



PEACE IV Programme - Shared Education Impact Evaluation

Collaboration Through Sharing in Education (CASE)/ Sharing from the Start (SFTS)

Summary of Case Study Findings



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

Approach

As part of the wider Impact Evaluation of Shared Education¹, seven Shared Education partnerships were invited to host a case study visit. These were identified by Sharing from the Start (SFTS) Project Partners (i.e. Early Years – the organisation for young children; the National Childhood Network; the Fermanagh Trust) and CASE Project Partners (i.e. the Education Authority and Léargas).

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 teachers/early years practitioners 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 contribute to the wider dissemination efforts to showcase the work funded under the PEACE IV Programme.

¹ The evaluation is being undertaken by SJC Consultancy, in partnership with

Case study visits aimed to include the following research activities:

- An in-depth interview with the manager/principal of each partnership school or setting.
- Observation of a Shared Education session.
- One creative engagement exercise with a group of children who have taken part in shared classes.
- A review of existing partnership documentation, to include monitoring information and photographs of a range of shared class activity.

While all visits were scheduled for February and March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown restrictions meant that only three could be completed face to face as planned, while the remaining were undertaken partially or fully via remote methods (telephone or video call).

The visits and subsequent reports considered the following elements:

- 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;

the National Children's Bureau, and on behalf of SEUPB.

- Looking forward: sustainability and future plans; and
- Conclusions.

This **summary report** presents the key findings collated from across the case study visits, including areas of commonality and difference, structured under the headings as above. As the partnerships were selected to take part based on areas of

good practice as identified by SFTS and CASE, they are not necessarily representative of wider partnerships.

Please note that seven standalone case studies are also available for each of the identified partnerships. These provide specific details and photographs of the various shared class activities as well as individual feedback from settings.

Background to the partnerships

The following table provides an overview of the settings/schools who took part in case studies, including the number/percentage of pupils involved in academic year 2019-2020.

School type	Location	Setting/school name	Total enrolment 2019-2020	Year of funding (19-20)	Children involved in SE	% children involved
Nursery	Co Tyrone	Ardstraw Community Playgroup	14	3	14	100%
		Little Flower Playgroup	16		16	100%
	Co. Cavan	Krafty Kidz Community Preschool	44	2	16	36%
		Clever Clogs Childcare Service	66		22	33%
	Co. Down	Loughinisland Playgroup	21	2	21	100%
		Glasswater Preschool	20		20	100%
Primary	Co. Sligo	Ardkeeran National School	120	3	120	100%
		Taunagh National School	26		26	100%
	Co. Antrim	Moyle PS	428	3	150	35%
		St MacNissi's PS	189		174	92%
		Whitehead PS	438		170	39%
		Olderfleet PS	149		134	90%
	Co. Tyrone	Gaelscoil Eoghain	130	3	55	42%
		Donaghey PS	105		56	53%
		Lissan PS	111		62	56%
	Co. Donegal	Donoughmore NS	45	3	45	100%
St Safan's NS		59	59		100%	

For five of the case studies, the partnership includes two settings/schools; one partnership involves three schools; and one includes four schools. For the larger partnerships, the number of children involved has grown year on year as staff have become more confident and systems have been put in place. Four of the partnerships now have whole-school involvement, while one includes Years 2-7 (Year 1 is not included to allow them time to settle into their new school environment), and another includes Years 4-7.

Of the seven case study partnerships, three are in the Republic of Ireland and four in Northern Ireland. While there are cross-border partnerships taking part in Shared Education, none were included in the case studies.

Partnerships sit in a variety of settings, from tiny rural villages to large towns. For most, the area in which they are located is predominantly one cultural background or the other, while for some, the locality is already reasonably mixed. In terms of distance between settings/schools, some are within walking distance, while others are further apart - up to ten miles in several cases - meaning that transport is required to undertake shared activities.



Previous experiences of shared education

Shared Education is aimed at settings who have not been involved in formal shared projects before, however, some of the partnership settings/schools have had previous experience of working with a partner. This has usually been informal and between neighbouring setting/schools, with common activities including visiting one another for plays and celebration events, or meeting up for a joint trip or external activity.

Several of the settings/schools involved have previously taken part in activities funded through Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU) or been part of a twinned relationships through earlier PEACE initiatives. However, for all, Shared Education was the most significant and sustained shared programme they have been involved in.

Two of the preschool partnerships have been delivering the [Media Initiative for Children 'Respecting Difference' programme](#), which aims to raise awareness of diversity and foster positive attitudes towards those who are different; for these preschools, Shared Education was an opportunity to build upon the learning.

