



PEACE IV Programme - Shared Education Impact Evaluation

Collaboration Through Sharing in Education (CASE)

Case Study Report 2022: Primary School Partnership

Castletown Primary School, Portlean National School and Scoil Cholmcille
Drumman



Approach

As part of the wider Impact Evaluation of Shared Education¹, a number of partnerships were invited to host a case study in 2020 and 2022. Case studies were identified by CASE Project Partners (i.e. The Education Authority and Léargas).

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

The specific objectives of the case studies are:

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

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

This case study included the following research activities:

- A group interview with the Principals of each of the three participating schools. Two of the school principals are teaching principals.
- Review of existing partnership documentation including application form, action plans, evaluations, and monitoring visit report.

The case study report is structured as follows:

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

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

Background to the partnership

This partnership comprises three primary schools: Castletown Primary School, Portlean National School and Scoil Cholmcille, all located in County Donegal. Given that the county is largely rural, there is quite a significant distance (c. 35 kilometres) between Castletown primary and the other two schools in the partnership.

Castletown Primary School is located in St Johnston, a small village just 12km from the border with Northern Ireland. It has a population of just over 500 and is one of a small number of villages in Donegal that has a predominantly Protestant population. In 2021/22, the school had a total pupil enrolment of 59. Approximately 85% of the children are from a Protestant background, 13% are from a Catholic background and 2% were from an 'Other' background (as at 2017/18 when the Shared Education Partnership was formed).

Portlean National School is located in the large village of Kilmacrennan, about 10km north of Letterkenny. The village has a population of 753 according to the 2016 census and has a mix of people from both a Catholic and Protestant background.

In 2021/22, Portlean National School had a pupil enrolment of 31. The majority (some 80%) of children are from a Protestant background, whilst 16% are from a Catholic background and 4% are from an 'other' background. Finally, Scoil Cholmcille is located in Drumman, just outside the town of Ramelton. The school is located approximately 10km from Letterkenny.

The school had an enrolment of 66 children in 2021/22 and the vast majority (over 95%) are from a Catholic background.

Previous experiences of Shared Education

Prior to becoming involved in Shared Education, two of the schools (Scoil Cholmcille and Portlean) which are located geographically close to each other had a history of sharing resources over a number of years. This relationship was largely informal and not a structured partnership with defined activities such as that afforded by Shared Education.

“We (Scoil Cholmcille) worked closely with Portlean and we would have shared resources over the years. (Principal)

The principals of Castletown and Portlean National School knew each other from attending college together. Given their relative proximity to Scoil Cholmcille, the school was invited to take part in the Shared Education partnership by the other two schools. One of the principals explained the overall benefits that they believed might materialise for their children.

“We knew each other from college. One of our closest schools was Scoil Cholmcille and I asked him [the previous school principal] if he would be interested in becoming involved as we thought it would be very beneficial for staff and children alike. And it has been an extremely positive experience. (Principal)

The principal of Scoil Cholmcille noted the fact that the principal of Castletown Primary school had been involved in Shared Education in a school where she previously had worked. This was important in terms of understanding what was feasible from a practical point of view within their partnership.

“When [the principal of one of our partner schools] rang our principal about the PEACE IV programme and whether our school would be interested, we said we would give it a go. It was invaluable that that principal had already been working in a school that had been part of the programme. Her input and her understanding of what was doable was great.

One of the principals explained that none of the schools had ever been involved in anything similar to Shared Education before and were not aware of any programme that has similarities with Shared Education operating in schools in Ireland.

“I just have the experience of PEACE IV Programme in 2017 in the previous school I worked in. To be honest I've never heard of any other initiative getting children working collaboratively together and don't know if such a programme exists. (Principal)

Motivations for getting involved

The schools identified a number of motivating factors for getting involved in Shared Education. The overarching objective of being involved in Shared Education was to promote equality of opportunity and good relationships amongst the whole school community. In addition, the schools sought to create a collaborative culture by focusing on common curricular areas across their schools such as literacy, science, and physical education (PE) – identified within their school development plans as priorities.

