



PEACE IV Programme - Shared Education Impact Evaluation

Collaboration Through Sharing in Education (CASE)

Case Study Report 2022: Primary School Partnership

St Oliver's Primary School, Carlingford and St. Brigid's Special School, Dundalk



Approach

As part of the wider Impact Evaluation of Shared Education¹, a number of partnerships were invited to host a virtual case study visit in 2020 and again in 2022. Case studies were identified by CASE Project Partners (i.e., The Education Authority and Léargas).

The case-study outlines examples of activity where the coming together of schools from different backgrounds as part of curricular-based shared classes has helped to normalise contact between children, teachers, and across the school community. Embedding Shared Education into the schools' curriculum should be seen as a key marker of the project success, as sustained contact has led to bonds and friendships being developed, which will contribute to reconciliation benefits in the longer-term.

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 document how the Covid-19

pandemic impacted on the delivery of the initiative and how schools/other settings adapted their delivery in response.

- 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:

- A group interview with the principals of each of the two participating schools, alongside the Shared Education coordinator from one school.
- Review of existing partnership documentation including the partnership application form, yearly action plans and evaluations and reviews of activities delivered.

The case study report is structured as follows:

- Background to the partnership and motivations for getting involved;
- Previous experiences of Shared Education;
- Model of sharing;
- Benefits: for the child, school, parents, and wider community;
- What has worked well and why;
- Challenges and barriers;
- Looking forward: sustainability and future plans; and
- Final reflections.

¹ The evaluation is being undertaken by SJC consultancy, in partnership with the National Children's Bureau, and on behalf of the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB).

Background to the partnership and motivations for getting involved

There are two schools² in this partnership - St Oliver's National School, located in Carlingford, and St. Brigid's Special School, located 17 miles away in Dundalk, both in Co. Louth in the Republic of Ireland.

School name	School type	Enrolment 2021-2022
St. Oliver's National School	Catholic Maintained	152
St. Brigid's Special School	Special School	97

St Oliver's National School is a primary school with a Catholic ethos, however, is welcoming of children from all backgrounds, and caters for children aged 4 to 12. It is located in Carlingford, a small rural village with a population of 1,445 (Central Statistics Office, 2016), of whom 78% identify as Catholic, 8% as another religion, and the remainder as having no religion (or not stated)³. The school currently has a pupil enrolment of 152, approximately 92% of whom were members of the Catholic faith (as per the Shared Education application form).

St. Brigid's Special School is an all-age school (4 – 18) for children with mild learning difficulties. It is the only special needs school in Dundalk, a town with a population of around 39,000 (Central Statistics Office, 2016). Of these, 78% identify as Catholic, 11%

as another religion, and the remainder as having no religion (or not stated)⁴. St. Brigid's has a 2021/22 enrolment of 97 pupils. At the time of application to Shared Education, 95% of the school's pupils were from a Catholic background.

The principal of St. Oliver's National School was the first to identify the opportunity to take part in Shared Education, having attended a Shared Education information session. They contacted some local schools to gauge interest in developing a partnership, including St Brigid's as they were keen to forge links with a special school. Initially a third school was involved, however they left the partnership after Year 1 due to lack of capacity to fully engage with activities. The schools have however formed a link and maintained contact. The schools are now in the final year of their partnership (Year 5), having started in 2018/2019. Given that the vast majority of children in each school are from a Catholic background, the Shared Education partnership model differs from most others where children are usually drawn from a range of religious backgrounds. The focus for this partnership is therefore the working together of a special school and a mainstream school.

Neither school has had any previous experience of Shared Education previously, either of a cross-community nature, or with children of differing needs and abilities. One of the key motivating factors for becoming involved in Shared Education was to help children understand and value difference in terms of the range of disabilities and learning needs that children have.

² There was a third partner school (Church of Ireland school) but as this was a small school they were not able to accommodate the additional number of children on Shared Education days and therefore decided to partner with another school of comparable size.

³ https://www.citypopulation.de/en/ireland/towns/louth/0214__carlingford/

⁴ https://www.citypopulation.de/en/ireland/towns/louth/0388__dundalk/

Model of sharing

The table below sets out the model of sharing over the four years of Shared Education delivery within the partnership which began in the second year of CASE. While 30 hours of contact was delivered in each of the four years of Shared Education, the delivery model switched to online in early 2020. All children have been involved from the beginning and throughout.

