



PEACE IV Programme - Shared Education Impact Evaluation

Collaboration Through Sharing in Education (CASE)

Case Study Report 2022: Primary School Partnership

Moyle, Olderfleet, Whitehead and St. MacNissi's Primary Schools



Approach

As part of the wider Impact Evaluation of Shared Education¹, a number of partnerships were invited to host a case study visit. Case studies were identified by CASE Project Partners (i.e. The Education Authority and Léargas).

The case-study outlines examples of activity where the coming together of schools 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 schools' 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 teacher 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.

This case study included the following research activities:

- An in-depth interview with the principals of each partnership school and the Shared Education Coordinators.
- A children's drawing activity with 20 P6 and P7 children from two of the partnership schools – St. MacNissi's and Olderfleet Primary School (PS).
- Review of existing partnership documentation.

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, school, 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

This is one of the larger partnerships, with four schools involved and a total enrolment of 1,163 in 2021-22.

School name	School type	Enrolment 2021-2022
Moyle Primary School, Larne	Controlled	425
St. MacNissi's Primary School, Larne	Catholic Maintained	176
Olderfleet Primary School, Larne	Controlled	117
Whitehead Primary School	Controlled	445

Three of the schools are based in Larne town, while the fourth is in Whitehead, a town c.10 miles outside Larne. Larne town has a population of 32,563 (NISRA, 2018). The 2011 Census² reported that approximately 26% of residents belong or were brought up in the Catholic religion, 67% in the Protestant religion, and 7% other or no religion.

Whitehead has a population of 3,802 of which 17.5% belong or were brought up in the Catholic religion, 69% in the Protestant religion, and 13.5% other or no religion (Census, 2011³).

While the partnership includes three Controlled schools (with a Protestant ethos) and one Catholic Maintained school, all schools are welcoming of children of all faiths or none.

The partnership applied to take part in Shared Education in 2017, and the first shared activities took place in early 2018.

² For a profile of Larne, please click [here](#). Census 2021 figures are not available until Autumn 2022.

The current year – 2021-2022 – is the final year of funding for the partnership.

Only one of the schools reported having an inclusion and diversity strategy in place and this has remained unchanged throughout the Shared Education initiative. However, the school emphasised that this had been in place prior to the school's involvement in Shared Education.

Previous experiences of Shared Education

Previous experience of Shared Education was explored in detail as part of the case study visit in 2020. As indicated then, Olderfleet PS and St. MacNissi's PS had a long history of taking part in shared activities, however this was mostly informal and supported by a working friendship between the two principals. One of the more formal arrangements between the two schools, highlighted in the case study interview this year, was in relation to Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU) which operated across a number of schools over 20 years ago. This historic relationship of shared learning was viewed as being helpful in terms of their partnership's application to participate in Shared Education.

“*The Shared Education aspect came out when we were involved in Education for Mutual Understanding with Olderfleet over 20 years ago. Those existing relationships were helpful when we went to the information session for Shared Education. (Principal)*

³ For a profile of Whitehead, please click [here](#).

As indicated in the 2020 case study report⁴, other opportunities for collaboration and sharing were less formal. As the schools are within walking distance to each other, classes from either school have, on occasion, met up either in school or in the local library.

Neither Whitehead PS nor Moyle PS have taken part in any formal shared partnerships or activities in the past. However, Moyle PS recruited a new principal who had been involved in Shared Education in his previous school, and he actively sought shared opportunities as a priority when he took up his position.

Motivations for getting involved

All principals were excited at the prospect of signing up to Shared Education; for some, this provided an opportunity to formalise existing relationships, while for others it was an opportunity for the children and staff to experience something different.

Some of the primary considerations in getting involved, as identified in both the 2020 and 2022 case study virtual visits, included:

- ***The perception that Shared Education is a high-quality initiative***, providing plenty of occasions for children to interact across the schools whilst also enabling schools to access high quality resources through the funding it provides.

