



# PEACE IV Programme - Shared Education Impact Evaluation

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

### *Summary of Case Study Findings*

*August 2022*



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



## Approach

As part of the wider Impact Evaluation of Shared Education<sup>1</sup>, eleven Shared Education partnerships were invited to host a virtual case study visit in 2022. A number of these had also taken part in a case study visit in 2020. The settings were identified by CASE Project Partners (i.e., the Education Authority and Léargas) and Sharing from the Start (SFTS) Project Partners (i.e. Early Years – the organisation for young children; the National Childhood Network; the Fermanagh Trust).

The case studies outline examples of activity where the coming together of schools/pre-schools from different backgrounds as part of curricular-based shared classes has helped to normalise contact between children, teachers/practitioners, and across the school/pre-school community. Embedding Shared Education into the 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/early years practitioner training and partnership working; and projects which demonstrated engagement with parents and the wider community.

- To enrich the Impact Evaluation of Shared Education by capturing real-life stories of funded projects.
- To document how the Covid-19 pandemic impacted on the delivery of the initiative and how schools/other settings adapted their delivery in response.
- To contribute to the wider dissemination efforts to showcase the work funded under the PEACE IV Programme.

### Research activities undertaken as part of the case studies included:

- 12 in-depth group / one-to-one interviews with the principal / manager of each partnership school or setting, and where available, Shared Education coordinator. In total, 39 individuals took part in these interviews between March and May 2022.
- Two parent focus groups - one each for parents of preschool and primary/post-primary children. A total of 12 parents attended these focus groups between March and May 2022.
- One creative engagement exercise with a group of children who have taken part in shared classes in three of the Shared Education Partnerships. A total of 44 children from P5-P7 classes took part in these exercises.
- A review of existing partnership documentation including monitoring information and photographs of a range of shared class activity.

Given the continuing impact of Covid-19 and associated lockdowns and re-openings of schools, all the case studies in 2022 were undertaken virtually using Zoom.

<sup>1</sup> The evaluation is being undertaken by SJC consultancy, in partnership with the National Children's Bureau, and on behalf of the SEUPB.

**The visits and subsequent case study reports were structured as follows**

- The background to the partnership;
- Previous experiences of Shared Education and motivations for getting involved;
- Model of sharing adopted;
- 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 reflection.

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 **eleven 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 children involved in the academic year 2021-2022. As schools have become more confident in implementing Shared Education, the overall proportion of children involved in Shared Education in case study partnerships has increased steadily, from 43% in Year 1 (2017/18) to 86% in Year 5 (2021/22)<sup>2</sup>. This highlights the increasing demand for shared activities and the increasing confidence of settings in adopting a whole-school approach to the implementation of Shared Education.

School type	Location of partnership	Setting/school name	Total enrolment 2021-2022	Year of funding (21-22)	Children involved in SE	% children involved
Nursery	Co. Tyrone	Ardstraw Community Playgroup	11	5	11	100%
		Little Flower Playgroup	12	5	12	100%
	Co. Monaghan & Co. Tyrone	Tru Beginnings Community Playgroup	17	5	17	100%
		Woodland Adventure Playgroup	14	5	14	100%
		Clogher Valley Playgroup	40	5	40	100%
	Co. Down	Glasswater Playgroup	14	4	14	100%
		Loughinisland Playgroup	21	4	21	100%
Primary	Belfast	Sacred Heart Primary School	157	5	157	100%
		Ballysillan Primary School	234	5	234	100%
	Co. Antrim	Millquarter Primary School	134	5	134	100%
		Groggan Primary School	123	5	123	100%
	Co. Louth	St Oliver's National School	152	5	152	100%
		St. Brigid's Special School	97	5	97	100%
	Co. Donegal	Castletown National School	59	4	59	100%
		Portlean National School	31	4	31	100%
		Scoil Cholmchille	66	4	66	100%
	Co. Antrim	Moyle Primary School	425	5	621	53%
		St. MacNissi's Primary School	176	5		
		Olderfleet Primary School	117	5		
		Whitehead Primary School	445	5		
	Co. Derry / Londonderry	St Eoghan's Primary School	134	5	515	98%
		Damhead Primary School	201	5		
		Macosquin Primary School	193	5		

<sup>2</sup> Further details on the evolution of the Shared Education partnerships and the number of children involved over each year of the five-year period is available in the standalone case study reports which can be read alongside this summary report.



School type	Location of partnership	Setting/school name	Total enrolment 2021-2022	Year of funding (21-22)	Children involved in SE	% children involved
	Co. Down	St. Ronan's Primary School	433	5	433	100%
		Bridge Integrated Primary School	418	5	418	100%
	Co. Donegal	Scoil Mhuire	122	5	122	100%
		St Columb's National School	37	5	37	100%
		Donagh National School	46	5	46	100%

In 2021/22, almost all of the partnerships (9 of 11) had whole-school involvement. This is a significant achievement given the amount of buy-in that is required across all stakeholder groups (i.e. teaching staff, governors, parents and families) combined with strong leadership within and across settings. This demonstrates a strong commitment on behalf of the partnerships to ensuring that Shared Education becomes embedded thus helping to maximise the outcomes for staff, children and parents which are described below.

