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RESEARCH ARTICLE

A statement by the sun: a Practice-as-Research enquiry into presence and absence

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This article describes a Practice-as-Research (PaR) project, involving a group of young people in drama and visual arts practices, to explore their understandings of absence and presence in the community. The data, including the facilitators' reflection of the drama workshops, students' artwork, photographs, interviews, and a focus group, was analysed through reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022) integrated with poetic enquiry (Faulkner, 2019) and ethnodrama (Salvatore, 2025). The article starts by delineating the main elements of PaR methodology (Candy et al, 2022; Nelson, 2022), an approach to enquiry grounded in artistic processes that prioritises embodied knowledge, affective experience, and multimodal forms of expression. Next, the article draws on Kershaw et al's (2011) five dimensions of PaR to delineate the abSENce-presenCE (SENCE) study. The discussion traces how the initial thematic prompt of 'presence', at the heart of the study, evolved through the practice into a dramaturgical framework for exploring the relational dynamics, and ultimately into a methodology of PaR itself. This trajectory informed every stage of the project, from data generation through to analysis and dissemination, demonstrating how PaR shaped the research process holistically. The findings highlight the significance of positioning PaR as a methodology that drove the entire research process, generating plural practices that sustained ongoing engagement. Importantly, we argue that PaR can be applied not only by established artists, but also by community groups and young people, centring them as makers and enabling active participation in the interpretive dimensions of research.

Keywords Practice as Research • abSENce • presenCE • SENCE • poetic enquiry
• ethnodrama

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Overture

You are about to begin a process of interaction with this article. How present are you? How absent? What would happen if we asked you to pick up a pencil and get ready to draw? Would this subversive request awaken you? Provoke you? Annoy you? After all, you expected to be reading this article, not drawing. What an outright break with standard academic convention! Yet, if we may, we invite you to locate a writing utensil and a sheet of paper. Become present in the space around you, take a breath, and follow these instructions:

Identify one object that holds your attention and, for the next 60 seconds, draw it. Once you begin, follow three simple rules:

1. Keep your pencil moving for the full 60 seconds.
2. Do not look down at the paper.
3. Keep your gaze on the object for the duration of the task.

This technique, known as blind contour drawing, was introduced by [Kimon Nicolaïdes in 1941](#) and is commonly used as a warm-up in drawing classes, especially for live drawing. In our case, it was used with a group of 12 young people, who were instructed to simultaneously draw one another for 60 seconds. The article that follows will explain in more detail how we used this in our research project.

Now, you may read on.

Introduction

In this article, we present a Practice-as-Research (PaR) project investigating the themes of absence and presence, as shaped by the lived experiences of a group of young people in Ireland. The overall aim of the study, *abSENce-presenCE* (SENCE), was to foreground young people's agency in the co-creation of knowledge through drama and visual arts, emphasising situated knowledge and embodied cognition. We set out to investigate how young people understand and experience being present in their communities, what absence and presence mean to them, how these concepts are negotiated, and how such dynamics might be articulated through artistic processes.

In the first section of the article, we situate PaR ([Nelson, 2022](#)) the methodological framework of the study, positioning it as a decolonial methodology. Second, we introduce the project participants, with attention to an ethics of representation ([Pickering and Kara, 2017](#)). Third, we delineate the project, in terms of its practice and research components, and we present the findings through [Kershaw, Lee, Whaley, Lee and Pollard's \(2011\)](#) five dimensions of PaR: starting points, aesthetics, locations, transmission, and key issues.

Throughout the article, we trace how the initial thematic prompt, presence, evolved into a dramaturgical framework for understanding the interrelational dynamics of presence and absence. This trajectory informed every stage of the project, from data generation to creative engagement with the data, with PaR continuously shaping the entire enquiry. We argue that the dramaturgy of absence and presence moved beyond an initial theme or prompt, becoming a methodology of PaR through a collaborative process foregrounding ethical representation and creative data analysis. Such an approach challenges deficit models, particularly when working with young

people and racialised communities who are rendered external to the nation-state, mainstream creative spaces, and university settings, reframing research as a space of agency, creativity, and co-authorship.

Practice as Research

The conceptual framework for PaR methodology was developed by [Nelson \(2013; 2022\)](#) and [Candy, Edmonds and Vear \(2022\)](#) among others. While we acknowledge that these authors may have used variations of the term (Practice-Based Research, Practice-Led Research) for the purpose of this article we refer to PaR as an umbrella term to encompass the various semantic variations.

PaR can be situated within a qualitative orientation to Arts-Based Research ([Leavy, 2025](#)), with its origins traced to the 1960s, when epistemological attention began to shift from abstract theorising to embodied modes of knowing. Specifically, [Candy, Edmonds and Vear \(2022\)](#) define PaR as a methodology whereby ‘research and the practice operate as interdependent and complementary processes leading to new and original forms of knowledge’ (p 2). As [Kershaw et al \(2011\)](#) note, PaR positions artistic practice not merely as an object of study, but as a method of enquiry in its own right, generating knowledge through a reflexive attitude to the art-making process. [Mackey \(2016\)](#) adds: ‘Practice as research insists that practice is the core method of engaging with one’s research hunches or questions ... designed to investigate, respond to or directly address research questions’ (p 480). Similarly, we understand PaR, with [Nelson \(2013\)](#), as a form of research where the practice forms a substantial process, method, and evidence or data of ‘new insights’ (p 25).

