



# PEACE IV Programme - Shared Education Impact Evaluation: Collaboration Through Sharing in Education (CASE)

## Case Study Report 2022: Primary School Partnership

St Eoghan's Primary School, Macosquin Primary School, Damhead Primary School



## Approach

As part of the wider Impact Evaluation of Shared Education<sup>1</sup>, a number of partnerships were invited to host a virtual case study visit in 2020 and again 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 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, alongside the Shared Education coordinator from two schools.
- Review of existing partnership documentation including the partnership application form, yearly action plans and evaluations and reviews of activities delivered.

### 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

<sup>1</sup> 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

**Background to the partnership:** There are three schools in this partnership, located in the Coleraine and Draperstown areas in Co. Londonderry/Derry. Damhead and Macosquin are approximately five miles apart, while St. Eoghan's Primary School is further away, at approximately 30 miles.

St. Eoghan's Primary School is a Catholic Maintained school, situated outside Draperstown in a very rural but idyllic area in mid-Ulster, at the foothills of the Sperrin mountains. Children in the school come mostly from a farming background. The school has an enrolment of 134 children, five teaching staff alongside the principal. Children come mostly from a Catholic community background.

Macosquin Primary School is a Controlled school, located in a small village a few miles outside Coleraine, and again, children for the most part come from rural areas. The school has 193 children at present, predominantly from a Protestant community background.

Damhead Primary School is also a Controlled school, located a few miles outside Coleraine. Similar to the other two schools, there are children from rural areas, however

children also come from the nearby towns of Coleraine and Ballymoney. There is a current enrolment of 201 children, mostly from a Protestant community background. This information is summarised in the table below.

School name	School type	Enrolment 2021- 2022
St Eoghan's PS	Catholic Maintained	134
Macosquin PS	Controlled	193
Damhead PS	Controlled	201

St. Eoghan's and Damhead Primaries had a previous relationship in 2003 through Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU) funding. This EMU partnership ended and in 2017 the Shared Education opportunity arose. The principal of St Eoghan's Primary approached schools in the direct local area (given the distance requirements set by the SEUPB), however all were engaged in partnerships, so they contacted Damhead Primary to consider a revival of their prior relationship. Damhead Primary had a pre-existing relationship with Macosquin so invited them to join too. The three schools have formed a very successful partnership, now in its final year, and running to April 2023.

While the schools are quite far apart geographically, there are numerous similarities in terms of the demographics of the local areas, with many children coming from farming backgrounds. All three schools note similar school development plan priorities and are of comparable size.

## Model of sharing

The table below sets out the model of sharing over the five years of Shared Education delivery within the partnership. Pre-pandemic, Shared Education sessions took place face to face at each of the schools, however since then, activities have moved online. Further detail on the types of activities is provided below. All year groups, and the majority of children, have participated in Shared Education.

	Year 1 2017/18	Year 2 2018/19	Year 3 2019/20	Year 4 2020/21	Year 5 2021/22
Year groups involved	All year groups				
Total enrolment (all schools)	536	543	537	539	523
<b>Total no. of children involved</b>	<b>371</b>	<b>543</b>	<b>537</b>	<b>539</b>	<b>515</b>
% of children involved	69%	100%	100%	100%	98%
Model of sharing	8 x 4hr hour sessions, 1 x 5hr celebration event	8 x 4hr hour sessions, 1 x 5hr celebration event	5 x 4hr hour sessions. Interrupted due to the pandemic, moved online.	Online sessions due to the pandemic.	4 x full day face-to-face (24 hrs) 19.5 hrs online (sessions ranging from 30mins to 2 hrs)

**Activities/ subjects:** Activities throughout the five years have focused on Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) and Personal Development and Mutual Understanding (PDMU), both of which were development plan priorities for all schools. Schools invested in Izak9, an interactive maths/problem-solving resource with an online component as well as number cubes for children to manipulate.

Literacy has also been a focus in later years, and during the pandemic, wellbeing was prioritised through the introduction of the

PATHS programme<sup>2</sup>, a social and emotional skills programme.

Additionally, outdoor learning has been a central focus of this partnership's activities, with staff undertaking training to support their facilitation of outdoor activities, and outdoor resources built up in each school.

Initially, a joint Board of Governors meeting was held to outline the project and gain buy-in. An 'ice-break' day was also facilitated at the beginning of the project, in a neutral location, to allow children and staff to get to know one another.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.pathseducation.co.uk/>

Children were also able to take part in a range of celebratory trips in the early years of Shared Education (pre-lockdown), including to W5 and a science fair at the University of Ulster.