Two of the partnerships had between 53% and 98% of their children involved in Shared Education. This included the Larne partnership (which is the largest of the partnerships comprising four schools and 1,163 children) and the Co. Derry/Londonderry partnership (comprising three schools and 528 children). In the case of the Larne partnership, not all of the children were involved in Shared Education because of issues of a practical nature – e.g. finding venues large enough to accommodate children from all four schools. Notwithstanding this, the Larne Partnership involved over 600 pupils in Shared Education in 2021/22 which is a significant achievement and for an individual partnership is the largest number of children participating in the initiative across all of the partnerships.

Of the eleven case study partnerships, three are in Ireland and seven are in Northern Ireland. One of the partnerships has settings in both Ireland (in Co. Monaghan) and Northern Ireland (Co. Tyrone).

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 of one cultural background or the other, while for some, the locality is already reasonably mixed.

The school management type is for the most part either Catholic Maintained or Controlled. One partnership included a grant maintained Integrated school.

In terms of distance between settings/schools, some are within walking distance, while others are much further apart - up to 30 miles in one instance - meaning that transport is required by the vast majority of the settings to undertake shared activities.



## Previous experiences of Shared Education

Shared Education is aimed at settings/schools 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 (sometimes outside of those they have formally partnered with via Shared Education). This has usually been informal and between neighbouring setting/schools, with common activities including joining together for celebration events, day trips or other extra-curricular activities.

Several of the settings/schools involved have previously taken part in activities funded through Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU). EMU was one of six cross-curricular themes introduced as part of the Government's Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order of 1989 and was focused on helping children to learn to live with differences in a spirit of acceptance, fairness, and mutual respect.

Several of the schools had participated in other peace initiatives. For example, one principal had previously taken part in the Shared Education Signature Project (SESP) in a former school where they had worked. SESP launched in November 2014 and was created under the Delivering Social Change (DSC) Framework. SESP had similar aims to Shared Education with a focus on promoting reconciliation through shared learning and collaborative working.

In addition, some 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, and to share this with their partner setting.

However, for all schools and settings, Shared Education was the most significant, sustained and generously resourced shared programme they have been involved in.

## Motivations for getting involved

Prior involvement in similar initiatives was a key motivating factor for partnership staff in the development of some of the partnerships. Aside from this, however, there were several common factors that motivated schools and other settings to get involved as detailed below.

**Understanding, respecting and normalising difference:** Whilst most of those interviewed believed that children in their schools/settings did not treat children differently due to their religious background, many noted that a key motivating factor to participate in Shared Education was to bring children together to help them understand difference in its widest sense (including those with a physical disability or other special educational need) so that any differences are viewed as normal and not considered a point of tension or conflict. Providing sustained opportunities for cross-community contact was also perceived as being critical in terms of helping children to develop their social skills and become more empathetic towards those who are from a different background. This will also help to reduce potential stereotypes developing in early, formative years.

**To develop and/or build on the quality of existing relationships:** An initial catalyst for taking part in Shared Education was the extent and quality of existing relationships between staff across the various schools and settings. These relationships were forged in various ways, for example, where staff attended initial teacher training or ongoing staff training and development opportunities.

These prior relationships provided schools and settings with the initial hook to begin discussions about the merits of becoming involved in Shared Education and commence the application process.

For other schools/settings, particularly those delivered on a cross-border basis, differences in the curricular content meant that staff had few opportunities to meet prior to becoming involved in Shared Education given that staff had attended different cluster meetings and training events. For one of the partnerships, therefore, Shared Education provided staff with their first opportunity to collaborate and for their children to meet their peers in other settings.

The quality and depth of relationships was therefore a key enabling factor in the establishment of all of the partnerships, without which, it is unlikely that they would have flourished and succeeded as they did.

#### **Enhancing educational and social opportunities:**

All settings/schools foresaw potential educational benefits from the significant funding attached to Shared Education. They reflected on increasingly squeezed budgets not just for their school(s)/setting(s) but also for the families of the children involved. The funding would therefore allow them to offer educational and social opportunities not previously experienced by their children. Examples of resources that Shared Education enabled the purchase of included indoor and outdoor play equipment or educational resources such as Mathletics (an online maths programme).

For smaller settings/schools, particularly those located in rural areas, Shared Education was of great importance as children in these settings would otherwise have had few opportunities to meet and socialise with children from other

schools/settings. Shared Education was therefore viewed as an important opportunity for children and staff to reduce social isolation.

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.

#### **Helping children to transition between different schools and settings:**

A further key motivating factor for taking part in Shared Education was to help children to establish contact with their peers in other settings/schools and, in some instances, build friendships so that when they transition from preschool to primary settings or primary to secondary settings, they would already know children in their new school. This was viewed to be particularly important for the primary to secondary school transition given the significant changes children experience, for example in terms of the higher number of children attending secondary school and the wider array of subjects and subject teachers.

**Formalising existing links:** For those settings/schools who already had informal links prior to Shared Education, there was a desire to use Shared Education to formalise these links. Therefore, Shared Education was considered a logical next step to do this.