Nelson emphasises the importance of distinguishing between ‘new knowledge’ and ‘substantial insights’, as failing to do so risks undermining this methodology. We would add, with [Butt \(2017\)](#), that this differentiation is crucial for understanding how PaR can challenge the colonial epistemology within the academy. To state something as new knowledge or ‘new discovery’ can carry a positivist tendency, assuming knowledge is the epistemic privilege of the West ([Mignolo, 2015](#)). To ensure that our PaR project would not reproduce a colonial understanding of seeking, obtaining, stealing, misappropriating, or asserting the ‘new’ in ways that disregard or overwrite the non-Western world, we situate it instead as the pursuit of ‘substantial insights’, as suggested by [Nelson \(2013\)](#); that is, as a process through which something is learned in a deep and relational way.

[Nelson \(2013\)](#) highlights that ‘evidence may emerge beyond the practice itself – if the practice is conceived solely as a final showing or product of the research’ (p 27). We ask, then: what might PaR look like, if we were to extend it beyond the parameters of data collection and dissemination? How might this methodology offer a form of presence within data enquiry, particularly in ways where such presence is often made absent?

Research context

The SENCE study originated from an invitation by Erika Piazzoli to Tania Cañas to collaborate, as part of the Trinity Long Room Hub Visiting Research Fellowship Programme. The collaboration culminated in an exhibition, nested within the *Scenario*

Forum conference ‘Presence in Performative Teaching, Learning and Research’, hosted by the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin, Ireland, in May 2024. Throughout the conference, we heard definitions of ‘presence’ from the keynote speakers, [Sukhesh Arora \(2024\)](#), [Erika Fischer-Lichte \(2024\)](#), and [Rachael Jacobs \(2024\)](#); from the conference highlights, Eugenio Barba and Julia Varley; and from 130 delegates who presented articles and workshops. Yet, we felt it would be incomplete to define presence without hearing from young people. Specifically, we extended an invitation to Youthreach, inner-city Dublin, an organisation we worked with before ([Piazzoli, 2024](#)). Youthreach is an Irish government service providing education for unemployed, early school leavers. The participants were a group of 12 people, over 18 years of age, who self-identified as being Afghani, Eritrean, Somali, Ukrainian, and Irish, and their drama teacher.

We were interested in how creative practice might provide a means to engage with presence and absence across community sites. Here, ‘community’ is understood as a relational and creative condition that comes into being through shared acts of practices, co-creation, encounters but also attention, risk, and constraints. This understanding draws on community arts and decolonial scholarship that frames ‘community’ not as a stable social category, but as something enacted through dialogue, participation, negotiated relations ([Kester, 2004](#); [Goldbard, 2006](#)), and ‘commitment to collective imaginaries’ ([Staal and Hlavajova, 2016](#): 670). We explicitly acknowledge that community is multiple and contested, shaped by uneven relations of power, access, and complexities between visibility and invisibly in mainstream spaces, racialised and colonial entanglements that implicate forms of belonging both outside and inside institutional spaces ([Smith, 2012](#)). We acknowledge that, particularly for groups rendered marginal to the nation-state or to mainstream schooling structures, such as those engaged in Youthreach, ‘community’ can be imposed in ways that are pre-defined, colonial, or extractive. As such, community may carry connotations of being either ‘consenting’ or ‘non-consenting’, especially when considered in relation to historical definitions imposed upon bodies deemed as ‘other’.

In this way, participants are positioned not as subjects within a pre-existing community, but as co-authors in the making of relational, embodied knowledge. Participants’ own understandings of community were central to this framing. Across workshops, interviews, and creative processes, participants rarely described community in terms of stable membership (geography, identity categories). Instead, community was articulated through lived experiences of connection, moments of collaboration, recognition, and shared creative risk over consensus or cohesion ([Thompson, 2009](#)).

Attending to these plural and sometimes contradictory understandings, we intentionally did not seek to define ‘community’ in advance, in line with PaR methodology, which position knowledge as situated, embodied, and co-produced through practice ([Kershaw et al, 2011](#); [Nelson, 2013](#)). Community was thus approached not as an object of study, but as something enacted through creative practice, temporarily assembled, continually re-imagined and ethically negotiated.

Ethical considerations

The study received ethical clearance from Trinity College Dublin in April 2024. However, as we know, institutional ethics are often set up as a compliance data

management exercise, with little consideration of values-driven approaches (Kara and Pickering, 2025). We began our research by examining how invisible presences, such as privilege and positionality, could be surfaced through performance, and how agency, ethics, and resistance might be addressed in ways that avoid deficit models and complicate representational dynamics. Pickering and Kara (2017) highlight the importance of the ethical dimension of representational practice in applied research contexts. They position representation in research as an affective experience for participants. They define an ethics of engagement as an ethics ‘located in a commitment to actively engage with others through representational acts’ (p 299). The authors comment on the practice of anonymising participants as not necessarily something that is ethically correct, by default. They note, with Moore (2012), that anonymising can operate as a form of silencing. In discussing the ethical decision-making choices in research, Hammersley (2015) argues that study participants should at least be given the choice about how to be anonymised. Similarly, Allen and Wiles (2016) reflect on the emotional impact of choosing one’s own pseudonym.

While we were bound to using pseudonyms to comply with our internal ethics regulation, we made a point of attending to the ethical dimension of representational practice through a number of actions. In what follows, we discuss two: participants creating their own pseudonyms (artists’ names) and participants choosing how to be represented. Both strategies were embedded in the creative process, as we consider the ethics of representation as a collaborative task.

