



PEACE IV Programme - Shared Education Impact Evaluation

Sharing from the Start (SFTS)

Case Study Report 2022: Preschool Partnership

Glasswater Cross-Community Playgroup and Loughinisland Cross-Community Playgroup (Co. Down)



Special EU Programmes Body
Comhlacht na gClár Speisialta AE
Special EU Skemes Boadie

Approach

As part of the wider Impact Evaluation of Shared Education¹, a number of partnerships were invited to host case study visits in 2020 and most recently in 2022. Case studies were identified by Sharing from the Start (SFTS) Project Partners (i.e. Early Years – the organisation for young children; the National Childhood Network; and the Fermanagh Trust).

The case-study outlines examples of activity where the coming together of pre-school settings from different backgrounds as part of curricular-based shared classes has helped to normalise contact between children, teachers, and across the school community. Embedding Shared Education into the pre-school settings' curriculum should be seen as a key marker of the projects' success, as sustained contact has led to bonds and friendships being developed, which will contribute to reconciliation benefits in the longer-term.

The specific objectives of the case studies are:

- To provide examples of good practice i.e. projects which have shown improved educational and shared outcomes for children; enhanced early years practitioner training and partnership working; and projects which demonstrated engagement with parents and the wider community.
- To enrich the Impact Evaluation of Shared Education by capturing real-life stories of funded projects.

- To document how the Covid-19 pandemic impacted on the delivery of the initiative and how schools/other settings adapted their delivery in response.
- To contribute to the wider dissemination efforts to showcase the work funded under the PEACE IV Programme.

The case study included the following research activities:

- An in-depth interview with the managers of each partnership setting.
- Review of existing partnership documentation including monitoring information and photographs of a range of shared class activities.

The case study report is structured as follows:

- Background to the partnership;
- Previous experiences of Shared Education and motivations for getting involved;
- Model of sharing;
- Benefits: for the child, setting, parents and wider community;
- What has worked well and why;
- Challenges and barriers;
- Looking forward: sustainability and future plans; and
- Final reflections.

¹ The evaluation is being undertaken by SJC consultancy, in partnership with the National Children's Bureau, and on behalf of the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB).

Background to the partnership

There are two playgroups in this partnership as detailed below. In 2021-22, the total enrolment was 35.

Playgroup name	Enrolment	
	2020-21	2021-22
Glasswater Cross Community Playgroup	11	14
Loughinisland Cross Community Playgroup	21	21

The two playgroups are situated approximately five miles from one another, in the villages of Crossgar and Loughinisland, Co. Down. Crossgar has a population of around 1,900 (2011 Census²), of whom 65.5% were brought up in the Catholic religion and 29.4% in the Protestant or 'other Christian' religion. Loughinisland is a much smaller village, with a population of just over 200 (no religious breakdown available).

Both playgroups are cross community, with staff from both religious backgrounds, however children attending Glasswater are predominantly from Protestant backgrounds, and those attending Loughinisland from Catholic backgrounds.

The partnership began in January 2019, therefore the school year 2021/22 is the fourth year of Shared Education funding. One of the playgroups (Glasswater Cross Community Playgroup) had previously been in a partnership with a setting that is now no longer involved in Shared Education.

It is important to note that the setting, like others, experienced significant disruption

as a result of the pandemic including setting closures. From March 2020 onwards, all of the settings gradually adapted their delivery and moved many of their shared activities online using platforms such as Zoom and Google Classroom. This meant that activities primarily took place within each of the respective settings.

Previous experiences of Shared Education and motivations for getting involved

Outside of the prior relationship that Glasswater had with another setting, neither playgroup had been involved in any other shared project prior to this, although one of the group leaders mentioned that she always had a strong interest in integrated education and wanting to bring children from across the community divide together.

Glasswater Playgroup had initially participated in Shared Education with a different partner playgroup, however the partnership ended after less than two years. Loughinisland, their new partner, had previously been keen to get involved, however was located further away than the recommended distance between partnership settings. Glasswater felt it was important to continue after the original partnership ended, so approached Loughinisland, who were happy to get involved when the second opportunity became available to them. The new partnership began in January 2019.

² Census 2021 figures are not available until Autumn 20212.

The Glasswater group leader indicated that whilst it was really positive to have a new partner, they already had a lot of shared hours of activity completed towards the 30-hour requirement when their previous partner dropped out. They had to start over again with their new partner setting (Loughinisland) which, whilst challenging, was met by both of the settings.

