

Case Study:

A look at the role and impact of the support provided by the “Sharing Classrooms, Deepening Learning Project” with the Western campus of the Newry and Mourne ALC.

Background:

Due to the wide geographical scope and large number of member schools within the Newry and Mourne Area Learning Community, the community has been carved into 3 different campus groups. The Central Campus encompasses the urban schools from the Newry and Warrenpoint area, the Eastern group includes the schools located in Kilkeel and the Western Campus consists of the three rural schools situated in the South Armagh region.

These three schools, St Paul’s High School, Bessbrook, Newtownhamilton High School and St Joseph’s High School, Crossmaglen have been working in close partnership over recent years to achieve a number of common goals.

The principals are committed to developing and implementing a shared vision of working together to:

- Meet the requirements of the Entitlement Framework and provide a broader curricular choice which promotes equality of opportunity and experience for all young people irrespective of their background
- Promote and foster cultural understanding and mutual appreciation
- Improve learning and teaching across the partnership by sharing good practice and exploring opportunities for joint staff development
- Pool resources for the good of all schools
- Promote good relations and contribute to capacity building within the wider community

Overview of Schools involved

St Paul’s High School and St Joseph’s High School are similar schools in the sense that they are both non-selective, maintained schools which serve the Catholic community of the area. These schools have enjoyed a close working relationship for many years now and since the inception of the ALC they have enthusiastically embraced the notion of a more joined up approach to create a shared curricular offer which enables students to access a broader range of subjects at both Key Stage 4 and Post-16.

Newtownhamilton High School is a considerably smaller, controlled, non-selective school which traditionally has served the Protestant community of the area. Through its involvement in PEACE (Partnership for Education and Community Enhancement)

which was funded by the Sharing Education Programme (SEP), the school has formed a much valued partnership with St Paul's High School.

Through the SEP links which involve a myriad of joint activities across many areas of learning, the two schools have forged a meaningful relationship based on trust and mutual respect. It is the belief of the principals that the experiences afforded to both schools through their SEP projects has enabled them to begin planning for more sustained collaborative partnerships in the form of shared GCSE courses, which will enable students to access a wider variety of subjects, experience learning in a collaborative environment and promote opportunities for continued and real interaction between young people from differing religious and cultural persuasions.

Potential for lasting change and meaningful collaboration

Building on the success and trust built up over the past number of years, the three schools have embarked on a momentous and historical venture this September with the introduction of a shared class in the area of Btec First Sport.

For the first time ever in September 2012, students from Newtownhamilton High School, St Paul's High School and St Joseph's High School have opted to study a joint course which is currently being delivered on the St Paul's campus. The class which is made up of 15 students from all three schools represents a real opportunity for progress and innovation in this area.

During the initial planning stages for the course, the logistical issues in relation to time-tabling and transport required much negotiation and creative thinking. However, the main concern was how well staff and students would adjust to the proposed change and the challenges that the shared course could potentially present. Another real concern was how the wider community might respond to this new collaborative approach. Given that this marked the first occasion when students from differing denominations would be taught together in a sustained manner, it was of paramount importance that all key stakeholders felt informed and supported along each stage of the process.

Sharing Classrooms, Deepening Learning (SCDL)

Following their attendance at an SCDL Conference in Armagh in March of this year, the senior management team within the partnership made contact with NICIE in order to enlist their services and guidance. At this point the Project Manager of SCDL, Mrs Bernie Kells and the lead facilitator for this area, Mrs Mary Potter, visited St Paul's High School to discuss the partnership's specific needs in relation to organising staff development and student induction. The SCDL team outlined the menu of staff training options and classroom based activities for students which they offer. They liaised closely with each of the three schools to create a tailor made plan for implementation which would cater for the specific needs of our partnership.

The support and guidance provided to date by SCDL has proved invaluable to our partnership. The team has guided and advised us each step of the way on best practice and have afforded staff and students opportunities to build strong relationships both

within the classroom setting as well as through external training sessions and team building activities which have played a pivotal role in cementing the trust and openness both within the team of staff as well as with the student group.

