

Its good  
because we  
work in teams  
to complete a  
task. 😊

You will like it because  
you get to meet new people  
and do fun math activities.

## PEACE IV Programme - Shared Education Impact Evaluation

### Collaboration Through Sharing in Education (CASE)

#### Case Study Report: Primary School Partnership

Donaghey Primary School, Lissan Primary School, Gaelscoil Eoghain  
(Co. Tyrone)



# Approach

As part of the wider Impact Evaluation of Shared Education, 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.



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

**There are three schools involved in Shared Education Partnership 105:**

School name	Enrolment 2019-2020
Gaelscoil Eoghain	130
Donaghey PS	105
Lissan PS	111

The partnership is based around the town of Cookstown, a large town with a population of approximately 39,000. The population is quite mixed in terms of community background; the 2011 Census reports 58% belong to or were brought up in the Catholic religion, 38% Protestant or other Christian religion, and 4% no religion or no response.

Gaelscoil Eoghain sits within the town itself, while Lissan PS and Donaghey PS are situated in rural areas around five miles either side. Gaelscoil Eoghain is an Irish Medium Primary School with 84 pupils (98% Catholic pupils and 2% 'other'); Lissan PS is a Catholic Maintained Primary with 131 pupils (100% Catholic); and Donaghey PS is a Controlled Primary with 85 pupils (92% Protestant, 1% Catholic and 7% 'other'). While the schools each reflect one dominant cultural background, they are all open to children of all faiths and none.

**“ We laughed at the original application stage when we had to put religion make-up on the form and actually had to check. I think we all [controlled school staff] assumed that our school was 100% protestant, when in actual fact it isn't. (Principal)**

Staff feel that there are no concerns in terms of inclusivity and the schools integrate well within the wider community. In this regard, only one school currently has an inclusion and diversity policy, however this is in draft form and not a priority at the minute. Neither of the other schools has felt a need to develop such a policy, either before or because of Shared Education.

The partnership began in academic year 2017-2018, and is currently in year three of five years. In 2019-2020, 173 pupils from across years 4 – 7 were involved in Shared Education; this reflects an increase from 124 in year 1 (17-18) and 146 in year 2 (18-19).



## Previous experiences of shared education

The partnership was initiated by Gaelscoil Eoghain who invited the others to join, however the schools were known to one another and had had some previous interaction. Two of the schools had been involved in cross community activities, while Donaghey PS had previously had an ongoing relationship with a local Maintained School; this school later closed and most pupils transferred to Lissan PS, therefore it felt natural to continue the partnership with Lissan PS. The formal application to Shared Education built upon and cemented existing relationships.

**“ We did some joint events, organised between us, and then the idea for the Shared Education application came about. (Principal)**

Lissan PS also had an existing relationship with a Controlled School nearby, and first approached them to partner in Shared Education, however they declined. This relationship has since ceased, even though it is much closer than the other schools in the partnership (less than half a mile away). Principals reflected that the inclusion

of an Irish Medium school in the partnership may have caused some concern.

**“ I personally feel it was the Irish language issue, as they have since joined with another Catholic school. Since we got formally involved in Shared Education, we've had no further contact with them. (Principal)**

Staff reflected that the town is already quite mixed, and there are various other shared relationships in place, including one Shared Education Signature Programme (SESP) partnership<sup>1</sup>.

**“ There are a lot of people in the area who are quite proud of cross-community links and school links, there are obviously different pockets of traditions and religions, but a lot of mix, particularly around sports. The local youth soccer team is very mixed, so a lot of the children already knew each other from that when they started to take part. (Principal)**

<sup>1</sup> SESP is a separate programme, funded through The Executive Office, Atlantic Philanthropies and the Department of Education. SESP is managed by the Education Authority.

<https://www.eani.org.uk/parents/shared-education>

## Motivations for getting involved

**Formalising existing links:** As there were existing links already, it felt natural to progress to Shared Education; this didn't involve any large change in ways of working, and in fact felt like a good next step to move things on and formalise the relationships.