Overall, children have been involved in topic-based, exciting activities in all the schools. The focus on STEM has given teachers the opportunity to demonstrate their own expertise, interest and skills, which has been a benefit as money was not required for external facilitators.

**Lockdown adaptations:** As with all other partnerships, the three schools have invested time and effort to adapt Shared Education activities to enable children to continue to bond with their peers in partner schools and work together. The model of activities has shifted towards collaborative online work. In some sessions, the children are engaging directly with one another online in real time, and in other sessions they have worked individually on a project and then shared photos, resources or videos of the activities for discussion. Having all schools signed up to a shared Google Drive has facilitated smooth sharing of work.

**“We all do different topics but share pictures, videos, showing themes covered. Teachers get ideas for activities too. It really feels like having a critical friend in another school. (Coordinator)**

During lockdown, and in alignment with the aims of the PATHS programme, some online activities have focused on wellbeing.

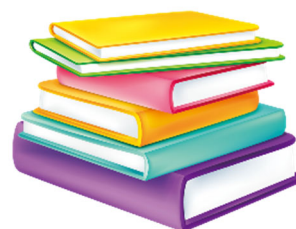
**“We celebrated Mental Health Week last year. We got together and shared ideas of what we could do, for example Wellbeing Wednesday and Feelgood Friday. Parents were involved as well sharing things online. We also did the Big Walk, and updated**

**each other weekly on how far the children had walked. (Principal)**

At the time of the interview, engagement was still online, and there are strong examples of how this is working well. A weekly Shared Education class session takes place between several schools, using the Izak 9 resource. For the teachers, this feels like a face-to-face meeting, as they happen regularly every week.

**“Children spend the first ten minutes catching up with each other, having a chat, and then they get into problem solving, so it's just like being in a collaborative class. Contact feels more natural - it's not 'Wednesday is Shared Education day', we just do it because that's what we do now. It's embedded, and feels much more real life than artificial.**

There are plans in place for children to meet face-to-face for the final time. Schools have each created an outdoor literacy and STEM trail, and they hope to use these in the final school term. Planning is also ongoing for a face-to-face celebration day for the three schools, as these have been online over past few years.



## Benefits for the child

Staff across all three schools feel that there have been huge educational and social benefits for the children who have participated in Shared Education.

**Educational:** Shared Education has supported the enhancement of everyday teaching and the delivery of the core curriculum across schools. The opportunity for staff training, and observation of other schools' teaching practice, has enabled staff to upskill and enhance their practice, leading to an improved learning environment for children.

Funding has enabled new resources and programmes to be purchased, including Mathematics and Izak 9 to support numeracy and problem solving, in addition to the Accelerated Reading programme.

**“Children’s problem solving skills have increased – this is clear through the data that we collect - and we will be looking at reading data over the next year to determine actual benefits. (Principal)**

Staff see Shared Education as having been particularly beneficial for children in P7, as they undertook the transfer tests and prepare to move to post-primary school.

**“Children in P7 across all three schools have journeyed through the transfer process together. They’ve shared their stresses, and been able to share this experience with 90 children rather than 27. (Coordinator)**

Staff are also hopeful that the experience of seeing other schools, working with different teachers and making new friends will prepare children for their move to post-primary school.

**“The P7 children are about to go to much bigger schools, with different teachers and subjects, and so they have already got a taste of that in joining up in [Shared Education]. Hopefully that will mean the new experiences are easier. (Principal)**

Outside of curriculum delivery, children have also been able to try out new activities, such as drama and art, and have tried out different sports (for example rugby, which hasn’t traditionally been played in all of the schools).

**“It’s all new experiences for the future. We organised a football tournament which was great fun, and the children will see their partner-school friends playing football against each other outside of school too.**

**Social:** As already noted, a key focus of Shared Education activities has been building children’s emotional skills. The funding has also enabled schools to invest in the PATHS programme, and staff feel this has been hugely beneficial. Schools are all now PATH ‘model schools’ and staff have noted improvements in pupils’ emotional intelligence across all schools.

**“We couldn’t have afforded the resources before, and this has made a big impact. We’ve seen children across all the schools using Path strategies to manage their emotions. Coming back after lockdown this has been particularly beneficial. (Principal)**

Recently, one school had an inspection, and noted that when talking to the children, PATHS and Shared Education both came up.

For the children themselves, the biggest benefit seems to be the new friendships they have made, and staff have observed examples where these are strong.

