

☺ I enjoy Shared Education as we meet different pupils ☺

**PEACE IV Programme - Shared Education Impact Evaluation
Collaboration Through Sharing in Education (CASE)
Case Study Report: Primary School Partnership**

Ardkeeran and Tاونagh National Schools (Co. Sligo)



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



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

This case study included the following research activities:

- An in-depth interview with the manager of each partnership school.
- Observation of a Shared Education session.
- One creative engagement exercise with a group of children who have taken part in shared classes.
- Review of existing partnership documentation, to include monitoring information and photographs of a range of shared class activity.

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.

Background to the partnership

Partnership 26 includes two schools:

School name	Enrolment 2019-2020
Ardkeeran National School	120
Taunagh National School	27

Both schools are set in Riverstown, a small village in Co. Sligo with a population of 334 (2016 Census). Schools are around 1.5KM apart. Riverstown has a Catholic Church and a Church of Ireland Church, and population breakdown by religion is approximately 83% Catholic, 9% other religion, 8% no religion (CSO, Ireland).

Taunagh NS is a small school, with 27 pupils, two teachers and a special needs assistant. Ardkeeran is larger, with 120 pupils, five teachers and two special needs assistants. Taunagh NS is a Church of Ireland school, and Ardkeeran a Catholic school, however both schools accept pupils of all faiths and none, and consider themselves to be mixed, with an ethos of inclusivity. As such, neither school reported having had the need for a specific 'inclusion policy' in place, nor have they currently plans to develop one. Should the need arise, they would develop one.

The Shared Education partnership began in academic year 2017-2018, and

will finish in 2022-2023 (five years in total). Initially, only pupils from third to sixth class took part (39 pupils), however by academic year 2019-2020, all 144 pupils from both schools (Junior infants through to sixth class) were engaged. Pupils take part in 10 shared sessions lasting three hours each, making up the required 30 hours for each child.



Previous experiences of shared education

Both schools were previously involved in an early PEACE project with a cross border school, however these were twinned relationships rather than regular formal shared sessions, with the schools meeting once a year for a joint school trip.

“ *It was more difficult as the pupils had no experience of working together and getting to know each other, so it was more like two separate schools in the one place. (Principal)*

Additionally, the two schools had engaged with one another, and with other nearby schools, in several ad-hoc activities and events, for example attending school concerts or plays. These previous experiences involved 'one off' activities that did not foster building of relationships.

“ *Ardkeeran NS and Tounagh NS would have taken part in some informal mixing in the past, for example would have come over to watch a Christmas concert or event, but nothing formal. This is the first*

formal shared relationship for both schools. (Principal)

Principals both feel that the difference between previous experiences and the current Shared Education Partnership comes from the sustained contact. This has made a difference in terms of helping children to build meaningful relationships and experience working together on joint projects.



Photo: Pupils from both schools working together on an exercise for the evaluator. They were asked to draw a 'person' to represent their shared education experience, including words to describe how they feel about the shared sessions, and what they like/do not like about the activities they take part in.

Motivations for getting involved

Building on local connections:

Ardkeeran first proposed getting involved with Shared Education, and invited Taunagh NS to join them. Initially, Ardkeeran thought the requirement would be for a cross border collaboration; while this wasn't a concern as such, they felt that a partnership with a local school, with the same strategic context, would be more valuable in terms of building local connections e.g. children would be able to form friendships with others living close by and who they might see at other clubs or activities outside of school.

“ *The fact we are so physically close makes the project [Shared Education] much more worthwhile. We've built up positive relationships with staff and pupils, it's bigger than just the project. (Principal)*



Neither school reported a concern around inclusion or diversity, nor was this seen as a motivation for getting involved.

“ *The religion aspect isn't the same here, the divides aren't as clear. I think across the border things might be different, but here we don't make an issue of it, we don't really talk about it. (Principal)*

There was a small concern prior to application that involvement in Shared Education might raise some of these issues and put a focus on the differences between the children, however there have been no problems.

“ *At the back of our minds in the beginning, we were of course apprehensive that we were doing the right thing, but the children don't see any difference, they just see children, and the activities are fun so they look forward to it. (Principal)*

Enhancing curriculum delivery: As the curriculum aligns across both schools, teachers saw the potential to share expertise and support one another in planning and school development. As small schools, this was considered a benefit for both staff and pupils.

