



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

Case Study Report: Preschool Partnership

Krafty Kidz and Clever Clogs, Co. Cavan



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 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 school.
- Observation of a Shared Education session.
- One creative activity with 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.



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 playgroups in this partnership:

Playgroup name	Enrolment 2019-2020
Krafty Kidz Community Childcare	44
Clever Clogs Childcare Service Ltd	66

This partnership includes one private and one community-based childcare provider, based in Ballyconnell, Co. Cavan. Ballyconnell is a small but diverse border town; according to the 2016 Census, there is a population of 1,105, of which 81% identified as Catholic, 10% other religion, and 9% no religion or no response. 19% of the population is Polish, and there are also residents from Lithuania, UK, wider Europe and elsewhere.

Krafty Kidz is community-based, and includes crèche facilities for babies from 3 months to 3 years old, as well as preschool and afterschool provision for primary aged children (up to 12). The setting aligns to the HighScope² approach, aiming to be child centred, open and inclusive. The children

² HighScope is a quality approach to early childhood care and education which has been shaped and developed by research and practice over 50 years. It identifies and builds on children's strengths, interests and abilities. The central belief of HighScope is that children construct their own learning by doing and being

attending Krafty Kids are from a range of cultural and socio-economic backgrounds.

Clever Clogs is a private day-care facility for children aged 0 – 12, located across two separate sites in the town. Within the preschool classes, children are in mixed age groupings, and teaching aligns to the Montessori Method³.



actively involved in working with materials, people and ideas.

³ The Montessori Method is an approach to learning which emphasises active learning, independence, cooperation, and learning in harmony with each child's unique pace of development.

Previous experiences of Shared Education, and motivations for getting involved

Neither setting had been involved in any Shared Education activities previously, however the setting managers had developed an informal working relationship given the close proximity of their respective preschools, and have collaborated and sought advice from one another from time to time. Both settings originally applied to take part in Shared Education with different partners, however these did not progress. Therefore, Krafty Kidz and Clever Clogs took the opportunity to formalise their relationship through a Shared Education partnership beginning in January 2019.

Breaking down barriers and dispelling misperceptions:

Both setting managers felt it was important to demonstrate a united front to the small community they are part of, and to play their role in breaking down any barriers there might be to collaboration and integration. In a small town with quite a diverse population, there was previously a belief that the preschools were in

competition with one another. While this may have been true to some extent in the past, the managers are keen that this is not the case moving forward.

“ *I wouldn't necessarily say we were in competition with one another but historically there wouldn't have been cooperation between the two services and that is something that we really wanted to build on. (Manager)*

Coming from a small town, many of the children live on the same streets, and will be going to school together at primary and post-primary level, so it is important that barriers are not allowed to build.

Managers also reflected that Clever Clogs has been perceived as being for better off families, while Krafty Kidz was thought to be for less well-off families, and has a mix of children from different backgrounds and minority groups attending. The partnership has given them an opportunity to dispel these assumptions.

“ *It is good for the community of parents to see that there are no differences and we aren't 'the snobby school on the hill'. (Manager)*

However, staff feel that these were purely adult perceptions, and that the children do not notice or understand difference.

“ *They don't notice a difference with one another in general, they are just little children, playing and getting to know each other.*
(Manager)

Enhancing learning opportunities:

Both managers saw the opportunity as an important one for the children they work with, and felt that the shared class activities would broaden the preschool experience for all.

“ *We like to grow and do something different every year. For us, it was about opening up a new set of experiences for the kids.*
(Manager)



Photo: Children enjoying free-play time at one of the settings.

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.

	2019/2020
Age of children involved	Senior preschool children (aged 3-4)
Total enrolment across both settings	110 (Krafty Kidz: 44; Clever Clogs: 66)
Number/ % of children taking part	38 (35%) (Krafty Kidz: 16; Clever Clogs: 22)
Model of sharing	9 x 3.5-hour sessions, held once per month

Practicalities: Shared sessions take place one day a month, for 3.5 hours each time. On scheduled Shared Education days, half the children from each setting go to visit the other setting; this helps to maintain the number balance in each preschool. Staff and parent volunteers also accompany the children, and as the settings are physically close to one another, the children and staff or helpers walk across. Children wear High-Viz vests for safety reasons. The children are in multi-age groups, therefore younger children mix with older children during shared sessions.