#### **Encouraging the development of a collaborative culture:**

Staff felt that Shared Education would provide a unique opportunity to work together much more closely than they might have been able to do in the past. It provided them with the resources to be able to jointly plan, deliver and evaluate Shared Education activities and by extension an opportunity to informally develop their repertoire of teaching skills and strategies.

## Model of sharing

In general, the model of Shared Education focuses on two main aspects: Firstly, the emphasis is on creating contact between children from different community backgrounds. Secondly, and equally important is that this takes place in an educational setting, therein normalising this contact. Therefore, key to the success of Shared Education is both the level and quality of contact and embedding shared sessions in curricular based activities.

Prior to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, all settings/schools were expected to provide 30 hours of shared sessions per child. As a result of the pandemic, the number of hours expected to be delivered by some of the partnerships was reduced given the significant disruption they experienced.

The delivery model therefore varied not only in relation to the total number of hours each partnership was expected to deliver, but also in relation to the length of the individual sessions or activities. Some of the partnerships compressed their delivery over a shorter space of time and delivered relatively long sessions, whilst others delivered Shared Education by timetabling these sessions into their school calendar. Whilst all settings/schools reported positive benefits of Shared Education, those that compressed delivery over a shorter space of time generally reported more sustained benefits for both their teaching staff and children as it enabled staff to effectively plan the sessions jointly whilst also sustaining the children's interest and supporting the developing of deeper friendships.

The table below summarises Shared Education delivery arrangements for the academic year 2021/22.

Partnership & setting/school involved	Shared session arrangements in 2021/22
Ardstraw Community Playgroup	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>16.5 hours split over the three terms.</li> <li>Sessions of 1-3 hours each.</li> </ul>
Little Flower Playgroup	
Tru Beginnings Community Playgroup	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>11 hours delivered in sessions between one and four hours.</li> </ul>
Woodland Adventure Playgroup	
Clogher Valley Playgroup	
Glasswater Playgroup	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>30 hours delivered in sessions of between two and four hours each.</li> </ul>
Loughinisland Playgroup	
Sacred Heart Primary School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>30 hours of contact delivered via: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Four collaborative projects of between six and seven and a half hours each.</li> <li>Two meetups per year group of five to six hours per meet up.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Ballysillan Primary School	
Millquarter Primary School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>30 one-hour sessions based on specific themes (e.g. numeracy).</li> </ul>
Groggan Primary School	
St Oliver's National School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>10 lessons of 20 hours duration in total.</li> <li>5 video calls of 10 hours duration in total.</li> </ul>
St. Brigid's Special School	
Castletown National School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Six collaborative projects involving 34 hours of class-based work and 37 hours of online contact work.</li> <li>One end-of-year trip of five hours.</li> </ul>
Portlean National School	
Scoil Cholmchille	



Partnership & setting/school involved	Shared session arrangements in 2021/22
Moyle Primary School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Four projects (lasting between four and 20 hours) delivered to P2-3 year groups. Activities were timetabled flexibly.</li> </ul>
St. MacNissi's Primary School	
Olderfleet Primary School	
Whitehead Primary School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Four projects (lasting between six and eight hours each) delivered to Year 4-7 groups. Activities were timetabled flexibly.</li> </ul>
St Eoghan's Primary School	
Damhead Primary School	
Macosquin Primary School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Four full day face-to-face (24 hrs).</li> <li>19.5 hours online with sessions ranging from 30 mins to 2 hours duration.</li> </ul>
St. Ronan's Primary School	
Bridge Integrated Primary School	
Scoil Mhuire	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>30 hours of in class and online sessions of varying duration due to Covid-19 restrictions</li> <li>30 hours of sessions comprising six sessions of five hours duration.</li> </ul>
St Columb's National School	
Donagh National School	

Shared Education is delivered through a range of formal shared teaching sessions, outdoor play, trips and outings, and celebration activities. The format for sessions and the types of activities that could be delivered changed as a result of the pandemic, with a gradual transition to online delivery using platforms such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom and Google Classroom during lockdowns. More recently, many of the partnerships have moved to a hybrid delivery model, combining a mix of remote sessions and face-to-face activities. Notwithstanding the preference for face-to-face contact, the hybrid model has proved to be a useful model whilst settings / schools emerge from the pandemic.

Early in Shared Education, many partnerships paid external facilitators to run sessions.

However, over subsequent years, staff felt that they could deliver these sessions to a higher standard themselves as they gained more confidence.

Bringing groups of children together in one place has created difficulties in terms of finding suitable venues that can hold large numbers, therefore classes in some of the partnerships have been split into smaller groups with sessions running concurrently. Other partnerships have been able to source suitable venues such as local town/village halls or community facilities. Despite this, and particularly in the earlier years of Shared Education, the task of bringing children together has proved logistically challenging for many in terms of ensuring the right number of tables and chairs available and any other resources they may have needed.

**Preschool activities:** There was a particular focus on indoor and outdoor play in pre-school settings. Other activities included, for example, joint circle-time, story sharing and joint celebrations at specific times of the year (e.g. St. Patrick's Day celebration of culture with music and dancing). Preschool parents noted that their children really enjoyed the cultural activities, and the opportunity to move about and have fun through singing and dancing. This also brings physical health benefits.

