



Research Update

School's out

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The 11+ tests, in all their guises, have been a feature of the education system in Northern Ireland since the 1947 Education Act, and in its current form since 1981. Many people in Northern Ireland will have experienced 'the qualifying', the '11+' or the 'transfer test'. Every year in late autumn, many 10 and 11 year olds face exams which will impact on their educational career and perhaps onto their entire lives in the future. The only exception is in the Craigavon area where academic selection takes place in line with the Dickson Plan System. This is a two tier system whereby pupils automatically transfer from primary to junior high school at the age of 11, and academic selection is delayed until the age of 14.

Over the years there has been speculation and rumour that the 11+ tests would be abolished, or that a different system would be introduced. The report from the Independent Review Body on Post Primary Education (the Burns Report) in 2001, recommended that academic selection at age 11 should end as soon as possible. The last action of Martin McGuinness, Minister for Education within the Northern Ireland Executive until its collapse in 2002, was to announce that the last 11+ tests would be held in 2004. However, in the period of direct rule since then, questions were raised again about this decision. Accordingly, the task of the Post-Primary Review Working Group, headed by Steve Costello, was to take account of the responses to the consultation on the Burns Report, and provide advice on options for future arrangements for post-primary education. The Costello Report came to the same conclusions as the Burns Report, that the current selection procedure has considerable weaknesses and is unfair to some children. Thus, on January 26 2004, Jane Kennedy (Minister with responsibility for Education) announced that the 11+ test and academic selection in Northern Ireland were to be abolished in 2008. However, secondary and grammar schools will still remain. And so the debate continues.

In 2003, the **Young Life and Times (YLT) survey** recorded the attitudes of 16 year olds in Northern Ireland to a range of subjects affecting their lives. One of these was education. As a cohort that had reached the age where they could leave school, this issue was pertinent to them and within their



very recent memory. This Research Update will explore young people's attitudes to the 11+ as well as their experiences of school.

Type of school

Nearly equal proportions of respondents attended grammar and secondary schools (45% and 47% respectively). Six per cent attended planned integrated schools. Other types of schools attended by respondents included Irish language and special schools (see Table 1).

Religious segregation still remains a feature of many aspects of life in Northern Ireland. Despite the increase in the number of integrated schools, Table 2 indicates that

Table 1: What type of school do you (did you last) attend?

	%
Secondary	47
Grammar	45
Planned integrated	6
Special school	1
Other	1
Irish language	<1

most of the Young Life and Times respondents experienced religiously segregated education. Four out of five Catholics (83%) and three out of five Protestants (63%) went to schools in which they thought that most of their schoolmates were of the same religion as themselves. The majority of respondents who considered themselves to be neither Catholic nor Protestant also attended schools that were largely segregated. However, one fifth of this group attended schools that they felt were religiously mixed.

Attitudes towards the 11+ Tests

Most respondents (70%) agreed with the statement that 'the 11+ tests place too much pressure on 10 and 11 year olds', and only 18% of respondents disagreed with it. A higher proportion of females than males agreed (74% and 62% respectively). Respondents who regarded themselves as belonging to the Catholic community were also more likely to agree (77%) than those who said they belonged to the Protestant community (65%) and those who said they belonged to neither (58%).

Attitudes varied considerably between students in the different school sectors. The vast majority of pupils of planned integrated schools (86%) and secondary schools (81%) agreed that the 11+ tests place too much pressure on 10 and 11 year olds. However, pupils from grammar schools were less likely to take this position (56%) and 29% of them disagreed (Table 3).

Leading on from this, respondents were asked how much they agreed or disagreed with the statement that 'selection has to happen at some time in a child's education'. Three quarters of respondents (76%) agreed, although this time, grammar school pupils were more strongly in agreement (85%). Only 5% disagreed (see Table 4).

Young men were only slightly more likely than young women to agree that some selection procedure should be in place at some point during the educational career (78% and 75% respectively). The differences in terms of religious belonging were somewhat larger: 80% of respondents who considered that they belonged to the Protestant community felt that academic selection should take place at some point, compared with 73% of those who said they belonged to the Catholic community and of those who said they belonged to neither.

Experience of school

Is the type of school respondents attended reflected in their experiences of their school days? Respondents were presented with a

Table 2: Religious breakdown of schools by community background of respondent

Type of school	%			
	Protestant	Catholic	Neither	All
All or nearly all Protestant	63	2	14	29
Mostly Protestant	20	4	28	15
About half Protestant and half Catholic	12	4	22	9
Mostly Catholic	1	7	6	4
All or nearly all Catholic	2	83	27	40
Don't know	1	1	4	1

Table 3: 'The 11+ places too much pressure on 10 and 11 year olds'

	%			
	Planned Integrated	Grammar	Secondary	All
Agree	86	56	81	70
Neither agree nor disagree	2	14	10	11
Disagree	11	29	7	18
Don't know	2	1	2	1

Table 4: 'Selection has to happen at some time in a child's education'

	%			
	Planned Integrated	Grammar	Secondary	All
Agree	64	85	69	76
Neither agree nor disagree	22	10	17	14
Disagree	13	5	10	8
Don't know	2	1	3	2

set of statements and asked which, if any, applied to their experiences of school. Based on the figures in Table 5, it appears that most respondents had fairly positive experiences of school. Three quarters of respondents (75%) said that school taught them the skills and knowledge that they will need later in life, and 58% thought that schools opened their mind and made them want to learn. In addition, 64% said that some teachers at school really inspired me. However, over one quarter of respondents (28%) also said that they were bored at school, and a slightly smaller proportion (24%) said that school didn't teach them to think for themselves.

