



PEACE IV Initiative - Shared Education Impact Evaluation

Collaboration Through Sharing in Education (CASE)

Case Study Report 2022: Primary School Partnership

St Ronan's Primary School and Bridge Integrated Primary School



Approach

As part of the wider Impact Evaluation of Shared Education¹, a number of partnerships were invited to host a case study visit in 2020 and a virtual case study visit in 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 Initiative.

This case study included the following research activities:

- A group interview with school staff, including both school principals and a Shared Education coordinator.
- Review of existing partnership documentation including the partnership application form, yearly action plans and evaluations.

The case study report is structured as follows:

- Background to the partnership and motivations for getting involved;
- Previous experiences of Shared Education;
- 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 and motivations for getting involved

This partnership involves two schools located in Newry.

School name	School type	Enrolment 2021-2022
St Ronan's Primary School	Maintained	433
Bridge Integrated Primary School	Integrated	418

St Ronan's has a total enrolment of 433 in 2021/22. It is one of the parish schools of Newry and is situated on the main Rathfriland / Hilltown Road side of Newry. It opened in 1994 to serve the growing needs of Newry. The school serves the entire Parish of Newry and the surrounding area. It offers a wide selection of afterschool activities such as soccer, Gaelic, music, baking, computer club, basketball, and languages. Almost all (98%) of the children enrolled are from a Catholic background. St Ronan's has always welcomed parental involvement, and this is ranked high in their list of school priorities. A close working relationship has been established with parents and they are encouraged to participate in the life of the school by joining religious celebrations, accompanying children on school trips and by attending parent workshops and meetings.

Bridge Integrated Primary School (IPS) opened its doors to 75 children in 1987 in Daisy Hill House in Newry. In 1997, it moved to a new purpose-built school on the Ballygowan Road just outside Banbridge.

Bridge IPS has a pupil enrolment of just under 420 and a total of 40 members of staff, both teaching and non-teaching. In terms of the religious background of the children, 43% are from a Catholic background, 42% are from a Protestant background and 15% are from an 'Other' background. Like St Ronan's, the school offers a wide range of extra-curricular activities including football and after-school hockey. The school has a significant focus on literacy and accelerated reading (AR) and children are encouraged to compete in AR competitions.

The distance between St Ronan's Primary School and Bridge Integrated Primary School is approximately 12 miles.

The Shared Education co-ordinator noted how the context of both schools differed, with the pupil intake in St Ronan's described as being from different socio-economic backgrounds in comparison to Bridge IPS. Whilst this posed an initial challenge in terms of the relative expectations of each partner school, this became less significant over time.

“Our children are from different financial backgrounds and that came with its own difficulties in terms of expectations.

However, we managed to work through that over time. (Shared Education Co-ordinator)

Notwithstanding the different backgrounds of the children who attend each school, their common ground is the vision and ethos of the schools where they seek to be caring environments where childhood and community are valued. They also seek to inspire learning for life and to support children to develop the personal and social

qualities needed to succeed in a rapidly changing world.

The quality of existing relationships and the availability of additional financial resources and accompanying training opportunities for staff were primary motivating factors in the decision to become involved in Shared Education. However, in terms of the practicalities of the partnership, doubt was initially cast on whether the schools could partner given the physical distance between them and the fact that one of the schools was located near Banbridge, whilst the other was located in Newry.

“It was initially because of existing relationships. We talked at various times and met at various courses and we weren’t even sure we would be able to do it because [the other school] was on the boundary of the distance allowed. We were lucky that it went ahead. We knew there would be a lot of opportunity. We didn’t realise how much there would be around professional development. (Principal)

The financial resources for staff training and development was viewed as being particularly important given the challenging school funding context and tight budgets. As well as being able to bring teachers together for joint training, it provided an opportunity for teachers – particularly those with more experience – to come together and share new ways of working.

As the principal of one school noted, these new experiences helped and empowered teachers to take control of their own professional development.