Several preschool settings took part in the Media Initiative for Children (MIFC) which aims to help children in early childhood care and education settings to understand and respect differences.

As indicated above, with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, almost all of the activities transitioned to online delivery methods, with all partnerships using virtual platforms to engage. Examples of activities included the development of videos as an opportunity for children in each setting to introduce themselves to children from other settings, or working alongside one another virtually to make Christmas decorations and Christmas cards, which children were then able to post to partner settings.

**Primary school activities:** Shared activities generally aligned to either the CCEA Curriculum (NI) or NCCA Curriculum (Ireland) or to shared priorities identified via school development plans. Partnerships chose different themes each year depending on their school development priorities for that particular year (e.g. literacy, numeracy or emotional health and well-being). Common topics covered in Shared Education sessions included:

- 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;
- Emotional health, well-being and resilience (specifically to address the mental health impact of the Covid-19 lockdowns on children);
- Physical Education.

Within these themes, classroom-based and outdoor activity sessions were delivered. Organised trips also featured strongly in the primary school delivery of Shared Education, and there are a wide variety of examples, including beach trips, museums and exhibitions, sporting activities, forest/park walks, and many other activities (which are discussed further below).



## Benefits for the child

Partnerships reported a wide range of benefits for the children in their settings/schools, summarised below under educational and social/emotional benefits. Generally, it was felt that the benefits for children were greater for those partnerships that had compressed delivery within a short space of time as opposed to delivery that took place over the entire school year.

It was felt that this enables children to benefit from more sustained periods of face-to-face contact with children from other settings thus facilitating friendship formation. This ability to form friendships was particularly noted as having been impacted by the pandemic and necessary adaptations made.

**Educational benefits:** Shared Education has allowed settings/schools to widen the curriculum and provide engaging activities that help development specific skills (e.g. penpal letter writing, Accelerated Reading and Word Millionaire competitions). These benefits point to how Shared Education has succeeded in delivering curriculum-based learning, which is key to the wider success of the programme.

Staff identified several contributory factors:

- Shared Education funding has allowed settings/schools to buy **resources to enhance the shared learning experience**. Often, schools have invested in games or equipment that can help make learning fun, and support collaborative learning in the classroom. Staff noted this this has led to increased engagement by children in the activities and ultimately increased motivation to learn. Examples of resources purchased include art and craft materials, role-play toys (such as a play-post office and circus set), iPads/tablets, outdoor play equipment, computer software and other resources such as Mathletics and Hive Hackers (a computer coding programming activity).

Parents of primary school children felt that the additional resources, bought through Shared Education funding, or made available by the partner school/s, strongly enhanced their child's educational experience, with examples given of activities such as coding and Minecraft which they thought positively impacted children's learning and stimulated interest.

- Prior to the pandemic, children were able to go on **shared educational trips** that for many, would not have been possible before due to the cost of these trips. These trips provided the ideal opportunity for children to make new friends with peers in other schools – particularly during lunch breaks where there was less structure and more opportunities for children to develop and deepen bonds. The trips also provided a good opportunity for children to learn

about aspects of curriculum topics in a fun and engaging way which appealed to a broader range of learning styles. Many of these visits also took place during the Covid-19 pandemic, however often children were kept within their own social bubbles to minimise risks.

Examples of visits included:

- W5 at the Odyssey in Belfast (contributing to science and technology);
- The Forest School<sup>3</sup>, Crawfordsburn Scout Centre, the Ark Farm and Streamvale Farm (the outdoor environment / literacy);
- Beach trips, e.g. to Culdaff beach (to learn about the sea and wildlife); and
- Visits to community gardens to learn about plants and how they grow (linking to science, nature and the environment).

When asked about their favourite activities during Shared Education, children remembered these activities the best, and reflected on the fun they had and the chance to make friends in their partner school. Parents also noted the importance of these trips, giving children a chance to try activities that they might not have experienced previously.

- **External facilitators** were brought in to deliver sessions on specific subjects, for example for sports, outdoor or science activities. Their expertise was largely bought-in in the first year of Shared Education. However, several of those partnerships who used outside expertise reflected that the activities were, on occasion, too structured and were not sufficiently tailored to meet the needs of all of the children. There were exceptions

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<sup>3</sup> Forest Schools are based on a Scandinavian idea that considers children's contact with nature to be extremely

important from an early age and they help children to build their confidence and develop their language skills.

to this – for example one of the Partnerships believed the PeacePlayers was very well received by the children in their schools. This is a basketball training programme that incorporates conflict resolution education and leadership development activities. This programme was viewed positively in terms of promoting understanding and valuing of differences.

In subsequent years and as staff gained more confidence and skills/competencies in delivering shared activities, less reliance was placed on external expertise and only bought in where the external facilitator had skills and expertise that the partnership did not have.

