



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

Case Study Report: Preschool Partnership

Glasswater and Loughinisland Cross-Community Playgroups (Co. Down)



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 the 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.
- 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:

School name	Enrolment 2019-2020
Glasswater Cross Community Playgroup	20
Loughinisland Cross community Playgroup	21

The two playgroups are situated approximately five miles from one another, in the villages of Crossgar and Loughinisland, Co. Down. Crossgar has a population of around 1,900 (2011 Census), of whom 65.5% were brought up in the Catholic religion and 29.4% in the Protestant or 'other Christian' religion. Loughinisland is a much smaller village, with a population of just over 200 (no religious breakdown available).

Both playgroups are cross community, with staff from both religious backgrounds, however children attending Glasswater are predominantly from Protestant backgrounds, and those attending Loughinisland from Catholic backgrounds.

Academic year 2019/2020 is year three of Shared Education funding; the partnership was due to end in 2020 however a further year of funding has been secured, meaning it will finish in June 2021.

Previous experiences of shared education

Neither playgroup had been involved in any other shared project prior to this. Glasswater Playgroup originally signed up to Shared Education with a different partner school, however the partnership ended after a year and a half. Loughinisland had previously been keen to get involved, however was located further away than the recommended distance between partnership settings. Glasswater felt it was important to continue after the original partnership ended, so approached Loughinisland, who were happy to get involved when the second opportunity came. The new partnership began in January 2019.

Motivations for getting involved

The primary motivation for involvement for both settings was the opportunity to promote inclusion and begin to help children to embrace difference from an early age. There are several integrated schools in the area, and a local primary school is also involved in a Shared Education partnership. Both managers saw Shared Education as an opportunity to prepare children for future experiences, and to begin to break

down prejudices early, in line with the wider evidence on when such attitudes can develop.

Whilst religious and cultural background is part of this, the groups were keen to promote inclusion in a wider sense. One setting manager has a grandson who has Down's syndrome, and she feels strongly that children should have the opportunity to get to know children who are different to themselves in lots of ways.

“ *Our primary motivation was inclusion, not specifically religious/cultural differences but to tackle prejudices about children with Special Educational Needs, children from other countries, different*

skin colour etc. If we hear a comment from a child about someone different to them, we were able to work that into a discussion. (Manager)

“ *I have a grandson with Down's syndrome and we also have children with Special Educational Needs in the class. I'm a strong advocate for inclusion, and we thought it was very important to continue on with what we had started and all the good work we had been doing. (Manager)*



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.

	2018/2019	2019/2020
Year groups involved	All pupils	All pupils
Total enrolment	39	41
Total number of pupils taking part	37	41
% pupils taking part	95%	100%
Model of sharing	10 sessions x 3 hours, 1 per month	10 sessions x 3 hours, 1 per month

Although the partnership began in January 2019, four months into the preschool year, managers worked hard to ensure that the children completed the required 30 hours of contact, therefore sessions were more frequent than would have been ideal. This academic year (2019/2020), the partnership aimed for one shared session per month, although plans have been interrupted due to COVID-19 lockdown. Managers prefer all children from both settings to meet together, rather than splitting the group. The first two sessions focus on getting to know one another and becoming familiar with the new staff and surroundings, and are held in one

of the two playgroups; these usually last for the full morning (approximately three hours).

“ *The first few sessions were just about getting to know each other. So we would just have had the children in our own settings, so they can get familiar with the other children, the staff and the surroundings.* (Manager)

“ *The children settled into play together very easily - helping with chores and beginning to call each other by name! Name badges were worn, children split into different groups so that they were mixing well - play was enjoyed indoors and outdoors in the garden area... another great wee day* (From partnership Reflections documentation)

Once the children are comfortable with one another and with their new surroundings, managers have introduced more structured activities, such as visiting facilitators (e.g. a session from Jump, Jiggle and Jive, an exercise and dance programme) or celebration events, with a joint trip at the end of the year (this was planned but cancelled in 2019/2020 due to COVID-19). These activities,

celebrations and trips align with the curricular themes the children have been working on as well as national/global days such as Christmas, St Patrick's Day, Children's Mental Health Week, and World Down's Syndrome Day. Where possible, parents, grandparents and wider community members are invited to join in with activities and celebrations. Last year (2018/2019), one of the main celebration events took place for St Patricks Day; the playgroups used this as an opportunity to introduce children and guests much more widely to elements of both cultural traditions.

In December, the partnership hosted a Christmas Singalong with Santa, and parents came along to join in the singing.