**“If you’re asking children about the benefits of Shared Education, they don’t say ‘we got to go on a school trip’ but they say they have made friends and talk about the everyday interactions they share with their partner schools. That’s normal, that’s just how school is for them. (Coordinator)**

**“We had one lovely story about a child who went off to secondary school where they knew no-one and when they go there, there was a Shared Education partner child. So they are really starting to grow friendships with children from other communities, and we hope this will stand them in good stead for the future. (Principal)**

**Promoting cultural respect and understanding:** Staff have observed changing attitudes since the beginning of Shared Education, with this being the first opportunity for some children to mix with those from other backgrounds. When children meet each other outside school now, they recognise them from shared lessons and are able to say hello.

## Benefits for the school

### **Relationship building and peer support:**

Staff feel that the benefits of Shared Education for the staff team and wider schools have been huge. Prior to becoming involved, and due to the rural settings, schools were quite isolated, and the friendships that have now been built are genuine and, staff feel, long-lasting. Where schools are small, there is often only one class teacher per year, therefore this opportunity for peer support is not always guaranteed.

**“This is very much a live partnership. Shared Education has had such an impact on everyone, from children right up to governors. We couldn’t have got through lockdown without each other. (Principal)**

This benefit has been appreciated all the more during lockdown, as schools had to deal with a shift to online learning, and have had peers in partner schools to share ideas, discuss issues and plan together with.

**“During Covid, things have been very isolated, and staff now have a friend to talk over activities with. All our staff are very comfortable with each other; they can lift the phone or WhatsApp each other, ask for ideas, resources or advice. (Principal)**

As already noted, the school’s Board of Governors have also had an opportunity to connect through a joint governor meeting, and schools hope to develop that side of the relationship further in the future.

**“That [joint Governor meeting] was such a successful evening, we looked back over the journey and planned ahead for the future. Shared Education has to come from the top and work down for a successful partnership to be embedded. And we’ve definitely done that here. (Principal)**

**Increased skills and knowledge:** Staff have also benefitted in terms of continued professional development, which, they noted, would not have been available outside of Shared Education. Both formal (e.g. through training opportunities provided through Shared Education) and informal (learning from new colleagues and trying out new skills) development opportunities have been experienced, which have increased staff confidence and competence.

## Benefits for parents and the wider community

While there have been no formal activities delivered to parents and the wider community, staff feel that the benefits are filtering down through the children, and through informal opportunities, for example when parents were supporting their children at the football tournament, or picking up/dropping off children to shared activities. Pre-covid-19, there were plans underway to host a joint fair in a local hotel, incorporating health and wellbeing activities for parents, however that had to be cancelled. However, during lockdown, opportunities for indirect parent engagement have presented themselves, for example while children have been participating in online activities.

Parents have been able to get to know one another this way, and staff feel this is an important benefit of Shared Education, given that parents may not have had similar opportunities themselves in the past.

**“Parents would have grown up in quite separate communities too and not had the chance to get to know one another and mix, so now they are getting that chance through their children. (Principal)**

All schools have held PATHS assemblies for parents, and hope to run some joint parent meetings, training and activities in the future. Overall, all parents have been supportive of Shared Education, and schools hope that further opportunities will present in the future for parents to get to know one another.

## What has worked well and why?

**Sharing the practical arrangements:** In the early years of Shared Education, staff felt there was a heavy logistical burden in relation to transport and physical space as well as the activities planned. While Shared Education activities were delivered as part of the curriculum, staff still felt that they required extra effort on top of normal activities. Since then, staff learning and experience has enabled them to simplify things. Now, planning and activities feel much more natural. They have transitioned into an approach where teachers make Shared Education activities part of their everyday class, rather than something that needs extra planning or effort. This is supported by the fact that teachers are now very comfortable with each other, will share problems and learning, and develop shared solutions to problems identified, and are also able to fill gaps in one another’s expertise.

**“***We have reframed it to ‘this is just part of your role, to share with partner schools’. We have genuine relationships between teachers now, we feel like it’s gone way further than a Shared Education activity, it’s just part of everyday life.*

**CASE support:** The Education Authority support is seen as a strong enabler, and staff are grateful for the support provided by EA team in the early days and throughout.

**“***The [CASE Programme Manager] has been wonderful from the start, he supported the set up of the partnership and came to Board of Governor meetings to support at the beginning. The only negative is that there have been a few changes in support officers and while they have been very supportive, we haven’t had that continuity. (Principal)*

**Aligning wider school procedures:** Beyond Shared Education, schools now do things in a more joined up way. School development planning is also now in sync, given that the three schools are very similar with similar challenges and goals. Shared Education Coordinators meeting regularly to consider shared priorities, develop and evaluate action plans. Overall, the partnership is mainstreamed and embedded far beyond the remit of Shared Education.