“*In terms of our motivations, we have always really thought very highly of Shared Education. One of the big things is the money for purchasing resources – that has been a big thing for us. (Principal)*

- ***An opportunity to challenge stereotypes:*** Several staff and principals talked about the lack of opportunities they had to mix with people of other religions until after they had left school. This was something that they did not want for the children they work with. Several staff reflected on the shifting attitudes within Larne itself, and the changing demographics as new families move into the area resulting in a more religiously diverse population. There is a clear belief in Shared Education and the role it can play in breaking down barriers within the local area.
- ***Broadening children’s experiences:*** Most of those interviewed believed children do not recognise differences based on the religious background of their peers. Therefore, motivation for taking part in Shared Education largely centred around the opportunities provided for children to meet and make new friends, and to engage in activities that will broaden their social and educational experiences whilst also strengthening their social skills.

⁴ To access this report, please click [here](#)

- **Build relationships between schools:** Principals and staff were motivated by the potential benefits for their wider schools, including training and networking opportunities for teachers; funding to invest in resources; and overarching opportunities to collaborate and support one another, and to share learning and experiences.

“*We wanted to develop links with the other schools as a lot of the teachers liked the sharing aspect with teachers from the other schools.*
(Principal)

- **Supporting recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic:** The pandemic and associated lockdowns have had a significant impact on children’s mental health and well-being. As schools have moved out of lockdowns, one of the motivations for staying involved in Shared Education is to keep providing opportunities for children to meet together.

“*This year has been slightly different (given the Covid backdrop) as the main draw was getting the children together again. There are lots of positives coming out of it.*
(Principal)



Model of sharing

As the partnership is large, smaller numbers of children initially took part, however this has increased year on year, peaking in 2020/21 at 69% before falling slightly to just over one-half (53%) in 2021/22. The table below summarises the children involved, and the length/frequency of sessions.

	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22
Year groups involved	P2 & P5	P2, P3, P5, P6	P2 – P7	P1-7	P2-P7
Total enrolment	1,236	1,223	1,204	1,168	1,163
Total no. of children involved	240	423	628	804	621
% children involved	19%	35%	52%	69%	53%
Model of sharing	- 6 sessions x 5 hrs	- P2 & P3: 6 sessions x 5 hrs each - P5 & P6: 5 sessions x 6 hours each	- P2 & P3: 6 sessions x 5 hrs each - P4-7: 5 sessions x 6 hours each	3 projects and 1 end of year activity: - Project 1: 30 hrs delivered to P1-P3 groups with sessions 30 mins to 3 hrs - Project 2: 30 hrs of activities to P4-7 year groups timetabled during class times - Project 3: 30 hrs of activities delivered to P4-7 year groups - 1 x celebration day	- 4 projects (lasting between 4 and 20 hrs) delivered to P2-3 year groups. Activities were delivered flexibly - 4 projects (lasting between 6 and 8 hours each) delivered to Year 4-7 groups. Activities were timetabled flexibly

Olderfleet and St. MacNissi's are smaller schools, with only one class per year group, and all P2-7 children take part. Whitehead and Moyle have two classes per year group, therefore only one class from each year group participates. Classes are alternated yearly to ensure everyone has a chance to take part.

The partnership made the decision not to involve Year 1 children in Shared Education. Staff and principals felt that their priority for the youngest children should be to help them settle into their new school routines.

The required 30 hours of contact time per child has shifted from a model of delivering sessions in blocks of 5 or 6 hours, towards a more flexible model of delivery where Shared Education is delivered via specific projects and within timetabled hours.

In Year 1, only the P2 and some of the P5 classes were involved in Shared Education. All four schools identified their Shared Education priorities from their School Development Plans. In Year 1, there was a focus on outdoor play and Activity Based Learning (ABL) for P2 children, whilst for P5 children, the focus was on the World Around Us (WAU) curriculum specifically learning about "Egypt Now and Then" incorporating STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths).

In Year 2, as the schools became more confident in delivering shared activities, Shared Education expanded to include children from P3 and P6 in addition to the P2 and P5 year groups. P2 and P3 year groups continued to take part in Play Based Learning (P2) and Activity Based Learning (P3) opportunities, with the latter group also focused on developing thinking skills and personal capabilities as part of the Personal Development and Mutual Understanding (PDMU) curriculum. P5 and P6 children were

also involved in shared activities relating to the PDMU curriculum as well as the development of thinking skills relating to the STEM curriculum.