	Year 1 2018/19	Year 2 2019/20	Year 3 2020/21	Year 4 2021/22
Year groups involved	All year groups			
Total enrolment (all schools)	156	260	263	247
Total no. of children involved	156	260	263	247
% of children involved	100	100	100	100
Model of sharing	7 x 4hr hour sessions, 1 x 2hr celebration event	6 x 4hr face to face meetings (24 hours) Online collaboration activities (6 hours)	4 projects (22 hours) 2 meet-up dates (8 hours)	10 lessons (20 hours) 5 video calls (10 hours)

Originally, both schools had all children involved, and had mixed age groups for each session. On Shared Education days, the two schools spent the day together and children took part in a range of different activities during the day. However, staff found that the full school mixing, and the mixed age groups within this, were difficult to facilitate. Schools have learned from this and adapted their approach in later years, with smaller groups of children taking part in each session, with children in their own age group.

Activities/ subjects: In the first year of Shared Education, activities were focused on art, PE, and music. Specialist teachers from within the schools were able to lead these, and activities were rotated so all children were able to experience all activities.

Year 1 also involved joint trips, including a visit to the pantomime. At the end of year one, a celebration event was held, showcasing the art and music/songs that the children had worked on together during the year.

In planning for Year 2, staff considered what activities aligned best with their school development plans, and as a result, focused on literacy and drama. Coordinators identified three relevant activities, and children alternated between these. Following learning from Year 1, children were assigned to age specific groups rather than placed in mixed-age groups. Staff felt this was more effective as children were more closely matched in interests and abilities, which made activity planning and delivery more straightforward.

Younger children followed the Aistear curriculum⁵ which focused on a particular book theme, while older children took part in drama activities facilitated by an external drama teacher. Children also took part in quizzes and other fun activities. Similar to Year 1, a celebration day was held at the end of the school year, and children were able to go on several school trips during the year.

“The children had lovely experiences, and it was much more meaningful when the groups were [the] same age and smaller. (Coordinator)

Year 3 of Shared Education fell during the Covid-19 pandemic, therefore face-to-face activities were curtailed, and staff had to be creative to maintain engagement, particularly when children were being home-schooled. During this time, engagement was facilitated using online methods. In one activity, children made video collages with pictures they had drawn, spelling out a message to frontline workers. Children also took part in a home fitness challenge, sharing videos with one another and on social media to share their progress, and compiling these into an overall showcase video. Staff found Shared Education during the home-schooling period a challenge but overall, they felt they made the best of a bad situation.

The partnership is now in its fourth year. While children were back in school for the end of Year 3 and beginning of Year 4, online activities continued, with staff using their learning from the previous year to facilitate better engagement.

One example of a successful activity using online engagement has been Weaving Wellbeing, a mental health and wellbeing programme⁶.

Staff undertook joint training online to learn about the Weaving Wellbeing programme and activities. Classes in each school undertook the same activities each week and shared their learning with peers in the partner school via video calls. Staff felt this had been a strong success of Shared Education, with wellbeing an important area of focus given the difficulties of lockdown.

At the time of interview (March 2022), staff also had plans for a shared Wellbeing Week towards the end of March, aiming for children to make videos to share with their partner class.

“We felt this [wellbeing] was an area that was really needed. Weaving Wellbeing programme has been working really well, and wellbeing was a very good route to go down this year, as pupils have been in lockdown and their wellbeing is a concern. (Principal)

Throughout the five years of Shared Education, schools also took the opportunity to join together to celebrate specific days or calendar events, for example World Kindness Day or Animal Day. On these days which took place during lockdown, children participated in activities in their own schools and then shared their outputs (videos, drawings, or writing) on their partner school's website. Children have also had video calls to allow them to chat with their peers and share their stories.

⁵ [Aistear](#) is the early childhood curriculum framework in Ireland

⁶ The [Weaving Well-being programme](#) is a suite of 10 lessons designed to enhance children's social and emotional well-being. The lessons are delivered as part of the SPHE curriculum.

