



**PEACE IV Programme - Shared Education Impact
Evaluation**

Collaboration Through Sharing in Education (CASE)

Case Study Report: Primary School Partnership

Donoughmore and St. Safan's National School

(Co. Donegal)



Approach

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

The specific objectives of the case studies are:

- To provide examples of good practice i.e. projects which have shown improved educational and shared outcomes for children; enhanced 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 contribute to the wider dissemination efforts to showcase the work funded under the PEACE IV Programme.

Due to COVID-19, research activities have been limited to:

- An in-depth interview with the manager of one partnership school.
- Review of existing partnership documentation, including monitoring information and progress reports.

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, setting, parents and wider community;
- What has worked well and why;
- Challenges and barriers;
- Looking forward: sustainability and future plans; and
- Conclusions.

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

Background to the partnership

There are two primary schools involved in Shared Education Partnership 60:

School name	Enrolment 2019-2020
Donoughmore National School	45
St Safan's National School	59

The schools are located five miles from one another, on either side of Castlefinn, Donegal, a small town with a population of 705 (Census, 2016). Both schools have pupils between the ages of four and twelve (Junior Infants through to Sixth Class). Donoughmore National School has 45 pupils, spread across two mixed-age classrooms. There are two teachers (one of whom is the principal), plus a special educational needs (SEN) teacher shared with another school. The school has a Protestant ethos. St. Safan's National School has approximately 90 pupils, spread across three mixed-age classrooms, with three teachers and a principal, who is also the SEN teacher. The school has a Catholic ethos. The schools are both in rural settings, with many of the children coming from farming backgrounds. All pupils across both schools are involved in Shared Education.

The partnership began in the academic year 2017-2018 and is currently in year three of five years of funding (due to end in 2021-2022). Prior to becoming involved in Shared Education, the schools had some historical contact with one another as the principals knew each other from attending courses and meetings, however following a change in school leadership, there had been no engagement for some time. Furthermore, the wider staff teams had not previously had the opportunity to get to know one another.



Previous experiences of shared education

Neither school has previously been involved in any other shared education project.

Motivations for getting involved

Cross community collaboration: After receiving information on Shared Education, both principals felt that involvement would be beneficial for the pupils, giving them the opportunity to mix with other children from different cultural backgrounds in the same area. Outside of school, sporting activities tend to be divided down religious lines, for example hockey or Gaelic football, and children often mix with others from a similar background to themselves.

“ We are a very small school from a Protestant background, and we felt the children don't have opportunities to mix with children in the area from other backgrounds. We saw this as an opportunity to build those relationships. (Principal)

Enhancing pupil opportunities: The funding available through Shared Education was also a strong motivator, as staff saw the potential educational benefits for the pupils. As small schools, there is limited funding for activities outside of the core curriculum, and Shared Education created opportunities and experiences that were not previously an option for the schools.

“ There are many things we would love to do, and to give the kids the opportunity to do, we just don't have the money to do these things. So Shared Education opened that opportunity. (Principal)



Model of sharing

The table below sets out the number and percentage of pupils from each school taking part, and the way in which the 30 hours of contact are distributed.

	2017/2018	2018/2019	2019/2020
Year groups involved	All pupils	All pupils	All pupils
Total enrolment	127	108	104
Total number of pupils taking part	127	108	104
% pupils taking part	100%	100%	100%
Model of sharing	10 sessions x 3 hours	10 sessions x 3 hours	5 sessions x 6 hours

Practical arrangements: As all pupils across both schools are involved, shared sessions were held separately for junior pupils (1st to 4th class) and senior pupils (5th and 6th class) in years one and two of funding, with the junior pupils joining up for the first half of the day, then senior pupils joining up for the second half. This created additional pressures in terms of transport arrangements, however it was thought necessary to make class size manageable. In the third year of funding (2019/2020), principals have trialled longer sessions (five x six-hours) as the activities had felt rushed.

During the first year of involvement, Donoughmore was having some building work carried out, therefore all sessions took place at St. Safan's. During the second year, sessions were held in Donoughmore to provide a

balance from the previous year and give pupils a wider experience. In the third year, sessions were alternated between the two schools (until interrupted due to the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown).