“The other aspect was that we would get a lot of resource in terms of Continuing Professional Development (CPD). There was a time when all budgets were getting cut and we were stretched. But Shared Education gave us an opportunity for teachers to work together. In [our school] we had an older stable staff team. They hadn’t had opportunities to work much with others. Shared Education was a way for our staff to get new insights and new learning experiences in a different way. It helped our teachers to take control of their professional development. (Principal)

Previous experiences of Shared Education

The principal of one of the schools indicated that he had been involved in the Shared Education Signature Project (SESP) in a school that he had worked in previously. SESP launched in November 2014. The project was created under the Delivering Social Change (DSC) Framework. It was funded by Atlantic Philanthropies, the Department of Education and the Executive Office. SESP had quite similar aims to CASE with a focus on raising educational standards and promoting reconciliation through shared learning and collaborative working. One of the schools in the partnership was involved in the Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU) initiative. 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.

The involvement of this school in EMU, in addition to the principal having been involved in the SESP in a previous school, provided the partnership with a solid foundation to build upon.

“Our school was involved in the old Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU) initiative. We have been working in a cross-community way from the start. (Principal)

Model of sharing

The table below illustrates the pupil enrolment of each of the schools throughout their involvement in Shared Education, the proportion of children involved and the model of sharing. In Year 1 (2017/18), less than one-half (44%) of children were involved in the initiative, however in Years 2-5, all children across both schools were involved. Whilst many of the activities in Years 1 and 2 were delivered face-to-face, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, most of the activities moved to online delivery using a range of collaborative tools such as Google Classroom and Zoom.

	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22
	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5
Pupil enrolment: St Ronan's	405	406	415	423	433
Pupil enrolment: Bridge IPS	417	417	420	417	418
Total enrolment	822	823	835	840	851
Pupil involvement in St Ronan's	180	All pupils	All pupils	All pupils	All pupils
Pupil involvement in Bridge IPS	181	All pupils	All pupils	All pupils	All pupils
% of children involved	44%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Model	P1-2: 2 x 5 hour sessions and 5 x 4 hour sessions. P4, P6 and P7: 2 x 6 hour sessions 6 x 3 hour sessions 1 x 2 hour video conferencing	P1-3: 7 x 4 hour sessions and 1 x 5 hour session. P4-7: 2 x 6 hour sessions / 6 x 3 hour sessions / 1 x 2 hour video conferencing	6 x 5 hour sessions in addition to online collaboration via Google.	30 hours of in class and online sessions of varying duration due to Covid-19 restrictions.	

In Year 1, the main focus was on the development of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) in the maths curriculum and to promote greater cross-community understanding through the delivery of collaborative lessons.

In Year 2, all pupils from across both schools were involved. The focus of the Shared Education sessions shifted towards the development of curricular areas of the World Around Us (WAU) and Personal Development and Mutual Understanding (PDMU) for all year groups, in addition to activity specifically targeted at P1-3 year groups. A total of five sessions of four hours duration were delivered in relation to these areas, alongside a team-building day and a celebration event.

In Year 3, seven sessions of four hours duration each were delivered to P1-3 classes in addition to one five-hour session. Activities sought to develop the theme of similarity and difference, building on Year 2 activities. The main curricular areas focused on included PDMU, ICT and play / activity-based learning.

The theme for the P4-7 year groups was the same, with six sessions of five hours duration delivered around the theme of similarity and difference through the curricular areas of PDMU, ICT and literacy (reading, talking and listening). Children in these year groups were introduced to initiatives such as Accelerated Reading (AR) including AR 100% and Word Millionaire competitions², and they also benefited from participation in World Book Day. A joint parent evening to promote AR was held to explore the importance of reading.

The theme and associated activities were broadly similar in Year 4 and Year 5, but with an enhanced focus on emotional health and well-being to develop a whole school nurture approach using PATHS (Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies) resources³.

