Young people’s experiences of integration and segregation in Northern Ireland

Helena Stockinger

Introduction

The Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) and Young Life and Times (YLT) surveys have, since their inception in 1998 and 2003 respectively, elicited the views of adult and sixteen year olds across a range of topics. While the majority of questions change from year to year, a number of questions are asked annually, for example, respondents’ preferences for living in mixed or single religion neighbourhoods; working in mixed or single religion workplaces; and sending children to mixed or single religion schools. However, changes in attitudes towards mixing and integration have been positively or negatively affected by significant political events and incidents, for example, the Holy Cross School dispute in 2001 or, more recently, the debate round the flying of the union flag (Hughes and Donnelly 2001; 2003; Devine and Schubotz 2004; 2005; Schubotz and Robinson 2006; Devine, Kelly and Robinson 2011; Hayward, Dowds and Shaw 2014). As such, the responses to these time series questions act as a barometer for community relations and are used by the Northern Ireland government, amongst others, as good relations indicators.

In 2014 the Integrated Education Fund (IEF) sought to explore the attitudes of children and young people in Northern Ireland to integration, segregation and mixing. To do so, they funded and devised a series of questions for inclusion in two ARK surveys, namely, YLT, a postal survey of sixteen year olds, and Kids’ Life and Times (KLT), an online survey available to all Primary 7 aged children in Northern Ireland and completed in school. While previous YLT surveys have asked questions around issues of segregation and integration, the inclusion of the IEF questions in KLT was the first time that the views of a large number of 10 – 11 year olds had been sought on these issues. KLT was completed by 4757 children (21% of P7 aged pupils) from 215 schools (25% of primary schools); all children had the opportunity to respond to the IEF questions. While YLT was distributed to 5962 sixteen year olds only half of the surveys (2846) included the IEF questions - of these 1034 were completed (37%).

This Research Update highlights the most important findings in relation to how divided children and young people think Northern Ireland is; whether they think that more integration is needed; how welcome a new pupil from different backgrounds would be made in school; and which type of school they would prefer their own children to attend and why.

Perceived Division in Northern Ireland

Using the options ‘very divided’; ‘quite divided’; ‘not really divided’; ‘not at all divided’ and ‘don’t know’ respondents were asked how divided they felt children (KLT) and people (YLT) who live in Northern Ireland are in terms of:

- their religion
- their skin colour and/or the language they speak (KLT) / their ethnicity (YLT)
- their cultural traditions and festivals
- the sports they play
- the schools they attend
- how rich or poor they are (KLT) / their social class (YLT)

A large majority (81%) of YLT respondents saw religion as the main source of division in Northern Ireland. In the case of KLT 42% saw children as being divided to some extent by religion, which was the only one of the six terms where more respondents answered ‘very or quite divided’ than answered ‘not really or not at all divided’. In terms of school, the same proportion saw this as a source of division as did not see it as a dividing factor; 36% in each case. In each of the remaining three terms more respondents believed that the people who live in Northern Ireland are ‘not really or not at all divided’ than ‘very or quite divided’. YLT respondents perceived divisions in Northern Ireland across all terms, and the more negative perceptions of the sixteen years olds in comparison to 10 – 11 year olds are clearly demonstrated in Figure 1.
Need for more integration in Northern Ireland

Respondents were asked how much integration (mixing) they thought there should be between children (KLT) or people (YLT) in Northern Ireland in the same terms as in the question about division in Northern Ireland.

Making new pupils feel welcome

Respondents were asked how welcome they thought they and, separately, the other pupils in the class would make a new pupil feel if they were of a different religion, ethnicity (KLT ‘skin colour and/or different language’), or social class (KLT ‘rich or poor’) from most other pupils.

In both surveys, respondents thought that they themselves were more welcoming to children and young people from other religious, ethnic and social backgrounds than their classmates; however this perceived difference between other pupils’ attitudes and respondents’ own attitudes was much larger (24%) among 16-year olds (Figure 3). A much higher proportion of KLT than YLT respondents felt that their classmates would be
welcoming to a new pupil with a different ethnic or religious background, whilst a higher proportion of 16-year olds than P7 children felt that they themselves would be welcoming to such a pupil.