**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 have got to know one another throughout Shared Education, strong friendships have formed and often, these have moved beyond the classroom with children playing with each other in other schools (e.g. local sports clubs) and in each other's homes. Indeed, some parents noted that their children have since become involved in sports not traditionally aligned to their community. Children have also been able to get to know others with additional needs, for example wheelchair users or non-verbal communicators. The opportunity to mix with a wider group of children was felt to be particularly important for those partnerships whose schools are located in rural, and therefore, more geographically isolated settings. In other settings, Shared Education was viewed as

critical to help break down any tribalism based on religious differences.

While preschool parents and practitioners felt that their children were too young to recognise differences, they agreed that preschool age is the optimum time to 'normalise' discussions on difference.

- All partnerships reported **increased confidence** among children. They felt that several factors contributed to this, including opportunities to interact with new people – whether children, school staff or parents. Indeed, in some cases parents delivered shared activities. Travelling on the bus to visit other settings was a particular talking point and an opportunity for children to interact with each other, and also gain confidence being 'out and about'. Making use of technology to engage during lockdown allowed children to develop and demonstrate skills they might previously not have used in the school/setting.

For parents of preschool aged children, increased confidence for their child was the strongest benefit, and parents were able to see their child start to demonstrate confidence in other situations, for example talking to a child next door, because they had had the experience of meeting new people through Shared Education. For parents of primary school aged children, they also reflected that their child's growing confidence had enabled them to get involved in various groups and activities outside of school.

- The mix of activities has enabled children to **build on their social and communication skills**. Throughout Shared Education, they have mixed with and communicated with many different people. Some partnerships have given children the chance to mix with differently-abled children, those speaking a different language or requiring additional support.

As activities have shifted to online platforms, children have had to develop different communication skills. For some, the use of online technology to engage with partnership peers has been challenging, while for others this has actually facilitated communication and engagement. Parents of preschool children noted that their children enjoyed communicating using technology, as it was something different for them and therefore fun. They also made 'getting to know you' videos which helped build friendships in the absence of face-to-face visits.

During the parent focus groups, both preschool and primary parents were keen to emphasise the importance of opportunities for their children to make new friends with other settings. For those in small rural communities, this is a particular benefit given the small pool of friends in the surrounding areas.

Shared Education opens up opportunities to make friends with a wider range of children from different backgrounds, and some of these have benefitted children later. One parent of a primary school aged pupil shared that her older daughter had gone on to Community College after school and had rekindled a friendship there from someone she met during

Shared Education. Supporting children through the transition period was a common goal across partnerships.

With the onset of Covid-19 and the movement to online delivery, teachers/practitioners commented that this impacted on children being able to meet and make friends as readily as they would otherwise have. However, since lockdown has limited the socialisation opportunities for young children, online and innovative Shared Education activities have presented opportunities to redress this to an extent.

- During lockdown, there was a strong focus on **health and wellbeing**, which came through clearly in discussions on activities undertaken. Examples included [Weaving Wellbeing](#) and [PATHS](#) programmes; walking and other physical activities; online yoga sessions; and coordinated activities for wellbeing week. Primary school parents welcomed this focus on wellbeing, given the difficult times that children may have experienced during the pandemic.





## Benefits for the setting/school

The aim of Shared Education is to create opportunities for sustained interaction of children from different backgrounds through their participation in curriculum-based common classes.

In the process of achieving this aim, benefits have spread much more widely. Shared Education has provided staff with opportunities to meet colleagues in other settings/schools, with many reporting the development of deep and meaningful friendships. The points below highlight the benefits of Shared Education for the staff and their settings / schools.

**Staff relationships:** Shared Education activities provided a plethora of opportunities for staff to meet and for friendships to form over time.

One member of staff, in particular, noted how he felt development of productive staff relationships was the biggest achievement of his career and this was attributed to their school's involvement in Shared Education. Many of those interviewed stated that their staff felt comfortable and welcomed when visiting their partner setting/schools thus helping to maximise the impact of the initiative for both staff and children. For other settings/schools – some of which are located in very rural areas – Shared Education provided valuable opportunities for staff to meet up, helping to minimise any sense of social isolation that might otherwise arise in the absence of Shared Education. As with other benefits, this peer support has been especially appreciated during the pandemic, with examples of staff across the partnerships maintaining contact with partner settings through WhatsApp groups, and communication stretching far beyond Shared Education issues.

This support from partnership colleagues is a key area where the benefits of Shared Education are expected to be sustained post-funding.

**Joint planning, delivery, and evaluation of activities:** Shared Education provided settings/schools with protected time to jointly plan, deliver, and evaluate shared activities. Partnerships were allocated a minimum number of days for sub-cover for their staff which meant that Shared Education was not an additional task on top of their main teaching responsibilities. The joint planning, delivery and evaluation of shared activities provided staff with opportunities to learn from their colleagues by observing their practices. During the lockdowns, many of these face-to-face opportunities were more limited, however, given that most activities transitioned to online delivery, many of those interviewed noted how their IT skills were enhanced through the opportunities this provided for informal learning.