Despite the fact that the shared hours could not be counted, they were keen to continue Shared Education as the group leader and staff could see the benefit of it in the first few years for the children.

Model of sharing

The table below sets out the number and percentage of children from each playgroup taking part and the way in which the 30 hours of contact are delivered. In 2017/18, almost all of the children (95%) took part in Shared Education. This increased to 100% of all children from 2019/20 onwards. 30 hours of sessions were delivered in sessions of between 1 and 4 hours duration.

	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22
Year groups involved	All children	All children	All children	All children
Total enrolment	39	41	32	35
Total no. of children taking part	37	41	32	35
% of children taking part	95%	100%	100%	100%
Model of sharing	30 hours delivered through 10 sessions x 3 hours, 1 per month		30 hours delivered: sessions 2-4 hours each.	



In 2021/22, sessions typically lasted between 2-4 hours. Activities included:

- Visits to sites throughout Northern Ireland (e.g. a visit to Castleward to see exhibitions relating to sea-life and to hear educational stories about the environment);
- Music and play activities delivered by Jump, Jingle and Jive;
- Joint circle-time and sharing stories together;
- St Patrick's day celebration of culture with music, dancing and festivals; and
- Delivery of the Media Initiative for Children (MIFC)³ which is an opportunity for early childhood care and education settings in the South Belfast, Lisburn and Castlereagh, and Ards and North Down council to help children understand and respect differences.

“We had a group called Jump, Jingle and Jive. She [the external facilitator] was very much into Shared Education. She paired them together – from different [playgroups], which was great. (Manager)

Most of these activities had been delivered face-to-face prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. During the pandemic, the vast majority of the sessions have been delivered online with some delivered face-to-face. However, even when sessions (such as those involving the Forest School) were delivered face-to-face, children largely had to stay in their own bubbles. The Forest School provided much needed outdoor activities for the children in the partnership during Covid. Forest Schools are based on a Scandinavian idea that

considers children's contact with nature to be extremely important from an early age and they help children to build their confidence and develop their language skills.

Despite the impact of Covid-19 on face-to-face engagement levels, session leaders felt that virtual events can work positively with the appropriate IT equipment. Whilst children initially were reluctant to engage, there was a feeling that this would improve over time.

“On reflection we first thought sessions may have been more difficult to roll out virtually. However, once the sessions got underway it became apparent that the sessions can work positively but could be enhanced with the loan of virtual display equipment which [has been provided]. At the beginning children were shy but when engaged in larger groups children were more confident. As the connections continue, we feel children will become more engaged. (Manager)

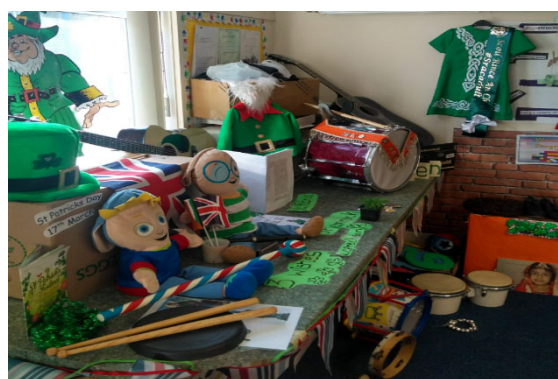


Photo: A wide variety of musical instruments used to celebrate St Patrick's

³ The Media Initiative for Children (MIFC) Respecting Difference Programme is an intervention programme aimed at improving long term outcomes so that children, practitioners/teachers, parents, and communities become

more aware of diversity and difference issues and positively change attitudes and behaviours to those who are different. For more information see: <https://www.early-years.org/respecting-difference#mifc-introduction>



Photo: Many of the activities moved online. The Zoom sessions provided an opportunity for children to see their peers in their partner playgroup

Benefits for the children

Educational: Children have benefitted significantly from the Shared Education activities and have learnt about the importance of diversity and respecting differences.

“Sharing is caring, you would have heard words like that... it doesn't matter what people look like. The children gelled really well... we are different but the same inside. (Manager)

The project has been conceived of, in its broadest sense, as a project that teaches children to respect diversity and difference beyond people's religion to include other aspects of difference such as those who have a disability. The settings jointly celebrated World Downs Syndrome Day and created resources to support this, e.g. a child friendly book on what makes everyone different.