KLT respondents thought that their classmates would make new pupils with other religious backgrounds feel slightly more welcome (70%) than pupils who spoke other languages or had another skin colour (66%), but there was virtually no difference with regard to the proportion of respondents who said they themselves would make pupils with other religious or ethnic backgrounds welcome (77% and 78% respectively) as Figure 3 shows. In KLT, girls were somewhat more likely than boys (10% as opposed to 8%) to say that they would make a new pupil from a different religious or ethnic background feel very welcome at their school.

Around six in ten YLT respondents thought that new pupils from a different ethnic or social background (59% in each case) or a different religion (58%) would be made welcome by the other pupils in their class. However, more than eight in ten respondents said they themselves would make pupils with other ethnic (83%), religious or social class backgrounds (82% in each case) feel very welcome. Nine to twelve percent more females than males felt that they themselves would make a new pupil of a different religion, ethnicity or social class welcome.

In both surveys, respondents from integrated schools were most likely to say that they thought their classmates would make a new pupil with another religious background feel very welcome.

Integration preferences with regard to school

KLT and YLT respondents were asked if they had children if they would prefer to send them to a school where all the children had the same religion or to a mixed-religion school. Whilst, for all, except a very small number of YLT respondents, this is a hypothetical question it is, nonetheless, useful in assessing integration preferences among children and young people.

In KLT the proportion of respondents who said they would prefer to send their own children to a school with children of only their own religion was exactly the same as the proportion who preferred a mixed religion school (36%). Twenty-eight percent said they did not know which school they would prefer their own children to attend. Respondents who attend an integrated school were significantly more likely to prefer a mixed religion school (69%) than pupils who attended Catholic Maintained schools (29%) or Controlled schools (37%).

Reasons for choosing a mixed school

Respondents were asked to explain why they would choose a 'mixed religion school' or single religion school for their children. Below are details of a thematic analysis of mixed school preferences.

In KLT respondents, the main reasons given for preferring a mixed school were:

1. They should learn about other people's lives and religions and understand the differences.

Table 1: KLT preferences regarding their own children’s school, expressed by school type attended by respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Catholic Maintained</th>
<th>Controlled</th>
<th>Integrated</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>All</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Own religion only</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed religion school</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t know</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: YLT preferences regarding their own children’s school, expressed by school type attended by respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Planned</th>
<th>Integrated</th>
<th>Grammar</th>
<th>Secondary</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>All</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Own religion only</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed religion school</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t know</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Religion is the aspect in which both KLT (42%) and YLT (81%) respondents are most likely to say that people in Northern Ireland are divided.

Respondents feel strongest about the need for more integration in relation to their religion and their skin colour and/or language (each 45%), whereas YLT respondents feel strongest about the need for more integration in relation to religion (75%).

YLT respondents are much more likely to say that people here are divided and they see a greater need for more integration than KLT respondents.

Respondents in both the KLT and the YLT surveys think that they themselves would make a new pupil from a different ethnic background feel more welcome than other pupils in their class would.

In KLT there is no difference between the proportion of respondents who would send their child to a mixed school and those who would send their child to a single religion school (each 36%).

Among YLT respondents more 16-year olds would prefer their children to attend a mixed religion school (59%) than a school where all the children had the same religion (26%).

There are many different reasons given for preferring a mixed religion for their own children. The IEF funded research shows a clear perception among children and young people of continuing division in Northern Ireland especially in relation to religion, with the latter being particularly the case for YLT (aged 16) respondents. Nonetheless, respondents to both YLT and KLT (P7 children) feel there is a need for more integration and mixing in many areas of life.

**References**


Hayward, K., Dowds, L. and Shaw, C. (2014) *Belonging and Alienation in the new Northern Ireland*, ARK Research Update 93, Belfast: ARK.


**Key points**

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**Conclusion**

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