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 Children (Junior Infants to sixth class)	All Children (Junior Infants to sixth class)	All Children (Junior Infants to sixth class)
Total enrolment	144	144	146
Total number/ % children taking part	144 (100%)	144 (100%)	146 (100%)
Number of children per school	Ardkeeran: 116 Taunagh: 28	Ardkeeran: 116 Taunagh: 28	Ardkeeran: 120 Taunagh: 26
Model of sharing	10 x 3 hours, monthly	10 x 3 hours, monthly	10 x 3 hours, monthly

Location: Most of the shared sessions take place at Ardkeeran NS, as it is the bigger of the two schools, however outdoor sessions can take place at Taunagh NS. Sessions for junior and senior pupils take place at different times as there would not be enough space or resources for them to happen together. Pupils from the visiting school are integrated throughout the Ardkeeran classes strategically to encourage integration.

“ *When pupils come over, we split them up so they are mixed. We do this strategically as some are already friends (e.g. play a lot of football together). There are no issues, they are happy to mix. (Principal)*

As there are significantly more Ardkeeran than Taunagh pupils, there is potential for Taunagh pupils to feel outnumbered. Staff members have played a key role in ensuring that all children fit in well, by observing interactions, paying attention to different personalities, and grouping children in ways they felt would get the best from everyone. Principals reflected that for some of the younger pupils from the smaller school, mixing into a bigger school can be daunting at the beginning, but they settle in well.

“ *Coming over from small school to bigger school could be intimidating. But they learn how to mix and it's a life experience. (Principal)*

Activities: Shared activities have focused on STEM subjects, which both schools see as a priority and have common curricular areas. Examples of activities have included using '[Izak 9](#)' maths cubes, playing chess, introduction to coding, a robotics project, and [Lego Wedo](#) kits. Schools have also taken part in various trips and external activities together to supplement the classroom learning.

Visits have been aligned to the curriculum themes, including seashore and nature walks, a visit to Ailwee Caves and a birds of prey exhibition (supporting learning on 'Social, environmental and scientific education'), and a visit to Sligo Institute for Technology during Engineering week, to align with STEM classes.



Photos: pupils from both schools showing off their picture drawn during the evaluation activity. The group reflected that they felt happy and excited when they took part in shared education sessions, and that they particularly liked to go on trips, play games in class and play sports.

Benefits for the child

Educational: Pupils have access to resources and educational activities which they wouldn't previously have had. This has broadened their learning opportunities and makes learning more fun and engaging. Children themselves see the shared activities as more fun and collaborative than usual classes, and look forward to the shared sessions.

“ *Shared education gives you a chance to talk and work with your friends. (Pupil)*

“ *Shared education has enjoyable tasks like science. (Pupil)*

The external trips and activities that have been funded through Shared Education have been beneficial in helping the pupils to build relationships in less formal settings, and have also helped to bring classroom lessons to life, and are considered positive for both staff and children.

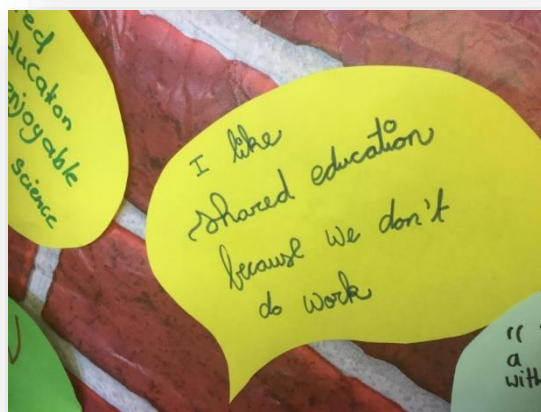


Photo: Just after taking part in a maths class (using Izak 9 cubes), the evaluator gave out speech bubbles and asked pupils to write down what they liked about shared sessions. The photo above reflects only one of numerous pupils who reported that it felt like they weren't doing work, or that they had so much fun, or they get to play games.

Easing the transition process from primary to secondary school: As small schools, the principals saw shared sessions as an opportunity for the pupils to experience wider teaching styles, and to meet other pupils who they would be moving to secondary school with. As Taunagh NS only has two classrooms, pupils are in a multi-grade class with the same class teacher for three to four years. As the shared sessions are rotated between schools, pupils get to visit their partner school regularly and therefore can experience a different teaching style, engage with other adults and children, and have access to a variety of physical resources.

“ *It prepares them for transition to secondary school, as 80-90% of our pupils will go to the same secondary school as Ardkeeran pupils, so it's nice for them to know faces and names before they go.*
(Principal)

“ *It's really good for them that they get to meet other teachers, and see how they work and interact with the class.* *(Principal)*

Social: As two small schools, principals feel the biggest benefit for the pupils has been the opportunity to get to know more peers, and to engage with a wider group of staff. Children certainly enjoy the activities; when asked how they feel coming to school on a Shared Education day, they reported words such as excited, happy, joyful and good fun. A few also mentioned feeling nervous in advance, and said this was down to meeting people they did not know well, but that it usually faded after a while.