Outline of training and support events provided by SCDL to date in relation to the Btec First Sport Course:

1. In June the team of key staff from all three schools were afforded an opportunity to come together in the pleasant surroundings of the Slieve Gullion Courtyard Centre to plan for the year ahead. The team was made up of the teachers from St Paul's High School PE Department who would be delivering the Btec course, the HOD of PE from all three schools, the relevant Year Head from each of the schools along with the EF Co-ordinator and Vice Principal from St Paul's. Over the course of a very enjoyable day the team engaged in a range of activities facilitated by personnel from SCDL. One of the most crucial aspects of this initial training day was the chance for the staff to get to know each other and agree a shared strategy for moving forward. The session was extremely productive, in that a wide range of issues were discussed including:
 - The development of a joint Service Level Agreement which would reflect an agreed approach in relation to school policies and logistical issues
 - The development of a well planned student induction programme
 - Whole School Diversity Management
 - Public relations – how best to raise awareness of the partnership
2. During the initial stages of the course in September the SCDL maintained a strong supportive and advisory role. For the induction session, they facilitated a range of ice-breaking activities to encourage students to get to know each other. The students participated in a workshop to plan their own uniform- a sports jersey which they as a group would collectively design. The materials for this workshop were provided by SCDL. The project manager has been able to enlist the support of the IFI for the planned launch event of this jersey which will take place in December.
3. On the second week of term the students participated in a team-building event organised by the PE and SCDL staff at the Acton Adventure Centre in Poyntzpass. The students were very enthused by this experience and reported that it enabled them to “really get to mix with each other and have some fun”.
4. The support for this course is on-going and the SCDL team are in regular contact with each of the partner schools to advise and help in whatever way possible. The students are looking forward to receiving their new jerseys as they believe it will give them their own distinct, shared identity and moreover they have had ownership of the design process throughout.
5. The team of staff involved in the delivery of this partnership are being given another opportunity to meet and review progress next month. This meeting will give all participants a chance to build on existing relationships and to plan for the term ahead.

6. Due to the young age of the students involved in this shared course, there have been a few issues with students adapting to a new school environment, but we have worked very closely to resolve these and remain steadfast in our commitment to our partnership throughout. Very close liaison has been maintained at all times between staff in the schools. Trust and mutual respect between teachers are such that there is an openness to addressing issues or perceived problems that bodes well for the future.

Support with other aspects of the shared curriculum:

SCDL have visited each of the three partner schools to discuss plans for further guidance in other areas which the partnership views as being vital to enhancing our collaborative work.

LLW or more specifically Local and Global Citizenship, has been identified as a vehicle by which we can address crucial issues and give our students opportunities to further develop a sense of mutual respect, equality and cultural appreciation. In light of this, the LLW Heads of Department from each of the schools have worked with SCDL to develop a bespoke training course which will enable teaching staff to respond effectively to challenges which may arise within the classroom and explore relevant controversial issues.

At the beginning of this year a group of LLW teachers attended a workshop in the Amma Centre in Armagh. At this event they were able to draw up a list of areas which they identified as being particularly relevant to our partnership. Following on from this day, three joint staff training sessions have been planned by SCDL and an added incentive for staff involved is the opportunity to receive accreditation in either the Exploring Skills Accreditation or the Extended Skills Accreditation which SCDL offer.

In addition to these staff training and development opportunities for teaching staff, the SCDL are working with the three schools to inform, engage and up-skill other key stakeholders within the process, including classroom assistants, members of the Board of Governors and parents. Senior managers in schools have been impressed with the willingness of SCDL personnel to adapt their own ideas and respond to the uniqueness of the challenges facing individual schools and the communities which they serve.

As a result of SCDL's involvement in our partnership, the students have integrated more easily and have had enriching opportunities through their involvement in the wide range of induction activities. All three partner schools have been given a forum to express their views and identify their needs and share in the on-going practical support and advice from SCDL. They have been able to embrace the spirit of collaboration and build on their commitment to creating further opportunities for shared education within the Western Campus.