“We hope to create an environment of education based on co-operation around the common curricular areas of literacy, science, and PE (including the Active Schools Programme). This is in line with the School Improvement Plans of the schools involved. In order to achieve this, teachers from different faith schools will work together collaboratively, both at the planning and teaching phase. (Shared Education Application Form)

The additional financial resources were also a key motivating factor, and this was identified as a key driver for the schools coming together.

“The money was a big driver. The finance helped a lot as it gave pupils and teachers an opportunity to get to know each other and learn about themselves in a safe space. (Principal)

The financial resources were critical in terms of helping principals and teachers to physically meet together. This was important given the relative rural location of the schools, the distance between them and also the fact that the schools are relatively small and have low numbers of teachers. As one principal noted, participation in Shared Education has been invaluable in helping to reduce the sense of isolation for principals in relatively small schools.

“ *Just to build relationships with other children and teachers. Being a principal in a small school can be a lonely experience so having those relationships is important. (Principal)*

Similar to other schools and settings taking part in Shared Education, Covid-19 has had a significant impact on the extent to which activities could be undertaken collaboratively on a face-to-face basis.

For much of 2020/21 and 2021/22, activities have been undertaken within each of the settings with schools linking up using online platforms for specific events. In addition, the focus of some of the activities changed, with a major focus on activities that promote pupil's emotional health and well-being.



Model of sharing

The table below sets out the model of sharing over the five years that the programme is being delivered within the partnership. All of the children in each of the schools were involved in Shared Education from the beginning.

The partnership was part of Cohort 2 and it commenced in 2018/19 (Year 2 of the programme). Pupils in separate year groups were grouped together (e.g. junior and senior infants / 1st and 2nd class) and a series of activities were delivered to each.

	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22
	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5
Castletown Primary School	38	48	57	59
Portlean National School	25	24	31	31
Scoil Cholmcille	87	77	71	66
Total	150	149	159	156
% of children involved	100% of pupils (Junior Infants to 6th Class)	100%	100%	100%
Model of sharing	5 Shared Education lessons in topics such as literacy, SESE and PE x 4 hours per lesson 1 education tour (x 9 hours) 1 team building day (x 5 hours)	6 Shared Education lessons in curricular areas of PE, Literacy and STEM x 4.5 hours each. 1 motivational session x 4.5 hours	5 collaborative projects focused on wellbeing, mental health, and literacy, largely delivered in own settings with some collaborative online activity x 6 hours per project	6 collaborative projects involving 34 hours of class-based work and 37 hours of online contact work. 1 x end of year trip of 5 hours planned

Prior to Covid-19, the start of the year involved children participating in a team building trip, followed by the delivery of five Shared Education sessions of four hours duration each. The school year ended with one celebratory event of nine hours duration. The Shared Education sessions focused on specific areas within their respective school development plans such as physical education. For example, one of the schools, Portlean National School, was able to work towards achieving the Active School Flag.

Other areas included Social, Environmental and Scientific Education (SESE), Green Schools and literacy development.

In Year 3 (2019/20), six sessions of four and a half hours duration were delivered, covering a range of curricular areas including PE, literacy and STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics), alongside a motivational session of the same duration. This was followed by an educational STEM tour (of nine hours).

In Year 4, schools experienced considerable disruption due to Covid-19. The model of delivery shifted in response to this, with projects predominantly delivered onsite within each of the respective schools followed by collaborative online sessions. Five collaborative projects were delivered with each project lasting up to six hours. Given the Covid-19 context and the impacts of this on children, there was a specific focus on positive mental health and well-being, amongst other things. One of the principals interviewed explained the rationale as follows.