In general, finding space to meet has not been an issue. While Donoughmore is a physically smaller school, it has been able to access the local Church hall, which is on the school grounds for shared sessions. St. Safan's benefits from a large outdoor space and access to its local parish hall, although this is around half a mile away so does require transport arrangements.

Activities: Schools have been able to choose areas of study that align to their existing priorities and/or school development plan, to build on and

enhance the curriculum rather than as separate activities.

The curricular focus during the first year of Shared Education was science, and the partnership used Shared Education funding to hire an external science facilitator for 10 weeks to run science workshops. To keep pupil numbers low, groups were divided in two; half took part in the science class while the other pupils worked on group projects on a subject of their choice, then groups swapped.

During the second year of Shared Education, physical exercise and music were the focus of shared lessons. Within that theme, the schools have taken part in activities that showcase one another's cultures. Pupils engaged in a workshop on pipe band drumming, led by an external facilitator and aligned to a discussion on elements of the Protestant culture, and céilí dancing, as part of a wider discussion on the Catholic culture. Pupils also had lessons in Hip-Hop dance, which they fully enjoyed.

“ A very successful feature of our project this year was the cultural aspect, introducing the children to a part of the two different cultures, through pipe band drumming and céilí dancing.

The children really embraced the other cultural activity and were interested in learning about it. (Case Progress Report 2018-2019)

In the third year, activities have been mixed, with schools drawing on their own staff expertise, including drama and baking. One school had undertaken staff training in chess, and had played this with their classes; their pupils were able to teach their partnership school pupils how to play as part of a shared lesson. Further activities had been planned, including gymnastics and samba drumming, however these have had to be cancelled (due to Covid-19).

School trips have been incorporated throughout to compliment the shared sessions. These have included a visit to a Hip-Hop dance studio in Letterkenny for dance and circus skills lessons, and a gym trip for team building games and fitness challenges.

Lessons during the first two years of Shared Education were quite structured and did not allow much time for free play. In the 2019-2020 academic year, plans were made to incorporate more recreational time together to further encourage integration, as staff felt this would be beneficial.

Benefits for the child

Educational: While school staff do deliver many of the Shared Education sessions, the schools have invested in external facilitators for several activities, for example; science and drumming and dance workshops. While facilitators are costly, staff felt that the pupils would learn more and benefit educationally from someone who had specialist knowledge in the subject.

“ *As a primary school teacher, you have to be 'jack of all trades, master of none', so it's good to get that expert knowledge in and gives the kids a better educational experience all round. The science facilitator was a proper scientist with the experience we don't have. So, she was working with chemicals and things that we teachers couldn't have done. The actual teaching has benefitted.*
(Principal)

“ *The pupils have gained such a wealth of knowledge via all the different activities they have participated in - this is immeasurable!*
(Principal, survey response)

Social: The biggest benefit for pupils has been the social aspect, getting to know children their own age from a different cultural background, trying out activities they have not been involved in before such as hip-hop dance or Gaelic football, and starting to learn about other cultures. More importantly, they have discovered similarities between themselves and pupils from a different school. Both schools have strong farming backgrounds, and it has been a surprise for children to realise that many of their parents already know each other, especially their fathers, who have worked together or know each other from the local farming community.

“ *When the kids have got chatting and gone home to tell their parents who they met, they've come in the next time and said 'my daddy knows your daddy'. It's actually been a real eye opener, that their daddies were already friends or acquaintances.* *(Principal)*

While staff had to facilitate integration of pupils in the early days of involvement, this mixing now happens very naturally without adult supervision. The relationships have begun to build outside of Shared Education sessions; many of the pupils have made friends on social media or

via online games, and maintain contact outside of school and at the weekends.