Respondents' experiences varied slightly depending on the type of school that they attended. For example, only 16% of pupils attending planned integrated schools said that school is all listening and very little doing, compared with 29% of pupils from grammar schools. Grammar school pupils were also more likely to agree that school didn't teach them how to think for themselves, although they were less likely to say that they did not

enjoy learning at school. These figures may reflect the higher emphasis on academic subjects and success placed with grammar schools compared to secondary schools.

The gender breakdown shown in Table 5, however, shows that in all statements females reported a more positive experience of school than their male counterparts. Particularly, although over two thirds of both males and females felt that they learned skills in school that they would need later in life, females were 11 percentage points more likely than males to say that what they learned was relevant for their lives. Equally, almost two thirds of females (64%), but less than half of males (49%) felt that school opened their eyes and encouraged them to learn.

Plans for the future

Since all respondents to YLT had turned 16 in February 2003, they could legally leave school at the end of June 2003. Respondents

were thus asked what they thought they would be doing in October 2003, at the start of the next academic year. Table 6 shows that the vast majority of respondents thought that they would be attending school or college, either full time (57%) or in combination with working part time (27%). The 2001/2 rate for participation in full-time education for 16 year olds is 78.1% (Department of Education for Northern Ireland, 2003). Just under one in ten respondents (9%) thought that they would be on a training scheme, and a smaller proportion (4%) expected to be working full time.

Respondents were then asked what they thought they would be doing in two years' time, in October 2005. Again, the majority of respondents still expected to be undertaking education (see Table 6). More than two in five (43%) thought that they would be at university or college full time, while 27% would be combining education with part time work. However, one in five respondents expected to be working full time.

Respondents' plans for the future varied strongly according to the type of school they attended. Almost three quarters of students from grammar schools (72%), but only 46% of students from planned integrated schools and 45% of students from secondary schools, said they would continue school full-time. The proportion of those who said they would continue school but also work part-time was highest among respondents who attended planned integrated schools (44%) and lowest among grammar school students (23%). Only 5% of grammar school students said they would not continue to go to school in October 2003, compared with 11% of respondents who attended planned integrated schools and over one quarter of respondents (27%) from secondary schools. Unsurprisingly, the proportion of those who said they would be studying full-time in October 2005 was highest among grammar school students: 58%, compared with 31% of students from both secondary and planned integrated schools. Students from secondary schools were much more likely than grammar school students to expect that they would be working full-time in October 2005 (32% and 9% respectively). The proportion of respondents who thought they would study but also work part-time was again highest among students from integrated schools (40%), compared with 28% of grammar school pupils and 24% of secondary school pupils.

Slightly more females than males said they would be at school or college full-time (58% and 55% respectively) at the start of the new academic year, whereas more males than females thought they would be working full-time (7% and 3%) or take part in a training scheme (14% and 5%) (See Figure 1). Similar

Table 5: Experiences of school (% saying 'yes')

	%					
	Planned Integrated	Grammar	Secondary	Males	Females	All
I was bored at school	29	26	29	33	24	28
Some teachers at school really inspired me	60	65	65	58	68	64
School is all 'listening' and very little 'doing'	16	29	22	28	24	26
School taught me the skills and knowledge I will really need later in life	76	75	76	68	79	75
School didn't teach me how to think for myself	20	27	21	28	21	24
School opened my mind and made me want to learn	62	62	55	49	64	58
I did not enjoy learning at school	22	17	23	25	17	20

Figure 1: What do you think you will be doing in October 2003?