“ I love the mix of young children and older children being together in the group. It

means that they are not all new at once, so the older ones help the younger ones settle in. (Manager)

Focus of activities: The overarching theme for the partnership is 'community development', and staff aim to help children understand that they are part of a wider community made up of lots of different people. Children take part in free play activities, inside or outside, and both preschools have outdoor play areas. The groups have also taken part in several trips and organised activities together, and where possible these incorporate local facilities or resources. Visits have included a walk to the local library for a tour followed by lunch together in the local park; a visit to the local fire station; a session with some birds of prey; a visit to a local farm; and a trip to Kool Kidz activity centre for free play and face painting to celebrate the end of the year.

“ The trip to the library is a lovely shared session as the library is already familiar to most of them, so they are comfortable and happy to explore it and interact with one another and the staff there. It doesn't cost anything and we can walk there together. (Manager)

During the case study visit, one setting was hosting a free play session, where children were able to choose between a range of activities (including sand play, art and craft, building bricks, kitchen play, quiet reading corner), while the other setting hosted an outdoor play session, using available scooters, trikes, swing, climbing frame and slides). Children were mixing freely and enjoying their activities.

Benefits for the child

Educational: Staff have planned the shared activities to support educational outcomes, and they try to look for the 'teaching moments' in everyday activities. One of the themes running through the year has been farming, and children have had the opportunity to visit a local farm (owned by the husband of one setting manager). Although this is an activity that one setting has tried to do annually, the children at the other setting would not previously have had this opportunity. This visit is part of a wider lesson plan on the cycle of farming, from breeding and looking after farm animals, to food and other products, through to marketing.

“ *We run a farmer's market to support the farm visit, so the children can see the full process from animals through to the end selling. I cook up burgers and sausages and we set out stalls, bring in leather shoes, bags, lay it all out to show them end to end farming. They get the experience of the whole cycle of farming. (Manager)*



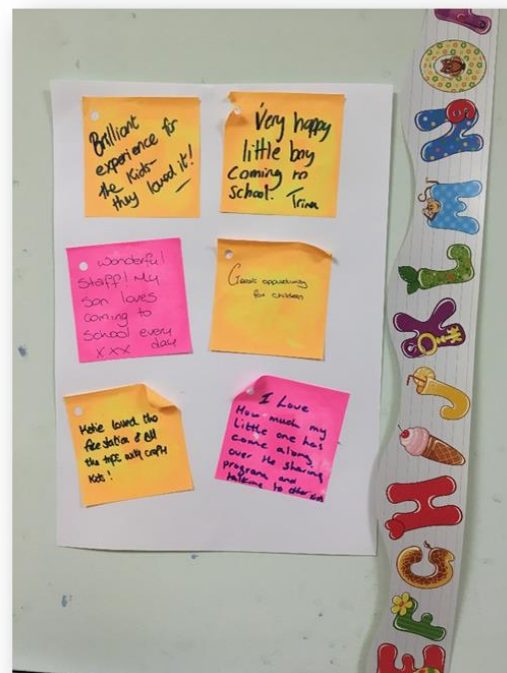


Photo: One setting has a message board for visiting parents to leave messages about their child's experience of Shared Education.

Comments include:

'I love how much my little one has come along over the sharing programme and talking to other kids.'

'Katie loved the fire station and all the trips with Crafty Kidz.'

'Brilliant experience for the kids- they loved it!'

Social: There is widespread agreement from all involved that the clearest benefit for the children has been a social one. They have become much more confident in meeting and engaging with new people, both children and adults, and are very accepting of diversity, whether that is children from different socio-economic backgrounds, cultures or those with a variety of special educational needs.

