School improvement in the Shared Education Signature Project: the views of teachers and principals

WORKING PAPER

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SUMMARY

Introduction

The Sharing Education Programme (SEP) team in Queen's University was invited to examine the views of teachers and principals involved in the Shared Education Signature Programme (SESP) on its contribution to school improvement. A formal review of this aspect of SESP will be available through a comparison of Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4 data, but there are limitations to the data and only one cohort data will be available. In addition, the ETI have been reviewing activity in SESP schools and will report in due course.

The SEP team ran the SEP1 and SEP2 programmes which provided the initial testing ground for school collaboration. One important lesson that emerged from that work was the need to empower teachers by recognising their professional expertise and experience. That lesson informs the present study.

The study had two stages: stage one involved interviews and focus groups with teachers and principals in a sample of SESP partnerships. The purpose of this was to gain insight into their perceptions of whether school collaboration had supported their work on school collaboration: where it acted as a constraint we wanted to hear how this was addressed; where it enhanced work on school improvement, we wanted to hear how. Stage two involved an online survey of principals and teachers to check whether the themes emerging from the qualitative work had a more general resonance. Sampling of schools and partnerships was carried out in collaboration with the Education Authority, which also facilitated the online survey.

Stage One - the views of principals and teachers at interview

Eight SESP partnerships from cohorts one and two were approached to participate in the study and six partnerships agreed. Two of the partnerships involved primary schools and the other four involved post primary schools. A total of 14 principals and 31 teachers participated in individual interviews or focus group discussions.

The interviewees highlighted the importance of viewing the contribution of SESP to school improvement in holistic terms: the analysis of Kay Stage data was important, but narrowly focused, and some highlighted the relevance of such frameworks as the 21st Century skills of communication, collaboration, creativity and critical thinking. Given the importance of context in the design and priorities of individual SESP partnerships, they also were not enthused by a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to evaluating the impact on improvement.

Many of the interviewees highlighted the importance of the quality of experience gained by pupils and how this was affected by collaboration. Some suggested that the diversity providing by collaboration had an important impact on character and values education, others talked about the

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1 This research upon which this paper is based was supported by funding from the Social Change Initiative. All views and conclusions in the paper are the responsibility of the authors.
way it promoted respect and self-esteem, while others suggested it broadened their pupils’ sense of future possibilities and their capacity to exercise choice. Shared education was said by some to have improved the relationship between schools and their local communities and enhanced local engagement.

Some interviewees reported that SESP had allowed their schools to broaden the range of opportunities provided to pupils, both in terms of the curriculum and broader support. Pupils in shared classes gained a richer experience in addressing such areas of the curriculum as history. When schools pooled expertise and facilities, this also contributed to a wider and richer experience for pupils. Some interviewees reported that their pupils had enhanced their confidence and communication skills, and were more articulate in expressing their views. In some contexts this had been particularly enhanced by the flow of international visitors to schools, eager to hear about their experience.

Making collaboration work effectively had required some schools to rethink some traditional ways of working and led to innovations such as the recasting of the traditional timetable. This, in turn, had afforded opportunities for further innovations in teaching and learning, and the consensus was that this had been to the benefit of pupils.

Other gains highlighted by our interviewees were the enhanced social capital developed through principal networks, with many talking about the way they had begun to develop a sense of shared responsibility for all the young people in the partnership schools. Principals also described how collaboration had strengthened distributed leadership within their schools, by giving new levels of responsibility to middle management teams working to make collaboration effective. Opportunities to give pupils new levels of experience and responsibility had also occurred, in such initiatives as joint schools councils.

Teachers talked about how shared education had encouraged them to deepen and extend their own practice, often as a consequence of being stretched or challenged by colleagues from partner schools. They also talked about the partnership engagement between teachers as providing the basis for fresh and different perspectives that sometimes pushed them out of their comfort zones. SESP also provided new opportunities for formal and informal professional learning. Some even described how their schools had previously been very inwardly focused, even isolationist and protective of their own ways of doing things, but collaboration had opened the schools up to new ideas and experience, allowing for constructive challenge to taken-for-granted practices.

There was some indication that the positive environment for teaching and learning created by collaboration was leading to the pooling and sharing of resources, increased efforts to identify areas where common policies might be developed, and enhanced use to technology for communication and planning. The importance of sustained engagement in collaboration was highlighted by some interviewees who suggested it was becoming a fundamental part of the ethos of the school and opening up productive discussion on the importance of inclusivity. One remarked how school governors had insisted that the first question for candidates for a vice principal post in a school would be to enquire about their experience and commitment to shared education.
Stage two - an online survey of principals and teachers

An online survey was distributed by the Education Authority to the principals of the 350 schools involved in SESP and the 100 coordinators known to the EA. A total of 134 responses were received by the deadline: 55% were from primary schools, 25% from secondary schools, 15% from grammar schools and 5% from nursery schools; 46% were from controlled or voluntary schools, 43% from Catholic maintained or voluntary schools, 9% from integrated schools and 2% from ‘other’ schools. Of the total respondents 42% were SESP coordinators, 28% were principals and 28% were teachers. On average our respondents said they had been involved in shared education for 4.7 years.

The main purpose of the online survey was to test the extent to which the themes emerging from the qualitative interviews had a more general resonance. The general conclusion is that they did, in that most of our respondents identified a range of positive outcomes from SESP for school improvement and pupil opportunity. More important, there was hardly any voice suggesting that collaboration had got in the way of school priorities and made their work harder or more difficult.

The survey questions were divided into seven main sections: these included questions asking about the impact of collaboration on pupil learning, school systems for teaching and learning, teachers’ work in classrooms, curriculum, opportunities for pupils, opportunities for teachers and any new systems that had been introduced into the partnership schools.

In virtually all areas the patterns of responses were very positive. Thus, for example, three quarters or more of the respondents said that collaboration had provided more opportunities for pupils, improved pupil attainment, provided broader curriculum choice and had enhanced learning experiences. Two third or more of respondents said that collaboration had improved their professional networks and relationships with other teachers, improved CPD opportunities and their access to resources, and improved their teaching strategies. Ninety per cent said that collaboration had enhanced their links with the community and changed school systems for the better.

Equally high percentages of respondents said that collaboration had enhanced teacher confidence, classroom management skills, access to resources, communication with colleagues and their planning, while over three quarters said it had enhanced their ability to meet pupil needs and carry out pupil assessment. We asked about the impact of collaboration on various 21st century skills and large majorities of respondents said it had led to improvement: over 90 per cent said communication and thinking skills had been improved, while three quarters said literacy had improved. Only 57 per cent said numeracy had improved, but even here only four per cent said the impact of collaboration had been ineffective.

A very large majority of respondents said that a range of opportunities provided for pupils had been enhanced as a consequence of collaboration and hardly any said these had been negatively affected. The respondents were very positive about enhanced opportunities for them to attend courses, manage budgets and coordinate others. About half said they had had more opportunity to influence school policy or work with the senior management team. Most said that collaboration had provided them with significant new opportunities to work with colleagues from other schools, share practice formally and, especially, informally, and to observe new approaches to teaching and learning.
It was only in relation to the institutionalisation of collaboration that a more mixed pattern of results emerged from the online survey. A little over a quarter of respondents said their schools had developed joint policies or established a joint school council; a little over 40 per cent had run joint parents' days or engaged in timetable re-alignment, but almost 60 per cent had worked on joint aspects of their school development plans. On some of these issues, most notably the realignment of timetables, secondary schools were much more likely to have implemented these changes, in comparison with primary schools. There were few differences in the patterns of responses from the different school sectors.