Motivations for getting involved

Individuals within settings/schools understandably have their own personal motivations for engaging in Shared Education, however several common themes emerged; these are summarised below.

Promoting inclusion: All setting managers, principals and staff interviewed had an overarching desire to give children the opportunity to get to know others from different community backgrounds, to begin to understand and respect differences in cultures and views, and to be able to build friendships with children from different backgrounds to their own. Often, this desire has been driven by their own experience of growing up in a segregated community, and several individuals reflected on how this segregation continues through teaching college and often into working life within education. Beyond cultural differences, the three preschool partnerships specifically noted a desire to support children to embrace diversity more widely, for example learning to engage,



communicate with and accept children with special educational needs or a disability, and to learn more about these differing needs and behaviours.

Enhancing educational and social opportunities: All settings/schools foresaw potential educational benefits from the funding attached to Shared Education. They reflected on tight budgets, and expressed hopes that the funding would allow them to offer educational and social opportunities not previously experienced by the children before. For smaller settings/schools, this was of importance as they have little opportunity to offer children activities outside of the core curriculum. There was also a common desire for children to engage in cross-cultural leisure activities that they would not traditionally have taken part in, such as Gaelic football, hockey, rugby or Irish dancing, and again, staff hoped this would enhance the educational experience for children.

Preparing children for the future: Many settings/schools reflected on the wider life experiences ahead of their children, including the key transition periods (preschool to primary, primary to post-primary, preparing for university or employment). They hoped that the experience of Shared Education, including meeting new friends, experiencing different teachers/early years practitioners and educational settings, would prepare children for transition periods and make new experiences less daunting.

Formalising existing links: For those settings/schools who already had informal links prior to Shared Education, there was a desire to formalise and build on the efforts already made, and to continue to build local community connections. Shared Education was considered a logical next step to do this.

Encouraging integrated working for staff: Beyond the experiences of

children, many settings/schools were motivated by a desire to challenge potential stereotypes held by themselves and staff, and to broaden their own experiences, which they hoped would then benefit the children they teach. Again, this was discussed in the context of segregated educational training, and the need to address issues with the wider system.

Model of sharing

While all settings/schools must provide 30 hours of shared sessions per child, these 30 hours are made up in different ways based on the needs of the individual partnership, distance between the settings/schools, and activities planned. Several have trialled different patterns until they have found the frequency and duration that works best for staff and pupils. A summary of the arrangements across each partnership is included below.

Partnership & schools involved	Shared session arrangements
Ardstraw Community Playgroup Little Flower Playgroup	1 session per month x 3 hours each All children meet as one group
Krafty Kidz Community Childcare Clever Clogs Childcare Service	1 session per month x 3.5 hours each. 2 sessions are run concurrently, with half the children from each setting.
Loughinisland Playgroup Glasswater Pre-school	1 shared session per month x 3 hours All children meet as one group
Ardkeeran National School Taunagh National School	Usually once per month x 3 hours each. Separate junior and senior sessions held on different days.

<p>Moyle Primary School</p> <p>St MacNissis's Primary School</p> <p>Whitehead Primary School</p> <p>Olderfleet Primary School</p>	<p>A complex timetable is in place given the size of this partnership.</p> <p>Year 2 and 3 children have 6 sessions x 5 hours each and Year 4 to 7 have 5 sessions x 6 hours each.</p> <p>As there are 6 year groups involved, sessions are held on 3 or 4 days each month, with 2 year groups each day.</p> <p>For each year group, concurrent sessions are held in two schools at a time, with children split between them.</p>
<p>Gaelscoil Eoghain</p> <p>Donaghey Primary School</p> <p>Lissan Primary School</p>	<p>8 sessions per child as follows: 4 x 5 hours, 3 x 3 hours, 1 x 1 hour. Year 4/year 5 held together, and year 6/year 7</p>
<p>Donoughmore National School</p> <p>St Safan's National School</p>	<p>Each shared session lasts 3 hours. In year 1 of funding, these were held weekly for 10 weeks.</p> <p>In year 2 of funding, these have been held in 5-week blocks which was less intensive for the staff. Children split in two groups (Junior and Senior), and sessions held on same day (Juniors in morning, Seniors in afternoon)</p>

Shared Education is delivered through a range of formal shared teaching sessions, free play time, outings or trips, and celebration activities. Sessions are led by settings/school staff, or by external facilitators bought in using funds. Bringing several groups of children together in one setting can create difficulties in finding physical space, therefore classes are often split in half with two or more sessions running concurrently. Local halls or community facilities are also commonly used to bring all children together.