“ *The children are very comfortable with one another, and excited to go to visit their new friends. There have been strong relationships built, and everyone is very accepting of one another. (Manager)*

Ahead of the evaluators' visit, children were asked to draw a picture of something they liked about Shared Education. Lots of the children drew pictures either of new friends or staff, and were able to name them.



Photo: A child with a picture drawn of her by a new friend in the partner preschool.

The time spent in free play, either inside or outside, has helped children to mix better with each other and develop their confidence to approach new children; parents have seen this difference extend to their child's confidence outside of the preschool.

“ Now wherever he goes whether it be a playground indoor or outdoor he will just mix with whatever kids are there because of the

experience he has had here in the preschool. (Parent- [The Fermanagh Trust video](#))

Staff feel that the experience of Shared Education contributes significantly to supporting transition into primary school, with children leaving preschool behaving more confidently and with stronger communication and negotiation skills. They have also built relationships with children from very diverse backgrounds. Managers noted that they have some children with special educational needs, which other children may not have experienced before. Teachers have spent some time working with the children to help them understand that everyone is different and that some children may look or behave differently from others, but that is OK. This has been a useful learning opportunity for them. Staff therefore feel that Shared Education has helped to build a culture of inclusion, but that does not necessarily have a religious element.

“ The children are mixing with children from other countries. We have different languages, I think that's great, it's good for their confidence and their social skills. (Parent- [The Fermanagh Trust video](#))



Photos: Children from both settings playing together during outdoor and indoor sessions

Benefits for the settings

Staff: Staff members are delighted to be involved in Shared Education, and feel that it has brought many benefits for them as well as the children. In both settings, staff across all levels have had the opportunity to share and collaborate, learn new ways of working, and experience new things. There is regular and informal communication between settings, with staff also discussing everyday practice outside of Shared Education. This additional peer support has been very welcome and has been beneficial to their practice overall.

“ *Myself and the other class teacher have very similar styles of teaching, so we've worked together really well to plan and set goals, and learn from each other. (Early Years Practitioner)*



Because of the strong relationships built, staff can resolve any issues in terms of practice approaches when they arise, whether through planning sessions or in the room when the session is happening.

“ *They discuss differences in practice, not in a confrontational way but in a learning way. (Manager)*

Benefits for parents and the wider community

Parents have been extremely positive about Shared Education from the beginning, and have volunteered to support the shared sessions and outings. They are actively engaged in supporting the planning as well, and have made their own suggestions for activities.

“ *Parents are delighted with the experience, and have come in with ideas themselves through parent feedback. We take ideas on board and if we can do it we will. It's extended our thinking. (Manager)*

One suggestion made by a parent, which settings are currently considering, is the possibility of making connections with a local elderly care home, thereby introducing an intergenerational element to the partnership.

The settings have made a concerted effort to raise the visibility of the partnership in the community, by getting the children out and about using local amenities, walking through the town and visiting local services. They also communicate activities by posting on their Facebook pages and having articles in the local newspaper.

“ For us I think Shared Education has opened our eyes to getting out into the community more, we wouldn't really have gone out much before. (Manager)

“ I think people would have seen us as competition in the past, which isn't true as there's room for both of us, we're both full and expanding. I think it sends a fabulous message to the outside world that we do collaborate and work together, and it is about community. (Manager)

What has worked well and why?

Visiting one another's settings:

Managers and staff agree that free play sessions and activities taking place at the settings are more effective than the outings (which are of course still enjoyable). Staff see more evidence of children bonding, engaging and collaborating with one another when they can play freely somewhere they are comfortable and familiar with. The trips place additional pressure on staff due to safeguarding and supervision considerations on top of practical logistics; staff are therefore much more at ease when they are at their own or each other's setting.