**“** *We had a good relationship with Lissan and Creevagh [a local primary school not in the partnership] schools before, but it was cosy. We felt this was an opportunity to push and formalise things a little, as the children do learn off one another and it's important.* **(Principal)**

**Supporting pupils to embrace difference:** A key motivation for all schools was preparing pupils for life, helping them to understand, accept and embrace difference. Principals agreed that they wanted their pupils to get to know pupils from other schools, and be open to the fact that there is a mixed population in the town, and across Northern Ireland, and that they can hold differing opinions, cultures or views while still becoming friends.

**“** *My goal for our children is that when they are older, if they see or hear something sectarian, they can say that wasn't their experience, or they don't get offended by seeing something in Irish for example, that it is very much a shared space and country.* **(Principal)**

This was a common theme, with another principal commenting:

**“** *I want my pupils to be able to think for themselves, to form their own judgements and question what they are told, so they need to get that experience.* **(Principal)**



Two principals reflected on their own experience of starting at University/College and finding it difficult being in a group of mixed religions/cultural backgrounds, as this was something they hadn't previously experienced. All agreed that they don't want the same experience for the children they work with, and it is important to build these connections from an early age.

One principal noted:

**“** *The majority of my pupils are from unionist families. If they are going down to QUB, for example, they need to be open to the fact that it's a mixed population and they need to feel confident to work, socialise, play with others.* (Principal)

**Encouraging integrated working for staff:** The principals also reflected on the segregated nature of teacher education, and of the profession itself, with staff backgrounds often reflecting the ethos of the school. They felt that the opportunity would be good for staff as well as pupils, and would help to challenge the stereotypes that might exist for staff, as well as challenge the wider educational structures.

**“** *For those in teaching college, they continue to be segregated right through to teaching. The wider system has to change. If adults can't be trusted to learn together, there is no hope for the children.* (Principal)



**Photos: Pupils working together on an investigative maths exercise during class time**

## 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
<b>Year groups involved</b>	Year 4 – Year 7	Year 4 – Year 7	Year 4 – Year 7
<b>Total enrolment</b>	300	327	346
<b>Total number of pupils taking part</b>	124	146	173
<b>% pupils taking part</b>	41%	45%	50%
<b>Number of pupils involved per school</b>	Gaelscoil Eoghan: 28 Donaghey: 33 Lissan: 63	Gaelscoil Eoghan: 38 Donaghey: 55 Lissan: 53	Gaelscoil Eoghan: 55 Donaghey: 56 Lissan: 62
<b>Model of sharing</b>	10 sessions of varying lengths (5 x 1hr, 1 x 2hr, 2 x 2.5 hr, 3 x 4hr, 1 x 6hr)	7 sessions for year 4/year 5, and 7 sessions for year 6/year 7 (2 x 5 hr, 4 x 3 hr, 1 x 6 hr); 1 1hr session for all children.	8 sessions for year 4/year 5 groups, and 8 sessions for year 6/year 7 groups (4 x 5 hr, 3 x 3 hr, 1 x 1 hr).

The numbers have been increased year on year, with 50% of pupils taking part in 2019/2020. The length of sessions varies greatly; this is dependent on the type of activity taking place, with longer sessions being reserved for external trips. In the first two years of engagement (2017-18, 2018-19), activities focused on 'The World Around Us', literacy, PE and Personal Development and Mutual Understanding (PDMU). In 2019-2020, activities for all year groups have centred on STEM, including

Investigative Maths, identified as a priority for all schools in their school development plans, and Scientific Enquiry.

Regular school trips have taken place, and schools have tried to tie these to the topics being studied, including a visit to the Titanic museum to complement 'design and build' science and technology lessons, and a visit to the Seamus Heaney Centre to complement literacy lessons on local poetry. Pupils also visited Stormont to



meet MLAs and witness 'government in action'; this aligned to work ongoing in PDMU, promoted the importance of 'pupil voice' and informed the ongoing development of their school councils.

**“ Children reported great enthusiasm about their writing following the workshops. They enjoyed the trip to the Seamus Heaney Centre. Poetry has become a more accessible and alive genre of literature. (From 18-19 internal evaluation)**

One of the partnership schools is Irish Medium, so being taught in and engaging with one another in English is one of the biggest changes for the pupils. The shared sessions are taught in English, therefore this year's focus on STEM subjects has worked out well as there is commonality across maths theory and many concepts will have the same names (e.g. isosceles triangle).