Some specific activities have helped to develop children's knowledge of the world around them and of the importance of celebrating diversity. One such activity is the MIFC where children learn about and understand difference.

“Definitely, their knowledge of the world around them has been enhanced with their involvement in Personal, Social and Emotional development... the social and personal skills have developed through the programme. (Manager)

“We also do the Media Initiative and we use puppets so that they are getting in touch with their feelings and can understand bullying someone who is wearing glasses is wrong.

They are more in tune with each other's feelings. We had a little boy who had Down's Syndrome and another who is deaf. We used the sessions to learn about that difference. (Manager)

Social: One of the biggest benefits of the programme is that children are increasingly getting involved in a broader range of activities that they might not otherwise have experienced. For example, children who would only have got involved in the GAA, were now more likely to try a wider range of sports such as soccer and rugby. Meanwhile, the other setting stated how their children were getting more involved in Irish dancing.

“In our locality, we would be into the GAA. I have noticed that children are getting into soccer and rugby as well as the GAA... they are starting to get a different mind-set. (Manager)

“Our children are going to Irish dancing more and more. (Manager)

In terms of friendships, these developed more naturally pre-Covid and have continued since then. However, the extent of face-to-face contact has not been as frequent during the Covid pandemic and therefore friendships have not developed or deepened as much as either setting would have liked and would have naturally occurred in the absence of the pandemic. Nonetheless, some face-to-face activities, such as play dates, have taken place.

“Some of the friendships have continued... they met the kids from the other [setting] at the playground or the coffee shop... some have had play dates. (Manager)

“Definitely, the friendships were pre-Covid... one wee girl and another, they really connected... but that was in our first year. (Manager)



Benefits for parents and the wider community

Parents had much more hands on involvement with Shared Education prior to Covid-19, attending shared sessions and supporting activities.

The amount of face-to-face contact has reduced during, and between, lockdowns and subsequent re-openings.

“Parents were more involved pre-Covid... Forest Day was the only way we could meet safely. A lot of people are afraid of meeting up – you cannot blame people and you can still get it... people are still weary of it. (Manager)

Despite the limited level of social contact, the managers in each setting believe that the programme has helped to break down pre-conceptions of the “other” community.

It has also helped them see that they share more in common than they might have first thought.

“Someone from the Protestant community used our hall. She came around from the idea that this was completely different to what they were thought to believe. The parent said that there were only pictures of footballers when they were expecting this place to be covered in emblems... they loved the whole programme. (Manager)

Another example was given of how parents perceptions of playgroups are changing through their child's involvement in Shared Education. Involvement in the programme (and the use of social media and other forms of communication) has raised awareness of the good work that the playgroups in the programme are delivering with parents wanting to send their children to playgroups they might not otherwise have done.

“This year, one of the parents want their kid to come to [our setting] because of what we have done on Shared Education. (Manager)

One of the settings, however, experienced some challenges at the beginning in terms of obtaining consent from a small number of parents so that their child(ren) could participate. They noted how some parents a few years ago did not agree with their child(ren) visiting particular venues, such as the GAA playing grounds. Initially they received complaints from some parents and two withdrew their child(ren) from the setting.

“3 years ago, we had a challenging time with some parents. We had a day organised and we had to change to the GAA club in [the local area] last minute... a few parents did not agree with it as they were not aware it would be in the GAA club. (Manager)

The setting made parents aware that they had signed up to the programme objectives which meant that their child would be visiting various facilities across both communities including the GAA playing grounds. The leaders in each playgroup initially apologised to the parents. However,

this strengthened their resolve to continue implementing the programme as this scenario was viewed as the primary reason why the programme was needed.

A few years later, the parent agreed to re-enrol their child and now eagerly supports the programme and its activities.

“They withdrew their child from the pre-school. However, two years on the parents and their children are back in the programme and they are loving it... they don't have a bad thing to say about it and they are promoting The Media Initiative for the children. It shows you through that perseverance... those people have changed their views. (Manager)

What has worked well and why?

Both settings were very appreciative for the funding available that has enabled them to deliver a range of Shared Education activities that they otherwise would not have been able to deliver. Both setting leaders fundamentally believe in the importance of Shared Education and are not involved in the programme simply because money is available to their setting; their involvement is based on a commitment to the underlying principles of the programme.

An array of factors has helped to contribute to the success of Shared Education in these two settings including:

- Development of trusting relationships between staff and an understanding of cultural differences.