“ A great party morning with a special visit from Santa - singing Christmas songs and playing instruments. Santa gave all the children a present and the parents all arrived to join in Christmas singing - the children sang so enthusiastically in front of their parents, grandparents and carers - everyone was so proud! (From Reflections documentation)



Photos: Christmas celebrations underway, with parents, families and local community involved



cultures too. We had traditional Irish dance costumes, and music, but we also had Lambeg drums and a sash, and Scottish dancing and music too. We had elderly from the local community come in and play music and other young locals Irish Dancing. We had grandparents and wider community members come along to join us. (Manager)

Both playgroups are small, therefore when meeting together, half the children play outside while the other half play inside, before coming together as a full group at the end. When an activity has been planned that requires keeping the full group together, the partnership has the option of using a local hall or nearby school grounds.



Photos: St Patrick's Day celebrations, with activities and costumes celebrating both cultural traditions.



Photo: Both groups together for a shared session using a local hall, giving them space to take part in physical activities.

“ *Last year we had a lovely celebration day for St. Patrick's Day, but it wasn't just about St. Patrick, we celebrated other*

Benefits for the children

Educational: Children have had educational opportunities that they would not have had previously, and the curriculum has been enhanced as a result. When working on 'the world around us', the children had a visit from a travelling zoo, and were able to meet and learn about animals and their environment.

“ We had Casey's Creatures - learning about different kinds of animals that we would not see in the zoo or in our environment: Sheldon the Armadillo, Willo the Skunk, Conkers the Hedgehog - the children really enjoyed watching the animals' movements and discussing their habitats, colours, food etc... a great learning day and some VERY BRAVE KIDS! (From Reflections documentation)

The children have also learned new words and concepts that they would not have had an opportunity to hear otherwise. The work the partnership has done to highlight World Down's Syndrome Day, and to help the children to think about inclusion in this

sense, has been educational for them. Children have learned and tried out communicating with Makaton², and discussed how people communicate in different ways.

“ We teach children here a bit of Makaton, and it's helping to get children aware that other children might communicate in a different way, they might not be able to talk, but they can still communicate and they can still tell you what they want. That's been really good. (Manager)

“ We've had children coming back using new words e.g. Down's syndrome, and using them at home. I've brought my grandson Euan in, and they even ask me about him and how he is. (Manager)



Photo: Children meeting Euan, and learning more about Down's syndrome.

² *Makaton is a visual way to support and develop communication skills using signs and symbols, either alone or alongside sounds. This visual way of communicating in turn helps to*

encourage language development, i.e. putting words together. Makaton helps understanding, giving the child or adult an extra visual clue.

Social: Staff have emphasised the message throughout that it is OK to have different hobbies and take part in different activities from one another and still be friends. They feel that children are becoming much more aware of differences, and similarities, and importantly, how these are positive rather than something to be worried about. The children have also had a chance to hear about and try different sports and cultural activities that they would not have been exposed to before.

“ *It was really great to be able to open those topics up. Because we've done the Media Initiative, it followed on. We don't actually talk about religion, we just say we all do different things and its ok to do those and be different but still be friends with each other. And we've seen children starting to go to Irish dancing who wouldn't have done that in the past. (Manager)*

“ *Our preschool is cross community, so we have two girls who are in separate bands; one a Catholic tradition and the other a Protestant tradition. Both play a drum, and we were looking forward to them both bringing their drums to show and play, and realise that they*

are both about rhythm even though the uniforms are different and the tunes are different. We really like to emphasise 'It's OK!' (Manager)



Photos: Children learning about the musical traditions across both cultures

Managers have seen the friendships develop between children at both playgroups, with them getting to know each other's names and talking about their new friends when they return to

their own playgroup. Last year, two of the children started to meet up outside of playgroup, and staff were delighted to see friendships extending outside of playgroup activities.

“ They are making friends and are able to name them and talk about them back at their own settings. Two of the wee girls started to meet up with each other at a local coffee shop, so that's lovely to hear. (Manager)

Benefits for the settings

Managers have benefitted from the support structures in place through Shared Education, including direct support from SFTS, informal support from other partnerships, and attendance at cluster meetings. The relationships built between staff team members has also been a strong benefit, and allowed them to learn from one another, talk through any difficulties, seek advice, and learn new ways of approaching activities.

“ The support from SFTS and even from other groups has been really good, we attend 2 or 3 cluster days a year, and

you get ideas from other groups. We had a group webinar yesterday to chat about how things are progressing. (Manager)

Benefits for parents and the wider community

Parents in both playgroups are really engaged with the work, and 'hands on' in terms of coming to shared sessions and supporting activities. Managers feel that the discussions they are having with the children are useful for parents to hear, as it is helping them to think about prejudice and stereotypes, and encouraging them to talk about and explain differences with their children.

