



**PEACE IV Programme - Shared Education Impact Evaluation
Sharing from the Start (SFTS)**

Case Study Report 2022: Preschool Partnership

Ardstraw Community Playgroup and Little Flower Playgroup (Co. Tyrone)



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

Approach

As part of the wider Impact Evaluation of Shared Education¹, a number of partnerships were invited to host a case study visit 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-schools from different backgrounds as part of curricular-based shared classes has helped to normalise contact between children, early years practitioners, and across the pre-school community. Embedding Shared Education into the pre-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 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.

This case study included the following research activities:

- A one-hour in-depth interview with the manager of each partnership setting; and
- Review of existing partnership documentation including monitoring information, evaluations of sessions and photographs of a range of shared class activity.

The case study report is structured as follows:

- Background to the partnership;
- Model of sharing;
- Impact of Covid-19 on the partnership;
- 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 settings in this partnership: Little Flower Playgroup and Ardstraw Community Playgroup. In 2021/22, the total enrolment was 23 across both settings.

Playgroup name	Enrolment in 2020/21	Enrolment in 2021/22
Little Flower Playgroup, Sion Mills	10	11
Ardstraw Community Playgroup, Ardstraw	11	12

Both settings are located in small rural villages in Co. Tyrone, five miles from one another, between the towns of Newtownstewart and Strabane.

Little Flower Playgroup is based in The Glebe, Sion Mills, a small village with a population of around 1,900, of which 63% belong to the Catholic religion and 35.5% to the Protestant or 'other Christian' religion (from the last Census, 2011²). Residents in the area immediately surrounding the Little Flower Playgroup come from a predominantly Catholic background.

Ardstraw Community Playgroup is in the village of Ardstraw outside Newtownstewart and has population of around 200 residents, however with a largely Protestant background.

There are flags and emblems visible in the areas immediately surrounding both settings, and the areas have traditionally been quite segregated, during the Troubles and more recently. Despite this, both settings are cross-community and welcome children of any background regardless of their religion or ethnicity.

The partnership began in 2017, therefore academic year 2021/2022 is the fifth, and final, year of Shared Education funding.

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 both settings gradually adapted their delivery and moved many of their shared activities online using platforms such as Zoom. The mentoring and guidance provided by the Project Partners and Senior Early Years Specialists (SEYS) particularly during Covid-19 and as pre-schools emerged from the pandemic restrictions was particularly important in helping pre-school settings to continue to deliver Shared Education.

“Our Senior Early Years Specialist (SEYS) has been a valuable support throughout the Sharing From The Start over the last 5 years. During Covid, our support has been through virtual meetings, but prior to this our SEYS attended shared sessions and facilitated cluster groups and information sharing sessions. (Principal)

² Census 2021 figures are not available until Autumn 2022.

Model of sharing

The table below sets out the number and percentage of children from both settings taking part between 2017/18 and 2021/22 and the model of delivery in terms of the number of hours delivered and length of session. It can be seen from the table below that between 2018/19 and 2019/20, the number of hours delivered reduced from 31.5 to 16.5 due to the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns.

	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22
Age groups involved	All Children 3/4Yrs old				
Total enrolment	24	29	30	21	23
% of children taking part	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Model of sharing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 30 hours delivered over 3 terms of 3 hours duration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 31.5 hours delivered in sessions of varying duration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 30 hours planned / 16.5 hours delivered over 6 sessions • Remaining sessions cancelled due to Covid-19 lockdown 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 11 hours split over the 3 terms • Sessions 1-3 hours each 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 16.5 hours split over the 3 terms • Sessions 1-3 hours each

Most of the shared sessions and activities were undertaken virtually in 2020/21 within each of their own settings with more face-to-face contact experienced in 2021/22. SFTS supplied each of the settings with IT equipment to support virtual engagement, and staff took time to learn how to make effective use of this technology to support implementation of shared sessions. This was quite time consuming at the beginning of the pandemic, however without the provision of this IT equipment through Shared Education, it is unlikely that the movement to virtual delivery would have been possible to the extent that it was.