Conclusion

Overall the pattern of results from the interviews and survey are consistent and clear. Teachers and principals identify a wide range of positive outcomes arising from collaboration through school partnerships supported by SESP. More important, there is virtually no evidence that participation in SESP partnerships has created any blockage or constraint on the ability or capacity of schools to advance their core educational missions. Indeed, the evidence lies in the reverse direction in that teachers and principals say that collaboration has enhanced opportunities and outcomes for pupils, improved pupil learning and broadened curriculum choice.

Furthermore, teachers and principals report that collaboration has improved their capacity in many significant ways as well, whether this is through the formal or informal sharing of experience, access to resources and expertise, or opportunities for professional development and learning. There is also evidence that the experience of collaboration, after an average of less than five years, is already leading to the re-engineering of some school systems and processes in ways which is enhancing the learning environment.

A deeper analysis of the data points to areas of work where greater levels of enhancement may be possible. It is also true that the institutionalisation of new practice as a consequence of collaboration lags behind improved practice and engagement, but this is unsurprising: indeed, it may be that the level of institutionalisation of new practice after such a short period of time is, in fact, an unexpected bonus.

The balance of evidence emerging from this study of the perceptions and views of principals and teachers involved in school partnerships in SESP points to a high level of consensus. That consensus is that collaboration is having a very positive impact: it is leading to enhanced opportunities, outcomes and practices, for pupils and teachers, and that it is helping schools not only meet their core educational goals, but to promote positive innovations. Perhaps most striking of all is the almost unanimous view that pupil and teacher confidence has been enhanced by participation in shared education, thereby confirming that old adage that none of us is more effective than all of us.
MAIN REPORT: INTRODUCTION

Shared Education involves collaboration between schools from different sectors to run shared classes in core curricular areas. The purpose of Shared Education is to promote social cohesion, school improvement and the more effective use of resources. This study is focused on the second of these goals, in the context of the Shared Education Signature Project (SESP).

School improvement can be measured in a number of ways. The simplest form of direct measure compares attainment measures taken at two points in time. For the SESP programme the range of measures available is limited, the baseline measure has limited scale and the timeframe for comparison allows for a consideration of only one cohort. In our experience of working with Shared Education schools over more than a decade, other direct benefits include wider curriculum choice, and access to enhanced facilities or wider expertise.

This paper is based on research carried out with teachers and principals in a sample of SESP schools. The purpose of the research was to explore teacher perceptions of the ways in which they felt SESP had promoted school improvement. The research approach involved two stages. In the first stage we carried out individual interviews and focus group interviews with teachers and principals involved in a sample of SESP schools. Following the analysis of these qualitative data we prepared an online questionnaire to test the extent to which a wider sample of teachers and principals in SESP schools agreed that the reported benefits had been achieved.

CONTEXT

The research evidence is clear that collaboration can lead to school improvement, but that this does not happen automatically. Collaboration creates an enabling environment, but action has to be implemented to take advantage of this environment and promote school improvement. A wide corpus of research of (Katz et al, 2008; 2009; 2010; Chapman and Muijs 2014; Chapman et al 2009; 2011) suggests that schools collaborate effectively when there is: enhanced organisational capacity; new approaches to professional development undertaken within and between schools as a consequence of collaboration; enhanced and new approaches to teaching and learning as a consequence of teachers working together; and opportunities for leadership development. Additionally, research on the Contested Spaces project (Duffy and Gallagher 2017) highlights the
benefits arising from enhanced engagement with key external agencies in improving educational opportunities and learning.

This study will examine the educational impact of shared education across this wider conspectus of possibilities by exploring the views of teachers and principals involved in SESP schools.

The extant literature suggests that the positive educational impact of shared education is likely to be evidenced in one or more of the following themes:

- The benefits and impact of collaboration for teaching
- The impact on leadership
- New approaches to teaching and learning
- Structural changes
- New or enhanced approaches to professional development and capacity building
- The shared use of resources, including space, facilities and equipment

METHODOLOGY

The first stage of the study identified a target sample of schools from eight SESP partnerships. In consultation with the Education Authority, the eight partnerships were purposively selected from the first two cohorts of SESP. Six of the partnerships were post primary and two were primary. The Education Authority approached all eight partnerships and six agreed to participate, (see Table 1), comprising of four post-primary and two primary schools. In these schools there was a total of 45 participants interviewed, including 14 principals and 31 teachers (see Table 1 for more details). The interviews took place between October and December 2017

Where possible, separate focus groups were undertaken with the principals and some teachers in a partnership. In some cases a single focus group with principals and teachers was conducted. In one partnership the principals were interviewed individually and separately. The interview schedules were informed by school improvement literature and designed to engage participants around the following broad themes:

- how practitioners define educational impact
- their perceptions of the impact of collaboration on leadership
• their perceptions of the impact of collaboration on teaching
• their perceptions of the impact on pupil learning and engagement
• their perceptions of the impact of collaboration on school structures and systems

Interviews and focus groups lasted approximately one hour. Ethical approval was sought and approved by School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work Ethics Committee at Queen’s University Belfast prior to data collection and all participants provided written consent.

In stage two of the project the analysis and conclusions from the interview data were used to design an on-line questionnaire survey. The Education Authority distributed the survey electronically to [INCLUDE THE NUMBER HERE] principals and teachers involved in the SESP. We received 134 responses from teachers and principals and the findings are discussed in section [X]

Table 1: School partnerships and number of teachers in focus groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Partnership</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Participants</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Post-primary: 2 maintained &amp; 1 controlled</td>
<td>2 Principals &amp; 3 teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Primary: 1 maintained &amp; 1 controlled</td>
<td>2 Principals &amp; 4 teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Primary: 1 maintained &amp; 1 controlled</td>
<td>2 Principals &amp; 6 teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Post-primary: 1 maintained &amp; 1 controlled</td>
<td>2 Principals &amp; 6 teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Post-Primary: 1 maintained &amp; 1 controlled</td>
<td>2 principals &amp; 4 teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Post primary: 2 maintained 2 controlled</td>
<td>4 principals &amp; 8 teachers</td>
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INTERVIEW DATA: ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Defining Educational Impact

Focus group participants were asked to talk about the way they assessed educational impact and how, if at all, this was affected by collaboration. This generated rich discussion around how the term is currently interpreted or understood by teachers. The following subsections describe the key points emerging from the participants’ perspectives.
Quantifying the Educational Impact of Shared Education

Participants stated often that the educational impact of Shared Education was ‘difficult to quantify’. Teachers and Principals took the view that, despite the importance of attainment metrics (numeracy, literacy, 5 GCSEs grades A-C) for tracking patterns of achievement, applying this type of measurement framework to Shared Education was too narrow. The most frequent comment from participants was that a broader definition of educational impact, beyond attainment, was required to understand the value and effect of Shared Education.