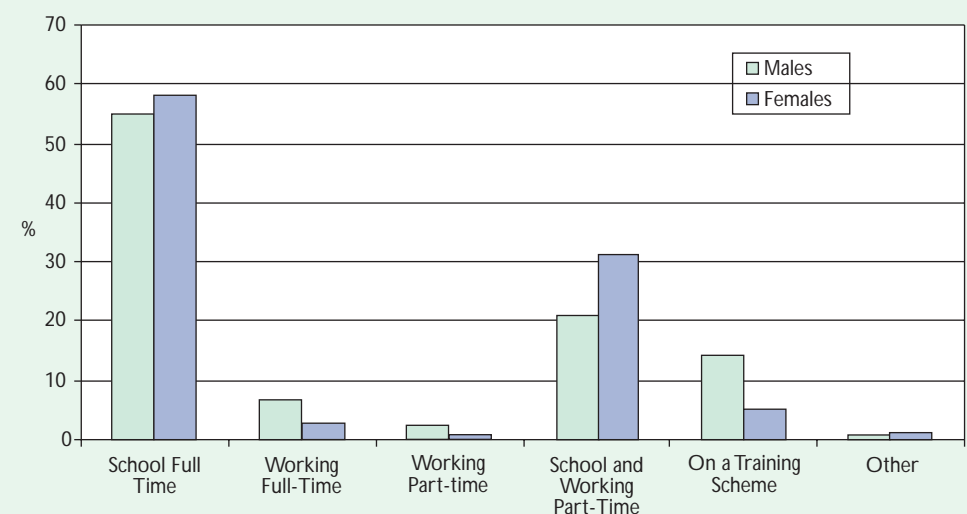


Figure 2: What do you think you will be doing in October 2005?

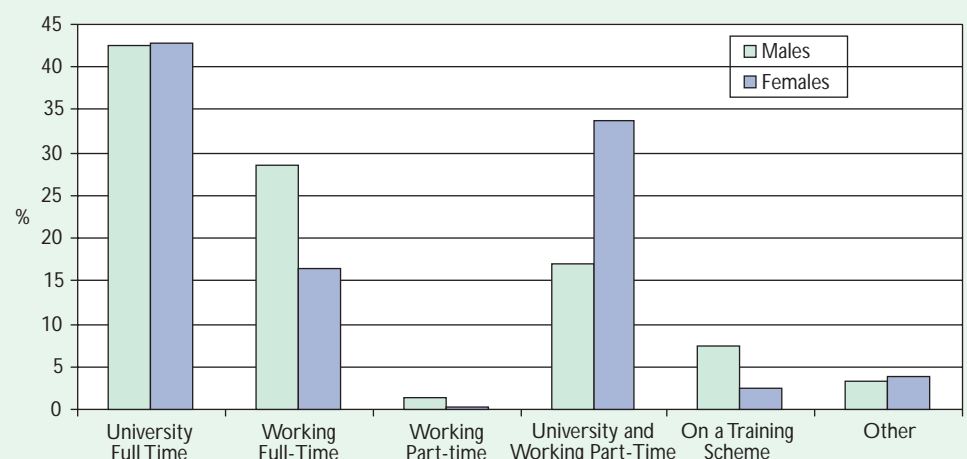


Table 6: What do you think you will be doing in:

	%	
	October 2003	October 2005
At school/college full time	57	43
Working full time	4	21
Working part time	1	1
At school/college and working part time	27	27
On a training scheme	9	5
Unemployed	<1	0
Other (Please Specify)	<1	2
Don't know	<1	0

proportions of male and female respondents expected to be studying full-time at university or college in two years time (42% and 43%). However, the proportion of respondents who thought that they would attend university whilst also working part-time was twice as high among females than among males (34% and 17% respectively). Thus, over three quarters of female respondents (76%), but only 60% of male respondents expected to achieve a university career. Significantly more males than females saw themselves working full-time within two years (28% and 16%) (See Figure 2). Perhaps this reflects the more negative experience of school reported by males in Table 5.

Conclusions

Schools in Northern Ireland remain largely segregated along socio-religious lines with less than 10% of students attending schools in which they say about half their classmates come from another background than they do themselves. In general, respondents were deeply critical towards the current 11+ selection procedure. While the majority of respondents reported an overall positive experience of school at age 16, young men

in the survey reported significantly worse experiences of school than young women did. At a time when there is much debate about how boys are performing badly at school, reinforced by society's emphasis on obtaining qualifications, these experiences of school are a matter for concern for teachers and policy-makers alike.

References

Department of Education for Northern Ireland, 2003, Compendium of Northern Ireland Education Statistics 1989/90 to 2001/02, http://www.deni.gov.uk/facts_figures/

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Key Points

- Most of the Young Life and Times respondents experienced religiously segregated education.
- 70% of respondents agreed with the statement that 'the 11+ tests place too much pressure on 10 and 11 year olds'.
- However, 76% agreed that 'selection has to happen at some time in a child's education'.
- Respondents' experiences at school were mostly positive, and there was little difference according to the type of school. However, boys had less positive experiences than girls.
- 84% of respondents expected to return to school or college in October 2003.
- 70% of respondents expected to attend university or college in two years time, with more young women likely to think so.

The Young Life and Times survey is carried out annually and records the attitudes and experiences of 16 year olds in Northern Ireland. In 2003, 902 young people aged 16 completed the survey in one of three ways: online, by self-completion questionnaire or by phone.

The Young Life and Times survey is a joint project of the two Northern Ireland universities and aims to provide an independent source of information on what young people think about the social issues of the day. Check the web site for more information on the survey findings (www.ark.ac.uk/yit) or call the survey team at Queen's University (028 9097 3947) with any queries.

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