**“ Children interact in Irish although some children still communicate with their teacher in Irish as that's what they're used to. So shared sessions are in English, and in the playground we tell the children it's shared session today so they use English. (Principal)**

Principals reflected on this and other differences in ways of working across the schools, and how they have worked together to make sure that these don't become barriers.

**“ All interaction is done with good intentions, it's all about learning to appreciate difference. (Principal)**



**Photo: A group of pupils from the three schools 'hanging out' together during break time.**

#### **Activity examples:**

The evaluator observed an outdoor investigational maths activity taking place. This involved various 'stations' set up around the playground, with mixed groups of children at each taking part in activities such as measuring the playground with a 'measuring wheel', or working out the area of the school steps by counting the tiles. Children were working together, taking turns and moving



about with a lot of chatter and laughter alongside challenging tasks.

Another group was taking part in a classroom based maths activity. Pupils in mixed groups were given a task to plan a party with a set budget, and had to choose from a handout detailing prices for a selection of entertainment and catering options. Groups worked together to decide what would be the best value for money, and how they were going to spend their budget. The task tested core maths skills, group-work and negotiation, as well as wider life skills (for example, deciding whether it was better value to buy large bottles of cola or individual cans). Again, the children had a lot of fun undertaking the activity.



**Photo: pupils working together to measure the playing group using a measuring wheel**

## Benefits for the child

**Educational:** The activities that the pupils get to engage in, and the way they are delivered, is considered a key benefit of Shared Education, providing a more enriching learning experience. Activities tend to be task based rather than desk work. Pupils and staff agree that the activities are also considered more fun than usual classwork, and there is often physical exercise involved where possible.

“ *I like Shared Education because we work in groups, and if we get stuck the other people will help us. (Pupil)* ”

“ *It's good because we do fun maths activities, and we work in teams to complete a task. (Pupil)* ”

As normal class timing is suspended during shared sessions, teachers can allocate more time to the lesson, therefore feel like they are able to explore topics in more detail.

**“** *Having time to set aside a full day for the children to focus on something e.g. maths or science, and to really engage in it, is fantastic.*  
*(Teacher)*



**Photo: Children working in groups in the playground during a shared activity**

**Social:** Principals, teachers and pupils agree that the biggest benefit has been the range of people (pupils and staff) that children have got to engage with and the social and communication skills that they are developing.

**“** *It's nice because we can play, help each other and you do fun group stuff. And we can make new friends and see friends from other schools.*  
*(Pupil)*

Pupils are now mixing regularly with children they wouldn't normally have had a chance to get to know, learning that they have lots in common, rather than immediately seeing difference or judging others as one religion or another, and have made new friends as a result.

**“** *They don't really know which school, just know they know each other from one of the shared education schools.*  
*(Teacher)*

The pupils get a chance to hear different points of view, engage with different personalities, and are learning to respect difference by getting to know one another on a deeper level.

**“** *The children demonstrated great respect for each other's literature and language by spontaneously applauding the poems they devised in either English or Irish as part of the Heaney Homeplace workshop (from 18-19 internal evaluation)*

**“** *Shared education is where you make new friends and mix with other schools.*  
*(Pupil)*

The children are also getting to experience different teaching styles and seeing different approaches to education, which is particularly important as the three schools in the partnership are smaller than many other primary schools.

**“ P6/P7 may only have had 3 teachers through their primary school education, and in fact we (and Lissan) don't have a male teacher, so it's great they get to experience that. It's broadening their experience overall. (Principal)**

The group work format of the shared lessons gives pupils the chance to negotiate with one another to work out solutions, therefore building teamwork skills. One school also noted that their children are benefiting from access to outdoor and green space that they don't have at their own school, and they are really enjoying this.