Staff have seen many pupils increase in confidence as the shared sessions have progressed, and feel this will have long term benefits for them in transitioning to secondary school, and for engaging in wider life. Indeed, many of them will end up attending the same secondary School, therefore it is good that they are able to build relationships now.

“ *The children are really keen. They love it and look forward to the sessions. And they talk about the pupils from the other school when they aren't here.*
(Teacher)

“ *Shared education is sharing and meeting new friends.* *(Pupil)*

“ *Everyone can express themselves* *(Pupil)*

Staff have seen changes outside of school too, with children carrying on friendships outside of the classroom which they hope will continue longer term.

“ *It's a much wider experience than just shared classes. We've seen friendships forming outside of school too, which is lovely.* *(Principal)*

The pupils agree; when asked what they like to do during Shared Education sessions, many of the children's responses focused on leisure activities, such as meeting up with new friends, taking part in sports (football, GAA, basketball), playing in the playground and chatting.



Photos: Artwork done by the children during the case study visit, describing how they feel and what they enjoy about Shared Education.



Benefits for the school

Staff: Staff have very much benefited from the relationships built with the partner school. Bigger schools usually have more than one class teacher in each year, therefore have peers to discuss teaching strategy and ideas with, however in small schools, there are no peers to plan with. The partnership has provided principals and staff with peers from whom to seek support for planning and delivering of lessons, and to talk through issues, concerns and opportunities. They have drawn on one another's strengths and have learned a lot from one another. This is useful both for planning and delivering Shared Educations, and much more widely, in administration of practical school arrangements, helping to ensure that schools are consistent with one another's policies and practices.

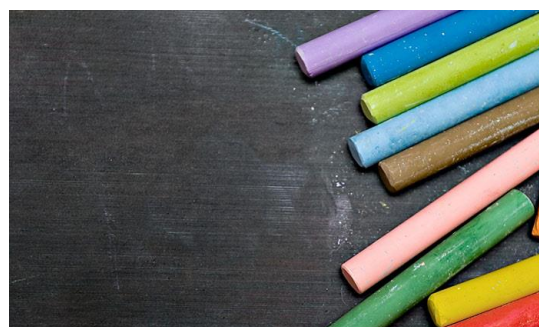
“ I can ring the other school to ask advice, and we can align things e.g. special closure days etc. And it's good to have someone else to talk through difficulties with. (Principal)

Schools have also undertaken opportunities for shared Continued Professional Development, for example through the Discover Primary Science Programme (Science Foundation Ireland) and found this useful, not only

to develop new skills but to work collaboratively with new peers.

Economic: The schools have been selective in how they have made use of the funds available, so that any money spent will be an investment in the school rather than a temporary measure. As well as resources for the pupils, money has gone towards upskilling staff.

“ We invested in resources and staff training. If you pay for facilitators to work with the children, they come, deliver a session and go again. Whereas if you invest in upskilling staff and in gathering resources, those are permanent and the programme becomes sustainable. (Principal)



Benefits for parents and the wider community

Positive responses: Parents and school governors have been fully on board and engaged from the beginning, which has been a real benefit for the schools. Although there are no specific activities targeted at parents, they are kept informed through regular updates via Parent Associations, through the school newsletters and other regular school correspondence. While principals are unclear as to whether there has been a wider cultural or attitudinal change for parents because of Shared Education, they have had generally positive feedback.

“ There's been a very positive response from parents. They all agree it was/is a positive experience for all and new friendships are formed. (Principal)

Modelling behaviour for the community: As the two schools are situated in a small town, the partnership has allowed them to publicly demonstrate partnership working and support for one another. Principals feel this is extremely important and sets a good example for the community and the children. They use Facebook and the school websites

to publicise the activities they take part in, and have had features in the local press to raise awareness.

“ It's in our interest to build on the positive relationship and work within the community together. It's a united front to the parents in the area too, we do a spring clean together, we decide together on charges for school visits etc. (Principal)

In 2019, both schools joined forces to clean up the village during National Spring Clean Week, and in support of the Tidy Towns Initiative. This was a practical way to work together and to develop a greater sense of community membership for pupils and staff.

“ It's a fantastic scheme, great for our little community where there's two schools, a great way to bring things together. (Principal)

Teachers have found they are getting to know more of the wider community through Shared Education, particularly as they live and work in the village.

“ I live in this area and the children from Taunagh now speak to me and know me. (Principal)

What has worked well and why?

Initial time investment in breaking the ice:

There has been significant time invested from the beginning in helping the staff and children get to know each other. This was an important step in the early days of the partnership, and has really helped to maximise the relationship.