**Professional development opportunities:** Partnerships had access to a comprehensive training programme which covered the concepts underpinning Shared Education, followed by more practical sessions on implementation support to facilitate effective roll-out of projects. For example, as part of CASE's Teacher Professional Learning (TPL) staff had access to a suite of training sessions including 'Online Collaboration'; 'Sharing through Play', and; 'Understanding and supporting emotional well-being'. For SFTS partnerships, training opportunities included the Media Initiative for Children and Virtual Connections and Networking/Catch up session.

In addition to supporting the delivery of Shared Education, the range of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) opportunities also helped to equip staff with the skills needed to make best use of ICT during the lockdown. Staff received CPD sessions on how to use iPads and also how to make best use of online software such as Google Classroom to enhance lesson delivery.

These sessions tended to be delivered to all staff in particular partnerships.

The training opportunities described above, alongside the use of shared storage systems (e.g. Google drive) meant that when the pandemic struck, schools were already well prepared and equipped for delivering activities using online learning platforms.

Beyond this, there were other opportunities for staff to take part in, for example whole school nurturing training and first aid training. Collectively these training and professional development opportunities, combined with learning directly from colleagues in partner schools, has allowed staff to upskill both formally and informally, which helped to bring positive benefits for children not directly involved in Shared Education.

**Economic:** As already noted, many settings/schools have taken care to spend their available funding in ways that will be of benefit beyond the lifetime of Shared Education. For most, this has included the purchase of educational resources to support learning, with many examples noted including indoor and outdoor play equipment, Mathletics online maths package, Weaving Wellbeing books, and PATHS wellbeing programme resources. Without the funding provided by the SEUPB, settings/schools would not have been able to afford these resources within their own budgets, some of which are operating in deficit.

## Benefits for parents and the wider community

Level of engagement with parents and the wider community varied across the partnerships. SFTS partnerships generally reported higher levels of engagement with parents than their CASE counterparts, and indeed were more likely to report intentional engagement with parents and wider communities. CASE partnerships attributed this difference to their desire to spend time establishing processes and systems to embed Shared Education for children and teachers in the first instance, with plans for later-stage engagement with parents curtailed by the end of face-to-face activities that the pandemic brought.

In general, there were only a few strong examples of where Shared Education activities had been targeted specifically at parents. As indicated above, preschool partnerships tended to have had more engagement with parents and communities, which reflects the closer relationships they already had with parents, and parents' reflections of this engagement were extremely. Examples of engagement with parents prior to the pandemic included:

- Invitation of parents to join their children on trips or other shared activities, either to volunteer or to take part in activities.
- Some pre-school settings ran workshops for parents on particular themes such as parenting skills or involved them in relation to particular events such as Safer Internet Day.
- In a small number of instances, parents were invited to facilitate sessions where they had particular expertise in relation to the topic being delivered.

Since the pandemic started, direct involvement of parents has been much more limited – particularly in face-to-face activities. Indeed, Covid-19 was cited as one of the main factors limiting the direct involvement of parents/carers. However, settings/schools have made a concerted effort to keep parents involved, via parents' evenings, newsletters, and photographs of sessions shared via social media. Parents feel they have been kept informed by settings/schools have tried their best to maintain the connections established with parents.

Some partnerships have noted increased engagement of parents in educational activities, as children were working at home and often required their parents' support to join zoom sessions, upload their homework or undertake activities.

Several partnerships noted how they intended to get parents more involved in Shared Education as schools get back to normal following the various lockdowns. Partnerships pointed to the importance of these in terms of the wider reconciliation benefits for parents and families given the important role that family members play in influencing children's behaviours and shaping their attitudes towards children from other community backgrounds.



## What has worked well and why?

Several key factors helped partnerships to become firmly established and thrive over the last five years. The following were identified by staff who were interviewed as part of the case study virtual visits.

### **Whole-school approach and buy-in:**

Partnerships do not always work out, and one of the key facilitators of a successful partnership is felt to be the quality of the relationships that have developed over time. While some reflected that this relationship developed organically, there is significant evidence of effort invested to build these relationships, not just for the staff directly involved, but more widely across each partnership setting/school.

Partnerships also worked hard to get buy-in from the Board of Governors and parents as well as all staff. This 'whole-school approach' is seen as critical to the success for all partnerships and was a priority from the beginning.

Staff interviewed talked about how their relationships and friendships developed over time and how their colleagues became a sounding board for sharing any concerns or talking informally about things not necessarily related to Shared Education. These friendships were critical particularly in the earlier years of Shared Education given how much there was for staff to absorb. The strong friendships meant staff could feel free to share ideas with each other and build shared learning into everyday practices.

**Direct support from Project Partners:** Support provided by SFTS / CASE project partners (including the Education Authority, Leargas, Early Years, National Childhood Network and the Fermanagh Trust) in addition to that provided by SFTS Senior Early Years Specialists and CASE Development Officers has proved to be invaluable to partnerships, particularly as they embarked on Shared Education. SFTS Senior Early Years Specialists (SEYS) and CASE Development Officers (DOs) organised training sessions for staff, attended and observed Shared Education activities and provided ongoing advice and support via Zoom sessions. The support was critical during the lockdowns when partnerships had to rapidly adapt their approach from face-to-face to online delivery. SEYS and DOs have also worked closely with practitioners/teachers to help them engage in reflective practice, contributing to improved use of self-evaluation frameworks thereby increasing standards across settings/schools.