Benefits for the child

Building new relationships: One of the biggest benefits for the children was seeing new people and making friends when visiting their partner school. Staff described the sense of anticipation and excitement before Shared Education visits:

“*The children got on with it and it [meeting new people] became a part of our ethos. They looked forward to meeting each other when we were doing Shared Education. They really looked forward to Shared Education and seeing new people and there was a sense of excitement.*

Exploring similarities and differences: The schools in the Shared Education partnership used the curriculum to teach children about difference and the importance of respecting each other. This did not just focus on cultural differences and community backgrounds, but also considered differences due to special educational needs. Messages were communicated primarily through books and stories such as ‘Can you see me’, a book written from the perspective of a young girl with autism.

² To become a Word Millionaire, pupils have to read one million words and pass the relevant Accelerated Reader quizzes.

³ The PATHS® Programme for Schools (UK Version) is designed to facilitate the development of self-control, emotional awareness and interpersonal problem-solving skills. More information can be found [here](#).

“The learning around similarities and differences has been subtle and not focused on what community you come from. It has been through things like discussing exclusion and inclusion and bullying and special needs. (Shared Education Co-ordinator)

Staff reflected that children were generally comfortable with one another when they came together and aside from some minor incidents of name-calling, the vast majority of children did not have any issues in talking about, or dealing with, difference. Visiting each other and having joint lessons became part of the ethos of both schools.

“Our kids didn’t have any issues dealing with difference. If an issue arose in class, they dealt with it. They talk about difference, but they don’t, because it’s part of our context. For our kids, it wasn’t a big deal to have kids coming from a different school. (Principal)

“Children are so adaptable... It became such a part of our ethos that children were going up and down to each other classes and they looked forward to it. (Principal)

An expanded curriculum: Shared Education has enabled both schools to invest significantly in their use of online learning. This has translated into greater opportunities for children across both schools to access a range of online tools such as AR, Myon and Mathseeds, which have helped to maximise the development of children’s literacy and numeracy skills. Shared Education has also provided teachers with a range of opportunities to share ideas

across their teams and therefore maximise children’s learning outcomes.

“There has been quite a shift towards the use of online learning platforms (introduced to us by the other school). That has had a very significant impact on children in terms of access to Accelerated Reader, Myon and Mathseeds and the sharing of ideas between the teachers. (Principal)

“The kids have benefited from having new teachers coming in with different skills. The kids have loved that as well. (Principal)

Improved pupil outcomes: Both schools have aligned their assessment processes and are using Renaissance Star Reader and Maths assessment tools to monitor and track children’s academic progress. This has been one of the biggest wins for both schools.

“Both schools have moved to Star Reader and Star Maths to capture where our children are and where they are going to. A huge difference made by Shared Education has been the staff and how they are tracking where children are going and tracking the outcomes of the children in their classes. (Principal)

Prior to Covid-19, Shared Education had a positive impact in terms of improving children's educational outcomes as well as on their emotional health and well-being.

However, with the limited opportunities to meet face-to-face, staff feel the impact of Shared Education has not been as positive as it would have been if it was being delivered face-to-face, and they are finding it difficult to evidence impact:

“It was very successful when it was running as it should be. Prior to Covid, we measured the impact through evaluations with children, how they felt about each other's schools, whether they felt safe or felt comfortable. But with Covid, the impact has been very difficult to measure. (Shared Education Co-ordinator)



Benefits for the parents

The Shared Education partnership has had high levels of support from parents since the very beginning and all of the parents agreed for their child(ren) to be involved from the outset. In addition, all parents/carers are kept informed through the use of social media.