First, we invited participants to create their own pseudonym, or artist’s name. This task was structured within the drama workshop, after a breathwork/voice exercise, ‘Names and Identity’, that facilitates self-reflection on how our names are pronounced and mispronounced, and the effects this has on the body (Piazzoli, 2018: 45). Here’s an excerpt from Tania’s reflective commentary on that moment:

When Erika mentions about names being ‘mispronounced’ I notice a lot of acknowledgement and nods of recognition. This is a visceral moment and has definitely connected with students.

Some of the participants, including a young man whose artist name is Headphones, involved the whole group in this decision. As Erika wrote in her reflection:

I then ask them to think of their artist names; one participant asks whether it’s OK to get the others to help him decide. This is a great moment; they negotiate this together. Proud moment, as he seems to own this and the others respect him.

Tania noted, commenting on the same incident:

He repeats his artist name as his right hand, in fist, moves to where his heart is. There is a moment of collective acknowledgement.

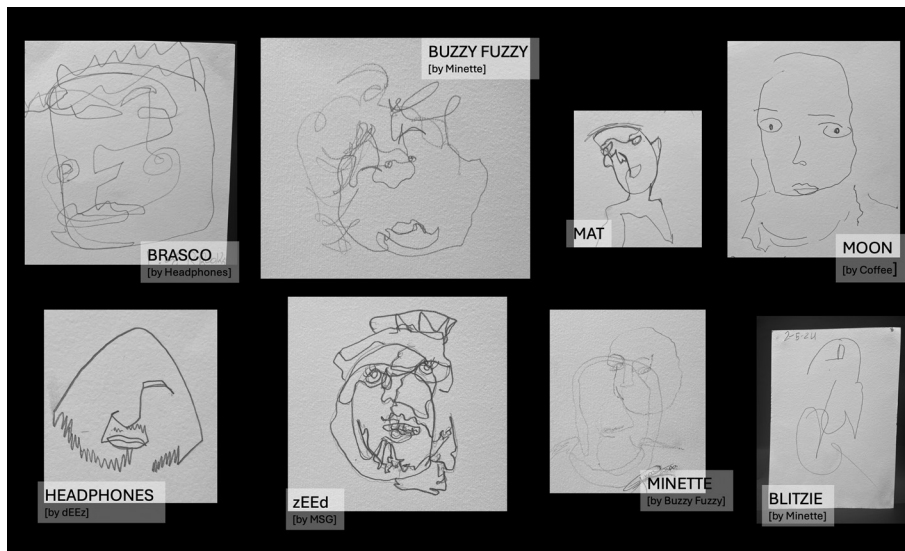
However, as Gallagher and Sallis (2018) reflect, when it comes to ethics, we do not have magic-bullet solutions: we later realised that some of the chosen artists’ names were, effectively, participants’ Instagram names. Thus, for the purpose of dissemination, we had to modify them; we chose to do so by integrating elements of

their artist's name, by way of a composite character. Ultimately, this demonstrates how absence and presence can coexist, allowing participants to leave a trace of themselves while remaining partially hidden, emphasising the nuanced ways that identity and agency are expressed in artistic practice.

Second, to comply with ethics regulations, no photographs of participants were utilised in the study. Instead, representation occurred through portraits created by the student-participants themselves (Figure 1), through blind contour drawing. This technique, outlined in the Overture of this article, required them to draw a portrait of their partner, in 60 seconds, maintaining the partner's gaze. The task was embedded within the workshops, followed by a reflection on how gazing and being gazed at affects presence and absence. Participants produced two sets of portraits each and selected which one to showcase at the exhibition.

On the day of the exhibition, we mounted a sign, 'No photography', as we were bound by restrictions around photography of data. However, we observed participants taking selfies next to their artwork, for their social media. This begs the question: who owns the artwork, in an arts-based project (Moriya, 2020)? We believe it was certainly their right to photograph their own artwork, though, on that occasion, others could not. Yet, we couldn't help but wonder, does this make sense in the context of an art exhibition? We took a photograph of the 'No photography' sign as a token to remind us of the fragile, contradictory tensions between institutional ethics and ethics in the real world (Kara, 2018).

Figure 1: SENCE participants' portraits, as drawn by their partners



The practice

The workshops unfolded over four weekly sessions, in March–April 2024, featuring an integrated arts approach to drama and the visual arts.

In the first week, after a breathwork and physical warm-up, we introduced the 'Names and Identity' sequence (Piazzoli, 2018), which led to the creation of artists'

names and the blind contour drawing exercise. We then invited participants to write and/or draw their definitions of presence and absence on an acetate sheet, which we kept adding to for the duration of the project. We encouraged them to draw as we were aware that, in this research context, drawing could ‘remove the hurdle of attempting to verbalise an intangible experience’ (Barratt, 2024: 186). This was followed by a series of image theatre activities (Boal, 2000), following our experience in Theatre of the Oppressed (Cañas, 2020), responding to prompts about absence and presence. We closed the session with storytelling, narrating the short story *Eric*, by Shaun Tan (2010).

Eric is a story about an international exchange student, whose unusual habits puzzle his host family. While they expect him to be interested in sightseeing activities, he instead pays attention to overlooked, everyday details. In the final scene, the character leaves without a word, flying out the window on a leaf. The host family is left puzzled, wondering why he did not say goodbye. Only later do they discover the objects he left behind, items that had captured his attention during his stay, now repurposed as gifts, reminders of his presence. While most of the story is rendered in black-and-white sketches, this closing double-page spread is colourful, marking the significance of his departure and its traces. The story reflects on cultural difference, attentiveness, and the quiet ways we leave traces of ourselves in others’ lives.