At the time of interview (April 2022) schools were still engaging online, with plans to return to face-to-face engagement for the final school term. While online engagement has been successful, it hasn't worked for every child, and it has been difficult to build and maintain friendships.

“Not being able to meet face-to-face was more challenging to ensure connections and friendships were developed among the pupils. (Partnership evaluation, 2021)

“The kids are definitely having cabin fever and dying to get out and about. It would be lovely to get back to face-to-face activities and see one another. (Coordinator)

During lockdown, many activities were undertaken separately and then shared with partner schools at a later date, and staff reflected that they exceeded target shared hours. Indeed, working in this way required more time commitment to develop activities, share them and then give and receive feedback.

Benefits for the child

School staff interviewed reflected on their overall experience of Shared Education, as well as the challenges and opportunities associated with the pandemic and subsequent lockdown(s). They felt there were clear benefits for children involved throughout:

Educational: Staff felt that Shared Education, and the range of new activities that the funding has facilitated, has enhanced the learning experience and acted as a motivator to getting the children involved in learning.

“It would previously have been a struggle to get children (with special needs) to write, but they were writing messages to each other on whiteboards and keen to get involved. The fact they knew other students were going to be seeing it – it's always that bit more exciting when they know someone else will see their work. (Coordinator)

The resources invested in through Shared Education funding have also helped to provide a more fulfilling and creative educational experience. St. Brigid's school has been able to revamp their delivery of the Aistear programme by investing in the toys and resources to support it.

These have included the purchase of Play post office and circus kits to support role play. Staff have also been able to learn from St Oliver's on how to best use these resources to engage the children. Schools have also invested in art materials. These will be of educational benefit to many more year groups of children and not just those directly involved in Shared Education, therefore contributing to sustainability.

“It was brilliant on a Friday afternoon as we took all the Aistear equipment out to the hall and the whole school played together – it's been fantastic. (Principal)

Necessary adaptations to teaching practice during the pandemic have also added to the educational experience for children, through new skills and resources. Schools have bought some tools to support online activities, including a webcam and a 'green screen' (a green backdrop to use when recording videos which then allows the background to be edited and replaced with fun effects).

As a teacher in St. Brigid's already had some knowledge of using this equipment, they mentored St Oliver's' staff to help them integrate it with existing activities. Sharing skills and knowledge between schools has been an important feature throughout Shared Education, which has brought benefits for the children and for teachers too.

“*One of the teachers at St Brigid's has art teaching skills, so they came over to us and shared those skills with our teachers, and they enabled pupils to do art activities they'd never had a chance to do before. (Principal)*

A further activity facilitated by Shared Education funding is the Weaving Wellbeing programme. Schools have been able to buy an accompanying book for each child, which wouldn't have previously been possible.

“*We'd have been photocopying pages before, whereas now all the children have their own book. And we're all working on the same activity at the same time, so we are able to link up and discuss what they've been doing when they meet up.*

Social: Staff feel that there has been a huge growth in children's understanding of the need for inclusion since becoming involved in Shared Education. This is particularly strong due to the partnership between a mainstream and special school, with children getting to mix with children they may not have had the chance to meet before.

“*It's really developed their social and emotional skills. They wouldn't have had a chance to do that. On a social and emotional level, it's the best thing the schools have ever done. The benefits then filter out into the community too. (Coordinator)*

Engaging with one another online during lockdown has also built on children's communication skills and increased their confidence.

“*Pupils learned new skills and ways of interacting with pupils/teachers through videoconferencing. They had to adapt their language and it helped build their confidence. (Partnership evaluation, 2021)*

Teachers also feel they have learned so much more about their own children's personalities, as they have watched how they have interacted with their partner school. This opportunity to meet and get to know a new set of children has been embraced by both schools, and staff feel the strong relationships already built helped to sustain the partnership through the necessary transition to online engagement.

“*It was the highlight of their year, they were so enthusiastic meeting partner children and getting to know them. This helped when things moved online as they already knew them. (Coordinator)*

Promoting respect and understanding of difference: The issue of religion is not a primary concern for these partnerships, with children in both schools coming from a range of backgrounds. Prior to Shared Education, both schools had invested significant effort in ensuring an open and inclusive ethos for all regardless of children's religious background or identity.