**“ We have limited outside space, and little green space, so it's so good that the children get to visit a different school and have that opportunity to play outdoors. (Principal)**



**Photo: new friendships have formed between pupils across the schools.**

## Benefits for the school

### **Staff relationships and peer support:**

There was a positive response by staff from the beginning, with everyone eager to be involved. The staff really enjoy their involvement, and get a lot out of it, in terms of learning new skills, building a support network, and meeting new people, both staff and pupils.

**“ We have had staff changes internally this year, and one teacher is disappointed as she was really looking forward to going and getting involved, but won't be this year. (Principal)**

Because the schools are all quite small, there tends to be only one class teacher per year group, therefore no peer support within schools. The Shared Education partnership has brought this much needed peer support, and teachers can now work together to plan sessions and support one another. Teachers felt this benefit may not be so pronounced for other larger schools who already have that internal peer support.

**“ You can become quite closed off in small schools, so it's good to get other opinions and bounce ideas off each other. (Principal)**

Teachers have shared discussions on many areas of school work, including timetables, timesheets, how to balance administrative requirements, class planning, organising dinner timetables etc. The relationship has evolved into the schools naturally working together. The year 1 teachers, while not directly involved in the delivery of Shared Education, have started a cluster group themselves and are really appreciating this new-found support.

**“ P1 teachers couldn't wait to talk to someone else about how they approach play, curriculum and activities, and have that peer support that they didn't have. We always learn from each other. (Principal)**

Other class teachers have done the same, and are really appreciating the wider benefits of the new friendships built.

**“ I have made really good links with teachers from other schools. We've met to discuss planning and reporting and helped one another, outside of the shared education work. We're trying to meet once or twice a term and we email lots in between. (Teacher)**

Principals have also found that involvement with Shared Education has helped to challenge and broaden their own thinking in terms of the other types of school and their approaches and ways of working.

**“ As teaching principals, we have the same problems as one another, potholes in the carpark etc. We're breaking down myths around differences in ways of working, we've realised we've lots of similarities [as schools and as principals] and can advise and support one another. (Principal)**

**Economic:** The funding to buy resources is recognised as a key benefit of Shared Education. Schools in the partnership have spent money



on maths games and outdoor equipment, and wouldn't have been able to buy these otherwise. These resources have added to the pupil experience, and also benefited the wider school as they will be used again and again in years to come.

**“** *We can now access lovely resources; last year we spent money on math games that we couldn't have bought before. (Principal)*

**“** *We bought trikes for the playground, which have been great and really get them mixing with one another. (Principal)*

The wider staff team have also benefited from attending training sessions which have been made possible because the schools have been able to join up and share the costs. The schools have also undertaken shared development days which have allowed them to share learning with one another more widely.

**“** *We've done wider training together and shared resources, so there are much wider benefits. We have been able to share training costs that we wouldn't have been able to afford alone. (Coordinator)*

## Benefits for parents and the wider community

There have been no activities delivered specifically to engage parents and the wider community with Shared Education, therefore teachers and principals could not comment on any wider benefits. However, they feel they are still early enough in the Shared Education journey and this is something they would like to address at a later stage.

## What has worked well and why?

### **Taking time to build familiarity:**

Teachers try to start each session with ice-breaking activities which focus on identifying things that the pupils have in common, rather than differences. Children start to discover that there are certain things that always unite people, such as sport, food, or pets.

**“** *I try to start every session with a child from each school in groups, and give them a random subject to talk about, then they present what they've learned. They always come up with similarities rather than differences, celebrating what makes us the same. (Teacher)*

The schools have not specifically discussed religion, flags and emblems, or difference in that regard, rather have focused on curricular activities while seeking opportunities to identify commonalities.

**“ We are purposely trying to keep things curriculum focused, we don't feel the need to go down the hard hitting 'let's get our flags out and discuss them route', the aim is to try to get the children naturally working together, finding out for themselves that xxx is just the same as them. (Teacher)**

Indeed, teachers reflected that they wouldn't necessarily feel equipped to deal with issues of religion and cultural traditions, and some would feel uncomfortable if they were required to take that approach.