In the second week, activities included a second blind contour drawing task, followed by a reflection on which one to display at the exhibition, and more image theatre strategies on the prompts of presence and absence. The short story *Eric* was resumed, this time as a pre-text (O’Neill, 1995), drawing on our experience in process drama (Piazzoli, 2025). Student-participants engaged with *Eric*’s short story by responding to this prompt:

It has been a year. Eric is absent, but his memory is still present ... draw a card to communicate how you feel – as Eric or the narrator.

Participants generated their creative responses using watercolour, acrylic, and/or mixed media on cardboard.

By the third week, all visual material was curated into an interactive exhibition at Trinity College Dublin, nested within the 3rd *Scenario* Forum International Conference ‘Presence in Performative Teaching, Learning and Research’.

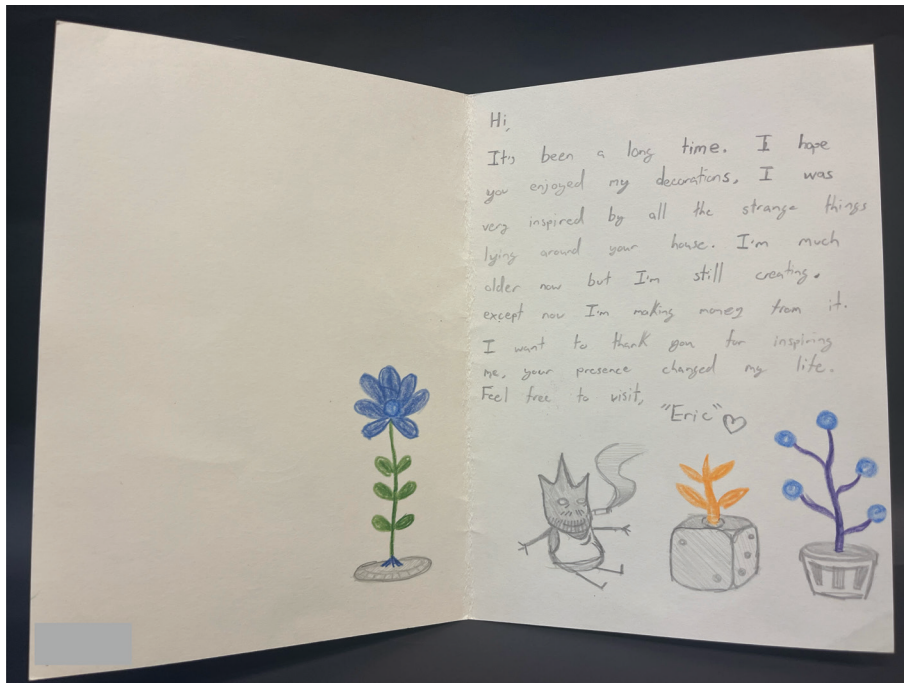
In the fourth session, participants engaged in the final part of the process drama. This was inspired by one student’s artwork, zEEEd, who drew a card representing Eric as an artist in the future (Figure 2).

zEEEd’s card reads:

Hi, it’s been a long time. I hope you enjoyed my decorations. I was very inspired by all the strange things lying around your house. I’m much older now, but I’m still creating, except now I’m making money from it. I want to thank you for inspiring me; your presence changed my life. Feel free to visit. Eric.

This artefact, and the line ‘feel free to visit’, became a stepping stone for the dramatic encounter. The participants reconfigured the classroom space to re-create Eric’s living room and then visited, in role as Eric’s host family, neighbours, and friends,

Figure 2: zEEd's card, responding to a prompt from Eric's story



interacting with the Teacher in Role as Eric. In the improvisation, Eric appeared remorseful about something that had happened in the past – a direct reference to another student's artefact (Headphone's card). The cause of remorse was hinted at, rather than explained. The process drama ended with participants representing, through image theatre, their understanding of the protagonist's remorse.

The research

The study was guided by three Research Questions (RQs):

1. What do 'absence' and 'presence' mean to young people?
2. How might creative practice provide a means to engage with these themes across community sites?
3. How might a dramaturgy of absence–presence be constructed?

These questions were not intended to elicit fixed definitions, but rather to open a space of enquiry where experience, embodiment, and artistic response could generate situated understandings, in line with PaR methodology. Data sets encompassed: the acetate sheet, annotated with text and drawings; 55 photographs; 20 portraits (pencil on cardboard); 8 cards (watercolour, pencil, acrylic on cardboard); facilitators' reflective notes; 11 interviews (10 students, 1 teacher); a 30-minute focus group.

The data analysis was multimodal, combining reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2023) with poetic enquiry (Faulkner, 2019) and ethnodrama (Salvatore, 2025). Through reflexive Thematic Analysis (TA), supported by NVivo 14 software, we generated over 100 codes, later refined into 25 main codes, synthesised into 10 themes, as outlined in Table 1. The creative data analysis generated a poem and four performances from the coded data.

We now present a concise overview of the ten themes through Kershaw et al's (2011) PaR framework.

Table 1: SENCE study reflexive Thematic Analysis (TA): codes and themes

RQ	Codes		Theme
RQ1	Absence as ...	Numbness	1. Absence as disconnection from your body
		Confusion	
		'Lights are on, but no one is at home'	
		Fear of missing out (FOMO)	2. Absence as disconnection from your friends
		'Social media eating you up'	3. Absence as disconnection from society
		Invisibility	
		Zoning out	
	Presence as ...	Showing up	4. Presence as agency
		Getting out of the house	
		Attending to others	
		Agency in life	
		Creating artwork	5. Presence as creative risk-taking
		Being outside comfort zone	6. Presence as visibility
		Existing in the moment	
	Happening at the same time	'I am a spectacle'	7. Presence & absence as co-existing states
		'So close by so far'	
		'Surrounded by others, but ...'	
RQ2	Creative practice as ...	Jamming pr-absence	8. Creative practice as metaphor
		Window as metaphor	
		Eric as metaphor	
		A trail of signs	9. Creative practice as validation
		'They were able to see themselves' as artists	
		Migrants and locals sit together	10. Creative practice as inclusion
		First time collaborating	
		Art bypasses language barrier	

Practice as Research: five dimensions

Kershaw et al (2011) propose five dimensions of PaR: starting points, aesthetics, locations, transmission, and key issues. We use this model to discuss the study's findings in more detail.