Some of the best educational impact that we’ve ever had [in our partnership] has nothing to do with results. (Principal: Partnership 1)

Unfortunately, we’re all obsessed by this thing ‘5 good GCSEs, including English and Maths’, but for me it has to go beyond that, for me it has to go into what they call ‘the four Cs of 21st Century skills’, which are Communication, Collaboration, Creativity and Critical thinking. If you look at each one of those: from a Communication perspective, there has to be an impact there, these pupils are communicating at a different level with those of a different tradition – there’s definitely Collaboration [...] Creativity: virtually all the projects that we have involve creativity and involve the children thinking at a level that is different to the ordinary level that they think of in the school. And I suppose Critical thinking is what encompasses all of it, at the end, that the children can think differently about themselves and their role in society, and about what this society is, and that it can make them think beyond the normal thought processes that children of this age group have, with regard to where they come from and where they’re going to. If I was using a baseline it would be on those four skills rather than on this ‘how’s it going to help these children get their GCSE’s?’ that is virtually impossible to work out. (Principal: Partnership 6)

There is so much more that staff around this table and many of the staff in this school, and parents in the wider community would also tell you, is the impact of Shared Education on this area. There’s hard evidence and there’s’ soft evidence and there’s all that unseen stuff as well with regards to relationships and societal harmony in the surrounding area. (Principal: Partnership 4)
**Partnerships have different frames of reference for evaluating educational impact**

Principals and teachers were asked to unpack some of the reasons why they felt that evaluating the educational impact of Shared Education should be based on a broader framework. Participants highlighted the importance of context, such that a small amount of progress in one partnership might mean a significant advance in another. They were uncomfortable with a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to evaluating the educational impact of Shared Education, not least because each partnership had distinct challenges and priorities. The general consensus was that any process of evaluation should be ‘grounded in local context’, taking account of local circumstances and, importantly, also the diverse range of specific issues addressed across partnerships.

**Quality of experience**

A high number of participants described ‘educational impact’ as an effort to enhance ‘the quality of experience’ that pupils received as a consequence of shared classes. Some school leaders noted an important development process, in that initially they had to learn how to deliver shared classes, and only later could they focus on enhancing the quality of shared classes. In the following extract, one Principal describes how bringing pupils of different religious backgrounds together has become normalised so they could move on to enhance the experience of these pupils.

> Our focus when it comes to KS3, initially, is about the quality of experience that the kids are getting in the classrooms – in other partnerships, maybe it’s more about the reconciliation idea [...] but we’re passed that. Any child that comes to both of our schools know that the fabric of both of our schools is that they work together, it’s a partnership [...] we’ve gone past that journey of reconciliation to more of ‘what are these experiences these children are getting in the classroom?’ (Principal: Partnership 5)

The notion of shifting from the practical challenge of running a shared class to addressing pedagogical challenges was described by many of the partnerships we visited.

**Holistic development of pupils**

It became clear that the priority of sharing education for most interviewees was not only about improving their pupils’ attainment levels, but also about preparing them for life beyond compulsory
education. In the following extract the Principal describes adopting a much more values-based approach for their pupils.

The outcomes for us are very important as far as exam results are concerned, because that’s first and foremost what we’re here for; for the young people. But on top of that it’s the building of character I think, it’s the values education end of it also as well as the exam results. It’s the integrity, the honesty, the effort, the belief in someone else, the compassion, the caring – it’s all of those skills that we’re giving the youngsters in Shared Education as well as a quality academic education – [...] we see that you can’t have a quality education without the values that underpin it. (Principal: Partnership 5)

Some school leaders highlighted the importance of making sure that every pupil had the opportunity to progress and succeed. For them, progress and educational impact were defined by more than exam results.

It depends what you call educational outcomes – and this is where, I suppose, is the difficulty for the department: an educational outcome for them is how many kids are sitting on three A to C, at A level, and five GCSEs A to C including English and Maths – that doesn’t fit everybody and who’s to say that’s a good result for the child? [...] for us it’s about that much more; it’s about that well-rounded child who’s caring, respecting, understanding and can make a contribution to society as a whole. (Principal: Partnership 5)

Shared Education is about improving confidence, self-esteem and progression. (Principal: Partnership 6)

In the following extract, a principal made references to the schools’ role in developing positive contributors to civic society by educating pupils to make better, ‘more informed choices’. They suggest that by sharing education, pupils can learn lessons that are not necessarily scholarly in nature, but just as important for their development and tutelage:

I suppose an educational impact really, for us, is about helping the young people make more informed choices. They can make choices, but with education you would hope that their choices would be better informed that their decision-making would be informed by what they experience, as well as by what they learn and by the opportunities that you provide for them,
and that through sharing, that those opportunities, particularly here in [redacted], that those choices would be better and would promote more social cohesion and so on. So there’s a narrow definition of education in terms of educational outcomes, but it’s really about making better informed choices for themselves in their lives, for their own health and well-being, in terms of their academic success, but also in terms of how they live their life and particularly how they live their life here in [redacted]. (Principal: Partnership 1)

The consensus amongst the partnerships we visited was that shared classes complemented their academic goals by developing a broad range of pupil aptitudes, such as inter- and intra-personal intelligences. One teacher explained that learning in Shared Education could be seen as divided into two aspects: the first being social learning or the incidental learning as a consequence of cultural differences and similarities; the second being academic or professional learning—they considered it important to capture both of these types when evaluating the educational impact of Shared Education.

**Educational Impact is about positive transformation**

In many of the partnerships Shared Education was described as a driver of change in terms of school improvement and enabling schools to shape their local contexts through shared learning. In this way, the definition of educational impact was perceived by participants as including a contribution to positive transformations.

*Participants described how having ‘partners in learning’ had facilitated positive transformations in their educational activities, such as providing opportunities and experiences for pupils, as in many cases these would not have been possible otherwise. Most school leaders were keen to highlight that Shared Education, as they interpreted it, was also about teachers working together. By providing staff with new experiences, perspectives and opportunities, school leaders were able to positively transform and inform practice. This sentiment was reaffirmed by some teachers who defined the educational impact of Shared Education as being able to enhance their practice, “taking what you teach in the classroom to the next level.” (Teacher: Partnership 3)*

Some participants noted that any impact made by Shared Education in terms of education is hard to separate from the community benefits and transformation. In one example, a principal described
how learning through Shared Education had the effect of disrupting local norms in a positive way, by empowering young people and educating them to make changes to their personal trajectories.

*If you take our City there’s not an awful lot of choice for our young people, so it’s beyond choice, it’s the change. It’s about empowering them to make changes and in some degree apply the ‘disruption theory’ [...] you disrupt the norms and you change it. Because kids have very little choice in this City and probably this country if we’re totally honest – the industry’s not there, the economy is still heavily based in the public sector – so educational impact is about empowering young people to know that they can change, not simply choose to follow predetermined routes.* (Partnership 1: Principal)

Other participants described how Shared Education had enabled their schools to engage better with both communities. In one notable example, a school had addressed previous difficulties in bringing both sides of the community together, by having pupils teach their grandparents and older locals in a peer-to-peer learning exercise. Some participants described how these types of shared activities had made a positive transformation in rural areas, as they permitted pupils to learn more about their own locality, allowing them to have conversations about local history and learning about their own backgrounds. Throughout the focus groups, participants conveyed the notion that Shared Education had a cascading effect, starting with having an impact on pupils’ learning (cultural and academic), which in turn had a positive effect on the community.

*For me a school sits at the heart of a community – so, an educational outcome for us is not only about the pupils, we talk about the pebble [ripple effect] all the time! What we do at year 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, those kids are going back into their communities and we can’t really change their communities, but what we can do is challenge their opinions and thoughts by their children going back out there, so this has a huge impact [...] you shouldn’t underestimate the impact that has.* (Partnership 5 Principal)

It was apparent from the focus groups that some schools utilise the Shared Education model as a means of developing community capital—building the capacity of teachers, pupils, and parents through shared learning. This in turn has informed how they define or perceive educational impact, because their priority is to educate stakeholders across many different levels with the intention of having a positive transformation, which would require a much broader definition.
School Size determines priorities

In some of the primary phase partnerships that we visited, staff members discussed the educational impact of Shared Education in the context of being a small school. It was suggested that Shared Education helped supportbroader opportunities and learning experiences in this type of setting, whilst also helping to tackle challenges relevant to their size. For example, Shared Education was considered to have offered an ‘alternative to composite classes’; another was that staff and pupils in single form entry schools benefited educationally from having access to more peers in another school. Shared Education had also enabled two small schools to purchase shared for the educational benefit of all their pupils. Many of these observations by staff members in small schools suggest that the broader educational impact of Shared Education may be determined by the features and priorities of the schools. This was reaffirmed by the staff members in some of the more rural primary partnerships who contended that being involved in Shared Education meant they became less isolated. In this setting, they said, Shared Education had better prepared rural pupils for the transition to a comparatively larger post-primary school.

