam year class and faced much uncertainty throughout the year as to whether they would have to sit those exams. They had experienced an increase in workload and found concentrating in an online environment difficult.

> *Some class overlap too. If you want to finish an online class, and then teacher was set up for another one, and you'd only get 15 minutes and there would be overlap (Student 1)*

> *It was hard was like was the time because when I had class in the morning, I'd be tired or not really awake, I won't be able to concentrate and then I'd be confused (Student 2)*

Outcomes for the students

As noted earlier, the students had completed about the half of the programme when they took part in this review. The second half of this 10-week programme involves completing an action research project to implement some of the concepts they learned about. The group indicated that they would probably come up with a project they could implement in school. They liked having a longer time to work on the project as most of these types of action project are limited in their Transition Year programme, where they have to complete modules in six-week slots. Participating in this programme over the two terms gives them much more scope:

You only have six weeks, you just about get everything into it, it's rushed. It's pointless starting something like art that you might not get finished

Further steps

Having the option and space to come on site was welcomed by the students and they could see it as an opportunity to do things that may not be an option in school. In addition, the youth worker described how, once the programme is completed, the normal practice is to sit down and explore what the young people might like to do next. As this is a youth-led initiative, the team would provide options for various other programmes, and discuss whether and how these might match the young person's interests.

We were thinking after we do the activating social empathy; we would sit down with the lads and if they were happy to come back, we could do the leadership for life programme or sound surfers. It's all youth led so whatever they would want to do. This one will finish up in early February and we will see from there (Youth worker)

Evidence for the Bridging Worlds model?

This case study has demonstrated how the Transition Year school programme and the local youth group can create a wrap-around model of support. Through participation in the cross-sectoral training programme, links between two sectors were strengthened, both groups of participants learned how to implement the ASE programme, and the resources were easily available through a website. The young people involved were attending their local youth club for the first time as a result of Bridging Worlds. They were participating in an enjoyable programme and looking forward to completing an action project based on their learning. They also had the option of continuing their involvement and accessing further programmes available within the youth-led approach. These connections serve not only to increase scaffolding and support to participants but as an exemplar as to how the two sectors can strengthen and enhance connections into the future.

1.3 Recommendations

This final section of the supplemental report sets out updated project recommendations based on this second phase of project delivery and the youth feedback.

1. Needs Assessment

A key success of this project was joint planning and development across the range of stakeholders. In particular the set of training resources that emerged in the Bridging the Gap training was the product of the needs of teachers, as represented by the NUI Galway School of Education staff, and the needs of youth workers, as represented by the Foróige practitioners. This joint review of training and service needs and the development of responsive resources should be the foundation for the next phase of the project, post pandemic. In addition, consideration should be given to building a needs analysis from the ground up, by engaging with the cohort of participants across schools and youth groups to reflect on shared learning priorities, thereby modelling the type of joint review and planning that Bridging Worlds set out to establish.

2. Stakeholder Engagement

A critical success factor in this project was the active and sustained involvement of Foróige, the School of Education and the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre, and the project funder. It is important that as support is sought for a project extension, this engagement be maintained and strategic links developed across education and youth partners both regionally and nationally. The role of the local Education and Training Boards (ETBs) may be of particular relevance here given their engagement in both the formal and non-formal education areas.

3. Modify the programme delivery

With the programme having been implemented during 2021 and in the midst of the COVID-19 disruptions, a number of modifications should be made to support more seamless delivery, especially given the time constraints participants face in combining training opportunities with work responsibilities. These modifications are:

- Refocus the Training: The main training component should be reformatted to be provided over two days. Day 1 should focus on the Bridging the Gap training incorporating blended learning, online culture and the role of the formal/non-formal education sectors. Day 2 should focus on one of the four prosocial programmes. Participants should be limited to one course at a time so that the commitment is not too onerous.

- Refocus the Support Sessions: The sessions should be refocused as a space for participants to develop their own agenda, resources and training supports in order to develop a shared learning space in their own localities. The seeds for this can be sought using an action planning process within the Bridging the Gap training whereby participants are asked to review their local area and identify sources of support to connect to, whether in the formal or non-formal arena. Completing this action plan would be a useful blueprint for developing future support sessions in that area.

- Clarify the time commitment: Participants should be asked whether they are interested in attending the initial training only or also participating in the development of the support sessions locally. If participating in developing the support sessions within their own area, a more open time commitment will be required and this should be clarified.

- Community of Practice: Within the support sessions, encourage participants to use community of practice learning tools to identify areas of interest and to develop shared learning spaces in order to foster resource development across formal/non-formal sectors in each area. As with the sharing of resources in the Bridging Worlds initiative, a set of useful resources could be collated and shared through the participant networks to foster this practice.

- Joint Events: A further suggestion for fostering cross-sectoral engagement is to explore at local level the interest in joint showcase events where project outcomes in a local school and/or youth group could be shared to raise awareness of the overlap between the two areas and opportunities for co-operative initiatives.

