



# PEACE IV Programme - Shared Education Impact Evaluation Sharing from the Start (SFTS)

## Case Study Report: Preschool Partnership

Ardstraw and Little Flower Playgroup (Co. Tyrone)



## Approach

As part of the wider Impact Evaluation of Shared Education<sup>1</sup>, a number of partnerships were invited to host a case study visit. Case studies were identified by Sharing from the Start (SFTS) Project Partners (i.e. Early Years – the organisation for young children; the National Childhood Network; and the Fermanagh Trust).

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 playgroup;
- 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.



<sup>1</sup> 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 playgroups in this partnership:**

Playgroup name	Enrolment 2019-2020
Little Flower Playgroup, Sion Mills	16
Ardstraw Community Playgroup, Ardstraw	14

Both playgroups are located in Co. Tyrone, five miles from one another, between the towns of Newtownstewart and Strabane.

Little Flower Playgroup is based in The Glebe, Sion Mills, a small village with a population of around 1,900, of which 63% belong to the Catholic religion and 35.5% to the Protestant or 'other Christian' religion (from the last Census, 2011). Residents in the area immediately surrounding the Little Flower Playgroup come from a predominantly Catholic background.

Ardstraw Community Playgroup is in the village of Ardstraw outside Newtownstewart, again a small rural village, with around 200 residents, however with a largely Protestant background.

There are flags and emblems visible in the areas immediately surrounding both playgroups, and the areas have traditionally been quite segregated,

during the Troubles and more recently. Despite this, both playgroups are cross-community and welcoming of children from any background.

The partnership began in 2017, therefore academic year 2019/2020 is year three of four years of funding, finishing in June 2021.



## Previous experiences of Shared Education, and motivations for getting involved

Neither playgroup had been involved in a partnership previously, or taken part in shared activities. Ardstraw has adopted the Media Initiative for Children 'Respecting Difference' programme for some time, and the manager had some knowledge of the research on the development of attitudes to difference in early years. Therefore, on finding out more about Shared Education, she felt it would build on this existing work.

**“ I didn't know what Shared Education was about but as we learnt more, I really thought it would be a good thing for our children, and would be an ideal next step to our Media Initiative work. (Manager)**

The Ardstraw manager then approached Little Flower Playgroup, who were keen to get involved and felt it would add a different perspective to the usual activities of the playgroup.

## Model of sharing

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

<b>Age groups involved</b>	All children
<b>Total enrolment</b>	30
<b>Total number/% of pupils taking part</b>	30 (100%)
<b>Model of sharing</b>	10 sessions by 3 hours each, taking place monthly

In terms of location, shared sessions have taken place in both playgroup settings, and additionally, the partnership has made use of a hall in Sion Mills to allow space for a whole-group session. The children and staff travel by bus to visit their partner playgroup.

There have been six shared sessions held this year, however further planned sessions were cancelled due to COVID-19 lockdown. These have included a combination of smaller group free play activities to get to know one another, along with organised celebrations and trips. Shared sessions have focused on a number of different curriculum topics, including personal and social education, language and communication, the world around us, and the arts. Within this, activities have included rhymes and story time at the local library and a 'fun with drums'

session, celebrations for St Patrick's Day and the Chinese New Year, and day trips, including a visit to Santa at Barrontop Farm.

## Benefits for the child

**Educational:** Children from both playgroups have had a much wider educational experience than they would have done without Shared Education. The programme of activities has been designed to build skills and knowledge (including maths, science and literacy skills), support physical, social and emotional development, and allow children to become familiar with the world around them.

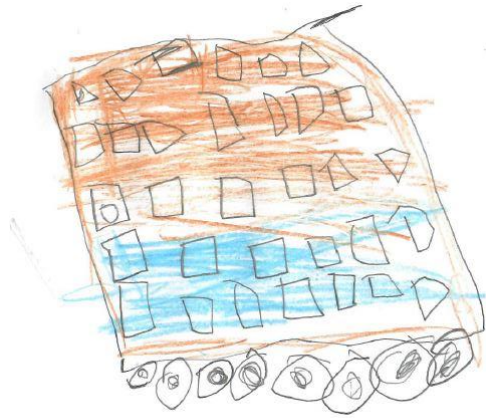
“ *During the trip to see Santa and the animals at Barrontop Farm, language and World Around Us was developed as children heard new language while naming some of the animals and discussing what they ate, looked like, etc. (Self-evaluation documentation, 2017)*

“ *If we weren't involved in Shared Education, the children would get an end of year outing, otherwise they would be here (in the playgroup) right through. (Manager)*

