

Learning to Live Together

An Evaluation of Civic-Link

Executive Summary

Civic-Link is a pilot initiative whose twin aims are to enhance the capacity of young people to participate in community and public life and to promote mutual understanding and respect for diversity. The initiative, which first became operational in 1999, involves the partnering of participating schools and youth groups on a cross-border basis. Civic-Link incorporates action learning and relationship building methodologies to secure its aims. As well as a programme of classroom based instruction, the full implementation of Civic-Link involves students completing a project on an issue that is of concern in the community in which they live and participating in a programme of two residential exchanges.

This report presents the findings of an evaluation of Civic-Link that sought to assess the impact of the initiative and to identify the lessons for programme development arising from the three years of its pilot implementation. The evaluation design used was a slightly modified version of a pre-post control group study. All schools participating in Civic-Link were selected for inclusion in the evaluation (N=96). Eighty schools - equally divided between those in Northern Ireland and

the Republic of Ireland - were identified as control schools. Four in five (81%) of participating schools participated in the evaluation and the response rate from the control schools was 48%. A total of 2,545 students participated in the evaluation. The data collection procedures included questionnaires administered by teachers in both the participating and control schools and a postal survey of teachers involved in the delivery of Civic-Link.

The overall pattern of the findings from the survey of students shows that Civic-Link is achieving its aims. This conclusion is based on the clear evidence from both pre-post and control group analyses showing that students participating in Civic-Link demonstrate higher levels of interest in and knowledge about matters related to their capacity to participate in community and public life and that, for the most part, participating students present a more positive profile in terms of their levels of mutual understanding and respect for diversity than students in control schools. More detailed exploration of trends within the overall pattern of the findings showed that the North-South dimension of the initiative is working well in the case of students from the Republic of Ireland and less

well for students from Northern Ireland, particularly Catholic students. Underlying this finding is the substantial difference in the context from which students in Northern Ireland enter Civic-Link compared to the peers in the Republic of Ireland.

Two factors were found to exert a significant effect on the extent to which the objectives of Civic-Link are being realised. The first of these factors is the extent to which students experience the full programme of two exchanges with their partner school. With regard to this there is clear evidence that the achievement of the full range of benefits of participation in Civic-Link is closely linked to students experiencing the full programme of two exchanges. The second factor is the socio-economic profile of the school. With respect to this the findings of the evaluation show that at both pre and post programme times students in schools designated as disadvantaged show a poorer profile on the indicators used to assess mutual understanding, respect for diversity and capacity for civic participation than their peers attending schools not designated as disadvantaged.

The findings from the survey of teachers - which mainly concern issues related to implementation - show that, overall, there is a high level of support for Civic Link among schools, the community in which participating schools are based, and parents of participating students. The detailed findings on this matter point to some variation by jurisdiction and the religious tradition of participating schools with the most discernable trend being the somewhat lower levels

of support being expressed by schools of a Protestant tradition in Northern Ireland. Teachers' assessments of factors impinging on the realisation of programme objectives confirmed the adverse impact of partial programme implementation and the more difficult task of securing impact with students attending schools designated as disadvantaged. Teachers also indicated the presence of difficulties arising from working with younger and less able students. Among the particularly challenging aspects of implementing Civic-Link identified by teachers are completing the project work associated with the action learning element of the programme and managing and supporting the student exchanges.

Among the development challenges identified for Civic-Link arising from the findings of the evaluation are deepening the engagement of the initiative with Protestant schools in Northern Ireland, prioritising the implementation of Civic-Link in disadvantaged schools, and developing the coherence between those elements of the initiative aimed at fostering mutual understanding on a North-South and cross-community basis and developing the capacities of students in relation to participation and community and public life. Among the practical implications arising from these challenges are reviewing the schools partnering procedure to ensure a greater cross-community dimension, reviewing the target age range of the programme, and developing methodologies for ensuring greater impact with students attending disadvantaged schools.