“[It] took some time and was a learning curve. A webcam was bought with funding from the Sharing from the Start money to help us meet online with the other group. (Manager)

There have been three shared sessions held in the current school year (as at the time of the interview) with more planned for the remainder of the year. Shared sessions have focused on:

- Developing videos to introduce children from each setting to each other. Interviews with each child were recorded using iPad/iPhone, allowing for each group to view the videos at their

own convenience. The session provided opportunities for children to develop their personal, social and emotional skills.

- Several sessions were held using a virtual platform to make Christmas decorations for each other's trees. Leaders face-timed their groups to demonstrate each child's decoration being hung on the other settings tree. In addition, Christmas cards were made and posted to the partner setting with children seeing their peers opening their Christmas cards.
- The SEYS also noted that this partnership used various online platforms to encourage interaction between the children, with activities linked to language and literacy skills. Children were given the opportunity to engage with each other, share ideas and talk about and recognise similarities (such as names, colours etc.).

In December 2021, children from both settings travelled by bus to meet face-to-face in a community hall in Sion Mills. This was one of the only sessions delivered face-to-face up to the point when the case study virtual visit was carried out (in March 2022). At this session, children and staff came together to participate in a programme to support the development of children's language and personal, social and emotional skills and also support relationship-building by playing party games and singing a Christmas song with each other.



Photo: Children having fun making Christmas cards!

Given that many activities were delivered online, it took staff longer to plan, and the benefits of these sessions were not viewed to be as great compared to face-to-face sessions, particularly in terms of building friendships.

“Often children don't remember one another as well as if they met each other face to face. (Manager)

However, the benefit of delivering sessions online and recording them is that they can play back these sessions as a reminder for participating children.

As indicated above, not all sessions were delivered online; there have been some joint sessions in the local community hall at Christmas where children were able to exchange Christmas decorations and gifts that they had made in advance. Whilst a number of sessions continued to be delivered virtually (e.g. the St Patricks day celebrations), others such as the Easter celebrations were delivered face-to-face (after the case study virtual visit was conducted) and there are plans to hold an end of year outing where children can come together in one venue.

The partnership has focused on the same celebrations each year as these are important to each setting and the activities are tried-and-tested.

“*This year, it has mostly been virtual, but at Christmas we hired a large community hall in Sion Mills for a Christmas event where we made decorations online & gifts for the other setting, & were able to give these to them face to face along with a singalong. (Manager)*

Benefits for the child

Educational: Shared Education has provided children with access to a wider range of learning opportunities. One of the most significant educational benefits that has materialised has been through the face-to-face meetings where children from each setting get to meet new staff and new children, and experience new environments. This contributes to curriculum areas such as the World Around Us, and Personal, Social and Emotional development. Children with additional educational needs enjoyed the sessions as much as their peers and the level of social mixing (particularly prior to Covid-19) presented lots of opportunities for new learning experiences to emerge.

“*Going to the other setting and meeting new staff, new children, new smells and a new environment, that was a lot for children to adapt to, particularly for children with additional needs, but they did adapt and it was all positive for their learning and independence. (Manager)*

Shared Education also provided children with an opportunity to take part in small group activities with their peers in another setting also helped to improve not only their confidence, but it also contributed to the development of a range of skills including those relating to communication and language development.

“*Their language and their confidence to describe what was going on in the activities – because it was all new to them and they were so excited... they were developing their communication, language, and processing skills. The whole package of skills was developed through small group engagements. (Manager)*



Photo: Children playing together and having fun!

Children were also able to access wider curricular opportunities that would otherwise not have been available to them. For example, the children in one of the settings have been able to access, and benefit from, the Respecting Difference programme³ in the other partnership setting. This meant that children were able to hear stories of different characters in the Respecting Difference programme that tied into particular celebrations throughout the year.