“ You maybe find you're doing a workshop earlier in the year and there are parents there, and you're talking through the prejudices and how young they start, and it makes parents suddenly realise that they don't want to transfer it on to their child. They don't know how to approach the subjects at home, so this helps. (Manager)

Even for those parents who do not attend joint activities, the messages are being fed back in a variety of ways, through the group social media, local paper, newsletter and notice boards in the playgroups, and parents appreciate the work that is happening.

“ *We send photos home to the parents, and a synopsis of the reflection after it, we both have notice boards, and the parents can come back and add comments to this. We find parents thanking us for doing it as they can see that the children really enjoyed it.*
(Manager)



Photo: Parent comment/notice board

When parents have come together at joint events, they have met new people, but also have 'bumped' into people they may have known in the past but lost touch with. The partnership has therefore been able to facilitate the rekindling of friendships among some of the parents.

“ *This year, some of the parents came to watch the Christmas session, and they realised they already knew each other from school years ago. They were meeting up for the first time in years, catching up and making plans to meet up again. They fed back that day that they wouldn't have seen each other again only for this.*
(Manager)

What has worked well and why?

Rather than picking out specific activities, managers agreed that it is the overall package that has worked the best. Meeting new children and adults, seeing a new setting, and new routes travelling to and from partner playgroup on a bus, have all contributed to the overall rewarding experience. All the activities, including free play and structured activities, have been well received and provided positive and enjoyable opportunities

for the children. Parents report that children really look forward to shared sessions.

“ *The children love it, and parents have told us that the night before, the children are so excited they can't wait. Parents get the timetable at the beginning of the year, so they know what's happening and when. The build-up is great.*
(Manager)

“ *On the way on the bus they are getting to know the environment, the routes etc., and that opens conversations on who lives where and how they get to granny's house etc. It's overall a much bigger experience for them.* (Manager)

Challenges and barriers

Objections from parents: The biggest challenge has been the opposition experienced from a small number of parents from one setting, who disagreed with the setting's involvement in Shared Education. The setting received a formal complaint, and several parents chose to remove their children from shared sessions.

One of the contributing factors was the use of a local GAA hall to host shared activities, which some parents were unhappy with. Another parent had an issue with their child going to the partner setting, but was happy for them to be involved in their home playgroup. Managers have made efforts to address any issues, however have also moved on with the planned partnership activities as complaints were from a tiny minority.

“ *I've tried what I can, invited them in to talk etc., but beyond that, I needed to step back and leave them to resolve things themselves. We aren't doing anything wrong - the overall response has been positive.*
(Manager)

“ *I feel it is even more important now that we continue. This year has been much better. There are still children who can only join in when they're in their own preschools - if the children can't get involved in the full 30 hours of Shared Education, we can't claim the funding for them. But more importantly, they are missing out on the experiences and benefits, so it is sad.*
(Manager)

Distance: there is a five-mile distance between the two playgroups, therefore transport is required, unlike some other partnerships who can walk across to meet one another. Parents in both settings have been supportive in driving, but on other occasions, buses have had to be hired which is expensive and leaves less money for activities.

“ *There is a good distance between us unfortunately (5 miles), there was no other setting closer. Last year, we had to use buses to get to one another, but this year the parents have been fantastic and wanted to get more involved, so there's no issues with them bringing the children to the different setting, and even joining in. (Manager)*

Individual child differences: Individual child differences have meant that on occasion, a child has not felt comfortable fully participating in the joint activities, and arrangements were made to support that.



Looking forward: sustainability and future plans

The setting managers are keen that the partnership continues, however will need to have further discussions to agree how that might work in practice, given the practicalities involved in arranging the joint activities. If parents continue to help by providing transport between the settings, then joint sessions that take place in either of the two playgroups should be able to continue, as the activities themselves do not cost money. For trips and activities involving external facilitators, the managers may consider fundraising as an option.

“ *We would hope to be able to continue the partnership, but would need to do fundraising around it and have the parents involved and helping out. We might not be able to do the bigger things, with visitors and trips, but we could do the things we do in the settings. St Patrick's Day, Christmas celebrations, the World Down's Syndrome Day, none of those actually cost us money, so we'd love to be able to do those kinds of things. (Manager)*

Conclusions

Both setting managers are pleased to have been involved in Shared Education, and see huge benefits for the children, their parents and wider family. Although it may have seemed daunting in the beginning, any additional work has been well worth it, and the managers have found ways to make the planning and administration work between them. Both would recommend Shared Education to any settings considering getting involved.

“ *I'd say just go for it. When we first had discussions about it, I thought there might be much more workload to it. There is a bit of admin, but we take turns to do it, and do it as you go along, so it all just works out. I think the additional work scares a lot of people off, but it is doable and well worth it.*
(Manager)



Photos: Children taking part in a joint nature walk in their local area, supporting their learning about the world around them.

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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