“Certainly, we have not had issues about children not being allowed to take part. In my [child's] own school certainly there have been issues where some have not been allowed to take part. We promote Shared Education through our social media and parents can see the impact of it. (Shared Education Co-ordinator)

The partnership involved parents in many of the joint activities that were delivered prior to Covid-19. One staff member reflected on the Colour Run activity, which they felt was the highlight of all activities that were delivered. The schools invited parents and governors to this event and got members of the parent's group to volunteer at the tuck shop. The activity involved everyone, including children with Special Educational Needs (SEN), and was enjoyed by all. There are plans to run the event again as soon as it is possible to do so.

“We got a fantastic location for the colour run between Newry and Banbridge. Cracking day – we took busloads of children. We invited parents, governors and members of our parent group to do tuck shop. Everyone got covered in paint and it has been the absolute highlight of the partnership.

Covid stopped this but we are hopeful we can run it this year. It was the most amazing thing of the whole partnership coming together. (Shared Education Co-ordinator)

Parents were also invited into school and involved in supporting the school trips. In addition, there were numerous other examples where parents were invited to attend events. For example, prior to the pandemic the partnership held thematic events and workshops for parents including a well-being evening, an adoption trauma workshop, and an online safety workshop, which all parents were invited to attend. Children and parents who were not directly involved in Shared Education at that time were still able to benefit from attending these events.

Despite the pandemic and the limited opportunities to meet up face-to-face, the partnership continued to deliver activities to parents. These activities, which were termed 'Flow workshops', were designed to equip parents with the knowledge and skills to support their children in literacy and numeracy and to develop learning through play.

This year the partnership plans to continue including parents in specific activities relating to the development and implementation of their school nurturing approach, including the PATHs programme, (Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies).

Benefits for the school staff

Relationship building: Overall, the quality of the relationships between staff are described as being very positive, with strong mutual respect between staff from both schools. One of the key reasons given for this was the high level of buy-in from the leadership team and staff across both schools.

“The relationships across the year groups have worked very well. Not everyone has worked with the same year group each year. There are positive and respectful relationships across both schools. We have sold it from the top. (Principal)

Joint training and planning opportunities: Over the past five years staff and governors have had access to a wide range of training opportunities including whole school nurturing training, Senior Leadership Team training and Teaching Assistant training. Shared Education has enabled both schools to more effectively co-ordinate not just their training calendar but also their school holidays calendar. One of the key benefits to materialise is an ethos and culture of working together to maximise the individual strengths of both schools.

“We have had joint governor and whole staff nurturing training. We also had our SLT training... it [joint training] has really become embedded in the culture and ethos of the schools and the idea that together we can achieve more. We do as much as we can as a group - we plan our holiday and training

days together. We are trying to make effective use of the resources together - we both have our strengths. (Principal)

The opportunities to undertake joint training and joint planning in advance of session delivery has afforded staff from both schools the opportunity to upskill and learn from one another. As one interviewee noted this is particularly important where the profile of staff differs quite significantly between each of the schools.

“*We have two different demographics of staff. I inherited older staff who quickly moved on. My staffing demographic has changed to become a younger staff. The other school has a stable staffing structure where staff have a lot of experience, whilst our school has young staff with a lot of enthusiasm. They both blended together very well. You were hoping that the younger staff would learn from the experiences of the older staff and they did. (Principal)*

Enhanced skills: The range of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) opportunities prior to the lockdown equipped staff with the skills to make best use of ICT during the lockdown. For example, one CPD session focused on how to make best use of Google and Microsoft technology in terms of enhancing lesson delivery. The fact that the sessions were delivered jointly meant that all staff benefited, whereas if it had been delivered in each school separately, staff from one of the schools might have been more reluctant to fully engage.

The particular focus on ICT as an area for staff training and development meant that

schools felt better prepared for the lockdown than other schools outside of Shared Education. The training, alongside shared storage systems (e.g. Google drive) meant that schools were already prepared and equipped for delivering activities using online learning platforms.

“*I feel both schools were better prepared for lockdown than a lot of other schools because of the training we had. We were using Google drive to upload work and save work in a shared capacity. A lot of these things were not new to our school. (Principal)*

What has worked well and why?