“We decided that given lockdown was traumatic and they [the children] were definitely suffering, we thought mindfulness would be our theme. Previously it would have been STEM, but our main focus would be well-being. We did loads of activities and had six weeks of mindfulness; one day a week. (Principal)

In 2021/22 (Year 5) similar themed events were undertaken including mindfulness. The well-being activities were broadened to include teachers, parents, and young people. As part of wellbeing week, children from across the different schools helped to raise money for a charitable donation to people living in Lagos.

Other activities undertaken in 2021/22 included: Christmas craft; a literacy initiative to support children and encourage them to read books, a book week event where children got an opportunity to dress up as a book character, and an active week where children could get involved in a range of activities including dancing.

Whilst the extent of face-to-face contact between children has been significantly reduced, the schools in the partnership are hoping for increased social contact in the coming months.

“There is a sports day coming up in May [2022]. We are also hoping to have meet ups in a garden centre, a visit to a farm, and dancing and gymnastics. (Principal)

Benefits for the child

Educational: Involvement in Shared Education has helped to widen the curriculum and expand the range of curricular content for children. This would not have occurred but for the additional financial resources provided by CASE. Specific activities that the children were able to engage with included learning how to do computer coding and building robots.

“We had a STEM day in January 2020 where we brought in a facilitator. The seniors learned about coding and built robots. It would have been impossible without the resources. That hands-on mixing was great. (Principal)

“They got to do a variety of different science and engineering activities like building robots and cars and playing with Lego blocks. They would have never have had that experience. (Principal)

The addition of a literacy project was also viewed as having a positive impact on children’s learning. Children were able to learn the Irish language and develop their language skills through Seachtain na Gaeilge which is an international festival promoting the Irish language and culture.

In addition, funding was provided to purchase books such as those authored by Julia Donaldson. Children were able to take these books home and extend their reading skills beyond school hours.

“Seachtain na Gaeilge was great as it helped them to develop their language as all of them were reading together. We also used funding to buy Julia Donaldson books such as the Gruffalo. The children could take them out of school and bring them home. We have been able to get the resources and would never have been able to do that. (Principal)

Skills and confidence: There has been a consistent focus on well-being and active outdoor activities throughout the schools’ involvement in Shared Education. Children responded well to these activities and bringing in outside expertise in PE supported the development of childrens skills and confidence.

“We have been doing well-being and active activities every year. They really enjoy it. The PE person we bring in has helped to build the skills and confidence of the children and they have gained so much confidence from that. (Principal)



Photo: Children taking part in sports activities whilst also getting to know each other better and building their confidence

The partnership also included a range of tasks for the children to develop their problem-solving skills. One of the activities highlighted by the school principals was in relation to making ‘massive’ nutcrackers. Whilst the task was described as being ‘a struggle’ and a challenge for the children, the children were proud of what they had achieved.

Other activities that helped to improve children’s communication and life skills included the pen pal letters which children sent to their peers in other schools. This helped to develop children’s writing and communication skills whilst also being fun at the same time. These pen pal letters were especially important given they were written by the children during the Covid-19 pandemic and were a critical means of keeping in contact.

“During Covid-19, the children did not get a chance to talk individually, so we assigned them pen pal partners. I allocated out the names. They do remember them even though that might be two years ago. (Principal)

“The pen pal letters develop the whole communication side of things. It’s another life skill. (Principal)

Social development: All three principals noted the importance of Shared Education in bringing children together and helping them to form new friendships. Initially, it took children a while to adapt to, and feel comfortable with, their new environments, however a range of well-planned activities (such as development of pen pal letters) helped them forge new friendship groups.

“Making friends with children can be difficult as they are so comfortable in their own setting, and it takes them a wee while. After a few weeks they talk to other children and start making new friends. We are doing the pen pal letters and that helps. (Principal)

One of the key aspects which helped support the development of friendships prior to Covid-19 was the amount of whole class work and group work where children were paired with children from other schools. This, along with the mix of practical activities, helped to promote the development of social skills and friendships.