In Year 3, P2-7 year groups were involved. The focus of activities remained largely the same, with P2-3 year groups focused on Play Based Learning, Activity Based Learning and development of the STEM curriculum and P4-7 year groups focused on development of the STEM and PDMU curriculum. Whilst a number of Shared Education visits and trips took place (e.g. to W5), several had to be cancelled due to Covid-19, such as a planned presentation by P4 and P7 children to school governors, the four Shared Education coordinators and the Shared Education CASE Officer did not take place due to Covid-19.



In Year 4, children from all year groups were involved in Shared Education. Again, the focus for P1-3 year groups was indoor and outdoor play. Activities included online plenary sessions as an opportunity for each class to showcase their learning with partnership schools.

Other activities included video-sharing of play sessions, an exchange of penpal letters/drawings and online celebration events via Zoom/Teams.

The focus for P4-7 children was on the development of numeracy and digital technology skills using online collaborative projects such as Mathletics, an online learning tool where children can undertake numeracy investigations and share their knowledge and solutions, and through the use of silent reading.

In Year 5, similar activities were undertaken with P2-7 year groups, with the addition of a project for P4-7 year groups focusing on “Active Bodies, Positive Minds” where children took part in a range of different physical activities to enhance their bodies and minds thus helping to promote their mental health.

Benefits for the child

The case study interview with principals and Shared Education co-ordinators in 2020 identified a range of benefits – both educational and social - for children in the partnership. These benefits have continued to be experienced by children and are outlined below.

Educational: Experience of different learning environments and teaching approaches has been an ongoing benefit. Children particularly enjoyed the STEM activities which involved interactive and ‘exciting’ resources such as rocket launchers, and the adoption of a practical and fun approach which made lessons more engaging. This also brings potential benefits for children with different learning styles, recognising that not everyone learns best through traditional teaching methods.

Children in P4-7 benefited particularly from the Mathletics given the competitive nature of the activity. A Shared Education coordinator highlighted how Mathletics has helped children develop their problem-solving skills.

“*Mathletics was a big hit. The competition really helped children to develop problem solving skills and it also helped them to make links with things in the classroom. (Coordinator)*

Social: Many activities such as the penpal letters have helped children to develop socially. Children got to hear from their friends in other schools and opening the letters with their own school peers provided an opportunity for increased social interaction and the development of talking and listening skills. Children were also able to develop their handwriting skills, while the opportunity to write with a purpose proved to be motivational for children.

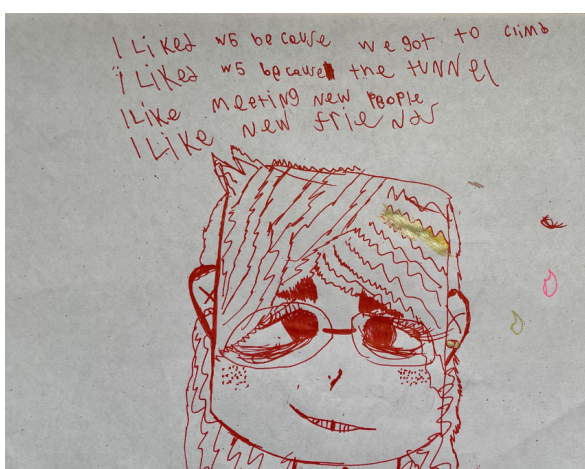
“*The Primary 3 children always posted their letters. There is that lovely wee bit where they hear from their friends. And when they open their letters, they are also interacting with each other. Their talking and listening skills have improved. (Coordinator)*

“*Writing letters is a slightly forgotten art. We have helped children to develop those handwriting skills where others are losing them... writing for a purpose is very motivational for all of the children. (Principal)*

Friendship formation: Undoubtedly friendships formed more readily prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. Evaluations undertaken by the schools within the partnership pointed to examples of friendships being formed between children which were cemented through activities such as football.

Covid-19 has had a negative impact on this, although the letter writing has helped to maintain contact between peers.