“*The school itself is accepting of all denominations and so children are too, they are aware of differences and used to that – children coming from different countries is so common it's seen as the norm. A lot of background work is done to embed that anyway, so children are very accepting. (Principal)*

Rather, the focus of Shared Education for this partnership has been about understanding inclusion and the needs of children with different abilities. Due to the range of abilities, in some cases, children have had to learn to communicate in different ways to be able to engage with peers in other schools.

“*They have had to learn how to speak to each other. Religious element doesn't come into it, we focus on the background of special needs and mainstream schools. (Coordinator)*

Children's experience: Children were asked to reflect on their experiences as part of a school shared session, with common answers focusing on the chance to make new friends, see a different school, play with, and share their toys and ask each other questions.

Photos: children's responses when asked to reflect on what they liked about Shared Education.

We made new friends. They shared their toys with us. We got to see their school. We had so much fun. They have a nice playground.

We get to make new friends
We ate our lunch with them
We shared our new friends
We get to play in their playground
We got to see what their school looks like
We got to play games with ^(like) them
We got to ask each other questions



Benefits for the school

Relationship building: Perhaps one of the biggest impacts on staff has been the opportunity to get to know partner school colleagues. Over the length of the funding, supportive and genuine friendships have formed, and staff found themselves turning to one another to discuss issues far beyond Shared Education planning and activities. Staff have made the effort to get to know one another, and they regularly shared new ideas.

“We didn’t know each other, and now have learned so much from one another. We naturally think of our partner school now when we want to know something or are considering going on training or trying new things. (Coordinator)

Increased skills and knowledge: In the early stages of Shared Education, the partnership hired external facilitators to deliver activities where skills were not available ‘in-house’. However, since then, staff have been able to upskill through training and development, as well as informally sharing knowledge with one another, and no longer rely on external facilitators, meaning that funds can be better spent on children’s activities and resources.

The pandemic and resulting shift to online training has actually been a benefit, making it easier for all staff to get involved in training session.

Benefits for parents and the wider community

The partnership has not delivered activities specifically directed at parents or the wider community. Pre-Covid, the end of year showcase was the best opportunity to get parents involved and let them know what their children had been doing in Shared Education, however they were not able to get involved directly in activities when they were taking place. Schools also noted evidence of discussions at home between children and their parents about Shared Education:

“We found children were talking about the project much more at home which led to it being brought up in discussion at parent-teacher meetings. (Partnership evaluation, 2020)

An additional benefit of online activities has been increased engagement from parents, in particular where children were undertaking activities at home and needed parental support. In many cases, the home activities became family activities. The school websites have also been a very useful tool to showcase to parents what has been happening during Shared Education sessions.

“We have made all videos and work available online, which schools probably didn’t do enough of before. This has been a positive from lockdown; we feel like they [parents] understand the project more now. (Coordinator)

In the same way, community engagement has not been a priority for the partnership, however staff have taken the opportunity to share information on Shared Education activities with the local media (local newspapers and radio station) at the beginning of funding, and since then, when relevant.

What has worked well and why?

CASE support: Direct support from CASE partners, including EA and Léargas, has been valued throughout, and training opportunities have been taken up by all staff. CASE Development Officers have kept the schools up-to-date with any new initiatives they could get involved in.

“*Last year we did the ‘share the walk’ initiative in other schools, and [our Development Officer] would have contacted us to let us know of things we could do or get involved in. (Principal)*

Buy-in from the top-down: The important element has been that everyone is on board with Shared Education and the ethos of the funding and bought into the process from the beginning. Having said that, staff also reflected on how motivation has increased over the years as the benefits have become clearer. In general, principals felt that they have built a very strong partnership with an open team, and this has meant they have been able to work out any difficulties where they arose. However, a key lesson learned was the need to invest in ‘getting to know you’ activities for staff as well as children to help build those relationships in the early months, given that most staff had never met. Icebreakers were always a priority with children, yet less so with staff.