“Getting children mixing and working together and not doing individual work was important. The Christmas crafting was great because there was a whole day of it and so they could have their own conversations. That was our whole aim – to have hands on activities in mixed groups so that they could feel comfortable and could establish relationships with the children. It involved a lot of planning.

Given the Covid-19 context and the lack of face-to-face meetings, this presented a challenge to schools and to the children to keep these friendships going.

“The connections that the children have made before lockdown were brilliant. They have been so lucky to do so many fun things. (Principal)

“There was a lot of friendship building and getting to know the children’s names. They got on so comfortably together and really developed good relationships. That was the challenge with Covid; how do we keep the relationship going? (Principal)

Mental health and well-being: Given the impact of the pandemic on parents, children and the teachers themselves, a key focus of the action plan in Year 5 was the inclusion of mindfulness and well-being activities for all of these groups. These activities were viewed as being beneficial for all groups, in particular for the children where they could learn breathing techniques and how to ‘shut out the world’ so as to be able to relax and sleep better.

Learning about difference: A number of activities focused on learning about difference and diversity. In Year 2, one of the activities involved children learning a song about two people – one from a Catholic background and one from a Protestant background. It used song to explore these people’s experiences and also the fact that, with the exception of their religion, they are both the same underneath.

“I think it was in our first year that the seniors did a song about two people: one a Catholic and one a Protestant. We talked through their story and that even though they are from different religions, they are just the same people. (Principal)

The charitable activity for people in Lagos was also an opportunity to learn about difference and they used the song mentioned above to teach about difference as well.

“The Lagos project had a lot about difference and it dealt with it in a subtle way. We sang the song every time we met up and it talks about there being no difference between us.

Overall, however, the interviewees noted that they did not believe that children notice ethnicity or ascribe any importance to it as dividing pupils. The differences they do notice are more apparent differences such as physical disabilities and one of the principals noted how the children treated a child with a disability from another school so well by being so welcoming and inclusive when they visited.

“I really don’t think they notice ethnicity. The uniforms – yes, you can tell they are different. There is a little girl with a walker frame and the children were so kind to her: they noticed her and cared and helped her. (Principal)



Photo: Children had an opportunity to take part in all sorts of activities throughout the year – this one illustrates advent and the countdown to Christmas – one of the shared activities that children took part in.

Benefits for the school

Provision of additional resources: All of those interviewed pointed to the benefits of being involved in Shared Education in terms of the additional resources they had been able to purchase that they couldn't afford otherwise. Resources included sharpies for children's artwork and drawing, books for the library and board games. Some of these resources will last well beyond the point the current funding ends and are viewed by interviewees as an investment for current and future learning.

“The benefit is the resources for children to use in the schools such as the sharpies for art. It's an investment in each of the lessons - we have used the resources. We made investment in our libraries and have bought books and board games. (Principal)

Enhanced communication between teachers:

The partnership set up WhatsApp groups for teachers of the various year groups so that they could keep in contact and jointly plan their sessions. The WhatsApp groups were pivotal in providing opportunities for teachers to plan lessons and activities and share ideas and learning and bounce ideas off each other.

“The WhatsApp was used by teachers to keep in contact and there was a lot of interaction. We had different groups for different teachers (e.g. Juniors / Seniors...). We used WhatsApp to plan our lessons, which was really successful. (Principal)

Development of new skills: The arrival of Covid-19 meant that teachers in Shared Education schools were some of the first to experience online delivery of activities via Zoom and teams. One principal talked about having to learn Zoom on the spot and without training, and also relayed how important virtual delivery of sessions was in helping to maintain contact between children who otherwise would not have been able to meet face-to-face.

“I don’t think any of us heard about Zoom before. I had a Zoom account and hosted some of the meetings. We learned on our feet; there was no training. Prior to Covid, we were used to going to schools for the activities. The Zoom meetings were successful. Because of Covid, children were home so long, and they were so excited to meet with kids online. (Principal)

It did help the staff that prior to Covid-19, schools had some exposure to ICT and had an opportunity to develop skills leading into the pandemic. Without the resources provided by Shared Education, it is unlikely they would have had the funding to buy in the training or the software (e.g. Zoom) or have the time to build up their knowledge and skills.