“ They have developed social skills, made new friends whom they are now in touch with outside of school. They have fostered a mutual respect for one another and embraced each other’s culture. (Principal, survey response)

“ It was good getting to spend time with my cousin from the other school and making new friends. (Pupil, CASE Progress Report 2018-2019)

“ I liked seeing friends that you don’t see in school. I am friends with someone from the other school on X-box. (Pupil, CASE Progress Report 2018-2019)

“ I made friends with boys from the other school who play football with me and now I know them. (Pupil, CASE Progress Report 2018-2019)

Staff felt that drawing attention to and embracing cultural differences was important. While religious and/or cultural differences might not be immediately obvious to the junior pupils, the older pupils are aware of differences and of potential stereotypes. These issues were not actively discussed during the first year of Shared Education. However, principals felt that an understanding of difference should be part of the educational experience, therefore in years two and three, took the decision to actively address the issue of religious and cultural differences and to build the theme of ‘celebrating difference’ into the wider messaging. Staff were aware this may lead to expressions of concern from some parents, however this has not been the case and feedback has been positive.

“ We are very open about the differences, talking about it in assembly and in the activities that we do, we talk about the culture differences and let them experience both. We would like to visit each other’s churches at some stage, and talk about the things that happen. (Principal)

Benefits for the school

Staff: The staff teams at both schools have benefitted from involvement in Shared Education. The training and networking opportunities have allowed them to see and hear what other partnerships are doing, and develop their skills. The biggest benefit for staff has been the relationships built with the partner school, and the support network that has developed. These relationships extend beyond discussions on Shared Education to wider curricular issues as well as general school planning and practicalities.

“ *If there is something coming up, we'll drop each other an email to see if the other school is interested. Or if there is a new policy or guidance, we can meet up and talk it through and what it means for our schools. The teachers have built friendships and can ask each other about curricular things they need support or advice on, and compare notes. (Principal)*

Staff also feel like they are gaining experience and increasing teaching skills through the opportunity to observe external facilitators.

“ *I have gained valuable CPD through watching trained tutors deliver workshops to the pupils. (Principal, survey response)*

Economic: The partnership has allowed the schools to jointly avail of external Continued Professional Development opportunities that would have been unaffordable previously; one such example is a first aid course recently completed.

“ *It costs the same to bring a trainer in to do something like that [first aid] whether there's 10 or 100 people, and it's too expensive for us on our own, so we were able to do this jointly with St. Safan's so that worked well. (Principal)*



Benefits for parents and the wider community

Parents are kept informed of Shared Education activities through regular school newsletters and social media, and children go home and discuss what they have learned and the activities they had taken part in. To date there have been no specific activities aimed at engaging parents or the wider community in Shared Education, however this was the planned next step for this partnership (pre-Covid-19 lockdown). To tie in with a Shared Education session on baking, the schools had planned to host a joint coffee morning for parents.

“ We thought that the kids could do the baking and then parents would come along for coffee and meet each other that way. Unfortunately that had to be cancelled because of Covid-19, but our aim for the next year will be to start mixing the parents a bit more. (Principal)

Schools have also found that the outings to local facilities such as the Fire or Garda Stations help to form community links and raise awareness of the partnership aims and activities.

“ Local outings also build on community relationships, and the schools were able to send off photos to the local paper and that brought a bit of publicity for the schools and the shared partnership they have built. (Principal)

Teachers have also noticed that when they go to, for example, the local supermarket and see children from the other school, the children will say hello and introduce their parents, so Shared Education is starting to bring people together and make connections outside of the classroom.



What has worked well and why?

Being open to learn from experience:

The schools have been learning as they have progressed along their shared education journey, and making changes to ensure things work best for all involved. In the first year, shared sessions ran weekly for ten weeks (three hours per session); although staff found this tiring and difficult to sustain and have made changes to reduce the number of weeks as a result.

“ *The first year we did the science, we spread sessions over ten weeks and we found it was a long time to keep the momentum going. Towards the end, we were all tired, and it really impacted our wider teaching as well. (Principal)*

In the second year of funding, sessions took place over five weeks (six hours per session), which the schools found easier to sustain. They also found the longer sessions meant there was more time to engage in activities, and children also got to mix during break and lunch times. They also incorporated an introduction day for the pupils to meet and become familiar with one another, then a farewell celebration event at the end.