**“ There's not been any discussion of religion, that type of language isn't used. You need to have strong foundations and relationships in place to even talk about those things in the first place, and it's not what the school wanted to focus on. (Teacher)**

**Building relationships:** The relationships built between principals and teachers from each school has been a really strong positive outcome from Shared Education and is a key reason why the partnership has been successful.

**“ The three of us [principals] have got on well from day one, as have the staff who have really clicked. Everyone has a very positive attitude and that can only be a positive influence on children. (Principal)**

Similarly for staff involved:

**“ Collaboration and working together, and making friends, has been great. We are different, our ethos is different given the community, and for there to be such strong collaboration already is a real benefit. (Teacher)**

**“ Everyone is really relaxed with it all, we help each other out. (Teacher)**

Principals noted that while they had some challenges in the early days of Shared Education, the staff teams across each school have always been

fully on board, which made the process run more smoothly.

“ *If they hadn't been on board, that would have been more difficult as it would have been difficult to expect someone to deliver the sessions if they didn't agree with it. (Principal)*

**Free play:** Teachers delivering the shared sessions feel that the break times are as important as the class sessions in facilitating mixing. While pupils can take a little while to 'warm up' to one another, once the barriers are broken down, they begin to make connections if left to their own devices.

“ *At the beginning they are more stuck to their own schools, but as they work together more through the day and into the second or third session, and get to know each other, the mixing happens more naturally. (Teacher)*

Staff reflected on the universal nature of play and its ability to unite children.

“ *Throw out a football and they're off, just playing together. (Teacher)*

## Challenges and barriers

### **Gaining buy-in from governors and parents:**

While two of the schools had only positive responses from parents, school governance and staff to the proposal that they get involved in Shared Education, one school had initial difficulties in getting the Board of Governors bought into the initiative. The Irish Language debate was prominent at the time of application, and the inclusion of an Irish Medium School in the Partnership caused some initial concerns among Governors from the Maintained school. However, this was resolved following positive responses to a parent survey, and support from the Education Authority. The three schools were determined that this wouldn't be a barrier to sharing.

“ *A handful of families were against the partnership especially the Irish medium school, but we wanted to prove we could work together, disagree on certain things and not fall out!! (Principal)*

“ *A lot of hard work had to be done, but we knew it would be worth it and we had the conversations and made the changes. (Principal)*

There are still some parents within the Controlled School who are not comfortable with their child's involvement, however this depends on the type of activity taking place. Most are generally happy for their child to mix with others if it is in their own school building, however they opt out of their child going to visit other schools. The principal feels that this is a religious, rather than cultural concern. The involvement of an Irish Medium School has been a little more complicated, and principals reflected on potential misconceptions and political attitudes behind this.

**“ We were aware of concerns around this, it is very frustrating for Irish medium schools too for it to have become politicalised, and we need to dispel the myths e.g. around funding. (Principal)**

**School differences:** There are physical differences in the schools, with Irish language signs in Gaelscoil Eoghain, and signs or symbols reflecting religious ethos across all. Pupils in the Irish Medium School also call their teachers by their first names, which is at first strange for the others to experience. However, they have continued to do this, and pupils know that when they go to visit Gaelscoil Eoghain, that is how they communicate, while Gaelscoil Eoghain pupils know that they need to use Mr/Mrs/Miss when they go to visit the

other schools. Again, this gives them a new experience of different ways of communicating with others.

**“ It's as strange for [Catholic Maintained] our pupils to go into the school and see signs in Irish etc., as it is for pupils from the Controlled School, so it's not about religion, it's just different. (Coordinator)**

**Pupil personalities:** There have been some natural clashes between pupils when the schools have come together, however these have not been in any way related to sectarian issues. Rather, they have been a result of strong personalities who are perhaps used to getting their own way and having to adapt to different people and ways of working. Teachers have dealt with these issues as they have come up, and although sometimes difficult, feel that this is a positive for the pupils as they learn to collaborate and communicate with others.

**“ They're having to work that bit harder to get the teacher's attention as there are more to compete with. So it's another learning experience for them. (Teacher)**



**Administration:** The administrative practicalities can be a challenge in terms of time and workload, although this varies between the schools as they approach things in different ways. One difference noted was the way in which schools deal with gaining parental consent to take part. One school requests a completed permission slip for each child for every individual visit to another school, whereas the other two schools request an overall permission slip at the beginning of the school year. This is personal choice and aligned to wider school processes.