“It has definitely impacted on friendships as they haven’t met face-to-face. In P2 and P3, they wrote the letters first and then saw each other on the video... they are putting a name to the face but its limited. It is a bit more difficult. (Coordinator)



**Photo from children’s drawing activity:
This child liked meeting new people and making new friends**

Breaking down barriers: While none of the schools reported having any concern about, or experience with, sectarian issues amongst children, staff do believe that stereotypes are complex and passed down through generations, and that these may influence the way children interact with each other.

Shared Education aims to provide children with an opportunity to get to know one another through sustained contact. For those teachers and principals with experience of other shared activities, this sustained contact is the most important aspect, bringing an opportunity to challenge stereotypes through proximity and experience, and allowing children the time

needed to build meaningful relationships and to familiarise themselves with the partner school buildings and staff. One principal believed that Shared Education has been successful at helping to break down any tribalism that might have existed, through the day-to-day opportunities for children to get involved in the life of the other schools in the partnership.

“Tribalism has been broken down. Shared Education has been brilliant in breaking it down. The way we have managed Shared Education is that whenever they were in [a partner] school the children were part of the life of the school; they were all playing together, and it didn’t matter what uniform you wore. Children felt that everyone else was as important as they are. (Principal)

As with other Shared Education partnerships, Covid-19 has had a significant impact on the opportunities available for children to meet face-to-face. This has meant that some children have only been able to meet online using Zoom. For many children, this has been a positive experience, however the online meetings are not as effective at breaking down barriers because children are not interacting with their peers in their school environment.

“Prior to Covid-19, we would have noticed a huge difference... they were in the playground together and it was wonderful to break down the barriers because they can have a wee nosy into the other children’s classrooms and it breaks down the differences and they can see that theirs (the classrooms) are the same as ours and they are doing the

same as us. Now we are confined to Zoom calls and we don't notice as big an impact. (Principal)

“*That is hard for us to measure as the meetings are not face-to-face [because of Covid-19] the kids just see that their classroom looks like our classroom... they are not picking out differences. (Coordinator)*

Preparing for transition: In the 2020 case study, staff interviewed noted the important role that Shared Education could play in preparing children for the transition to post-primary school. Transition from primary to post-primary can be a challenge for many children after their experience at primary school. Staff expressed a high degree of hope that children's transition to their local secondary school will be a positive one given the relationships that Shared Education has helped children to develop.

Benefits for the school

Many of the benefits for the schools identified by staff interviewed in 2020 continue to be experienced by the schools involved in the partnership.

Many of those involved in directly delivering Shared Education felt it has enhanced their teaching skills and encouraged them to try new ways of working.

Preparing a shared activity helped push teachers outside of their comfort zone and think more widely about how, and what, they deliver in lessons. The fact that this partnership comprised four schools (larger than most partnerships) meant that teachers had more colleagues to collaborate with.

This meant that they did not have to work in isolation and could learn and share good practice with each other.

“*One of the elements of Shared Education is that teachers can talk to someone else who teaches the same year group and can learn from, and share good practice with, each other. You can't buy it! You get four teachers from four schools and all of that sharing is invaluable. (Principal)*

However, it is important to note that these benefits would not be possible without the sub-cover provided to allow teachers and coordinators this planning time (up to a maximum of 5 days per school per year, to cover planning, evaluation, training and delivery). The provision of sub-cover means that Shared Education did not mean additional workload, which helped to keep staff morale high.

“*One of the positive benefits for teachers is that we are allowed to give them time to plan and deliver the programme. There has always been subcover for teachers to take time out of class. If we didn't have that budget, where would we find that time to do the planning. It keeps them (teachers) happy because it's not an additional workload. (Coordinator)*

Staff also benefited from several training opportunities related to Shared Education, with topics including play-based and outdoor learning and STEM skills as well as sessions looking specifically at school leadership.

Schools have also jointly availed of other training opportunities outside of Shared Education, with a particular focus on wellbeing. All these opportunities help to build staff skills and knowledge and contribute to the longer-term impact of Shared Education.

Staff across the partnership have really benefitted from the relationships they have built with each other, not only in relation to Shared Education activities but in wider school life too. Shared Education has facilitated schools to set up new communication channels using social media where staff can instantly message colleagues across the partnership – this has grown over time as more and more year groups have become involved.