**Mix and quality of activities:** The mix of activities comprising outdoor adventure activities and in-school curricular activities was viewed as being a key facilitator of success by several partnerships. Many of these activities involved bringing staff in from outside organisations such as PeacePlayers and Young at Art or schools going to external venues (e.g. Streamvale Farm, W5). These activities appealed to a wider array of learning styles, helping to meet the needs of all children. The mix of these activities was critical to making Shared Education a success. In addition, the purchase of play equipment and other resources as discussed above has significantly improved the learning opportunities open to children. Whilst the move to online delivery had an obvious impact on the development and formation of friendships, one of the settings pointed to an unexpected benefit of this model of delivery in terms of increased inclusivity for children with mobility issues or who were less able to engage face-to-face.

During lockdown, schools and settings also thought creatively to engage children in activities that would support their wellbeing, given the challenges that all children and their families were facing.

There are many examples of innovative practice, for example daily walking challenges where children uploaded and shared their progress, and a beach treasure hunt for children and their families to encourage outdoor activities.

## Challenges and barriers

Several challenges emerged in the earlier years of delivery for most of the partnerships, as they got to grips with the requirements and put in place practical plans. Schools and settings have worked to address these challenges over time, and for the most part, they became less impactful in subsequent years as systems became embedded.

Some challenges were specific to the setting/school whilst others impacted across a number of partnerships. Common challenges included:

- **Venue capacity issues:** Many of the partnerships reported issues in relation to the lack of suitable venues that could hold all of the children taking part in Shared Education.

Some partnerships were able to source suitable venues such as town halls or local sports facilities that were able to hold large groups of children, although on a few occasions this caused some difficulty due to sports facilities being affiliated with one community. Over time, schools / settings adjusted their delivery model by putting children into smaller groups based on their age or year group, which largely helped to mitigate against the requirement for a large external venue.

- **Planning time:** Some staff noted the significant amount of time required not just to deliver the activities, but also in terms of joint planning and evaluation of those activities. Face-to-face activities in particular required staff to spend significant amounts of planning time to ensure that children had access to the resources needed to make sure that the sessions were successful. Tasks involved counting and labelling resources and making sure there were sufficient chairs / tables at the venue for every child. Again, as staff reflected on past experiences, these challenges have lessened. Indeed, one school reflected that by the final year of funding, Shared Education had been fully integrated into everyday life, rather than an additional task to be completed.
- **Bureaucracy:** Settings/schools pointed to elements of Shared Education that were bureaucratic and time consuming. Examples included the need to get two or three quotations for buses, which meant that setting/school had to absorb the cost initially and then reclaim it back. Other aspects that were viewed as being bureaucratic included the need for action plans in advance of delivery. Whilst this posed initial challenges for some partnerships, these became less burdensome over time as processes became embedded. A third concern was the linking of funding to number of children actually participating in sessions; this meant that if a child was off ill or unable to attend, schools/settings received less money, which made planning difficult.
- **Lack of opportunity for face-to-face contact during the pandemic:** Face-to-face activities are critical to helping children develop friendships with their peers. The pandemic and resultant lockdowns had a significant impact on the extent to which children could meet up face-to-face.

For a sustained period of time, no face-to-face sessions took place. Preschool settings reported this as more of a challenge than primary schools, with staff reflecting that the younger children were less able to get to know and recognise other children online. In response to this challenge, schools and settings adapted to an online offering and delivered creative and imaginative activities to keep children engaged. Examples included activities such as penpal writing and design of Christmas cards which were shared with children from other settings. In addition, most of the settings/schools engaged the children in developing videos for specific activities (e.g. planting flowers) for sharing with their partner(s).

While settings/schools have made the most of the difficulties they faced, they did feel that online activities were more successful for children who had been able to build face-to-face friendships pre-pandemic.

Other challenges which were more specific to certain settings/schools included:

- **Settings/schools being overly ambitious:** This was a particular challenge for a small number of settings. In the first year, staff planned for a wider variety of activities than was possible for them to deliver within the time allocated and aiming to include all children right from the start rather than starting small and building up. Staff reflected that this sometimes meant children did not have sufficient time or space to take breaks from formal activities to properly socialise with their peers and develop important social skills. Larger groups of mixed ability children also meant that on occasion, some children had finished their set activity whilst others were still working on it. Partnerships made individual adaptations to their delivery in subsequent years to address these challenges, for example building in more time for breaks and lunch to facilitate



informal socialisation or holding some additional activities in reserve for children who completed set activities earlier than their peers.