1) Starting points

The first dimension proposed by [Kershaw et al \(2011\)](#) is *starting points*. This refers to the initial impetus for an enquiry, whether in the form of a question, embodied hunch, or intuitive creative urge.

When we first developed the application for this project, we focused on ‘presence’, as the *Scenario* conference theme. However, the second author questioned the theme of presence on its own: her lived experience of navigating displacement in so-called¹ Australia involved a complex relationship with *both* presence and absence, often mediated through power-dynamics ([Cañas, 2017; 2020; 2021](#)). Her embodied hunch was that the two are deeply interconnected, often enforced by power, but that agency can nonetheless be found through the critical examination of both. This prompted us to explore the *dynamic* more deeply and to develop the project in a way that considered both absence and presence.

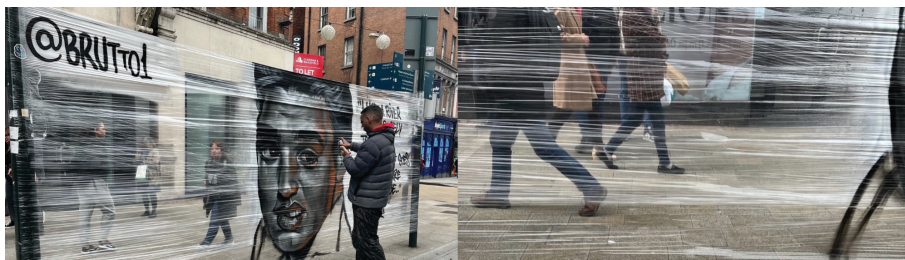
The project’s initial inspiration stemmed from the arts practice of Brazilian street artist Brutto ([Figure 3](#), left), who uses cling film as a surface for spray painting. The choice of medium and encounter with the street artist stemmed from the first author’s intuitive creative urge, or embodied hunch, as she happened to walk past the installation shortly before the project began. What arrested her attention was the layer of the cling film, and the soft gaze this created, reminiscent of presence, yet absence ([Figure 3](#), right).

Brutto’s technique, which requires the use of spray paint on cling film, was adapted to the use of a transparent 3 m-long acetate sheet. Using markers rather than spray paint allowed for the layering, see-through effect, and also met ethical considerations related to the research context. Initially, participants were invited to doodle on the acetate, which was placed on the floor as a substitute for paper. We then experimented with the acetate becoming a physical object, a see-through boundary, onto which participants traced silhouettes of their peers and delineated scenic space during image theatre exercises. Ultimately, the acetate became a sort of character, witnessing understandings of presence and absence; it evolved into the conceptual and aesthetic identity of the project itself, validating what [Kershaw et al \(2011\)](#) call ‘the unpredictable prompting of hunches’ (p 65). This leads us to [Kershaw et al’s \(2011\)](#) second element of PaR, the aesthetic dimension.

2) Aesthetics

[Kershaw et al \(2011\)](#) note the importance of *aesthetics* as a dimension of PaR. For the purposes of this discussion, we define aesthetic knowing with [Dewey \(1934\)](#),

Figure 3: Street artist Brutto on Grafton street, Dublin, provided the inspiration for the medium



Eisner (2002), and Leavy (2025). Etymologically, the term *aesthetic* originates from the Greek word *aisthetikos*, meaning ‘as regards sensing’. Yet aesthetic engagement is much more than this. In *Art as Experience* (1934), Dewey’s vision of aesthetic experience encompasses both the terms ‘artistic’ and ‘aesthetic’: the former refers to creation, the latter to perception. For Dewey, ‘active perception’ is an act of ‘reconstructive doing’ where consciousness becomes ‘fresh and alive’ (p 53) through active reflection.

By ‘aesthetic dimension’ we understand, with Eisner (2002), both the products and processes within aesthetic form:

Aesthetic is pervaded by an emotional tone made possible by the process of being engaged in a work of art. The phrase ‘work of art’ can have two meanings. It can refer to work of art, or it can refer to the work of art. The former refers to the product created, the latter to the process of creating it. Aesthetic experience can be secured at each location. (Eisner, 2002: 81)

Positioning this discourse within Arts-Based Research (Leavy, 2025), the aesthetics within a research project also relates to ‘how it fosters reflexivity and empathy’ in researchers, participants, and audiences (p 19). This is grounded in a philosophy that recognizes that ‘the use of the arts as critical in achieving self-other knowledge; values preverbal ways of knowing; and includes multiple ways of knowing: sensory, kinaesthetic, imaginary’; that is, aesthetic ways of knowing (Leavy, 2025: 20). In the SENCE project, the aesthetic dimension was a prominent element of all phases of the research. In this article, we limit the discussion to two aspects of the project’s aesthetic dimension: photography and poetry.