“The links that teachers made was great. The setting up of the trusted colleague network through instant messaging; that rippled out to the rest of the staff. It has created a good school community ethos and has widened out.

This is something that the [Shared Education] coordinators started, and it has grown. (Principal)

Shared Education has also brought wider networking opportunities, where teachers and principals have space to meet others in a non-educational setting, discuss and share ideas, and take time out to plan ahead.

As documented in the 2020 case study report for this partnership, the money available to buy resources was a significant benefit for the wider school, with effort being made to invest in resources that can continue to be used even after Shared Education ends. Resources purchased include rocket launchers for STEM

education, and an outdoor sandpit and picnic table for younger children. In addition, the schools were able to purchase an array of Athletics resources. The financial resources to pay for school trips also enhanced the educational experience and would not have been possible without Shared Education.

Benefits for parents and the wider community

There are no specific Shared Education activities directed at parents. Parents were invited to attend specific trips, however only a small number took up these opportunities. Covid-19 has meant that parents have not visited the schools or directly taken part in activities since.

“Some of the parents were involved in trips such as to W5. [Because of Covid-19] we still don't have parents back in the school. We will introduce parents back in the school next term. (Coordinator)

Parents are kept informed of activities. A joint parent information evening was held to showcase the activities the children had taken part in, although engagement from parents was limited. Schools also shared videos of activities with parents on Tapestry and SeeSaw, and kept parents informed via school newsletters. Staff were also aware that children talk to their parents at home about Shared Education activities that they took part in.

There were no activities focused specifically on engaging with the wider communities, therefore no wider benefits were reported.

What has worked well and why?

One of the biggest successes of the partnership was the high quality of coordination of Shared Education from the very beginning. The Shared Education coordinators met regularly, displayed excellent communication skills, and set out their expectations of Shared Education to staff and other stakeholders. This, according to one of the Principals, helped to make the partnership a success.

“The coordinators made it a success and they have been very faithful in meeting together themselves, being clear on what they wanted, were good communicators and set expectations for the staff. The coordinators have enabled the partnership to succeed. (Principal)

The partnership was very appreciative of the funding provided as part of their involvement in Shared Education. They acknowledged that even with the five days of coordinator time, there is still a significant amount of time spent on activities as well as time taken travelling between schools. To make collaboration a success, this needs time and commitment as well as appropriate funding. Interviewees believed that what they had achieved could not be done without the resources they received.

“Collaboration is the way forward and it takes time - it cannot be an add on! We couldn't fund it ourselves. (Coordinator)

“We could not do the same level without the funding. It is a good motivator. We plan Shared Education into the class and there are other hours spent on it. Without the funding, they wouldn't have the time to take photos and put them into a video. Even with the five days for the coordinator on top of other responsibilities, there is the time need for travelling. (Coordinator)

Other things that were identified as working well as part of the case study undertaken in 2020 included the following:

- **Free play:** While children enjoyed organised activities, staff felt that the opportunity for children to mix freely in the playground was also important. This enabled children to get to know each other better – whether or not they were involved in Shared Education. The extent of free play that children could engage in across the Partnership was more limited throughout Covid-19.
- **School trips:** Prior to Covid-19, children got to take part in a wide variety of school trips including the Ulster Museum, W5, Let's Go Hydro, World of Wonder, Carnfunnock Country Park, and Colin Glen. These trips gave children from all four schools the opportunity to mix informally and build relationships. Children found these trips very memorable and loved the time together with new friends. Staff noted the significant amount of time need to plan, organise and undertake these trips. Whilst the trips benefited children, there was a view that a mixed or hybrid approach, mixing face to face and online activities, might work better going forward.

“*I liked W5 because we got to play around a lot’ (pupil)*

“*Trying to get all the trips was a time constraint and costly. Teachers felt less pressured [during Covid-19]. Online delivery was easier to collaborate and time-wise it was easier to organise... that has been a good thing. It is nice to have a bit of mix. (Coordinator)*

- **Support from wider stakeholders:** All governors, teachers and parents have been supportive of involvement, with no negativity expressed. The Board of Governors includes several parents, and joint meetings were held as an opportunity to provide Governors with information on Shared Education. At the moment, meetings mainly take place via Zoom. Overall, the Governors believe that Shared Education will ultimately benefit both staff and children.