“We had a little experience with using iPads [prior to Covid-19]. To have the funding and time to increase knowledge and skills was great and learn how to use cameras was great. It was nice to have iPad skills leading into it (the pandemic). (Principal)

Benefits for parents and the wider community

For the most part, parents and the Board of Management (which includes some parents) have been kept informed about Shared Education as opposed to having direct involvement in the sessions or activities. For the Board of Management, Shared Education featured as a specific item on the meeting agenda.

“Parents have been kept fully informed as have the Board of Management; it has been on the agenda at each of the meetings. We haven’t involved parents in any of the sessions, but if you were to ask the parents about the Shared Education programme, they would be very able to answer. (Principal)

The partnership had plans to engage parents directly in Shared Education activities and more recently also planned to hold an activity for parents during wellness week.

However, the logistics of doing this are challenging, in particular finding somewhere near to all schools that has sufficient capacity to hold large groups.



“Pre-Covid – we did talk about doing something like a concert and involving parents. In addition, at mindfulness week, we had a session lined up for the parents and we had started to involve them. However, the logistics is challenging, Castletown Primary School is far away from Drumman, so we would have to find somewhere central and somewhere big enough. (Principal)

The partnership has been more successful at involving the wider community by including Shared Education activities and events in the local printed press.

“There are definitely community links. We include pictures (of Shared Education activities) in the paper, and they are labelled as being done as part of the PEACE IV Programme. (Principal)

In addition, the partnership makes extensive use of other forms of media including radio and Facebook to promote an awareness of the activities the children have been involved in. One example given was the involvement of children in Read Donegal Literacy (DL) – an initiative in County Donegal to promote reading.

“Our websites and Facebook pages always mention Shared Education. As part of Read DL, reading initiative that seniors are involved in, one of our staff and two children were speaking on Highland radio and helped launch a book. They spoke with the DJ and said they were doing this with two other schools [in the Shared Education partnership]. (Principal)

What has worked well and why?

A number of factors were identified in terms of sustaining Shared Education and the partnership of schools. Firstly, the additional funding and resources were critical to helping the partnership deliver so many activities. The time to be able to meet and jointly plan sessions would not have happened in the absence of funding and this provided critical opportunities for teachers to share and test new ideas and learn from each other.

“We are always learning from each other. Some teachers have certain skills and that sharing of skills has been tremendous. We also have some training and support from Léargas, such as iPad training. That is something we wouldn't have had... the sharing of expertise and the 'having a go and developing confidence' has been great. (Principal)

One principal noted how important this coming together and sharing of expertise has been to the partnership, given the relatively small size of the schools and their teaching staff. This has been critically important in terms of being able to plan interesting and stimulating activities for the children involved.

“We are working in small schools. I am the only infant teacher in my school. Instead of me running with ideas on my own, we can bounce ideas off each other. It has been lovely and refreshing that you are not on your own. Being able to formulate or plan days has been invaluable. (Principal)

Another key enabler has been the enthusiasm amongst staff to make the sessions interesting and engaging for the children and to build upon the success of particular activities to help ensure that the next is as good if not better.

“If we have one really successful day, we want to make the next learning experience even better. It is a lot of work and stress and you are much more tired but for me that self-satisfaction that it was a really good day and that we make the next day as successful, if not better, is so important. (Principal)

Challenges and barriers

One of the biggest challenges that those interviewed talked about was the challenge of being overly ambitious and packing too many activities in when the programme first began. In addition, the timings for the activities were not tailored to the skills and abilities of all children. The schools overcame this challenge by adjusting the timings needed according to the skills and abilities of children and they reduced the intensity of activities over time, by planning the delivery of fewer activities but keeping some activities in reserve if children got through the planned activities too quickly.

