

The Bridging Worlds project, funded by Reinvent Ireland, is an exploratory programme with the ambitious aim of creating a wraparound model linking the formal and non-formal education sectors. It provides a comprehensive educational ecosystem to support young people, teachers, and youth workers and in particular provides proactive provision to support marginalised groups. In the context of Covid-19's impact on young people's educational experiences, the project aims to bring together the formal and non-formal education sectors in a shared learning initiative.

When the normal educational system was paused in March 2020, many young people relied on the non-formal educational network for support and engagement. School closures due to the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated educational inequality and inequity (Darmody et al., 2020; UNESCO, 2020). In young people's experience of lockdown, one of the most notable domains for development that emerged was the need to bridge the gap between formal and non-formal learning contexts.

This gap, and the pivot to more virtual spaces for learning, created an opportunity to re-evaluate, recognise, and reimagine the importance of a more holistic view of education, connecting formal and non-formal learning, and to seek to identify a way of aligning the two. The Bridging Worlds project, funded by Reinvent Ireland, is an exploratory programme with the ambitious aim of creating a wraparound model that links the formal and non-formal education sectors.

Bridging Worlds provides a comprehensive educational ecosystem to support young people, teachers, and youth workers who have a shared focus on the quality of all children's learning; in particular it provides proactive provision to support marginalised groups. In the context of the impact of the pandemic on the educational experiences of young people, the project aims to bring together the formal and non-formal education sectors in a shared learning initiative – see the figure below.

The theoretical framework informing the design of Bridging Worlds was based on the foundational ontological notion that there is a close, mutual interdependence between the physical environment of learning and the pedagogies enacting within it in the current digital world

# Bridging Worlds

Building a bridge for our educational ecosystem and linking formal and non-formal learning

## **Cornelia Connolly**

School of Education, National University of Ireland Galway

## **Sarah Haslam**

Foróige

## **Sean Campbell**

Foróige

## **Bernadine Brady**

UNESCO Child & Family Research Centre, National University of Ireland Galway

## **Connie O'Regan**

UNESCO Child & Family Research Centre, National University of Ireland Galway

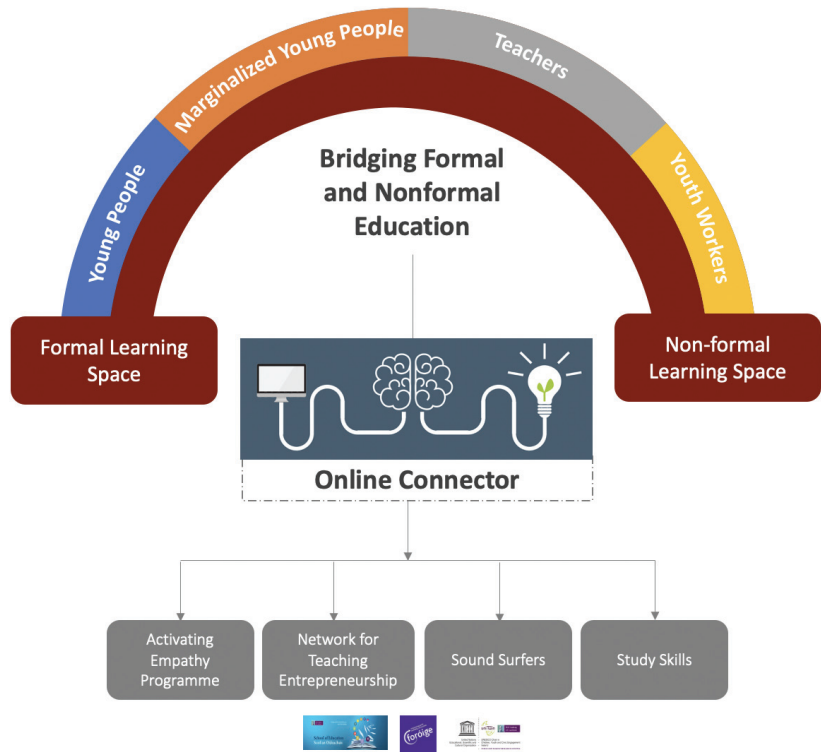
## **Pat Dolan**

UNESCO Child & Family Research Centre, National University of Ireland Galway

## **Gerry MacRuairc**

School of Education, National University of Ireland Galway

(Freire, 1997; New, 2009; Brühlmeier, 2010; Ketelaar et al., 2012; Penuel, 2019, Salmon, 2019).