“*They were expected to come together in this huge project with big ideas, and had never got to know each other. In the second year, we did lots of ice-breakers and training, pushed staff out of their comfort zones. We had so much fun that staff just gelled together. We made an effort to ‘break the ice’ with children, so why was this not the first thing for staff too? They feel like part of the same team now, just in a different location. (Principal)*

Online activities: The need to move Shared Education online during lockdown has actually been an enabler for this partnership, as it has increased inclusivity for children with mobility issues or who were less able to engage face-to-face but more comfortable online.

“*Younger children’s needs are getting more challenging and moving online has helped to include them that bit more. In the past we’d have struggled with the needs of the younger class groups. You can now get their attention a bit more with online activities. (Principal)*

Challenges and barriers

Challenges: the main challenges have come from the partnering of a mainstream school with a special school, although the benefits outweigh the challenges and the partnership was a deliberate one. These challenges have been quite practical in terms of accommodating physical needs and finding activities that suited both types of schools and the wide range of ages and abilities, as St. Brigid's has children up to the age of 18. In general, staff and children have all been very accepting of one another, and have made an extra effort to build friendships.

“They [children in St. Oliver's] really 'got it'. They've been patient and kind; they stood back and allowed the extra time needed, trying to understand what they [children in St. Brigid's] needed and learned to communicate with one another. Real friendships have definitely been made across both schools and in the community. (Coordinator)

Staff have always been open to talking and reflecting, especially at the end of the year, and to support children with questions. Both schools have been honest and guided one another as to what activities will work best for each school.

“We made it work very well, and I think we're a very good example for other schools going forward. (Principal)

On reflection overall, staff feel they should have started small and built up as they went along, engaging more children in subsequent years and building towards full school engagement in the final year.

“If I was advising others, I would say to start small and build on that, rather than going straight in with full schools! I think perhaps we tried to do too much in the first year, but we reflected and learned. (Coordinator)

Looking forward: sustainability and future plans

Staff feel that Shared Education will have a lasting impact on the children who have been involved. They have had new experiences, learned new skills and met children from a range of backgrounds and abilities, which required them to adapt (for example in communication techniques). However, they are uncertain as to whether individual friendships between children will be sustained given the wide age range and differing abilities.

“Our schools will always be linked, but it will be harder for the pupils. Hopefully they will come across each other in clubs and schools in the future. (Coordinator)

Staff are however confident that their relationships will continue when funding ends, considering the work that has gone into building friendships and the ways in which schools have come to rely on one another. In terms of formal shared activities, the schools will continue to make the effort to work together but are currently unclear about what this might look like.

“I feel the staff connection will be the main lasting impact and will benefit future children. It doesn't have to cost huge money, we will just have to make it work. (Principal)

Staff have also built new skills which they are already using to enhance the educational experience of new children.

“We generally don't have a chance to see how other teachers teach, so that has been invaluable, seeing what other teachers are doing with the curriculum and how they interpret – don't reinvent the wheel! (Coordinator)

Final reflections

Overall, this Shared Education partnership has been a really positive experience, and staff feel it has been successful in meeting its aims in terms of increasing collaboration between children and staff in different school types. Given the schools involved in this partnership – one a mainstream and one a special school - Shared Education has led children to develop a greater understanding and tolerance of difference in a much wider sense than just religious or cultural background.

“In our own experience, not having big religious background differences, I can only imagine how beneficial it could be for schools that had those challenges, considering how well it has worked here. It has been such a happy time for children, a super opportunity, and such a positive experience. (Principal)

The range of activities undertaken has given children a unique experience which they have fully immersed themselves in. Lockdown, while posing challenges, has been of benefit to the schools and enabled wider and more creative engagement, particularly for those children who struggle within mainstream classroom settings.

Staff are taking with them increased skills, knowledge and confidence, as well as a wider range of classroom resources, which they will be able to use to enhance the educational journey for future classes.

They are also positive that they will maintain contact, having built an important support network with reach far beyond the lifetime of Shared Education. This will also mean that future pupils can benefit from the opportunity to work together with children from their partner school.



This report was produced by SJC consultancy and National Children's Bureau, as part of the wider Impact Evaluation of Shared Education (PEACE IV Programme, Specific Objective 1, Action1)

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