“ A member of staff initially found it difficult when I came in as leader. She is from a Protestant background, and they go to the flute bands. But now she loves the programme; she has changed her whole attitude and we have built up a good friendship... I bring my drum in, and she brings her sash in for St Patrick’s. (Manager)

- Support from the Early Years specialist to establish contact between the play groups, get the partnership set up, and continuous and effective support from the Early Years specialist to help them adapt their offering during the pandemic.

“What funding we had helped. The support from the Early Years specialist was amazing and it all worked well. (Manager)

“Our Senior Early Years Specialist has been so supportive to both settings throughout the SFTS Programme. She was able to meet regularly with both settings - jointly and separately – and as, and when, needed whether it be via zoom or face to face and was present on a number of outings/visits that both groups had planned.

- Support for Shared Education from community organisations such as the GAA who shared their facilities at a reduced cost or no cost. In addition, the partnership developed a range of new relationships with community groups sharing information about the initiative with them.

“ We used our Gaelic club... we explained the programme to them... they got their photograph taken to show they supported it. (Manager)

“Every Christmas time – a group of ladies met on a Friday in the local monastery. Our children went every year to sing to the ladies there. We introduced Shared Education. We all went together, and they supplied presents for the 50 children... the whole community supported it! (Manager)

- Having access to appropriate IT facilities via Shared Education funding helped to overcome the barriers presented by not being able to meet face-to-face.

“We were not able to meet up during lockdown... three to four months were horrendous. We were given the TVs and the screens and that really helped us through the lockdown. (Manager)



Photo: Children Learning about and celebrating difference.

Challenges and barriers

Cost of transport and funding: The funding, whilst welcome, does not allow for settings to visit each other frequently and engage in shared activities. The issue of transport is a particular challenge for settings in rural areas. Asking parents for additional money to supplement programme costs is less and less an option given the current cost of living increases.

“The money to afford transport is a challenge because we are in a rural area. To be able to go to their [playgroup] or take children to go somewhere different... you cannot charge for this because now because everything is going up... we have funding but its limited. (Manager)

Notwithstanding the above, parents have been supportive in driving their child(ren) to and from both settings in the last year which has helped in maintaining pupil contact between the two settings.

“There is a good distance between us unfortunately (5 miles), there was no other setting closer. [A few years ago] we had to use buses to get to one another, but [last] year the parents have been fantastic and wanted to get more involved, so there's no issues with them bringing the children to the different setting, and even joining in. (Manager)

Looking forward: sustainability and future plans

The playgroups face significant challenges in continuing to sustain all the activities they currently deliver as part of the programme. There is a real desire to try and find the funding to make up the gap that will be left when Shared Education finishes.

Even if it was possible to sustain activities, there is a fear that the quality of outcomes will not be the same.

“Sustainability: we can do it to a certain extent, but we won't get the same outcomes. (Manager)

Similar to other playgroups operating in rural areas, both settings face similar challenges in terms of falling enrolment numbers. Equally, whilst parents have shown significant levels of goodwill to the settings, they are conscious in not wanting to take this goodwill for granted.

“We have low numbers coming in and with the funding you are not getting enough to do something outside the curriculum. For the forest school, we asked parents to drop the kids off. That was a big ask and they did do it. We cannot ask all the time. (Manager)

Final reflections

Both setting managers are pleased to have been involved in Shared Education and see huge benefits for the children, their parents and wider family. Although one of the settings had to re-start Shared Education with a new partner, the programme is viewed extremely positively.

This case study illustrates a good example of how the partnership has developed wider community connections and have kept parents and families fully informed of Shared Education activities taking place within their settings and wider community facilities. This appears to have influenced attitudinal and behavioural changes amongst parents of the participating children and made them much more open and tolerant of other cultural backgrounds.

Indeed, the partnership gave an example of a parent who chose to send their child to a preschool that would not previously have been their choice, due to Shared Education.

While staff are very positive on the reconciliation benefits of Shared Education, they also recognise the practice challenges of sustaining the activities, which they would not be able to maintain. If/when Shared Education comes to an end, the children will lose access to a different way of learning about difference.

“I would miss our connection if our funding came to an end. Shared Education is a different way of learning songs and learning about difference. (Manager)



This report was produced by SJC consultancy and National Children's Bureau, as part of the wider Impact Evaluation of Shared Education (PEACE IV Programme, Specific Objective 1, Action 1)

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