Impact on Pupils

We asked participants to discuss what impact Shared Education has had on their pupils. The majority of responses indicated that working collaboratively with other schools had opened up a range of new possibilities for pupils’ learning, alongside very clear social opportunities. In the following section we initially present the participants’ insights into how Shared Education has had an impact on their pupils’ learning, before considering participants’ responses regarding the social impact on pupils. This was explored with participants from primary and post-primary schools.

Pupil Learning

The staff members involved in the focus groups approached the discussion of pupil learning from two angles. In the first instance, participants discussed how Shared Education has changed the ways their schools approached learning at an institutional level. In the second, participants provided insights into how Shared Education has made an impact on their pupils within classrooms. Throughout, participants claimed that Shared Education had supported them to put in place processes that helped pupils’ learning. Although they conceded that it was difficult to quantify some
Data wise if you are saying are any of our results any better because we are in shared education, the hard part of that is that there are so many things that impact on your results. You can’t quantify it to one thing. What do I think it might be like if we hadn’t done share education? Again, there is no data for that. But if you ask is that way then we would all go, oh we would all far worse off if we didn’t have it. We would be back to being isolated our staff just looking inward. When I started there was no sharing practice. (Principal: Partnership 6)

**Engaged by wider curricular choice**

According to many of the post-primary participants, Shared Education had supported their schools in providing a much wider choice of subjects, delivered as mixed identity classes. A number of teachers and principals made a connection between having a wider curricular choice for pupils and improved performance within their school, claiming that it was ‘too much of a coincidence’ that the two appeared to correlate.

In terms of academic achievement, one of the things we’ve seen [...], because there’s a greater curricular choice there has been a rise in percentage of ‘A’ star to ‘C’ at G C S E... difficult to prove—difficult to prove, but it seems too much of a coincidence that there wouldn’t be an element of that. (Teacher: Partnership 4)

Appending this claim, other participants noted that having a wider choice of shared subjects permitted pupils to select subjects that engaged them more effectively. In this way, Shared Education was seen to support schools in ‘meeting the demands of pupils’.

Educational outcomes in both schools are very strong at the minute and that very definitely has something to do with the fact that pupils are able to select a range of subjects that suit their needs and meet their needs. We’re both all-ability school and we both have very able pupils and we also have pupils who struggle a little bit more academically, but we’re able to match those to the right breadth of subjects [...] that of course has a direct impact on pupil attainment because they’re studying subjects that they’re engaged in and they have the aptitude for. (Principal: Partnership 4)
**Shared lessons provide a wider range of experiences and opportunities**

As the responses from participants became more focused towards the value of sharing and its impact on pupil learning at a classroom level, it became evident that there were additional learning benefits associated with mixed identity classrooms. The main notion was that shared classes provided a diverse range of perspectives and learning opportunities.

“I definitely think it’s had an impact on academic achievement. Particularly within History, I teach the Troubles and getting that joint perspective—also teach the Home Rule for upper sixth—so they’re getting an insight into Irish history that they just wouldn’t get in a single identity classroom.” (Teacher: Partnership 4)

Some participants added to this claim, stating that pupils in shared classes were afforded ‘enriched experiences using different learning environments’, and ‘opportunities to learn outside of each other’s contexts’. One primary school teacher pointed out that this was:

‘...useful for them to see what pupils in other schools are doing and to see their work’, potentially giving perspective and context to their own learning. (Teacher: Partnership 3)

Similarly, a principal in Partnership 5 suggested:

*What do our kids get out of shared education? I think it is an enriched experience. To take a child from [controlled secondary] and set them in the [maintained school] for an hour and 10 minutes per week, they would not have had that experience and they would have always looked at that school and wondered what goes on in there.* (Principal: Partnership 5)

Across most of the partnerships that we visited, participants claimed that Shared Education had enabled them to provide a wider range of experiences and opportunities for pupil learning. Some of these activities included trips, using new technologies, and enhancing pupil voice through leadership initiatives as previously mentioned in section 6.3.

“You could make a list of the extra things that pupils get out of the fact that the two schools collaborate that would be a page long! You’ve got all the trips […], you’ve got the joint school
council and opportunities like that, you’ve got course provision, you’ve two experts or three experts in departments as opposed maybe one in small schools, we’ve got classes that may not be viable if either school operated on their own.” (Principal: Partnership 4)

**Skill development, confidence building and enjoyment**

Participants across all the partnerships we visited, consistently referred to how Shared Education was promoting better communication skills, building confidence, and enhancing the articulation of ideas and expression of opinions.

*They are learning an awful lot of communication skills as well, just as young people and nothing to do with identity, the whole socialising aspect of it. Being able to stand up and speak.* (Principal: Partnership 5)

A notable example of Shared Education promoting development of these skills was provided by a post-primary partnership—they highlighted a notable shift in pupils’ communication skills as a consequence of their partnership receiving international recognition and visitors. The outcome of this activity was claimed to have helped shape the world view of pupils, raising their sense of worth as ‘these people wanted to hear about their work’:

“Our pupils at the start of year thirteen, when they start to engage with those visitors, our pupils over the course of the year become much more articulate, they become much more confident, they become much more able to express their views and opinions [...] those skills you can’t buy, you have to develop those skills and by providing the pupils those opportunities they’ve benefited incredibly.” (Principal: Partnership 4)

One of the partnerships discussed the benefit of having time to do things differently in shared lessons, as they tended to be longer. This afforded teachers opportunities to be innovative and try new approaches with students, but also gave them some space to work on pupil skill development, particularly around thinking skills and personal development. Teachers in Partnership 1 highlighted that they found 35 minute lessons restrictive in terms of what they could achieve. Instead shared lessons allowed them time to work with groups of students in larger spaces and employ a range of techniques and active methodologies that targeted a wider range of skill development:
When you talk about skills-based learning, like thinking skills and personal capabilities, everybody is trying to put it into their classes but it is very hard to get everything in 35 minutes. So, there is a luxury of a couple of hours and working with groups. A lot of what we are getting them to do is manage information and work with others, those sorts of skills that they may not always get regular opportunities to do in a bigger setting and having to work with people from a different community. It gives them space to work on their thinking skills and personal capabilities that they don’t get all the time and that they don’t get at length. They don’t normally get that that length of time to work and with that volume of people. It is a unique opportunity for them. (Teacher: Partnership 1)

In other settings, particularly in the primary schools, pupils were observed as having more confidence ‘to work and play with someone new’. Some post-primary participants also claimed that sharing in junior school was building confidence for sharing GCSE classes in their partner schools, as they had already been exposed to the activity of moving from one school to another and have now become familiar with the other school’s learning environment—the value being that it causes less disruption at an important educational juncture. Similarly, post-primary partnerships also reported a noticeable improvement in confidence with regards ‘to working in larger group settings, presenting, and talking to each other’.