“ *The five weeks has worked much better, we found we were coming fresh to it every week and not getting tired by it all. (Principal)*

Group projects: Pupils have had the opportunity to undertake group projects on a subject of their choice. This freedom to choose a topic gave them a chance to find out each other's likes and dislikes, and identify what they had in common. As many pupils from both schools live on farms, some found a commonality in a love of animals and were able to talk about that which helped build relationships.

Reflective use of funding: In the first two years of Shared Education, school trips took up a considerable proportion of the budget, however during the third year the partnership has tried to be more creative and to consider low-cost but educational trip options. The junior pupils were recently taken on a tour of Letterkenny Fire and Garda stations, as well as a tour of a local bank followed by lunch at McDonalds. The trip worked out to be more cost effective than previous trips, and staff found that the pupils enjoyed the trip as much as other more expensive visits. Engagement with local services in this way has also opened opportunities to build community relationships, and to raise awareness of the Shared Education partnership in the wider area.

“ *What we've learned as we've gone along is to be a bit more careful in what we're spending money on and make better use of the funding. If you put your mind to it you can come up with things that don't cost a fortune and are as enjoyable. (Principal)*

Challenges and barriers

Administration: The main challenge for the partnership has been the administrative efforts needed to coordinate shared sessions. As all pupils from both schools are involved, there are a range of different activities happening at once to meet the needs of all age groups. The practicalities of identifying and booking external facilitators, as well as coordinating the venue, timings and transport, takes time and effort. However, this has not caused any issues in terms of delivery, and the schools feel they have been well supported throughout the process. Both schools feel that any additional effort has been more than worth it given the benefits for pupils and schools.

“ *It can be time consuming. Having said that, the planning time built in, and funds for coordination is adequate, there's a nice balance at the*

minute. We're managing and getting everything done. (Principal)

“ *The time spent on admin is proportionate as the benefits to children, staff and school community of shared education are huge. Everyone benefits from the programme. (Teacher-survey response)*

Looking forward: sustainability and future plans

Staff are keen for the strong relationship that has developed between the two schools to continue beyond the lifetime of the funding, as there are so many educational, social and financial benefits for the school and staff as noted above.

“ *The staff get so much out of it, asking each other advice on different school issues. And as small schools, we'll continue to lend resources and things to each other, and to get together to buy in training because we couldn't afford to do that on our own. (Principal)*

Staff have seen the relationships build between pupils from both schools, and many of these have crossed over to life outside of school. Given the shared farming background for many families, staff feel that these relationships will also continue, and may lead to wider family connections.

“ Relationships are developing between children, leading to relationships between parents of different faiths. (Teacher, survey response)

However, the Shared Education sessions are dependent on transport, and buses are costly, so it will not be possible to continue regular contact for pupils.

“ Unit cost is extremely important as we could not deliver high quality teaching and learning without investment in resources etc. Transport is also a major cost and because of the distance between schools we could not participate without it. (Teacher, survey response)

The schools will seek opportunities where they can join up with one another in the future, perhaps to avail of external workshops or outings for pupils, but these will likely be ad hoc and irregular.

“ There will still be occasions where we can come together and it will benefit us financially, so we will continue to do those things where we can. Otherwise, the staff relationships will continue. (Principal)



Conclusions

Overall, the Shared Education experience has been a positive one, for schools, pupils and parents. Feedback from all parties has been positive; everyone has benefitted from it in different ways, and schools would love to continue and indeed build on their work so far.

“ Our participation in shared education has greatly benefited our children and school. We have been able to upskill our teachers, invest in resources, and visit places we never have

been before. We would love to continue to participate in Shared Education and hope to see the project continue.
(Teacher, survey response)

“ This is a brilliant initiative and the children are getting an immense amount from it, in a variety of areas e.g. learning, social skills, etc. The level of funding we are getting at the minute needs to be at least sustained, if not, increased, in order to keep going and further develop this initiative.
(Principal, Survey response)



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)

January 2021