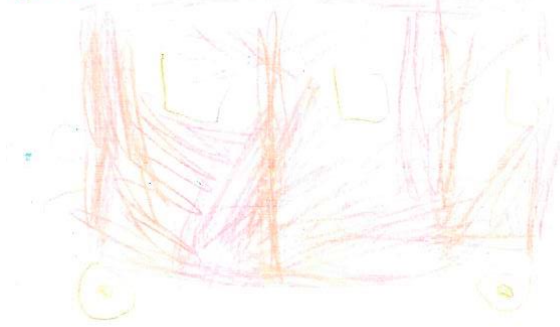
**Social:** The main benefit for the children has been the opportunity to meet new children, staff and parents in partnership playgroups, see new places and have new experiences (e.g. travelling by bus). This has had a positive impact on their confidence and helped to build their social skills. Following the first session of the year, staff noted that some children were a little shy initially, however grew in confidence as the session progressed.

“ *Some children were shy and needed adult support to become involved in activities at the other setting but when encouraged and supported by a familiar adult, their confidence grew throughout the session. (SFTS Reflections documentation)*





Charlotte  
the bus we go to Little Flower playgroup



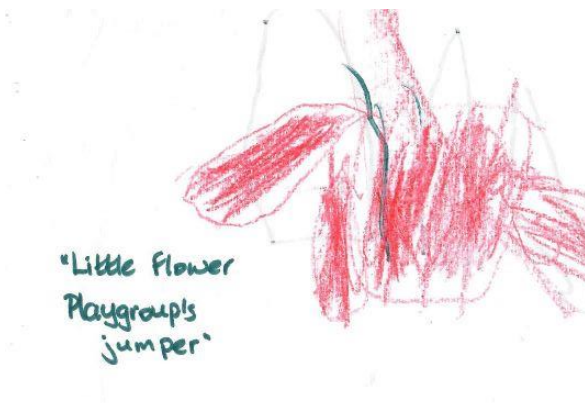
**Pictures: Children were asked to draw a picture of what they like about Shared Education. Two children drew the bus they go on to visit their partner group.**

Friendships have started to build, and children have got to know one another by name. While staff have seen no evidence of children actively meeting up outside of playgroup, they know that the children have bumped into one another at parks or activities outside of playgroup.

**“ I don't think the children would have arranged to meet up outside of school, but I know that they have bumped into each other say at soft play places, and would have recognised each other and played together. That would never have happened before Shared Education, so the relationships are building outside of what we're doing. (Manager)**

**Building inclusion:** Staff feel that the children do not have a concept of religious differences, rather they just see each other as the red school or blue school (due to the different jumpers worn). The two playgroups would not have met without Shared Education, so this has brought an opportunity to begin to integrate the two communities. While the settings do not specifically address religious or cultural differences, the children play with toys that might express one culture or the other and have taken part in activities relating to one culture or another (for example St. Patrick's Day celebrations) when they visit the other playgroup. Shared Education is therefore building familiarity with and acceptance of 'other' cultures at an early stage.

**“** They might be playing with a drum with a Union Jack on in one playgroup, or they would have seen an Irish flag on something maybe during the St Patrick's Day activities, but they wouldn't get the symbolism around those.  
(Manager)



**Pictures:** The children recognise that the other school wear a different jumper colour, however that is the only difference they see.

## Benefits for the setting

**Staff:** The biggest benefit for the staff has been the friendships made. While the managers did not know one another before Shared Education, they now count one another as friends. The experience has really felt like a partnership, and when difficulties have arisen, they have been able to work through these together. They can also discuss and help one another out with issues beyond Shared Education, and know that this relationship will last beyond the lifetime of the funding. While there have been other opportunities to meet peers, for example through local cluster group meetings, the intensity and format of Shared Education has allowed for a much closer bond to develop.

**“** We can talk about things that we might be concerned about, share thoughts and feelings, it doesn't have to be about Shared Education. All the staff have built these relationships. (Manager)

**“ It’s great to have someone you can turn to when you’re worried about things. We would have had support every so often when we went to local meetings, but we are linked so much more closely through Shared Education. (Manager)**

## Benefits for parents and the wider community

Parents are kept informed of Shared Education activities in several ways, including parents’ evenings, the AGM, newsletters, learning journals and photographs of sessions shared via social media. While the partnership does not currently host activities directed specifically at parents, they are invited to come along and watch, support or volunteer at Shared Education sessions and activities, as indeed are wider family members - parents, aunts, uncles and grandparents have all got involved.

Managers had some initial concerns about how the proposal to take part in Shared Education with a playgroup from a different tradition would be received by the parents and local community, as the two communities have always been very separate, and parents would rarely have mixed.

However, the partnership worked well from the beginning and the playgroups have had the support of parents and community in the most part.