Preschool activities: Activities within the preschool partnership tend to be less structured, allowing children free play time both inside and outside where space is available. A variety of trips and activities have taken place, with several making use of local facilities such as the library or a local park. Preschools have also hosted several celebration activities (for example on St. Patrick's Day or Christmas) and have invited parents, wider family and community to take part.

Primary school activities: Shared activities generally align to curricular/Aistear themes or shared priorities in school development plans. Common topics include:

- Science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) subjects;
- The World Around Us/Social, Environmental and Scientific Education;
- Personal Development and Mutual Understanding/ Social, Personal and Health Education;

- identity and belonging,
- Exploring and Thinking;
- Physical Education.

However, while teaching is curriculum-focused, lessons tend to be more creative, interactive and engaging, with opportunities for team work and collaboration incorporated. Joint trips are commonly included at the beginning of the academic year as a 'get to know you' activity, and at the end as a 'celebration and goodbye'.



Benefits for the child

Partnerships reported a wide range of benefits for the children in their settings, summarised below under educational and social/emotional benefits.

Educational benefits: Shared Education has allowed settings/schools to enhance the curriculum and give children a wider educational experience. Staff identified several contributory factors:

- Shared Education funding has allowed settings/schools to buy **resources to enhance the learning experience**. For the most part, these have been resources that have brought elements of fun and collaboration, leading to increased engagement by children in the activities and leading to increased motivation to learn. Resource examples include iPads/tablets, Lego sets, [IZAK 9](#) number cubes, outdoor play equipment and craft materials.
- Children have taken part in **educational trips** that for many, would not have been possible before due to affordability. Again, while these activities are fun and support relationship building, they are also directly related to the curriculum topics being studied, and help to bring the learning to life. Examples of visits include W5 (contributing to science and technology); zoos and parks, the seashore, and a birds of prey

exhibition (the world around us); the Seamus Heaney Centre and the local library (literacy); dance and fitness workshops (physical education), and the Titanic Museum and Ulster Museum (history).

- On occasion, **external facilitators** have been brought in to deliver sessions on specific subjects, for example music or science. Staff reflected that this brings a level of expertise to the subject which is beyond teacher/early years practitioner capacity and knowledge, and they felt children would learn more and be inspired by someone with specialist knowledge in the subject.

Social & emotional benefits: Shared Education has led to both social and emotional benefits for the children involved, as summarised below.

- **Breaking down barriers and accepting diversity:** As children got to know one another, genuine friendships have formed between children, and for some, these have moved beyond the classroom and into children's spare time, therefore broadening their social experiences. In most cases, these children would not have previously had the chance to meet, and they are now getting the opportunity to discover similarities between themselves and other children who may have been previously thought of as 'different'. In many cases, the children will meet up again in primary or post-primary school, and staff are hopeful that these

new-found friendships will continue.

- All partnerships reported **increased confidence** among children, facilitated by interacting with new people, experiencing new places and trying new activities. While sometimes shy or reserved at first, staff observed children becoming more confident as the year progressed.
- Children have had the opportunity to **build a broad range of social skills**, for example communicating with a range of different people, following directions, cooperating, taking turns, and expressing opinions. Many of the activities undertaken within Shared Education have facilitated the development of teamwork skills, including elements such as problem solving and negotiation skills. Again, staff have witnessed these skills grow, and feel that this will be particularly beneficial for children as they move towards transition to the next school level.



Benefits for the setting/school

While original motivations focused on the potential benefits for the children involved, several common benefits, both expected and unexpected, have arisen in relation to staff, teaching approaches and the wider setting/school.

Staff relationships: Staff have built close relationships and this is considered a primary benefit for all. Many staff reflected on how these new relationships have provided peer support to discuss teaching issues beyond Shared Education. For the smaller settings/schools, this was particularly important as some may have a staff of only two or three, therefore peer support is ordinarily limited. The relationships built between managers/principals in each partnership are particularly strong, and there is hope and expectation that these bonds will continue beyond the term of Shared Education funding.

Professional development: Shared Education has brought many opportunities for staff to build on their teaching and pastoral skills, through formal and informal training, observing or discussing teaching approaches with partner staff, taking part in workshops facilitated by external experts, and taking part in educational visits. For those staff directly delivering Shared Education sessions, the opportunity for joint planning has been invaluable, allowing them to build new ideas for lessons through observing or

working closely with teachers/early years practitioners in other settings/schools. Staff not directly delivering sessions have also been able to avail of training opportunities provided through Shared Education, therefore enhancing their own practice.