A consistent theme across the partnerships was that students enjoyed being involved in shared education. The transcript extract below demonstrates in a similar fashion to comments made above by the teacher in Partnership 1 that having dedicated time to explore and delve into topics appears to engage students:

You do still have the core curriculum and PDMU is part of that but we will all agree that you don’t spend a huge amount of time on PDMU. You’ve got your ICT, Literacy and numeracy. So having that hour and a half to really go into it and do stuff that the children really find interesting. [Principal name] is saying that her kids are coming back and telling her all the stuff that they have learnt in the lessons. They enjoy it and having that time to delve into things more. Teacher: Partnership 2).
Social benefits

The social benefits of Shared Education are well-documented and our data collection again reinforces this aspect of the model. Across all the partnerships we visited, staff members claimed that pupils had developed “amazing relationships” (Teacher Partnership 4) having observed how those taking shared classes were mixing with relative ease. Examples of this included post-primary pupils sitting together in class, being invited to each other’s school formals, socialising with one another after school or during weekends, and in one partnership playing together in sports teams outside school (which was noted as being atypical for the local area). Principals and teachers from one of the larger post-primary partnerships that we visited, noted that the political context of their communities had once been difficult, but since their involvement in Shared Education attitudes of pupils had changed remarkably—changing attitudes was mentioned frequently across all the focus groups.

[Shared Education] has removed curiosity about each other’s schools. It has allowed them to ask questions about what they don’t understand instead of picking up notions and rumour and ideas from other people in the street. I mean the whole thing about statues in my school was a big thing when the youngsters came over. “Why do you have all those statues?” “Why is everything green in here?” You know? Trying to explain all of those things to them. (Principal: Partnership 5)

The social impact of Shared Education was described differently by primary school staff members. It was often claimed that primary pupils were less concerned by community and religious identities, and therefore attitudinal change was less likely to be observed. Instead, primary school staff members highlighted improved opportunities for social learning such as “improved recall of school experiences and social memory in P1” (Teacher: Partnership 3).

Focus group participants from both phases emphasised the significance of continuing this work in context of Northern Ireland. The opportunity for ‘social learning’ and for pupils to interact with others from a different community background or school ethos continues to be a motivating factor for schools. The Principal in the following extract describes the social impact and ‘enriching experience’ that Shared Education has had on pupils, across their partnership:
We had a project last year with the two history departments. It was about 1916 and the Somme. It was year 10 kids, it was fantastic they loved it, because they started to understand each other’s side; it’s that whole enriching experience that pupils get. We have seen that their attitudes have changed from our surveys, their attitudes towards ‘them’uns’, if you like, if you want to call it that. Some of the classes will happen over breaks and kids could walk in during a class change. There were five [maintained school] uniforms this morning that came into travel and tourism and they are walking through our corridors and they are not embarrassed, nonchalantly. [...] We have a generation of youngsters here involved in shared education. This should have, well we maybe will not see it in the next five, ten, but I think you will see it have a huge impact on Northern Ireland moving forward if we stick at it and if funding follows it.

(Principal: Partnership 5).

In most instances, similar to the extract above, staff members claimed that the work of Shared Education in terms of social cohesion has yet to be completed, despite the progress and impact that it has made.

Impact on Leadership

Supportive networks between leaders

One of the most commonly discussed themes on the impact of shared education on leadership was the way in which collaboration between principals helped form strong professional bonds. Principals often talked about how, prior to becoming involved in shared education, their jobs could be lonely or isolated - often having to make decisions alone. In each of the interviews and focus groups involving principals, we witnessed very warm and affable relationships between them. Principals talked about how their collaboration enabled them to learn from, consult, trust and confide in each other. In the same way that teachers talked about the value of being able to collaborate with and learn from a more experienced colleague in another school, principals also highlighted this as a positive impact of being involved in shared education:

*Our job has changed dramatically I would say in the last three or four years. We are scrutinised beyond all recognition. We are held to account so greatly. Every single aspect of our job, every teacher’s performance is analysed to death by us, by the Education Authority, by the Department and by ETI. I think as leaders we have recognised that we cannot do this on our own. So I don’t know everything about assessment; I don’t know everything about SEN; I don’t*
know everything about redundancies and HR and everything that goes along with it. I don’t know all these things. This partnership has allowed us to very openly admit that we don’t have all the answers but we know where we can get them. To me it has been quite natural and maybe ten years ago people would have been more reticent to admit where there gaps in knowledge were. Today, if I have a problem I ring you or you. (Principal: Partnership 1)

It was also clear in many of the partnerships that principals had adopted a type of collective responsibility and concern for the development and successes of each other’s schools and communities:

You really have a sense of, not so much ownership but a sense of pride in what is happening in our schools. Even the way we use social media to celebrate what our schools have achieved together, we are putting out a loud and proud message that this is what we are about and this is what we stand for. (Principal: Partnership 1)

Developing Middle Management and skill development

Participating teachers including heads of department, subject co-ordinators and those responsible for co-ordinating shared education, pointed to evidence that being involved in the programme has provided opportunities for career progression and the development of middle management leadership skills. Many teachers talked about taking on new responsibilities including managing budgets, timetabling, managing staff, negotiating with other schools, and working with senior management. Others talked about new links that had formed at the middle management level forming between schools.

As a co-ordinator it has had a massive effect on some of the roles I have had to take on in school. I was a lot more heavily involved in dealing with senior management in terms of looking at methods and approaches with them that I certainly wouldn’t have done before. (Teacher: Partnership 4)

There’s a lot of leadership involved in actually delivering to 120 young people [...] but to actually take responsibility for moving those children to another school. There are many teachers that don’t hold any positions of responsibility, that have never taken a child out of
the school building and now those teachers are getting the opportunity to do that through shared education (Teacher: Partnership 1)

It’s managing the budget [...] In terms of my leadership it has definitely helped. It’s the timetabling, the budget and the relationships. You can’t make one decision you have to phone the other school and work with them and come up with an agreed plan [...] Because it is such a large budget and because it so fine-tuned, you dare not go over it. In school as a teacher we are not used to dealing with more than a couple of thousand - that would be a lot for us. So you are working with quite a big amount of money. (Teacher: Partnership 3)

Students demonstrating leadership

A number of partnerships talked about how shared education had provided new opportunities for students in their schools to develop leadership skills. In some joint student councils had formed or were in the process of being established. In one partnership student leadership was particularly advanced where a joint student council had undertaken a consultation with students in both schools about how to improve shared lessons. The findings of the consultation led to a joint staff inset day and helped inform teachers regarding their approaches in shared lessons:

At the start of every year we have joint inset days together and within those joint inset days the joint school council sat down for a period of a year. They worked out from talking to their peers what things worked well in shared lessons what were challenges for them and we delivered a joint inset day and we looked at those issues and what pupils had said and tried to come up with approaches in the classroom. [...] It could be simple things like that on a day to day basis teachers maybe were not doing within the first couple of lessons, you needed to know everybody’s name, you needed to take an interest in all the pupils equally. [...] The big thing for them was fairness and being treated equally. (Teacher: Partnership 4)

In the same partnership students were also involved in delivering elements of induction training at the beginning of each academic year. These inductions activities were designed to introduce students from different schools who were about to embark on shared education. Training would typically be led by students from both schools, who had been involved in shared education for a number of years:
We sat down together and worked out that it was probably better being delivered by our own pupils and showing the leadership of our pupils being involved in it. Having the example of pupils there and showing that they are passionate about shared education and that they take a leadership role (Teacher: Partnership 4)

In another partnership, where the two schools have been approved to become a shared campus, the schools are in the process of building student’s capacities to become ambassadors for the campus:

We had a planning meeting a couple of weeks ago for the shared campus and we are hoping to bring together pupils from the junior schools to become shared campus ambassadors so that they are involved in the planning and discussion and be the faces of the new build and we will have joint council. (Teacher: Partnership 5)

Impact on Teaching

Professional stretch and self-evaluation

A common narrative amongst teachers and principals was that being involved in shared education provided them with welcome opportunities to ‘deepen and extend practice’ or to be ‘stretched’ or ‘challenged’ by colleagues from other schools. In particular participants described how collaboration had provided opportunities to observe different approaches to teaching, planning strategies and evaluation, and how this gave rise to professional reflection, self-evaluation and adapting good practice from partner schools. A teacher commented that working with colleagues from another school provided ‘a fresh and different perspective... that pushes you out of your comfort zone.’