While taking photographs of key sections of the acetate for the exhibition, we experimented with different hanging methods and surfaces. Here, the use of light and shadow became a central motif in the artwork’s photography. During the focus group, we asked participants to comment on the photographs of the acetate: they noted how the shadow cast by the sun created an interesting effect on the text itself (Figure 4). Minette said: ‘I like that one, the way it’s dark, and then there’s a part that’s kind of highlighted by the sun.’ Blitzie proceeded to read the half-lit text: ‘You can be surrounded by others but still feel such absence. And “absence”, there ... It’s kind of weird that it starts half highlighted!’ She continued: ‘Bringing something to light, you know.’ We concluded that the sentence had been ‘made by the light’ as if it was a ‘statement by the sun’, echoed in the title of this article.

Such moments, with textual and graphic elements reinforcing each other, captured the poetic and ephemeral quality of the research process.

Importantly, the text on the acetate sheet was pivotal for the creation of a poem, within the poetic enquiry tradition (Faulkner, 2019). Phrases emerging from students’ reflections written on the acetate were assembled by the researchers into a participant-voiced, found poem (Prendergast, 2009), offering insight into the affective textures of the experience in a distilled and resonant form. The resulting poem reads:

So close, but so far,
being in the moment,
watching stillness,
but everything
moving

Erika: What do you think about this poem?
 zEEd: You picked up different lines from everyone else.
 Blitzie: Pieces from what you –
 Minette: – it's like poetry. Like, yeah, you're collecting it ... like Eric!
 Blitzie: [*Gasps*] Oh my God!

Participants associated the researcher's act of gathering words and assembling them into a poem to Eric's tendency to gather and re-purpose items as gifts. The poem thus functions not only as a form of creative data analysis, but also as a metaphor for participants' understanding of poetry-as-research.

Moreover, the poem functions as a symbolic representation of one of the themes, as per [Table 1](#) (Theme 7, *Presence & absence as co-existing states*). Interestingly, the poem was created in May 2024, as part of the exhibition, but it wasn't until May 2025 that we consciously formulated Theme 7. It then dawned on us that the poetic synthesis of the students' annotations on the acetate, and particularly the message of the poem (being present yet absent) inductively encapsulated a research theme. This operation revealed the immediacy of creative data analysis through poetry, reinforcing that aesthetic knowing that can precede rational ways of knowing ([Leavy, 2025](#)). As [Eisner \(2002\)](#) holds: 'The process of representation stabilises ideas and images ... provides the means for sharing meaning and creates the occasion for discovery' (p 239).

Significantly, the drawings were important not only as a way for students to express their understanding, but also to process them after the workshop had finished. During the focus group, we showed all artwork to the students, asking them to elaborate. Here, our thinking aligned with [Mäkelä \(2005\)](#), for whom an artefact can embody several functions, including 'a method of collecting and preserving information and understanding' (p 158). The drawings' function was to ignite and support the participants' thinking process, as noted by [Barratt \(2024\)](#). Commenting on the text near the window-eyed face ([Figure 4](#), top right quadrant), the participants noted:

Minette: Um, lights are on. The lights are on, but no one's home. No one is at home. Yeah. So, it's like, the windows are the eyes, like the eyes of the soul. Like the home is your body. Your body is a home.
 zEEd: Yeah. [...]
 Erika: So, if your body is your home, and you're not there ...?
 zEEd: Uh, you're in your own worldly!
 Minette: Yeah.
 Blitzie: Just like Eric!
 zEEd: Just like Eric.

The students' consideration ranges from analysis of the drawing as embodiment, arriving at absence as dis-embodiment, as per Theme 1, *Absence as disconnection from your body* ([Table 1](#)). The connection to the story *Eric* is captured in Theme 8, *Creative practice as metaphor*.

3) *Locations*

For [Kershaw et al \(2011\)](#), the dimension *locations* draws attention to the situated nature of PaR, both physically and socially: the contexts in which creative work unfolds

are never neutral but deeply interwoven with meaning. As [Thiang'o \(1997\)](#) asks in his critique of *The Empty Space* (1968), 'Is a performance site ever empty?' (p 12).

The SENCE project unfolded over three locations: the Youthreach centre, inner-city Dublin, where all workshops took place; a 'dramatic elsewhere' – the world within the story *Eric*; and Trinity College Dublin, where the artwork was showcased. These three spaces intertwined in the findings of the project.

The location of a dramatic world was particularly resonant in the engagement with *Eric*. Eric's silent departure without farewell foregrounded absence; while the final page of the story, a double-page spread with his hidden gifts, underscored how presence can endure beyond physical departure. The gifts functioned as aesthetic traces, embodied memories that complicated the binary of being there or not, demonstrating how absence can hold presence within it.

Significantly, some students made clear connections between the fictional context and their own lives. For example, when describing his image in [Figure 2](#), zEEd stated:

I suppose you could say [Eric] is taking a present role in life. He's pursuing his own passions, and he's making a living off it.

Later in the interview, zEEd used very similar words when talking about himself in the future and his understanding of presence as 'making a living off artwork'. It is important to note that zEEd is also an illustrator, which shapes his way of representing and interpreting presence. Similarly, when asked about his understanding of presence, Headphones commented: 'It's being smart, it's ... presence! It's being smart about life.' These ideas are encapsulated in Theme 4, *Presence as agency*.

Participants inhabited this dramatic elsewhere, giving form to what is not immediately visible: memory, gratitude, and the lingering impact of encounters. The improvised scenes and reflective discussions highlight how absence becomes productive, generating new forms of presence through creative re-imaginings. The dramatic location acted as a bridge between Youthreach, a space familiar to the students, and Trinity College Dublin, a space alien to the students, as the exhibition space itself took them back to Eric's world.