“ *I tell parents the plan overall, but for each trip I have an individual permission slip as I'll want to know latest medical info, contact details etc. (Principal)*

For one principal, this need to focus on the administrative side of things means that he doesn't see the shared sessions in practice, and the real benefits for the pupils.

“ *I feel I get bogged down in the admin side of things and don't get to see the wider benefits, although of course I know they're there. (Principal)*

## Looking forward: sustainability and future plans

Principals agreed that their involvement in Shared Education has been beneficial for all, and they will definitely continue the partnership beyond the length of the funding. However, what this looks like in practice isn't yet clear. The funding, in particular the travel budget and the funding for planning days, has been a key enabler in allowing the pupils to visit each other, so regular visits are unlikely to continue.

“ *Schools are under so much pressure at the minute. We've had time to have planning days, which we couldn't have done outside of Shared Education. So at the end of funding, we wouldn't be able to do this. (Coordinator)*

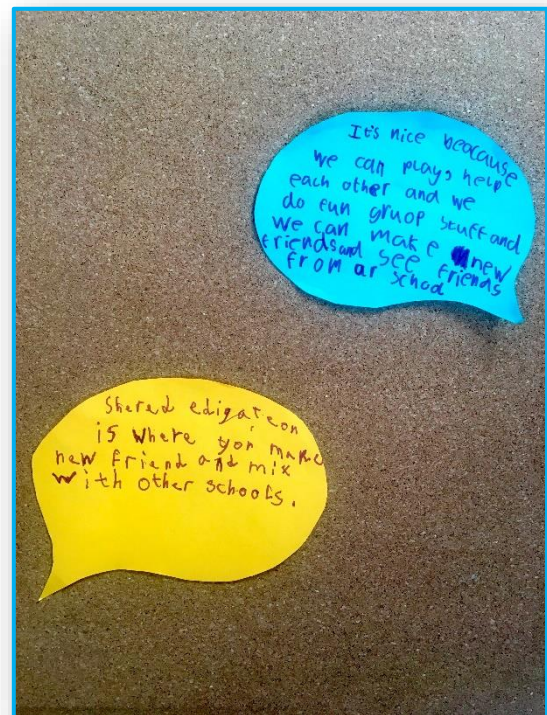
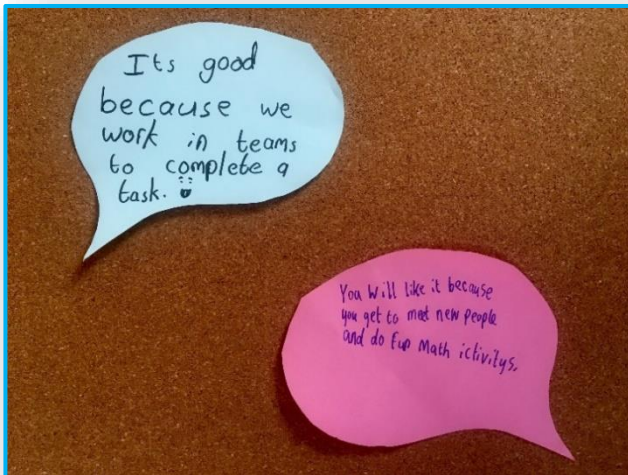
## Conclusions

Principals and staff all feel however that the friendships they have developed are now strong enough to last beyond the funding term.

Staff, teachers and pupils are all in agreement that the Shared Education experience has been an extremely rewarding one so far, and are looking forward to further engagement for the remainder of the funding (and indeed beyond).

“ I have a WhatsApp group with the other school teachers now, so we use that, just keeping in touch, having a laugh and sharing anything we think might be useful. That will definitely continue.  
(Teacher)

“ We all feel this is really important. We are starting to build good citizens, and sharing is important for the children's future, and for their future relationships and experiences. (Coordinator)



**Photos: feedback received from pupils during the evaluator's activity.**

---

---

---

*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*