Training and professional development

Teachers and school leaders frequently highlighted that shared education provided both formal and informal professional development opportunities. Teachers from partner schools talked about the value of attending training events together. Specific opportunities they mentioned included: SESP CPD modules; training provided by other schools; or training provided by external or private educational training providers. In one example, a primary school partnership talked about the value of attending numeracy training provided by a maintained secondary school. Both schools
subsequently adopted a common approach to numeracy. Importantly, participants emphasised that if they needed access to training or professional development their first port of call would be their partner school(s).

Teachers and school leaders emphasised the value of SESP funding in enabling them to align school inset days so that teachers could come together to train, plan and evaluate. In particular, many talked about inset days being aligned at the start of the academic year to enable to teachers to plan for the entire year and then at the end of the summer term to evaluate.

‘We had an inset session last year and one of the teachers presenting at it had spent time planning lessons for the signature project and she took staff through an insight into not only the practical processes but her thought processes of going through it and it was really very interesting because you could see that her journey went from, you know what’s this going to mean for me time wise? What’s this gonna mean for me as regards my workload? [...] Yet when they took time, sat down together, met and started the planning process they both said it was probably the most valuable piece of professional development that they had engaged in in recent years. And the outcome of that was superb lessons, which then again, takes you back to the impact on pupils and the quality of education that they are getting. (SESP Co-ordinator: Partnership 4)

**Sharing resources and expertise between teachers**

A key theme, put forward by teachers in a number of partnerships, was the idea that schools in the past tended to hold onto to or were protective of their knowledge and expertise, but now because of shared education there is a willingness to share resources and expertise across schools:

*We are always asking for help and people are providing help so willingly, it’s like the schools themselves have caught up with that paradigm and there is a new way to communicate and connect with each other. Perhaps schools in the past would have been much more monolithic and isolationist in the way that they held on to and coveted their knowledge and information, whereas now there is a greater sense, not only between the shared education partnership [...] I mean a genuine engagement. (Teacher: Partnership 1)*
We are very lucky because what we are offering is a different curriculum because the children who are coming from the High School do not study CAD, they study architecture and woodwork, so when they come over [here] they are getting a totally different experience. On the other hand, we as staff have learned so much from the [High School teacher] because he does woodwork and we have been able to share resources. (Teacher: Partnership 5)

Teachers talked about the beneficial opportunities of team teaching or being able to observe how other teachers approached lessons and planning. The teacher below talked about working with teachers from a school that had been rated by the inspectorate as outstanding:

When you are team teaching with someone who has expertise in another area, it really does help, to benefit from their experiences and the way they would do things which might be different from the way you would do it and to be part of that and to work with someone who is outstanding. [...] (Teacher: Partnership 6)

For other teachers, collaboration meant opportunities not only to share resources connected to their shared education projects, but to share on other elements of the curriculum too. This suggested that the benefits of collaboration could include a transfer to areas not directly included in the shared work. Furthermore, teachers talked about staying connected to their colleagues during periods where students were not involved in shared learning. In the example below, over the school year, the teacher describes adopting elements of the other school’s literacy strategy on spelling, yet the focus of their shared education project lasted 6 weeks and was on PDMU:

We have been sharing planning, not just the [shared education] planning we are doing together but the planning throughout the year, as we are doing the same topics and we help each other out. We met up with the P2 teacher and we were talking about spelling schemes that we were using. She gave me a few ideas and I gave ideas on what I was doing. [...] It’s not just that six week block when we are working together but over the whole year and I suppose that idea impacts on the children because we are getting so many more ideas and it is benefitting their education (Teacher: Partnership 3).

The one thing that I found the most surprising was when the RE teacher in the [controlled school] wanted to link up with the RE teacher in [maintained school] [...] and that’s not through shared education, they just decided to. But shared education allowed that to happen.
We now have people not just in Learning for Life and Work classes but we now have the RE teachers working together, not because they are involved in joint classes but because they needed that professional development from one another. We now have music, technology, history, maths, English. Our Irish teacher has asked, she teaches Irish and French, she has quite a small department and she is looking for some help with language resources and she has asked to link with the French teacher from here. (Principal: Partnership 5)

Teachers from smaller schools, often with a single form entry or a smaller subject department, talked about the value of being able to connect to another teacher in the same form but from another school, or having access to the expertise and resources of a much larger department. In the first example the principal from a primary school described how teacher collaboration through shared education provided opportunities for a wider professional dialogue. Similarly, in the second example, the teacher from a single teacher department in a post primary school talked about the value of having colleagues to bounce ideas off:

For the teachers, what they find every single time, we are a one form entry school – so for instance if you are the P4 teacher in our school you are the master of your own destiny but you can’t see the wood for the trees. You can’t pop in next door to see what the other p4 teacher is doing. You can’t say I had a had a nightmare lesson, how did you approach it? [...] That professional dialogue is limited. We can have whole staff meetings but usually it is housekeeping. When there are now two P4 teachers together, they are sharing plans and talking about practice and discussing curriculum. For staff that has been their biggest win. (Principal: Partnership 3)

I’m from [school name] which is a small school and a lot of our departments are single teacher departments. It is really good that they can work with teachers from other schools because in a bigger school in their department you can bounce ideas off different people but in a single teacher department you can’t do that. It is very beneficial for us. (Teacher: Partnership 6)

Participants also talked about creating online repositories to share and pool resources. Teachers frequently highlighted time constraints inherent in their roles; being able to access resources online was both efficient and convenient:
We are hoping to eventually use the One Drive. I have a training day planned on Google classroom and using Google Drive. The co-ordinators have a shared folder on Google Drive and we put up our calendar and photographs and maybe even permission letters that we have; anything else we have is put together and kept in one folder. In one of the languages days we physically left with resources but we also emailed around electronic versions of them. Time is the most important thing and through shared education we could take the time to sit and the cover was provided and that allowed us the time and the freedom to make the resources that we would have normally been under pressure to do otherwise. (Teacher: Partnership 6)

Connectivity and the use of social media

A common theme discussed by teachers and Principals was the way in which they communicated with each other. The evidence points to a range of ways of connecting beyond the remit of the school. Practitioners talked about emailing and telephoning each other and exchanging mobile phone numbers. They also talked about utilising social media, such as WhatsApp, to stay in touch and share information. Practitioners stressed the importance of Facebook and Twitter to communicate and monitor each other’s schools social media profile. Participants emphasised the informal, connective structures that had formed between them. While much of these connections had formed to facilitate the sharing of information and resources, the structures also helped create less formal social structures where teachers had developed personal relationships and stayed in touch outside of school hours: this is an important characteristic of successful contact. A principal in a secondary school emphasised that the ‘informal relationships are an important structure’.

Structures and systems

One of the richest veins of evidence on the impact of shared education showed that school structures and systems were changing. Here we are referring to changes in the way that schools operate and articulate their priorities, such as school development plans or school policies.