**“ It could have gone either way but I was pleasantly surprised. There could have been barriers but there were no issues at all. Some parents didn’t want to get involved; they didn’t stop their children getting involved, they just didn’t come to anything themselves. (Manager)**

**“ There were one or two discussions where I think parents had predisposed ideas of what the ‘other’ setting would be like, but they went up anyway [to the partner playgroup] and realised that it isn’t that different. I think it gave them reassurance of their similarities. (Manager)**

Managers are particularly pleased at the engagement so far, and feel that it has given parents and families a chance to get to know one another and start to challenge their ideas of difference and similarity.



**“** *Recently, parents were invited to a joint sports day, and they all came in their own sports tops. There was just great banter between them all. It's been great for the parents as they have experienced something different. It's good for them to go into a different environment altogether but see similarities there too. (Manager)*

**“** *The wider family have also got involved in activities which is great, and they volunteer to help out at groups and visits. (Manager)*

## What has worked well and why?

**Small group sessions:** Teams in both settings have been flexible and open to learning as sessions progressed, and have adjusted their plans accordingly. At the beginning of Shared Education, the two settings quickly realised that, while the overall numbers were not large (30 children in total), bringing everyone together at once made the children warier of mixing with other children and less keen to make new friends. Therefore, managers began to split the groups, with half of each

playgroup joining up concurrently in Ardstraw and half in Little Flower, and found that these smaller groups were more conducive to building relationships. After children had had the opportunity to get to know one another, then a full group session worked more successfully.

**“** *It was all new to us so we just jumped in, but we learned lessons as we went along. With a smaller group you could see them showing interest in each other and the friendships sparking. It was amazing how they built up friendships. (Manager)*

**Support:** Managers noted that the support provided by the Early Years Advisor has been really helpful, as have the Cluster meetings which managers have attended. These meetings have allowed staff to meet with other partnerships, see how they are running their shared sessions, and get new ideas for activities. Teams across both playgroups have also been able to attend training on barriers to engagement, which they requested specifically and which has really supported their practice.

**“** *The support has been great, and it's nice to come together as a cluster and hear ideas of what other groups are doing. Plus, we asked for training on barriers to engagement, and that was arranged really quickly and delivered to the whole team, so we all found that really useful. (Manager)*

**Size of the settings:** Managers feel that the partnership has worked especially well because both playgroups are very small, therefore children and staff were better able to get to know one another. This has also been a benefit in making practical arrangements as there were not too many people or factors to consult or consider. The managers have been able to meet up regularly to make plans, and have found the opportunity to work together and to build a friendship to be a bonus.

## Challenges and barriers

**Administration:** The biggest challenge for the partnership has been the paperwork required, which managers complete with some input from their team. This adds to an already busy agenda, however, managers do feel that any additional work is worth the

effort in terms of what the children get out of being involved.

**“** *Paperwork is the biggest challenge- there is quite a bit although there is paperwork with everything nowadays, and we understand why it's needed. There are still more positives to balance it out though. (Manager)*

**Cash flow:** The partnership does not have a lot of spare cash available to pay for buses or trips, and often these must be paid for in advance. Although Shared Education covers these costs, the funding can take some time to come through, often after the trips or shared sessions have taken place. The managers agreed that if money is received in advance it would help to facilitate making practical arrangements and aid cashflow.

**“** *Sometimes it takes a while for the money to come through, so we had to negotiate with the buses to not need payment up front, as we didn't have the money to pay that. (Manager)*

## Looking forward: sustainability and future plans

Both managers agree that while they would love to continue with the work they have started, it will not be possible when the funding ends. The shared sessions and activities rely on bus transport, and the trips and large group meetings in the local hall cost money which two small playgroups do not have. The group managers do intend to stay in touch, and hope to continue to support one another as they have come to do, however it will no longer be feasible to bring the children to meet up as a group. This is disappointing for all involved.

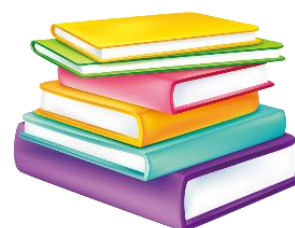
**“ We just wouldn't be able to do it. Parents won't transport the children, and we couldn't pay for venues or trips. It would be lovely to think we could do the odd shared activity, but financially, we don't see any options. It will be really sad, considering what we've built and what we're trying to achieve. (Manager)**

## Conclusions

Both playgroup managers are delighted to have been involved in Shared Education, and feel that it has been a very worthwhile experience, for the children, staff, parents and wider families who have been involved. Above all, they have formed a close bond with one another and hope this will continue.

**“ I've been really impressed, you have a sounding board and always have a partner in this. If issues have come up, we've just worked through them together. (Manager)**

**“ I would definitely recommend it for any other playgroups thinking about getting involved. It's been a really great experience. (Manager)**



*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*