A number of factors were identified as being particularly important to the success of the partnership, including:

- The high levels of buy-in from staff and other stakeholders across both schools;
- The availability of dedicated planning time for teachers and other staff to come together to carefully plan out activities; and
- The development of a culture of sharing across both schools whilst also maintaining their own individual ethos.

“*What worked well was the whole school approach and also the emphasis on teachers getting together for two days to plan for the 30 hours. The teachers take ownership for what is needed. We place a lot of importance on the planning time so that there will be no issue with the quality. (Shared Education Co-ordinator)*

“We feared that our ethos would have been diluted, but both schools have kept their ethos and identity whilst sharing across both schools. (Principal)

Challenges and barriers

Both schools faced a number of challenges throughout their involvement in Shared Education.

In the first year, the evaluations undertaken by staff showed that children were not getting the levels of interaction with their peers as they might have liked. This was due to the fact that sessions were of a shorter duration because school dinners could not be provided to children of one of the schools. Children therefore did not have time to sit with their peers for lunch and get to know them better something which was subsequently addressed in the following years.

“One of the things that did not work as well was that we had short days because dinners were a problem. The kids said they were only getting started and then had to leave - they wanted to be there for the full day and play at lunch time and have lunch together. With the number of kids who are entitled to Free School Meals, we didn't want to force packed lunches. (Shared Education Co-ordinator)

Another challenge was getting sub-cover in place to enable staff to take part in CPD opportunities. This was particularly an issue recently and connected to the uncertainty of teacher registration following the announced closure of the General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland, rather than a Shared Education issue specifically.

“Getting sub cover to allow CPD to take place has been a problem in the last number of months. The availability of sub-cover has been virtually impossible as people panicked about teacher registrations and booked subs for long periods of time. (Principal)

Lastly, additional time and associated bureaucracy was experienced by the partnership connected with the fact that Shared Education activities run over a school year whilst the funding cycle runs over a financial year. This means that it is difficult to know at a point in time exactly how much of the funding has been spent and how much remains, therefore additional time was needed to run reports.

Looking forward: sustainability and future plans

Given the financial challenges facing all schools, including the schools in this partnership, it is unlikely that they will be able to sustain all of the activities beyond the current funding period. Given that parents' finances are stretched there is also a reluctance to pass on the costs of the initiative to them.

In terms of the activities that might be sustained these include joint sessions via online tools such as Zoom and Google, and other activities – such as the British Science week – might also be possible as there is little cost attached to this.

“From a class teacher point of view, I wonder whether we could do things like British science week as there is no finance involved, just the time needed and working out how we would deliver it – I am very hopeful that that could continue. (Shared Education Co-ordinator)

Final reflections

Overall, this partnership has managed to garner significant levels of buy-in from senior leaders, school governors, teaching staff and others. The level of sustained contact between staff from both schools principally through joint training days and delivery of activities has helped to create positive working relationships and friendships across staff teams, which has helped to embed the initiative without diluting the ethos of each of the schools.

This has meant that children have been able to benefit from a much wider curricular and non-curricular offering including Accelerated Learning, Myon and Mathseed amongst other activities and programmes. They have also been able to take part in more informal fun-based activities such as the colour run.

These activities have all greatly benefited children educationally and socially and has helped them to develop deep and meaningful friendships with children in their own school as well as their partner school. While the subject of differences in cultural backgrounds has not been addressed directly, messages of inclusion in a broader sense have been embedded throughout activities and staff feel this has helped to normalise those discussions.

Looking ahead, there is a hope that some elements of Shared Education can be mainstreamed, whilst other activities, given their relative low cost, can be maintained beyond the current funding period.

This report was produced by SJC consultancy and National Children's Bureau, as part of the wider Impact Evaluation of Shared Education (PEACE IV Initiative, Specific Objective 1, Action1)

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