“*When we met up for Chinese New Year, [the manager from the other setting] was able to do the Stories from Kim from the respecting difference programme... and she was able to do those for St Patrick's day called stories from Tom. (Manager)*

Social: The most effective activities in terms of promoting social interaction and development of friendships are those that were delivered face-to-face. With the onset of Covid-19, fewer of the sessions have been delivered face-to-face. This has meant that the strongest friendship bonds that had developed were largely before the pandemic.

“*It is a bit more difficult because things are happening virtually. Over the years, friendships were made. They would meet each other down at Asda. It was very evident – parents fed back that they met parents and children from the other settings. (Manager)*

Notwithstanding, there have been opportunities (albeit limited more recently) for children to travel on a bus and see each other which was viewed as hugely positive in terms of improving children's social skills as well as boosting their confidence and self-esteem.

“*Most of these opportunities were available pre-Covid and staff indicated that some children had never been on a bus so being able to go somewhere, meeting new people, experiencing new things, smells, environments has been very powerful. This has helped to improve their confidence and self-esteem. (Manager)*

These trips provided children with a range of additional educational needs to meet new people and develop their confidence, whilst also being able to share their knowledge about people and places they know about whilst travelling between settings.

“*Children, particularly those with additional educational needs, have been given an opportunity to grow in confidence. When out and about, they've been able to recognise places & point out for example their granny's house and share that way. (Manager)*



³ The Media Initiative for Children (MIFC) Respecting Difference Programme is 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>

Feedback from parents on their children's involvement in specific activities (particularly those that happen face-to-face) suggest that children really benefit from engaging in activities with children from other settings. A number of parents and children provided feedback on specific Shared Education sessions. Common themes in terms of what children liked was travelling by bus and taking part in stories and rhymes.

“He enjoyed the snowman puppets he loved going on the bus as it was his first time ever on a bus with his school friends. I think its good for the children to be able to get to meet new people and try new thing. (Parent)

Drawings: Travelling on the bus was one of the children's favourite activities! Children also enjoyed singalongs and story time and meeting other children in the partner setting.



Building inclusion: Staff feel that the children do not have a concept of religious or cultural differences, rather they just see each other uniforms as being something that makes them different from their peers. They also get access to, and experience, different resources that they would not have had access to.

“They see different resources, but they wouldn’t see any cultural differences. (Manager)

The programme is nonetheless important in terms of helping parents / carers and other family members to explore difference, positively influencing their children’s attitudes and behaviours.

“Young children don’t see differences, they just want to play with their new toys. But there are benefits for the adults (parents, grandparents etc) getting involved and then maybe feeding these down to their children. (Manager)



Photo: Stories, rhymes and games at the visit to the Debutots

Benefits for the setting

Staff training, development and sharing of resources: Staff noted the significant benefits of learning from each other in terms of the range of activities delivered in each setting and how they are delivered. Attending each other’s settings has enabled staff to see what learning resources and equipment are available/used so that they could purchase the same ones for their own children. Settings were also able to share educational resources with one another.

“Leaders and staff have been learning from the types of activities happening in each other’s settings and buying some of the same toys that the children enjoy using. For example, we bought a wee digger for an outside area. We have lots to learn as both of our settings could have the same resources but we use them really differently. (Manager)

A number of staff members have attended a range of training sessions to equip them with the skills and knowledge to engage all key groups. These sessions included one on ‘Removing Barriers to Participation’ and a session on ‘Parents in Partnership.’ Staff found these both really useful and have really helped them to get parents involved. It also prompted a sharing of learning across settings where staff might not have been able to attend the training.

“The Parent Partnership training was recent training I attended and I shared it with [the manager from the other setting]. It gave great ideas to think outside the box about creative opportunities to engage parents. (Manager)

Staff from one of the settings have indirectly been able to learn about a programme that they had not been implementing called Getting Ready to Learn programme. This seeks to encourage and develop parental involvement in children's early learning to ensure maximum parental contribution at a crucial time in children's early brain development.