**“***The ‘three school’ partnership has been a good model, we aren’t in competition with one another in terms of attracting children, and has brought in so much expertise from across the three schools. (Principal)*

## Challenges and barriers

**Challenges:** As noted above, the logistical requirements of Shared Education, such as booking buses, handling the finances, arranging class activities and timetables between three schools, has been the main challenge faced. However, staff feel that as every year has progressed these have been streamlined and lessons have been learned to make subsequent years less burdensome. The willingness of all staff to make things work has undoubtedly helped overcome this barrier.

**“***It can be quite overwhelming when embarking on something new. But it’s a very equal partnership and everyone does their bit. Everyone feels valued and included. That helped us to make the logistics work. (Principal)*

As with other partnerships, and indeed schools and services across the globe, technology has been called upon to continue Shared Education activities. There are ongoing challenges with technology, for example poor Wi-Fi when numerous classes are trying to undertake video calls at the same time.

However, staff have always been flexible and have worked together to find creative ways to interact when needed, for example by uploading and sharing resources via Google Drive. Indeed, staff feel that their use of technology before the Covid-19 pandemic to support Shared Education has actually given them an advantage and left them more prepared to handle the challenges faced than many other schools were.

**“***Those have been right across education not just Shared Education. But challenges have helped teachers innovate to connect. We were actually more prepared for lockdown as we already had to come up with ways to engage. Google Drive was already being used, so were at an advantage.*  
(Coordinator)

## Looking forward: sustainability and future plans

The three schools feel strongly that the staff relationships built means they have ‘mainstreamed and embedded’ their partnership, which will continue beyond Shared Education funding. As noted above, the journey through lockdown and ongoing Covid-19 restrictions has changed Shared Education engagement. Schools now find that they value both face to face and online/remote engagement, and will aim to keep this hybrid model of working in the future, while testing and refining activities.

While initial engagement between the schools was at a principal-level (pre-Shared Education), the relationships have filtered through to all levels of staff, and school development plans are aligned, therefore schools feel the partnership would be robust against significant/core staff changes.

**“***If the principals left the school, this would of course have an impact because we work so closely together, but we feel like it’s so embedded in the schools that they would carry that on. Shared Education is too important to the three schools now, and*

*has been fully embedded, that couldn’t end.*  
(Principal)

Reframing shared activities towards an embedded part of the weekly class activities rather than fixed ‘Shared Education days’ is a more sustainable model of working.

It’s not about the money, it’s been more about the personalities and coming together. Resources have been a substantial benefit for the schools and children, but that was never the central element of why the schools partnered. Relationship and trust is the central component and being able to call colleagues and talk through any issues they have experienced has been very beneficial.

The partnership has also invested funds, where possible, in developing staff and building resources, again in an effort to impact cohorts of children beyond the lifetime of Shared Education. Four years on, principals feel like schools are in a much stronger position than when they began. Investment in the PATHS programme is one example given of how Shared Education funding will benefit for years to come.

**“***PATHS has been huge, this is now in our school ethos and policies, and we couldn’t have done that without Shared Education – that’s been school-changing.*  
(Principal)

## Final Reflections

It is clear that this partnership is built on strong relationships, at all levels, and the ethos of Shared Education has become embedded throughout the school. At a practical level, staff in all schools are collaborating to identify more efficient and effective ways of working, to share and streamline their skills, and to support one another in providing the best possible opportunities for the children they work with. Cross-community collaboration at a school level is strongly evident and genuine friendships have formed; this looks set to continue long-term.

Examples given demonstrate that children are having a wider social experience, with friendships growing with children from the partner school, and opportunities to take part in sports traditionally associated with another culture. Staff have noticed a change in pupil attitude since the beginning, with children now recognising and acknowledging partner school children when out and about in the local community. Staff are hopeful these relationships will continue, and there are already examples of friendships continuing into post-primary school. While the priority has been to enable children to meet others from different backgrounds, opportunities have arisen for parents from different cultural backgrounds to meet – which for many is a new experience given their own upbringing.

The enthusiasm for, and belief in the benefits of Shared Education are clear, and this has helped schools to successfully navigate the challenges of lockdown and continue to work together. Looking ahead, the partnership will continue, and staff will continue to adapt and refine their approaches.

The following quote from one of the principals sums up the passion and commitment from this partnership perfectly.

**“Shared Education is such a successful way forward. Mention it to any of us and we’re so enthusiastic. We don’t see it as an extra or as a chore, we are always happy to talk about it, share the learning. The benefits are amazing for the whole school, for the children and the staff. It has been absolutely wonderful. We all want a long term positive impact for our society, and all believe that will happen. We’re sharing all the time – resources, planning, evidence, skills, knowledge and troubles. We are all very proud of our school, staff and children and how they have embraced Shared Education – we’ve worked really hard and reaped the success. (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, Action 1)*

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