- **Parental support:** A small number of partnerships reported challenges in terms of getting parental consent from some parents so that their child(ren) could fully engage in activities. The number of parents who did not consent to the involvement of their child(ren), whilst low in absolute terms, had a significant impact on those children in terms of being excluded from taking part in the school trips and visits. It also meant greater workloads for some staff as extra teacher capacity was needed to deliver lessons to these children. Whilst the resource implication was an issue, staff felt more disappointed that these children were not given an opportunity to interact with their peers in other schools. Partnerships worked through these challenges, and there were examples of successful outcomes, for example, where parents agreed to their child(ren) taking part in shared activities within the school setting.
- **Use of external facilitation:** Some partnerships made use of external facilitators – particularly in the earlier years when they themselves felt less confident in being able to deliver particular activities. As indicated above, teachers / practitioners felt that some of these activities were too structured and did not provide children with sufficient time to and get to know their peers. As staff became more confident in delivering Shared Education, less reliance was placed on bringing in outside expertise.
- **Dedicated time for principals/managers to meet:** Whilst teachers/practitioners who delivered Shared Education activities were provided with sub-cover to release them to plan and deliver sessions, principals who were not directly involved in delivering

Shared Education, were not provided with sub-cover to enable them to meet together.

They appreciated the importance of this shared time together and were happy to make the commitment to meet, however this was in addition to their normal day-to-day workload. Indeed, several principals noted that they had set aside time in the evenings for this important collaboration to happen.

- **Allocation of planning days:** One of the partnerships noted issues relating to the allocation of sub-cover. This partnership had three schools within it – two of which were small in terms of child enrolment and staffing and one which was much larger. Regardless of the size of schools, each school was allocated nine days of sub-cover. This presented a challenge for the larger school which had eight staff involved in Shared Education. Whilst the partnership found a workable solution to the issue, they believed this should be looked at in greater detail in future, in particular for any potential PEACE PLUS projects that are funded.



## Looking forward: sustainability and future plans

Shared Education is unlike any previous initiatives that settings/schools have taken part in, in terms of the level of resourcing and its duration. It has provided settings/schools with an unparalleled opportunity to develop deep and meaningful relationships with partners, helping to reduce social isolation, particularly for those that are smaller and located in more rural areas. It has also helped to sustained interaction between children from different community and socio-economic backgrounds through shared activities.

The case study interviews have shown that there is a real desire to continue as much of the existing activities as is possible. However, there is equally a recognition that maintaining all of the activities would not be possible without continued funding. Whilst the pandemic has shown that much can be done using low-cost online tools such as Google Classroom and Zoom, settings/schools reported that this is not a full substitute for face-to-face activities and reported that it was more difficult for children to develop deeper social bonds and friendship.

There is a limit, therefore, to how much online tools can replace meaningful face-to-face contact that are critical in helping children to develop strong social bonds and friendships with their peers.

Those interviewed believed that some element of funding – particularly for costly activities such as school trips – would be critical to be able to sustain the shared activities that add most in terms of helping children to develop their social interaction skills. However, those partnerships who invested in educational and play resources, and in staff training, will continue to use the new

resources and approaches to support children's learning for years to come.

Beyond this, all partnerships are keen to continue the relationships they have built with partner(s) and see the friendships and joint working as something that will continue long beyond Shared Education. For many, partner settings/schools have become an extended group of colleagues rather than separate.

Many have now established joint planning processes and administrative systems which will also continue.

At the end of five years of Shared Education funding, and despite the challenges brought by the pandemic, there are clearly positive changes to all settings/schools involved.



## Final reflections

Partnerships have come a long way in terms of developing and embedding Shared Education. Most settings/schools started out at a relatively small scale in terms of pupil numbers and built this up such that nine of the 11 case study partnerships now involve all year groups in shared classes as part of a whole-school approach. Whilst there have been challenges along the way, partnerships have adapted their offering with the support of CASE and SFTS Project Partners.

Despite the Covid-19 pandemic, and challenges experienced, all feel that Shared Education has been of significant benefit to their children, staff, and wider setting/school.

Shared Education has now become a central part of children's educational experience through sustained curricular led shared classes and outings with others from different community backgrounds. These shared sessions have enabled children to learn new skills, such as coding or improved literacy, as well as enhanced confidence, social and communication skills. Children have greatly benefited from the skills and expertise of teachers/staff from across the partnership.

There are examples of settings/schools having aligned their priorities and developed collaborative working that extends to the whole school offering rather than Shared Education specifically.

The fact that Shared Education has been fully integrated into school life, rather than an additional task, bodes well for sustaining shared activities into the future.

It is evident that staff have developed new friendships and are able to call upon their colleagues from within their partnership to share ideas and take part in joint training to develop skills to enhance teaching methods.

Regardless of the level of future funding, all case study partnerships agreed that they are committed to continuing to share best practice and use the resources they have acquired through Shared Education and sustain as many of the activities as possible.

Whilst opportunities for face-to-face activities reduced during the pandemic, both staff and children found new ways of engaging with their partners, for example through the use of penpal letters, thereby further developing their writing and communication skills whilst also helping young people to develop bonds and friendships.

Through the enhanced opportunities to meet, share, learn and develop friendships with children from different communities and cultural backgrounds, Shared Education has left a positive and lasting legacy for children. Many children will continue to benefit when they make the transition nursery to primary or from primary to secondary school and will be able to re-engage with the friends they have made via Shared Education.

Staff in all schools/settings are hopeful that the lessons learned will shape children's interactions with others they meet as they continue their educational and life journey, thereby contributing to building a culture of good relations.

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