As the exhibition coincided with the time of the divestment pro-Palestine encampment, the campus, which also functions as a tourist site, was closed to the public. It was a period when frustrated tourists were being turned away at the main entrance. We had to arrange special permission so that student-participants could gain access. At Front Arch, the security guard double-checked the permissions. It was a tense moment. When student-participants were finally allowed in, there were murmurs of excitement. Passing through the old sandstone arches and into the open courtyard of Front Square, students emerged into the iconic cobblestoned courtyard. We walked to the Trinity Long Room Hub, where we gathered in the Hoey Ideas Space. Catering had been arranged, offering juice, coffee, tea, and a fresh assortment of sandwiches and pastries.

Following this, we visited the exhibition in the main hall of the Arts Building. The students were visibly excited as they entered the space, taking selfies, chatting with each other, exploring the work. This marked their first visit to the campus. This moment highlighted a profound sense of absence–presence: while tourists often feel entitled to access this historic public space, all the young people noted in the interviews that, up to that moment, they felt excluded from that site, perceived as

publicly significant, yet socially inaccessible. Experiencing the students' excitement in this context revealed an unexpected but powerful articulation of absence and presence, underscoring how public spaces can both include and exclude.

After the exhibition, we spoke with the students about their work being showcased at Trinity College Dublin. All students commented on the location. Blitzie, for example, said:

I definitely got a sense of pride just seeing my stuff in somewhere like Trinity, you know what I mean? People always talk about it and then knowing that a little piece of me was in there at some point, even if that many people didn't see it. I still know I was there.

The teacher, Ronny, commented:

When we went to Trinity, they loved seeing their artwork and their kind of drama creations on the walls. So, they were able to see themselves.

Ronny suggests participants were able to see themselves through the (perceived) gaze of others. Here, we circle back to [Pickering and Kara's \(2017\)](#) argument on the ethics of representation, in terms of participants being bound up with the audience of research: 'The ethics of representation in relation to individual participants are thus intimately bound up with other – real or imagined – audiences' (p 302). As Ronny added:

Their artwork was right up there with everybody else's. And just there for everyone to see. I think they were very happy to see that. It gives them the inward inspiration, you know, to give it a go, whatever they want to do in life, to give it a go.

Seeing their work exhibited at an art exhibition in that location was experienced as a self-validating process, as portrayed in Theme 9: *Creative practice as validation* ([Table 1](#)).

4) *Transmission*

As formulated by [Kershaw et al \(2011\)](#), the principle of *transmission* in PaR holds that knowledge can be communicated through multiple modes (visual, embodied, textual, spatial) resisting reductive translation into purely verbal accounts. The transmission phase of this project attempted to draw on different modalities to engage communities of practice.

The first avenue through which we chose to communicate the PaR findings was through audience interaction, through the exhibition at the *Scenario* Forum International Conference 'Presence in Performative Teaching, Learning and Research', at Trinity College Dublin, 9–11 May 2024. The exhibition was designed to be interactive: it featured a table with colours and cardboard along with two copies of *Eric*. Delegates were not only invited to read, but also to respond to the story by producing a creative artefact, extending its participatory dimension. We utilised the same prompt that student-participants responded to, adapting it to the exhibition's setting: 'It's been a year, Eric is absent, but his memory is still present. Create a card

for Eric to communicate how you feel, either as the narrator or Eric. Stick your card on the wall.'

One of the *Scenario* conference delegates later reflected, in a report to the conference itself:

Near the reception area, there was an installation – an invitation from the organizing team. After registering on the first day, I walked over and recognized my favourite story: a short story titled *Eric*. For this installation, the team invited us to ponder the meaning of 'presence and absence' by reading the story and writing a letter to a character from the tale. I still remember that moment, the texture of the daylight, the sound of footsteps, the pen moving across a piece of paper. Someone was already seated at the desk, writing a letter with full concentration. I was drawn to this state of being. Presence meets presence, so I decided to write a letter too. After a moment of silence, we finished and posted our drawings on the wall. 'Oh, you're writing a letter to me!' We smiled and shared a moment of silence. Before we asked for each other's names, we parted ways, each entering the conference. (Chiu, 2025: 194)

This interactive aspect of the exhibition generated a series of new artefacts and countless encounters between delegates.

The second avenue through which we chose to communicate the PaR was also through audience participation at an academic conference, though the interaction was of a different nature. The project was presented at the International Drama in Education Research Institute (IDIERI) conference, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada, 21–25 June 2025. As Mackey (2016) emphasises, PaR takes practice as the primary pathway for responding to research questions. In that spirit, during the IDIERI conference, we invited delegates to engage with the data, as a way to address RQ3: 'How might a dramaturgy of absence–presence be constructed?'

We started with workshoping what dramaturgy is. Next, several data sets from the study were made available: interview excerpts, the poem, printouts from the acetate, copies of artefacts, and an audio recording of a song, performed a cappella by students in the focus group. These materials were organised into ten key themes (Table 1), in relation to RQ1 and RQ2. We also provided props that student-participants had used during the practice: an empty frame, a spool, and cling film. Conference delegates formed groups, chose a theme, and performed the coded data under their selected theme.

The four performances featured:

- A dance piece guiding delegates through verbatim quotes, each actor reading aloud as they followed a string suspended between two extremities.
- Two actors using sound and material to explore the dynamics of absence–presence.
- A sound and movement interactive piece, leading the audience through three key moments, using data transcripts and artefacts, piercing them through a rope, using spatial levels to further engage with the theme.
- A curated exhibition led by two silent characters who guided the audience through the artefacts, using subtle gestures to invite embodied engagement (e.g., peeking under the whiteboard, standing tall).

