A fundamental obligation of any society is to prepare its young people to lead productive and fulfilling lives as adults. Education is typically the clinch call to action to address the many challenges which impede this responsibility. Education is acknowledged as a key level of inequalities, and has long been recognised as the foundation of progressive and knowledge-based economies and societies. It is increasingly called upon to address poverty, disadvantage and issues of inclusion in society – gender, disability, race and ethnicity. My work in the Arts Education Research Group (AERG) in the School of Education examines arts-based, active learning approaches to address social challenges.

Social Drama and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) – I lead a large funded research group within AERG in developing a novel social and communication skills intervention for children and young adults with ASD. Supported by the NGO, Aspire Ireland, this longitudinal study is pioneering a unique form of social skills education in addressing the core deficits associated with autism. Working with many of the same participants for more than 10 years, the arts-based pedagogies underpinning Social Drama – a unique set of strategies to learning where participants explore and experience social situations using drama, music, movement and visual art – are leading to a breakthrough in further understanding the autism spectrum. We have identified 12 distinct subtypes on the spectrum. This advance will facilitate tailor-made social and educational interventions for specific subtypes, resulting in better outcomes for participants. Training has been provided to educational and health professionals in Ireland and internationally, most recently in Hong Kong. This is the only longitudinal study of its kind in the world and the first cohort of results are in press.

Creative Teaching and Learning in Early Childhood Education in China – Advances in the field of neuroscience and early childhood development confirm the importance of the first few years of a child’s life in terms of their all-round development. Following a period of significant educational reform in China, which recognises the early childhood sector as central to social and economic success, and building on educational drama workshops I had provided to teachers and educators in China, I was invited by China Renmin University Press (the People’s Press), the largest educational publishing press in China, to write three books to introduce educational professionals to drama as a cross-curricular teaching and learning tool in early years education. These books, published in 2016, will introduce a new generation of kindergarten and primary school teachers, parents and educators to an active and creative way of teaching and learning all subjects on the curriculum in China, with play, drama, music, dance, visual art and craft as the active learning pedagogies. The books will form the basis of a collaborative programme in Continuing Professional Development for teachers and educators, offered by Trinity’s School of Education, and rolled out from October 2016 onwards, initially in Beijing and Shanghai.

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Carmel O’Sullivan received her PhD from Mary Immaculate College, Limerick and her MA and PhD from Birmingham City University. She joined Trinity in 1998, having worked at Newman College’s Faculty of Education, University of Birmingham. She served as the Coordinator of Trinity’s four Associated Colleges of Education from 2000–05, as Warden of Trinity Hall from 2009–05, and is now Head of the School of Education. Published widely, her research interests are in drama and arts education, autism studies, early childhood education and creative teaching and learning.

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