“I think before Covid, we were a victim of our over-enthusiasm... we over-estimated the amount of activities we could deliver for the time we had. We adjusted the timings of the activities depending on whether the children were more or less able because the skills of the children differed across age groups. We tried to pack too much into a day, but now we have a few things sitting by if we need them. (Principal)

There was also a realisation that whilst staff were putting a lot of pressure on themselves to deliver lots of activities, the important thing was not the quantity of activities but the quality of the interaction and enjoyment that the children got out of those activities. This naturally led to the coordinators ‘stepping’ down the pace of delivery and focusing on things that the children enjoyed such as the JumpingCLAY².

“We put a lot of pressure on ourselves but the enjoyment for the children was always about getting together. We were nearly running out of time to some of the things done so we stepped it down a bit. Every child mentioned different things that they liked. Some of them especially liked the Jumping clay but they all had different things that they enjoyed. (Principal)

² JumpingCLAY is an educational company specialising in both children's educational activity programs and air-drying clay products suitable for all ages 3+.

A challenge closely associated with the scale of activity was the time it took to organise activities, particularly when they were delivered to children across all of the schools. As one principal noted, everything had to be organised for the entire activity well in advance and for the right number of children.

“The organisation time and not just organising the venue, it’s the activities as well. You have to have 38 pairs of scissors, and everything had to be organised into the right pile and ready to go. (Principal)

Another principal noted the challenge in similar terms about having to remember to bring chairs when visiting a partnering school. Whilst this posed a challenge in terms of workload, the benefits made it worthwhile.

Putting aside the additional workload, one of the principals, who had been involved in Shared Education in another school where behaviour was an issue, stated that there had been no other challenges that caused an issue for them.

“I can honestly say there have not been other challenges. I have been involved [with Shared Education] before and I found it hard to deal with behaviour issues then. But in our partnership the children are so respectful. If you are dealing with behavioural issues, then it’s not as positive an experience. (Principal)

Looking forward: sustainability and future plans

The schools in the partnership plan to continue their relationships after funding comes to an end. Particular aspects of the current arrangements such as the WhatsApp groups, which are essentially cost free will also be maintained.

“We will definitely keep the relationships going. Also, the teachers have a WhatsApp message group and we use zoom for some of the meetings. We will keep it going. (Principal)

There was also some agreement that particular activities and initiatives such as Read DL (Donegal Literacy) could be maintained and that broadly speaking about half of the current 30 hours of shared activities could be maintained and would be sustainable.

“The literacy initiative in the community runs every year (called Donegal Learning). We could keep that going. We could manage 15-20 hours of activities. (Principal)

Notwithstanding, school transport was identified as a key sustainability issue. Considering how rural the schools are and the distance between some of them, all agreed that they could not afford to fund the school trips to bring all of the children together for shared activities, thus a key aspect – sustained face-to-face contact – is not envisaged going forward.

“I cannot think of anything else where the activities we want to plan would be funded like that. Even the transport costs: buses cost a lot of money and we could not afford that without the funding. (Principal)

Final reflections

Overall, Shared Education has had a significant and positive impact on both the staff and the children within this partnership. One of the key things that helped them to succeed was the quality of relationships between the staff and the ambition to deliver high quality activities that stimulated the interests of children. The combination of activities spanning across literacy, numeracy, STEM and physical and emotional health and wellbeing kept children interested and engaged.

The lockdown, whilst being traumatising for everyone, provided an opportunity for schools to work in a different way making best use of online platforms such as Zoom.

This has helped the schools in the partnership to see that elements of their delivery during lockdowns can be sustained into the future at relatively low cost. Notwithstanding this, this would not provide meaningful face-to-face contact required for children to develop deep and meaningful friendships and bonds on cross-community basis that are so vital to helping children to understand and appreciate difference.

“Lockdown has taught us that you can do so much over Zoom. We now know that we can do Kahoot (i.e. quizzes) over zoom and have a chat. That makes it more doable. (Principal)

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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