This embodied reading of the themes culminated in a discussion on collaborative and creative data analysis, reflecting on the importance to extend the methodology in ways that could later be re-engaged with the students from Youthreach.

Collectively, these works demonstrate an active process of shaping, assembling, and structuring performance that engaged the audiences with the data, while continually deepening the exploration of absence and presence. In doing so, the artefacts were reactivated as storytelling structures.

Absence and presence thus moved from being themes to becoming performatives in themselves. PaR facilitated a dramaturgy of absence–presence that was simultaneously methodological, thematic, and performative. This dramaturgy foregrounded the interplay between visibility/invisibility, belonging/exclusion, and presence/absence, emphasising that these are not binaries to be resolved, but co-constitutive forces shaped by lived experience. Hence, transmission was pursued through ‘time-space events’ (Kershaw et al, 2011: 66), achieved through an exploration of how art mediates the tension between absence and presence.

5) Key issues

The final dimension suggested by Kershaw et al (2011) as a dimension of PaR, *key issues*, relates to key issues emerging in the study. Specifically, what did this mean for the student-participants?

Absence was associated with disconnection, from one’s body (Theme 1), friends (Theme 2), and society (Theme 3). As for presence, it was articulated through agency (Theme 4) and creative risk-taking (Theme 5). It was felt in moments of connection to others, to the materials, and to the self. Participants offered diverse definitions of presence, some of which are encapsulated by the codes, in Table 1: ‘being in the moment’, ‘leaving your comfort zone’, and even ‘being a spectacle’. One participant, a teenager who adopted the artist’s name Blitzie, stated: ‘I like to believe I’m a spectacle’, framing presence as performative and self-affirming. This culminated in Theme 6, *Presence as visibility*.

Findings from the various data sets reinforced participants’ understandings of presence and absence not as binary opposites, but as coexisting states (Theme 7). Participants spoke of being ‘in the room but not in the moment’, or of feeling both ‘present yet absent’. These paradoxical expressions became recurring refrains throughout the workshops, suggesting a layered understanding of presence as more than mere attendance. In the focus group, several participants broke into spontaneous song about presence and absence being intertwined, an embodied response that underscored the non-linear, affective dimensions of the enquiry, encapsulated in the code: ‘Jamming pr-absence’.

The public exhibition proved to be a powerful moment of recognition. For many participants, seeing their work displayed in the university environment was both surprising and affirming. It challenged their sense of place in educational spaces and opened new possibilities for self-perception. They became visible not as students or subjects, but as artists. The creative practice thus became a form of validation, with participants seeing themselves as artists through the perceived gaze of others (Theme 9). Presence was understood as a felt sense of engagement: being witnessed and witnessing others, together. Most students, though at the same school, had never spoken to each other before, due to being placed in separate English-proficiency groups. For them, the practice generated a renewed sense of group cohesion (Theme 10: *Creative practice as inclusion*).

Key issues, for Kershaw et al (2011), also concerns the provocations PaR raise in relation to privileging of written text over embodied knowledge, and compartmentalising theory and practice. In this regard, our article highlights the fruitful collaboration of theory and practice, generating praxial, embodied knowledge (Leigh and Brown, 2021). Knowledge was generated not only through individual insight, but also through co-creation; for example, building on students' artefacts for the improvisation; engaging delegates in the exploration of research findings; inviting readers of this article in the blind contour task, in the Overture. This fluid mode of enquiry challenges 'a powerful parade of binary oppositions' such as theory/practice, thinking/doing, product/process, as noted by Kershaw et al (2011: 67). As such, we argue that PaR opened an embodied and dialogic space for exploring the entanglements of absence and presence in community contexts.

Conclusion: Towards a dramaturgy of absence and presence

This research sought to engage participants in reflecting on presence and absence not only intellectually, but also somatically and emotionally. PaR enabled aesthetic, multimodal ways of knowing to broaden meaningful community engagement. This article has asked how, in working with what is produced, we might engage the ethos of PaR to bridge the limits of representational ethics, connecting academic interpretation with the lived experiences of participants (Kilomba, 2008; Cañas, 2018; Craen, 2025).

We argue that *practice* need not be limited to forms legitimised by the colonial frameworks of the academy or mainstream institutions. Nelson (2013) reminds us that PaR is often pursued by those with established records of practice or research, true of our own backgrounds as teacher-artists. Yet PaR methodology is not only an avenue available to established artists, but also for community groups and young people, centring them as makers who actively participate in the interpretive dimensions of research. The participants in this study engaged in practice not because it was sanctioned, but because of the *doing* itself: many of the students we worked with were musicians, illustrators, DJs, curators of their own Instagram feeds – creative expressions embedded in their everyday life.

Together, we attempted to explore how a dramaturgy of absence–presence might operate in community-based processes. Through drama, visual art, and collective reflection, participants developed ways of articulating presence in absence, absence in presence, and the traces that linger between the two. The final research question, 'How can a dramaturgy of presence and absence be created?', remains open, offering a generative site for continued exploration.

Note

¹ The term *so-called Australia* is commonly used to refer to the nation-state of Australia as one built upon the legal fiction of *terra nullius* ('nobody's land'), as claimed by the British Crown.

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EP and TC conceptualised the study's research questions and methodology. EP and TC co-facilitated the practice. TC conducted the interviews; EP conducted the data analysis. EP wrote the first draft of the manuscript; TC wrote the second draft. Subsequent drafts were co-written through ongoing dialogue, with ideas and interpretations developed collaboratively.

Data availability statement

The authors take responsibility for the integrity of the data and the accuracy of the analysis.

Research ethics statement

This study received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee (REC), School of Education, in April 2024.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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