Economic: As already noted, some of the funding has been used to buy resources to support teaching and learning. Many of the partnerships have invested in resources which can be reused beyond the lifetime of the funding (e.g. outdoor play equipment, Lego kits). Principals/setting managers have also noted how having a partner settings/school has allowed them to collaborate on opportunities for staff training / CPD (not specifically related to Shared Education) which they could not have afforded individually (such as First Aid training for all staff).

Benefits for parents and the wider community

This outcome area is less developed, and one that some partnerships are keen to build on, with several noting plans for the coming year. For primary schools, priorities have focused on raising awareness and increasing knowledge of activities amongst parents, family and wider community, however the activities are not specifically directed at them. Within

preschools, there is more direct engagement with parents, but often in a volunteer/support capacity, rather than through activities directly geared towards their engagement.

Communication activities, such as social media or photographs or stories in local papers, provide an opportunity to share the work with the wider community and raise awareness of the aims and objectives of Shared Education. Several preschools have also incorporated visits to local services or facilities, such as the library, fire station, Police/ Garda Síochána, and see this as an opportunity to both raise awareness of Shared Education, and model positive behaviours.

One preschool partnership provided examples of a more intentional approach to engage parents/carers, wider family and community members through celebration events hosted by the partnership. They have seen benefits in breaking down barriers between previously quite separate communities.

While most staff do not feel that there has been any significant benefit for parents and wider communities so far, there is a feeling that these wider benefits will be seen further down the line, as more children experience Shared Education and the message spreads within the local community.

What has worked well and why?

The activities and approaches that work well tend to be unique to individual circumstances, focusing for example on structure and location of sessions, activities undertaken, resources used, or management approach taken. Nevertheless, commonalities are noted below.

Ice breaking: Partnerships agree that it was important to take time to 'break the ice' at the beginning of the year, as well as the beginning of each sessions, to better support relationship building. Different approaches have been successful. Some have found that an introductory free-play session, in one of the settings/schools, creates a more relaxed environment, with staff feeling less pressured with practical tasks and therefore able to support the children in building relationships. Others have started each year with a joint trip away, giving children the chance to meet one another in a fun and less formal setting.

Activities aligned to the specific needs of the group: In the same way, activities found to be successful differ, as each setting/school has evolved their practice to meet the needs of the children. For some, free-play time in the setting/school allows children to mix, get to know one another and establish connections, while for others, a structured activity designed to encourage teamwork and discussion is the preferred approach. All feel that a celebration activity or trip at the end

of the year is important to acknowledge the work undertaken.

Resources: All settings/schools have found it useful to purchase resources to support learning, and these have made learning more interactive and creative, and helped to distinguish Shared Education classes from everyday activities.

Visiting local facilities: arranging trips to local facilities, such as the library, fire station, local park, has allowed partnerships to engage in low-cost but enriching activities, without the need for transport arrangements/costs and/or entrance fees. This reflective use of funding has helped to get more out of their time together, while also helping to raise awareness within their local community as already discussed.

Wider support: All setting managers/principals reported that wider support from SFTS and CASE representatives, their setting/school staff, parents, governors and to a lesser extent, local community, has really helped in the journey, and been appreciated throughout. They have also found networking opportunities, and the training and support sessions provided by Shared Education, to be of huge benefit in managing, planning and delivering Shared Education.

Learning from experience: Regardless of the preferred approach, there is common recognition of the need to be flexible and open to learning from experience as the Shared Education journey progresses, with partnerships refining the approach taken as experience of what works best for them has grown.

Challenges and barriers

All staff agree that involvement in Shared Education has been of significant benefit. However, it is important to note the challenges and barriers that have been faced in setting up and running the partnerships. Many of these challenges arose early in the process, while others have been ongoing.

Administration: The time required to administer Shared Education, including planning the shared lessons, organising the logistics of visits, including transport, activities and venues, and completing paperwork has been a challenge for all involved. All settings/schools reflected that this should be considered within the



context of an already challenging environment, with competing priorities on overstretched staff. For the primary partnerships with three or four schools to coordinate, and often multiple classes per year group, the administration burden has been greater, and while there were more staff to share the burden, this requires some complex interaction to manage. One partnership reported staff continuity issues, with a changing team meaning that knowledge and learning has not been transferred between staff and on occasion been lost, and this has increased the administrative burden.