Policies, Development Plans and Schemes of Work

Most partnerships highlighted that being involved in shared education has had an impact on their school policies. Some of the schools represented in the study had aligned or were in the process of
working together to create shared or common policies often related to the delivery of shared education, examples that were cited included:

- Pastoral care
- Discipline
- Homework
- Use of mobile phones
- Uniform
- CRED
- Student mentoring
- P.E.
- Personal Development and Mutual Understanding
- Learning for Life and Work

In other cases, schools had collaborated to align virtually all of their policies. In the case of Partnership 2, a primary partnership, the schools had worked together to align everything except their religious education policies. By contrast Partnership 6 decided not to align or standardise their policies, in order to maintain their unique character. They argued that some polices would naturally align, such as child protection and safeguarding. The principals, however, explained that while there hadn’t been an explicit agreement to align policies, their relationship meant that they were able to ‘steal’ or ‘borrow’ good practice from each other, which in turn helped shape policies:

> What tends to happen is you are in your own school and you’ve got a ridiculous number of policies that you are supposed to update. You prioritise and you know which ones you have got to do in a particular year and I might go (principal names) I’ve got to do this can you send me yours, it would be ad-hoc like that for us all. But we would all share. [...] It’s more about looking at some of our practices, so if we pick on assessment I was over here last year [...] I walked into the office and there was a big A3 post for your assessment. I asked if I could have look at it and I took that back to school. I’m stealing one of your ideas. My assessment guy looks at it and says that’s interesting. There are bits like that that we all do, we all steal from each other and then you tailor it to suit your own school. I would be keen on standardising all of our policies across all our schools, we are different, but you adapt. (Principal: Partnership 6)
Many of the principals who participated in the study talked about how shared education and the priorities of the partnership now featured in their respective school development plans. Some schools described sharing their development plans and consulting with each other regarding their priorities and development over time. Importantly some pointed to the fact that they did not set development plans in isolation:

_We were doing our school development plan. We were able to build it based on what we knew was happening in the other schools. It wasn’t done in isolation we knew what other schools were thinking and what they were talking about. We are in agreement that that is the way to go._ (Principal: Partnership 1)

In one example a principal of a primary school described how both schools wanted to develop a new approach to pupil mentoring, designed to support and develop gifted and talent pupils, the project became a priority for the schools and was built into their school development plans:

_We both talked about how we had gifted and talented children that were not adequately catered for. We have many interventions for under-achievers and low achievers but gifted and talented, you almost counted your blessings you had them and let them be. We have found that shared education has given us opportunities. We have now put this in place and we are doing staff to staff training this year. [...] The schools have a shared approach and we are learning from each other. [Principal name and I are leading it this year but we will be devolving it out to other teacher mentors in the school. [...] This is now part of our school development plan. I had two of [Principal name] teachers over year last Friday and we talked, compared and contrasted what we had done so far, we have a full inset day planned in February._ (Principal: Partnership 3)

As with development plans some schools talked about aligning schemes of work where heads of department would work together to align the teaching of subject areas:

_Even how the LLW co-ordinators are working their schemes of work, they have now tailored their schemes of work so that they are teaching the same things at the same times across the three schools [...] Shared education is now written into their schemes of work. I know that in here we have asked that all heads of department write shared education into their schemes of work._ (Teacher: Partnership 1)
**Scheduling**

One of the most common impacts on school structures and systems cited by school partnerships were changes to timetabling to accommodate shared learning between students. Schools described various approaches to timetabling including: partial alignments, block timetabling, shared education option blocks at GCSE and post 16:

*The way that the curriculum is designed at Key Stage 4 the kids have their core subjects then they have their option blocks. Option block 5 is the shared block. So we would discuss what are you putting into option block 5 this year? We normally have drama, music, technology, moving image and travel and tourism was there one year. We keep block 5 as the shared block and we make sure that whenever we are timetabling we make sure that bloc happens at the same time so that the pupils can move across the two sites.* (Teacher: Partnership 5)

Other examples of scheduling changes included adjusting break times to allow students some time to socialise or play or to accommodate travel time between schools:

*There’s the benefit of the two breaks being at slightly different times which means that my year 6 pupils then get to there [the other school] for your play time. It’s nice because they said before [pupils] that they didn’t get enough time to play together. So even though they are down for shared education together and because the breaks overlap they get to stay and have their play time.* (Principal: School 2)

In another example, teachers in Partnership 4 explained how school closing times had historically been 5 minutes apart. This was a legacy of the ‘troubles’ whereby staggering closing times during the 70s and 80s had been designed to minimise pupil contact and any possibility of disturbance:

*The joint student council sat down last year and we historically have had two different times to end school the maintained school finished five minutes before the controlled school and I think traditionally in the 70s and 80s it was just to get people out of the way. They sat down and they said well actually this structure no longer makes sense for us. Historically yes, but now, symbolically it makes no sense so they wrote to the principals and said we want to the schools to end at the same time.* (Teacher: Partnership 4)
**Governor and student councils**

Various different forms of shared councils have been established in some of the partnerships. As has been previously discussed, some have supported the development of joint student councils and have established structures and mechanism whereby student voice and participation is having genuine impact on teaching and the development of partnerships. Other partnerships have established shared governance structures or have encouraged governors from different schools to meet:

*Everybody from the Governors right through to the whole school community knows there is this focus that it [shared education] is a priority and the way talk about not just our own school but our shared schools collectively is something that happens at boards of Governor’s meetings, it happens at our staff development and the coming together of the board of Governors, I think has been a big step forward and as well as that I think the sense of shared responsibility the success that [school name] enjoyed when I came to their prize-giving. I know your Governors and they know me and to be able to go up and congratulate them. [Principal: Partnership 1]*

**Websites and Promotional Material**

A number of schools talked about how their websites had changed, whereby new sections had been created to promote the partnership and showcase shared learning between students. In an audit of each of the schools involved in the study, most had created explicit sections for shared education. During data collection some of the teachers and principals presented or talked about promotional materials in terms of brochures, leaflets or banners which featured shared education. In one case a principal provided official promotional materials which described their school as a ‘sharing education school.’ In the case of partnerships that had been approved for shared campuses, concept drawings or plans were on prominent display in the schools.

**Ethos**

Some schools suggested that shared education was having an impact on their ethos. In the first example below, the principal describes how their school ethos has changed or ‘moved’ to
incorporate shared education and in the second example the Principal argues that shared education is challenging the school to demonstrate that it is inclusive:

*One of the reasons I didn’t want to get into shared education, initially was that I saw it as a back door to integrated education in [school name] I was genuinely worried that this would be an erosion of ethos, through the back door but I have totally changed my mind on that and he reason being that the good work that is taking place ethos has shifted... not shifted, there is no threat from each other’s ethos is what I am trying to say but our ethos has moved to the point where we are a shared school and that is something that we hold very dear* (Principal:

**Partnership 1**)

*Shared education means now we have to practice what we preach. We have always said that we are inclusive school... we are a white, Catholic, one hundred percent Irish Catholic school and therefore our ethos was never really tested in practice, it was easy to deliver in essence. Here, it [shared education] is a challenge to it and can we adapt and modify.* (Principal: Partnership 3)

In other examples, when recruiting new staff, participants explained that it was important to recruit staff who were either similarly committed to shared education, had experience of or were willing to become involved. In one example a principal talked about how their school includes an ‘ethos statement’ in amongst a recruitment pack to prospective employees which describes the importance of shared education. In another example below, a Principal describes a recent recruitment process:

*We organised a principal relief job at the end of last year, a principal relief to cover me. The first question my Board of Governors decided to ask was what’s your understanding and experience of shared education? [...] They wanted somebody on the staff who cared and had an understanding and a belief in it.* (Principal: Partnership 2)

**THE SURVEY OF PRINCIPALS AND TEACHERS**

*Introduction*

Surveys were distributed to the principals of each of the 350 schools recorded as being in SESP and the 100 coordinators known to the EA, with one reminder email a week before the survey deadline.
A total of 134 responses were received, of which 55% were from teachers or principals in primary schools, 25% were from secondary schools, 15% were from grammar schools and 5% were from nursery schools. Of the total, 46% of the respondents were from controlled or voluntary schools, 43% from Catholic maintained or voluntary schools, 9% from integrated schools and 2% from ‘other’ schools. Finally, 42% of the respondents were SESP coordinators, 28% were principals or teachers and 28% were teachers. On average our respondents said they had been involved in shared education for 4.7 years.