“ I love the shared sessions in the settings, I much prefer them to the outings, where they are distracted by the newness, whereas the familiarity of coming to each other's settings, they collaborate so much better. (Manager)

“ The trips are lovely, but they are a sideshow to the reality of bonding and friendships. Where I have seen the greatest benefits is when they are relaxed in each other's settings. (Manager)

Getting out and about locally: The walk to and from one another's settings, and walking to visit various local facilities (such as the fire station and library) has contributed to learning around 'community development' and is seen as a strongly positive opportunity and a key activity of the partnership. Children meet local

people along the way, say hello and become familiar with the town they live in. It also helps familiarise the local community with the partnership, and helps raise awareness of what the settings are trying to achieve.



Photos:

Above: Children's drawings representing what they like about Shared Education, and their explanation of their drawings.

"I like to play with the toys in Clever Clogs and I like all my new friends"

"This is a slug with slime all over it that I saw on the way to Clever Clogs this morning".

Left: Children arriving for their visit to their partner setting. When they walk over, the children wear Hi-Viz vests for safety reasons.

Challenges and barriers

Delays in starting: As the partnership started late in the academic year (January 2019), there was some initial difficulty in implementation, and in making sure that the required 30 hours were completed.

“ We were late starting so that put us under pressure to achieve all the hours and get our heads around things. We still had to do the 30 hours even though we had missed the start. (Manager)

The second year of implementation has been much smoother and easier than the first year. The team has been able to build on what worked well for them, and learn from any difficulties they encountered.

Educational approach: There are some differences in the settings and their approaches to pedagogy, as one is Montessori while the other aligns to the HighScope approach. While HighScope⁴ and Montessori have some similarities, they also differ in several ways, including the age groupings involved, the layout of the classroom and toys/equipment, the role of the teacher in supporting and guiding

⁴ For further reading, see here http://www.earlychildhoodnews.com/earlychildhood/article_view.aspx?ArticleID=367

learning, and the level of independence and individual decision making given to children. This leads to some day to day differences in activities and rules.

“ When in our setting, the kids learn to do things as we do, but we aren't strict and relax the rules with them when we can. And the same goes for when ours go to visit the other setting, they go by the rules set there. There is the odd difference but we deal with them. (Manager)

Administrative requirements: As children walk between settings, and to local amenities, risk assessments must be carried out which adds some administrative pressure. The level of self-evaluation has also increased since the beginning of Shared Education, and while managers support the rationale behind this and see it as worthwhile, it is one of the things that has been given a lower priority when other pressures have arisen.

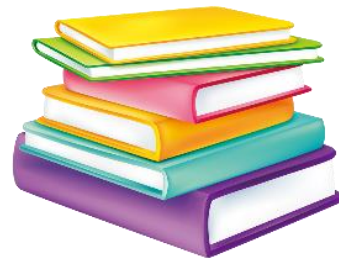


“ We very much agree with collecting information to demonstrate that we're making a difference and to help in training staff, and we will carry that through, but in general I'd rather staff focused on practice rather than paperwork. (Manager)

Looking forward: sustainability and future plans

While the two settings had engaged in collaboration to a small extent previously, both managers feel that Shared Education has shaped and cemented the relationship, and that collaboration will continue beyond the lifetime of Shared Education funding. As children can walk back and forth to the settings, no transport is required, and many of the activities have been low or no-cost, therefore these will be sustainable. The relationships built between staff will also continue, as they have become a strong support network for one another. While the financial aspect has been beneficial, settings consider this less important than the benefits for the children, therefore will make every effort to continue post-funding.

“ We really aren't doing it for the money. There has to be a positive outcome for the kids, I wouldn't do it otherwise. (Manager)



Conclusions

The experience has been an overwhelmingly positive one for all involved, with minimal difficulties raised. Managers, staff and parents are delighted to be involved, and have seen clear benefits for the children, staff and the wider settings and community. Managers would strongly recommend that other preschools take the opportunity to get involved if it is available.

“ I'm usually very much of the opinion that 'if it isn't broken, don't fix it', however on this occasion, I'd encourage everyone to open your mind to new experiences and take part in Shared Education if it is an option. (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, Action 1)

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