“[The leader in the other setting] is delivering the Getting Ready to Learn programme in her setting and we have been able to learn from that. (Manager)

Development of friendships: A number of benefits were noted by staff in terms of how Shared Education has impacted them. The biggest benefit for the staff has been the friendships made. While the managers did not know one another before Shared Education, they now count one another as friends. The experience has really felt like a partnership, and when difficulties have arisen, they have been able to work through these together.

Developing new skills: The onset of the pandemic meant that both settings had to get fully up to speed in how to make effective use of ICT to enable the Zoom sessions to take place. They also had to develop skills in order to create videos,

compile documents and crop and resize photos. The need to use ICT to deliver shared learning sessions provided lots of practical learning opportunities and a learning curve for staff which they rose to.

“It was a learning curve. We had to share videos and research what platform to put them on; we had to crop photos and rotate them. We worked through it and we got there. (Manager)

Staff confidence: The programme was beneficial not only in providing opportunities for children to meet new people and gain confidence, but it also provided staff, some of whom might not be as confident as their colleagues, with an opportunity to meet new staff and children and develop more confidence as a result.

“For group leaders it has also really built confidence in meeting new people. (Manager)

“Even for me to go out and meet new people because I struggle to talk to people I don't know. I have built on my own confidence. (Manager)



Benefits for parents and the wider community

There was some initial apprehension in terms of how parents might have responded to Shared Education at the start, with many parents 'dipping their toe' in the water initially. However, this enthusiasm quickly spread to other parents over time and interest in attending activities quickly increased amongst parents, some of whom felt they did not get this opportunity when they were at school.

“I was a bit apprehensive about how it would be received. They (parents) dipped their toe in the water... there was caution at the beginning. (Manager)

Parents were involved in a number of ways. Firstly, some parents became involved with Shared Education via their involvement in a number of different groups and committees and were therefore involved in the planning of some of the activities.

“The committee is made up of parents and they are part of the planning, so it's about all working together. Some past parents are also on the committee and had not been involved before in anything like this. (Manager)

More widely, parents were informed about Shared Education via Annual General Meetings and were kept informed throughout the year when activities were taking place. Prior to the onset of Covid-19, parents were invited to Shared Education

activities where there was a joint event (e.g. sports day).

It was noted that engagement levels were initially high with parents, aunties, uncles and grandparents attending a number of these events as spectators or to help out as a volunteer.

“The parents were notified at the AGM and told about Shared Education throughout the year. They would be invited to come along to Shared Education sessions (pre-Covid) and we had lots attending especially if we had a joint outing such as sports day. (Manager)

The face-to-face joint sessions really helped to support extensive engagement, not only of parents but also members of the extended family including grandparents, aunties and uncles.

“Prior to this, we had parents and grandparents, aunties and uncles – we had a really great turn out when we were going up to Ardstraw – it was great. (Manager)

“While not required, mostly each child had a representative. As an example activity, a joint sports day was held with parents attending the event. (Manager)

Other ways that parents were kept informed about Shared Education include parents' evenings, newsletters, and photographs of sessions shared via social media.

With the onset of Covid-19, the extent of parents' engagement has dropped substantially. They have been kept informed by the settings of what is going on (via newsletters and social media posts) and looking to the future there is a desire amongst both settings to re-invigorate the engagement of parents in Shared Education.

“The parents and grandparents are not as involved [as before Covid]. We are hoping to strengthen the link so that parents get to know each. (Manager)

“We went to a Shared Education launch and we had all of the publicity from the different events to share with parents as well which they could pass on to their friends and families. (Manager)



What has worked well and why?

One of the key drivers for the success of the partnership is the relationships that have developed between staff from both settings. These strong relationships formed the foundation of a continuing cooperation between both settings.

“If these relationships hadn't been as strong, it might have been difficult to sustain things but the fact that we had a really good relationship... sharing of information and sharing of experiences has all been really positive for us.