Parent or governor objections: Three of the seven partnerships noted a very small number of objections from parents and one noted an objection from a governor when Shared Education was proposed. Examples of issues raised include the inclusion of an Irish Medium school in a partnership, the use of a GAA sports hall for shared activities, and a general disagreement with the ethos of Shared Education. These issues were largely resolved with support from SFTS/CASE team. Because of parental choice, there are a very small number of children who have either not taken part in Shared Education, or have participated only when the activities were held in their own setting/school. Staff feel these objections support the need for programmes such as Shared Education to promote positive change and relationship building across different communities. Overall however, support from parents, staff, governors and wider community has been overwhelmingly positive.

Differences in setting/school

priorities or approaches: Within each partnership, there are differences in terms of the teaching approach or model, ethos or local priorities, therefore they have had to balance these with common priorities so that Shared Education meets both needs.

- Within one preschool partnership, one setting aligns to Montessori while the other aligns to HighScope, both different and quite specific models of pedagogy. Staff worked around these differences to find common ground, and have learned to be flexible in their expectations from the children.
- One primary partnership noted that while they appreciated the opportunities to get involved in shared CPD with their partner school, they were not starting from the same baseline, therefore did not necessarily benefit in the same way from the training.
- One primary partnership involves an Irish Medium school; normal classes are therefore taught in Irish, and there are Irish language signs around the school. Children also call their teacher by their first name, which is not common in primary schools. However, the partnership has worked around this; Shared Education lessons have been taught in English and children encouraged to speak in English when in mixed groups, and children have learned from experiencing a new approach.

- Within the primary partnerships, several noted the ongoing industrial action with many teachers following Union guidance on 'action short of strike', including not taking part in meetings and activities outside of working hours. In one partnership, not all schools were involved in this action, leading to challenges when for example one school was willing to engage in a parent's evening while the other was not.

Lack of appropriate physical space:

When bringing all children in a partnership together in the one venue, physical capacity becomes an issue. Several partnerships noted that they did not have the space to allow all children to meet at once, and had incorporated various solutions, including using an external venue, making use of inside and outside space, rearranging lunch times to create more space, or splitting the groups in two. This has meant that while the children are participating in 30 hours of shared contact, this may not necessarily be with the same group of children each time, therefore potentially lessening the impact. The need to source external venues has also contributed to difficulties, such as the issue around the use of a GAA hall as noted above, and adds an additional expense if there is a fee to pay.

Other practical challenges: One partnership noted that while buses, trips and resources generally need to be paid for in advance, funding for these is provided in arrears. As a small partnership with limited case flow, this causes difficulty as they cannot afford

to be out of pocket while awaiting funding. Another partnership noted the requirement for several quotes for transport, which added to their administration burden. A further partnership reflected on the value limit set for purchasing any individual resource, leading to them settling for two smaller inferior products, rather than one substantial resource. These are small but practical challenges which if addressed would make the administration of Shared Education smoother.

Looking forward: sustainability and future plans

All partnerships stated they would ideally like to continue with Shared Education activities beyond the lifetime of the funding, however for most, formal shared sessions will not be sustainable and unfortunately the engagement of children will be lost. The cost of transporting children to other settings is the main barrier to continuing with the current model, alongside the planning and administration time required, which would not be possible without sub-cover to facilitate this.

Having said that, there is a desire to build on the good work already undertaken, and maintain contact with partners where possible. Notably, the relationships built between setting

managers, principals and wider staff teams are strong, and have progressed beyond Shared Education. All those involved are hopeful that these relationships will last, and that they can continue to support one another in the future. Staff have also built skills and knowledge through their involvement which they will apply to their ongoing work.

While the children will not be involved in significant shared activities post-Shared Education, again, staff are hopeful that there will be opportunities to make connections for one-off activities where it is financially beneficial to join up, such as buying in training or facilitators. There are of course individual differences, and where settings/schools are close to one another, and shared activities can be arranged without transport or facilitation costs, there is a will to do this.

The possibility of continuing with more formal shared sessions is stronger for the preschool partnerships. The smaller number of children involved is an important factor. Where the children can walk across to the partner setting, there will be no cost involved in arranging ongoing play sessions or in-house activities, although external trips are less likely. Where transport is required between settings, options include asking parents to volunteer to provide transport, or undertaking fundraising activities.

Conclusions

Despite the discussion above on challenges faced, all feel that involvement in Shared Education has been of significant benefit to their children, staff and wider setting/school, and they are pleased to have been involved. Feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, from children, parents and families, and from the wider staff group. Lessons have been learned along the way as settings/schools have adapted to the ways of working that best suit them and their children, and while some activities and approaches may be different in hindsight, there are no regrets at engaging in Shared Education and all would take the opportunity to continue, should the opportunity arise.



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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