“ *We put a lot of time at the start into icebreakers. So many barriers have been broken down over the years, there would have been barriers many years ago but no longer. (Principal)*

Support provided by CASE: Principals reflected on the excellent support received from CASE, including guidance and materials during the application process and throughout implementation. The ongoing support has been invaluable, and principals know that if they have a question or concern, they can ask.

“ *Léargas [CASE Project Partner] have provided advice and support with all aspects of Shared Education, and we know we can ask for help if we need it. (Principal)*

Free play time: Staff reflected on the importance of children having unstructured time to get to know one another informally, and have found that the children wanted more time to play with their new friends. Visits have often been extended into playground time, meaning that pupils are getting more than the 30 hours contact time.

Resources purchased: The schools have used the funds available to invest in STEM equipment that will make lessons fun and engaging, and can be used again and again in the years to come. One example is the Lego Wedo kits; pupils work in groups, with each allocated a specific role, to follow instructions on an iPad to build a Lego machine. This supports group work, collaboration and problem solving. Classes also use the Izak 9 cubes; again, pupils work in groups to solve maths problems, supported by an online resource. Both staff and pupils love these resources and feel they transform teaching and learning.

The choice of resource was felt to be important, as more complicated resources can add additional stress to teaching and require significant time investment from staff to learn about them first. The Lego kits are self-contained and are tidied away again by pupils at the end of the session, ready for the next group.

“ *The Lego kits are magic. From a teacher point of view, the resource is all there ready to go. The Izak 9 kits are easy to use too. The trickier your resources are, the more frazzled you might become as you've to juggle staff and pupils and then resources too. (Teacher)*

“ *Shared education is full of new projects to try and experiment with! (Pupil)*

Challenges and barriers

Initial implementation and ongoing administration: Principals noted that the initial stages of the process were challenging and time consuming. Significant effort was invested in initial training and awareness raising to ensure that all staff were fully informed about the aims and objectives of Shared Education. Planning of the model of sharing, including focus of activities, and the resources required, was also labour-intensive but critical, particularly in the early days.

Implementing Shared Education does require ongoing time and effort from principals. For teachers, there is additional planning time required to prepare for the shared sessions, which

places a burden on staff who are already challenged in terms of day to day pressures of the teaching profession. This was noticed particularly in year two when the numbers of pupils involved was increased, from the initial involvement of 3rd to 6th class in year one (39 pupils), through to inclusion of all pupils in year two (144 in total).

“ *The classes also take a lot of planning, making sure iPads are charged, getting the resources sorted, and there's only so much good will you can expect from teachers outside of their working hours, so that has been a challenge. (Principal)*

Lack of opportunities to share learning: Both principals had attended a Shared Education conference (in Letterkenny) and found this very informative, however apart from a few other local (Sligo-only) networking opportunities, they had not had the chance to meet with other schools taking part in Shared Education. Principals would have liked the opportunity to hear about emerging lessons from other partnerships further along the Shared Education journey, which they could have used to inform their thinking as they developed their model of sharing. Ongoing networking opportunities would also be beneficial to allow for an exchange of ideas and sharing of expertise.

“ We went to a shared education dissemination day and were sat around the table, everyone thinking we’re all doing something unique, yet realise that we’re all doing the same thing. There’s a massive pool of knowledge that we really should have more opportunity to share. We all ‘made our own wheel’.
(Principal)

Looking forward: sustainability and future plans

Both schools hope to be able to continue the relationships they have built up over the years. However, they feel the formal shared class sessions won't be able to continue as they would rely on the resources funded through Shared Education, particularly payment for sub-cover, to allow them to plan and deliver sessions.

“ The funding for sub-cover is the essential bit to allow us to do the planning. This will be the real loss, as it would be difficult for the staff to meet to plan.
(Principal)

They will however continue to make use of the resources that were purchased with Shared Education funding, and investment in staff training has also brought an element of sustainability beyond the funding term.

“ I like the focus on investing in the staff, because the children will move on and we’ll be the constant over the years.
(Principal)

Having said that, the relationships built will absolutely continue, as these have already moved beyond Shared Education activities, with staff now contacting one another for wider advice and support.



Conclusions

Principals feel Shared Education has been a positive experience for all involved, including pupils, staff and wider community. They are looking forward to working together for the remainder of the funding term, and would encourage any schools considering involvement to go ahead.

“ Overall, it's been a very rewarding experience for us all. I would recommend it to any schools considering it, although my advice would be to start small and choose your tasks wisely - that keeps it manageable. (Principal)



Photo: pupils from both schools collaborating to solve a maths puzzle using the Izak 9 maths cubes. Questions are set via videos on the companion website (displayed to the class using an interactive whiteboard), and pupils work together to solve the problems using the cubes.

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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