### Bridging Worlds

The project's infrastructure and design aimed to create an equilibrium between the head, the heart, and the hands (Brühlmeier, 2010), thereby enhancing the inclusion of learners who were marginalised from more traditional and established learning environments. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory was used to explore the ways the project enhances and extends the mesosystem between school teachers and youth workers.

Although Bridging Worlds is not a technology project, the capacity of teachers and the youth work community to deliver blended and online education and to support student engagement was central to the project, and to ensuring that this technology relationship integrated learning both outside and inside the regular classroom. Wenger's (2010) concept of a 'community of practice' was applied to establish whether the project could create a community, or 'hub', where parity of esteem was created in a more integrated and effective way.

Key project activities included training 40 teachers and 20 youth workers in online teaching and blended learning; creating local hubs linking teachers and youth workers to identify how non-formal and formal education can be better integrated to support marginalised young people; and providing innovative youth work programmes in schools and youth services.

This part of the project had four phases:

1. A half-day online training event provided by project coordinators to Transition Year teachers and youth workers in three counties
2. Online training to learn about at least one of Foróige's four Positive Youth Development Programmes
3. Transition Year teachers and youth workers delivering one of the Foróige programmes to young people they work with
4. Teachers and youth workers invited to avail of two follow-up one-to-one online sessions to review their experiences and receive further advice and support.

The project was successfully implemented despite the ongoing disruptions caused by Covid-19. It exceeded the aim of recruiting 60 participants: 35 teachers from 19 schools and 30 youth workers across 17 projects participated. Patterns of engagement varied over the programme, in particular when on-site school returned in the latter half of the academic year.

More time is needed to fully embed the initiative, to ensure that all participants implement the youth programme in their area of responsibility, and to create stronger exemplars of cross-sectoral hubs guiding and supporting teachers and youth workers. But the fact that this project was implemented in a time of considerable upheaval and disruption is testament to the efforts of the teachers, youth workers, young people, and project team who took part.

One of the four goals of Bridging Worlds is to establish the foundations and conditions to ensure that the project is scalable, with the ultimate vision to achieve national rollout. Notwithstanding the success and potential of Bridging Worlds, the legacy is a model where all young people can benefit from the intersection of formal and non-formal education – and for the disadvantaged who typically struggle, that their educational infrastructure will be better.

If you are interested in learning more about this project, getting involved, or receiving updates, please email [learningspaces4newtimes@gmail.com](mailto:learningspaces4newtimes@gmail.com) or follow [@bridging\\_worlds](https://twitter.com/bridging_worlds) on Twitter.

**“Bridging Worlds provides a comprehensive educational ecosystem to support young people, teachers, and youth workers who have a shared focus on the quality of all children’s learning.”**

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The **Irish Science Teachers' Association, Eol Oidí na hÉireann**, is the professional association for teachers of science in the Republic of Ireland. As such it is represented on the relevant subject development groups of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. Since its foundation in 1961 it has been providing continuous professional development and support for its members at both national and branch levels.

The Association has close affiliations with the Association for Science Education in the UK and is a founding member of ICASE, the International Council of Associations for Science Education. It is also represented on SCIENTIX which promotes and supports a Europe-wide collaboration among STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths) teachers, education researchers, policymakers and other STEM education professionals.

Members are also supported and informed of developments through the Association's website ([www.ista.ie](http://www.ista.ie)) and through its Journal, SCIENCE, which is posted to members three times a year.

The major national ISTA events are the Senior Science Quiz – normally held during Science Week since 1990 and the Annual Conference which provides members with the opportunity to hear and meet national and international experts in areas relevant to science education. It is hoped that the next conference will be held in person in the **Eureka Centre in UCC, Cork on 8th & 9th April 2022**. However, if there are restrictions due to the global pandemic then it will be held virtually online via a Zoom webinar. The theme this year is: **Senior Cycle Science Reform – Issues and Challenges**



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