These relationships developed organically over time, and a key benefit identified by one of the settings was having a listening ear outside of their setting where they could talk informally about anything and everything.

“Partnerships don't always work out and people do clash. Not everyone gets on with everyone... We have been lucky, we have been able to support each; complain to each other... I phoned [the manager in the other setting] a week ago as I needed a listening ear... We are human beings and we need to talk to people outside our setting... it has worked exceptionally well. (Manager)

Beyond that, and despite the more limited face-to-face engagement with parents, parents strongly supported Shared Education within the school - an opportunity that they themselves did not get when they were growing up. All of the parents wanted

Shared Education for their child(ren) and viewed it as a way of helping children move on a post-conflict society.

“*They wanted [Shared Education] for their children and I was really encouraged by that. They were buzzing – you can see that they thought that having this programme was something which showed we were moving forward. (Manager)*

Challenges and barriers

Whilst both settings are very grateful for the support they have received, the biggest challenge has been in relation to finances. Their settings have to initially pay costs upfront and then claim them back later. For small settings such as theirs, the cost can be quite substantial (for example transport costs). This is particularly challenging within the context of settings that have falling numbers of children on their roll.

Linked to the funding is the burden of the paperwork (e.g. getting quotes for a number of buses) that is associated with participation in a programme of this nature.

In addition, there is a requirement for a certain number of Shared Education activities and sessions to be completed before funding can be claimed by each of the settings. This means that if a child is absent through illness, they still need to complete these hours.

“*Funding upfront to pay for buses is a challenge... this is costly for a small setting. Also, we don't know how much money we will get until all the hours are complete, and if a child is off sick, we have to make up the hours for that child or we don't get the full money.*

Even if we were able to get half the money or some money upfront... that would help. We are community based and our numbers are quite low at the moment. (Manager)

Looking forward: sustainability and future plans

Many of the issues identified in 2020 when we last undertook a case study visit are similar today in terms of sustainability. Both managers agree that while they would really like to sustain Shared Education, it will not be possible when the funding ends. Falling roll numbers and a challenging financial backdrop for both the settings and the parents means that it would be difficult to pick up particular costs and so the level of shared activities which rely on bus transport would be impacted negatively. Both settings would also be limited in terms of being able to fund trips and large group meetings in the local hall given the cost involved.

Both group managers do intend to stay in touch, and hope to continue to support one another as they have come to do, however it will no longer be feasible to bring the children to meet up as a group to the same extent as currently. This is disappointing for all involved.

“ Without the funding, we wouldn’t be able to keep this going. There will still be contact between us. I cannot see us being able to sustain... we can do it virtually but children don’t get enough out of it. We need money for buses, facilitators and halls... and paying staff for the time to do the paper work. We are not paid enough to sustain paperwork above what we have done.

Final reflections

Despite the arrival of the pandemic, it is clear to see that Shared Education has had a significant impact on the children in each of the settings. They have had a chance to make new friends, and Shared Education has begun to ‘normalise mixing with others. Parents were in the most part extremely positive about the opportunity for their child to take part, and saw the potential contribution to reconciliation that it can make. There was also evidence of a change in attitude from those parents who were at first apprehensive.

Both the parents and setting managers identified some common activities that children really enjoyed and benefited from – travelling on the bus to the other setting, participating in activities such as story-telling, and in songs and rhymes and making new friends in the process. Whilst the pandemic impacted on the extent of face-to-face activity, the ICT equipment provided by SFTS significantly helped settings to continue engaging in Shared Education albeit with less direct contact.

Children have had exposure to traditions and celebrations outside of their own culture, through the Respecting Difference programme and other Shared Education activities, and parents and staff are hopeful this will lead to wider acceptance in the future.

Both settings believed that Shared Education represented excellent value for money. The friendships formed amongst the staff will continue, bringing an ongoing element of sustained cross-community engagement. However, staff feel the funding is crucial to sustain the face-to-face activities, and therefore enhance the benefits of Shared Education over time.



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, Action1)

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