“*The Board of Governors have the final say on whether it’s a good idea to be involved or not and ours saw the benefits to the children and the teaching staff. (Principal)*

Challenges and barriers

Size of the partnership: The biggest challenge for the partnership has been the number of schools involved and therefore the organisational logistics required, particularly in the early days. There are four schools, with six year-groups involved, and two of the schools are quite large (400-plus children).

“*We had Year 2 up to Year 7 involved and every week someone was going somewhere. It was crazy and the timetable was a mine field! We had to talk to the secretaries of each school and get 3-4 buses organised and that was hard. (Coordinator)*

As indicated above, coordination of the various classes has been logistically difficult. However, this has been addressed in several ways, including by developing a colour-coded timetable so that everyone knows in advance where they should be; by holding all activities on a Wednesday to minimise disruption to the school week; and by putting the host teacher in charge of their session. While the timetable has been up and running well, if one of the four schools needs to change plans, this impacts on many children across four schools.

Other challenges identified included:

- **Lack of space:** This was a particular concern in the early days and for the smaller schools in the partnership. The impact of this was minimised by running parallel sessions so that two groups of children joined up in one school and two in another.

- **Staff buy-in:** While teachers and wider staff are generally on board with Shared Education, there are some who struggled in the earlier years with balancing this with the wider workload pressures. A lot of effort is required by the teachers and coordinators, and they previously noted that there is no additional remuneration for the Shared Education Coordinator role. The pressures relating to planning and coordinating activities have somewhat lessened since Covid-19 impacted on the schools given that fewer face-to-face sessions are taking place. Some staff can now see the benefit of a hybrid approach in terms of making Shared Education activities more manageable. Maintaining face-to-face activities (albeit on a smaller scale) is viewed as critical to staying involved in Shared Education.

“If we weren’t together [in Shared Education activities], we wouldn’t accept the funding. The 30 hours was quite a lot, and it would be a good idea to reduce the hours being together physically, it would mean less time spent travelling and organising and would create a balance. (Principal)



Looking forward: sustainability and future plans

All involved feel they would like to see a Shared Education legacy post-funding. While all agreed that it has been a worthwhile experience and they very much want to maintain the relationships built, staff do not feel it will be possible to sustain all of the activities currently undertaken.

Both capacity of school staff, and available funding, were considered the main barriers to taking Shared Education forward as it is post-funding.

Some of the elements of Shared Education that could probably continue include the penpal letters and the joint staff training. However, activities that involve significant levels of preparation, delivery and evaluation would be unsustainable without associated funding to enable staff to engage fully in all of these activities.

“We could probably have a link with other school. But, even getting 24 -30 [penpal] letters out would be tough enough. We could continue elements at the teacher level like doing a bit of training. When you come to the shared activities, that is when it takes so much time to prepare activities. There is lots of work that goes on in terms preparation and working with double the number of children, that takes time in planning and evaluating the activities. You need sub-cover for that and I am not sure that schools could carry that. (Principal)

Final reflections

As one of the biggest partnerships within Shared Education, there have understandably been difficulties in delivery in the early days. However, five years on, partnership working is now embedded, and the practical aspects of organising shared activities are working more smoothly. All agree that it has been worthwhile, and they can clearly see the benefits for children, schools and staff.

“I think everything has been successful. The activities have offered new quality learning experiences. There are things that will never replace face-to-face activities, but the coordinators have found innovative approaches and other forms of communication to give a new direction for children’s learning that removes physical barriers. (Principal)

In terms of reconciliation benefits, staff feel that the sustained contact facilitated by Shared Education has noticeably challenged stereotypes and encouraged integration of children from a variety of backgrounds. This has become more evident as friendships have formed, inside and outside of schools. This was a motivating factor for all schools from the beginning, and therefore a key success.

Staff have also benefitted from new friendships across the partnerships, and this will bring longer-term cross-community collaboration as the schools continue to work together.

The adaptation to online learning has shown the partnership that not everything needs to be delivered face-to-face and perhaps a hybrid approach might provide a better direction of travel for activities that they might take forward after the funding ends.

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)

August 2022