**General views**

We asked our respondents for their views on three general statements on the effectiveness of shared education on pupil performance, teaching and school structures. The results are shown on Figures 1 to 3 and indicate that a majority of respondents felt shared education was having a positive impact on each issue.

![Figure 1: Generally do you think shared education is effective in improving pupil performance in your school?](image)
Perhaps the most notable features of the responses to these items were that the largest proportion said that shared education was having a positive impact to the structures and systems of their schools, which implies a level of positive institutional change arising from partnership working.
For the rest of the questionnaire we categorized the items on a number of distinctive themes, including their perceptions of the impact of shared education on aspects of the pupil experience, teachers, teaching, curriculum, pupil learning, institutional learning, leadership opportunities and institutional change.

**Impact on pupils**

Figure 4 shows the pattern of results for the first of these, on perceptions of the impact of shared education on pupils’ experience. The pattern of results are positive on all items, with three quarters saying it impacted on pupil attainment. It is notable that the two items with the lowest positive response related to social cohesion, though over half the respondents were positive on the impact of shared education on these issues.

![Figure 4: For pupils, how much impact has shared education had on:](image)

**Impact on teachers**

Figure 5 shows the pattern of results for perceptions of the impact on teachers and the school, and the results here are even more positive than previously.
Impact on teaching

Figure 6 shows the pattern of results for perceptions of the impact of shared education on teaching in the schools. The most notable pattern in these results is that virtually no-one said that shared education was ineffective in supporting work in any of these areas, though there was a proportion who felt that it had little effective on some of the areas. The general pattern was, once again, of a very positive assessment of the impact of shared education, but this was least in relation to the delivery of lessons and for professional development: the first of these is important for shared education as it relies so much on shared classes, while the second is generally accepted as a strong potential benefit of shared education. As many as two-in-five respondents felt that shared education did not have much impact on career progression, but it probably has not been in place for long enough to have a discernible impact on this issue.
Impact on skills

We asked our respondents for their perception of the impact of shared education on 21st century skills and, as Figure 7 shows, got a very positive response across all items.
**Impact on learning**

Figure 8 shows the pattern of response to perceptions of the impact of shared education on various aspects of the pupil learning and opportunity, with a consistent pattern of positive responses across all items. Here again hardly any respondents felt that shared education prevented the delivery of any of the items, and majorities in all case saw the impact as positive.

![Figure 8: Shared education](image)

**Opportunities for teachers**

Figure 9 shows the pattern of responses for perceptions of the opportunities provided for teachers by shared education. The pattern of responses is more mixed here, with positive responses to items relating to opportunities for enhanced responsibilities, but more negative responses to items related to leadership opportunities. Perhaps the most notable response here was the very small proportion who said they had had an opportunity to contribute to their school development plan. In this case we also checked if there were any differences in responses from those in controlled/voluntary, maintained/Catholic voluntary or integrated schools. There were none, which suggests a uniformly positive experience of shared education across the sectors.
By contrast, Figure 10 shows that most of our respondents were very positive about the opportunities for them to extend their professional learning as a consequence of shared education, with particularly high proportions saying that it had provided opportunities to meet with, and learn informally from, colleagues in other schools. Almost as many said that they had been able to avail of more formal opportunities to learn and shared expertise.
New processes in schools

Figure 11 shows the pattern of results from our last group of items, all of which related to whether specific measures had been implemented in the schools as a result of their shared education work. On this Figure we can see again a mixed pattern of results. Only one-in-ten said a joint committee of the school governors had been established, and only a quarter said a joint student council had been established. By contrast, over half said they had worked on the joint development of their school development plans and explored aspects of shared ethos or values.

There were no differences between respondents from controlled/voluntary, maintained/Catholic voluntary and integrated, save that respondents from the last of these said they were slightly less likely to run joint parents’ events or establish joint policies.

More significant differences emerged when we compared the pattern of results from respondents in primary and secondary schools. A major difference emerged in relation to timetable alignment: only a third of respondents from primary schools said they had changed their timetables, whereas over two-thirds of respondents from secondary schools said this had been done. In a similar vein, over half of the respondents from secondary schools said they had extended the range of connections between the partner schools as a consequence of shared education, but only a quarter of respondents from primary schools said this.

There was a general pattern such that respondents from grammar schools were a little less likely to say any of these measures had been implemented in their schools, though the differences never reached statistical significance: there was a small minority of respondents from grammar schools who responded negatively to every item on the questionnaire and this may have skewed the pattern of results from respondents in this sector.
He overall pattern of results from the survey are very positive in regard to the impact of shared education and largely confirmed the findings to emerge from the focus groups. Most teachers and principals felt that the experience of being involved in shared education work had enhanced the opportunities and outcomes for pupils and teachers, had expanded opportunities for professional development and was leading to the development of more effective educational practice. Teachers seemed to value the new opportunities being provided by engagement with colleagues from other schools, whether this was through formal professional development opportunities or the informal networks that appear to be developing.

It is worth emphasizing that there is little or no evidence from the survey results that teachers or principals perceive shared education to be adding additional burdens to their work or imposing new responsibilities from which no benefit is being derived. By contrast, the pattern of responses is very positive.

The one area that emerges as a little weaker in relation to practice is that there is limited evidence from the survey that the experience of shared education is beginning to lead to formalized changes in schools which would contribute to its institutionalization in new practice. Some of our respondents did say these type of formal changes are occurring, but as yet this seems to be happening in a minority of schools. That said, the fact that some institutional change is occurring at all may indicate a level of deepening and embedding of shared education in practice, and the
broader climate of opinion suggests there is likely to be appetite for further developments in this area.

**OVERALL CONCLUSION**

Overall the pattern of results from the interviews and survey are consistent and clear. Teachers and principals identify a wide range of positive outcomes arising from collaboration through school partnerships supported by SESP. More important, there is virtually no evidence that participation in SESP partnerships has created any blockage or constraint on the ability or capacity of schools to advance their core educational missions. Indeed, the evidence lies in the reverse direction in that teachers and principals say that collaboration has enhanced opportunities and outcomes for pupils, improved pupil learning and broadened curriculum choice.

Furthermore, teachers and principals report that collaboration has improved their capacity in many significant ways as well, whether this is through the formal or informal sharing of experience, access to resources and expertise, or opportunities for professional development and learning. There is also evidence that the experience of collaboration, after an average of less than five years, is already leading to the re-engineering of some school systems and processes in ways which is enhancing the learning environment.

A deeper analysis of the data points to areas of work where greater levels of enhancement may be possible. It is also true that the institutionalisation of new practice as a consequence of collaboration lags behind improved practice and engagement, but this is unsurprising: indeed, it may be that the level of institutionalisation of new practice after such a short period of time is, in fact, an unexpected bonus.

The balance of evidence emerging from this study of the perceptions and views of principals and teachers involved in school partnerships in SESP points to a high level of consensus. That consensus is that collaboration is having a very positive impact: it is leading to enhanced opportunities, outcomes and practices, for pupils and teachers, and that it is helping schools not only meet their core educational goals, but to promote positive innovations. Perhaps most striking of all is the almost unanimous view that pupil and teacher confidence has been enhanced by participation in shared education, thereby confirming that old adage that none of us is more effective than all of us.