4. Project Expansion

Across both the education and youth work sectors, a cohort of teachers and youth workers have received training in one of the Foróige youth programmes in the past, separate to the Bridging Worlds project. This group may be interested in attending Bridging the Gap training to extend their existing training. They would be invited to explore the potential for local connections across the corresponding formal/non-formal sectors in their area. In this way, the project could extend incrementally, building through local networks and communities of learners.
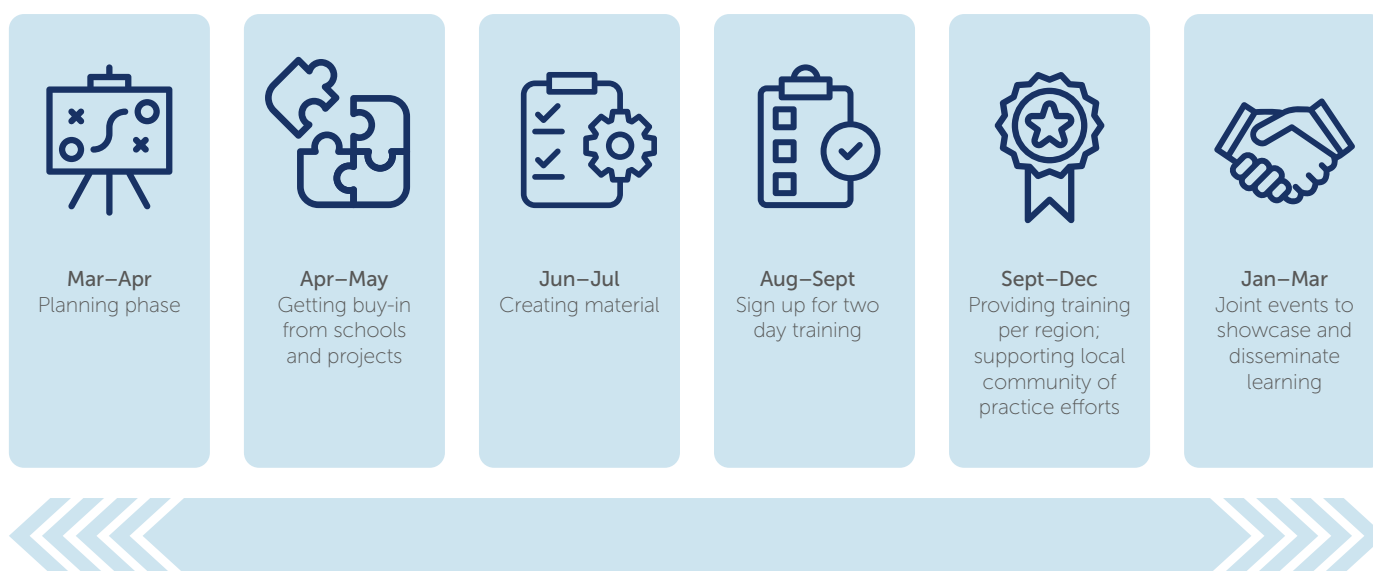
5. Youth Engagement

As the case study illustrates, the impact of this initiative on the young people attending school and youth groups is only being realised as the various projects are rolled out. When engaged, young people have feedback on how best to involve them across the various formal and non-formal spaces. They also have suggestions on what types of project fit better in the various spaces, whether blended or online. It is important that, as local hubs develop cross-sectoral plans, youth representation be included to bring that youth-led approach into any new co-created space.

6. Time lines

Given the extraordinary nature of project implementation during a pandemic, a critical success factor was active communication, coordination and adaptability. Notwithstanding the circumstances, the team did highlight key learning about a recommended timeline for rolling out a cross-sectoral initiative of this nature. A draft recommended timeline has been developed based on this learning and is set out in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2 Draft recommended timeline

| Mar–Apr Planning phase | Apr–May Getting buy-in from schools and projects | Jun–Jul Creating material | Aug–Sept Sign up for two day training | Sept–Dec Providing training per region; supporting local community of practice efforts | Jan–Mar Joint events to showcase and disseminate learning |

1.4 Conclusion

This supplemental report details the continued implementation of Bridging Worlds throughout the autumn term of 2021. It provides feedback on project milestones as the project coordinator continued to liaise with participating teachers and youth workers in supporting them to implement the prosocial youth programmes in their areas of responsibility. Further progress was also made on curating online and blended versions of the youth programmes to enable seamless delivery across both face-to-face and blended modalities.

This report has also described a case study example of how the programme has implemented a wrap-around model of support with both formal and non-formal education working together to implement a new youth programme for a group of young people. Finally, the report sets out a series of updated recommendations incorporating all the project feedback to date. As with the earlier full evaluation report, it is remarkable that so many of the participants continue to actively support and engage with the project in the midst of the continuing public health emergency. It illustrates the interest in and support for this innovative and cross-sectoral approach. Further time and implementation resources are needed to embed this approach more fully so that the positive gains envisaged for youth through these wrap-around and scaffolded supports can be fully realised.

Full Report O'Regan, C., Brady, B., Connolly, C. (2021). Bridging worlds: New learning spaces for new times: Evaluation Report. Galway: UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre, National University of Ireland Galway.