



Research Update

Happiest days of our lives?

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Northern Ireland is one of the few regions in the United Kingdom to have retained a selection system for transferring pupils from primary to post-primary schools. Until 2009, this selection procedure was managed by the Department of Education for Northern Ireland (DENI). If they wanted to attend a grammar school, children could sit the transfer test, also known as the 11+, in their own primary school and then, on the basis of the results of the test, they would be allocated a place in a grammar school. If they did not attain the required grade they would go to a secondary – or non-selective – school along with the children who had not taken the test. Within Northern Ireland, there are different types of schools, including controlled, voluntary maintained, voluntary grammar, and integrated.

In 2009, DENI policy changed to advocate a system that did not operate transfer tests. This was met with extreme opposition from many schools and, as a

result, separate tests were developed by two consortia of grammar schools. One, the Association for Quality Education (AQE) used the Common Entrance Assessment while the other, the Post-Primary Transfer Consortium used a test devised by Granada Learning (GL) – neither of which was regulated by Government. Consequently, the tests became known as AQE and GL. Children could sit either test – or both – on Saturday mornings in one or more of the grammar schools they wanted to attend, with the selected venues being allocated by the Education and Library Boards. The children, therefore, sat the tests in an environment that was generally unfamiliar to them.

A study by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) reported that many of the children sitting the new tests, and their parents, commented on the uncertainty and confusion surrounding the procedure and the lack of clarity

in relation to the provision of practice papers which were the cornerstone of the old transfer system. A considerable number of the parents consulted by NICCY whose children were doing the tests were concerned about the effect this uncertainty and confusion might have on their children (NICCY, 2010).

It is within this context that this Research Update explores the psychological wellbeing of the first cohort of Primary 7 (P7) children to take the new transfer tests, using data from the 2010 **Kids' Life and Times** (KLT) survey. Where appropriate, the findings from the 2010 survey are compared with data from similar questions asked in the 2008 KLT survey, when the old transfer test system was in place. Both surveys were completed online in school. 5192 children participated in the 2010 KLT survey (54% girls and 46% boys).

Children's psychological wellbeing was measured using one of the scales extracted from the KIDSCREEN-27 health-related quality of life questionnaire. There are seven items in the psychological wellbeing scale: Has your life been enjoyable? Have you been in a good mood? Have you had fun? Have you felt sad? Have you felt so bad that you didn't want to do anything? Have you felt lonely? Have you been happy with the way you are? All items had the response options 1: not at all, 2: slightly, 3: moderately, 4: very, 5: extremely – and higher scores on this scale indicate better psychological wellbeing. Overall, and in line with previous findings (The KIDSCREEN Group Europe, 2006), boys had significantly higher psychological wellbeing scores than girls, although the difference between the two groups was relatively small.

Happiness in P7

The majority of children participating in the 2010 KLT survey (83%) said they were mostly happy in their P7 year, 5 per cent were mostly unhappy and the remaining 12 per cent said they were undecided. There were no statistically significant differences in happiness in P7 between boys and girls, but there was a very strong association between happiness in P7 and children's psychological wellbeing (Table 1). Children who said they were mostly unhappy in their P7 year had extremely low scores on the psychological wellbeing scale, particularly when compared to those who said they had been mostly happy in their P7 year and this was the case for both boys and girls.

Table 1: Psychological wellbeing and happiness in P7

	Psychological wellbeing
	Mean Scores
Mostly happy	54.58
Mostly unhappy	39.53
Can't decide	46.34

Source: KLT 2010

Sitting the tests

Sixty three per cent of respondents to KLT in 2010 said they had sat the new transfer tests, and these children were not more likely than those who had not sat the tests to say they had been unhappy in their P7 year. In addition, there were no statistically significant differences in psychological wellbeing between the children who had sat the tests and those who had not.

The children who had taken the tests were asked how much pressure they had been under because of the tests. Overall, 17 per cent of children said they had felt under a lot of pressure, 23 per cent felt under no pressure at all and 58 per cent felt somewhere in between. More girls than boys said they had felt under a lot of pressure, while more boys than girls said they had not felt any pressure at all (Figure 1). A similar pattern emerged from the 2008 KLT data despite different tests and procedures being in place.

Children's psychological wellbeing was strongly correlated with how much pressure they felt they had been under when sitting the new transfer tests; those who had felt under a lot of pressure had the lowest mean score (47.67) and therefore the poorest psychological wellbeing compared with those who said they were under no pressure at all (57.06) and those who felt somewhere in between (52.28). Girls who had felt under a lot of pressure had the lowest psychological wellbeing scores (46.72), followed by boys who had felt under a lot of pressure (49.18) (Table 2). These results were very similar to those found in the 2008 KLT survey when the old transfer test was in operation.

Most children (88%) said they were well prepared for the tests while the remaining 12 per cent thought they were not. The latter had lower psychological wellbeing scores (45.84) than the former

Table 2: Psychological wellbeing and pressure from tests by gender

	Psychological wellbeing	
	Mean Scores	
	Boys	Girls
A lot of pressure	49.18	46.72
No pressure at all	57.59	56.48
Somewhere in between	52.88	51.81

Source: KLT 2010

(53.43) and this was the case for both boys and girls.

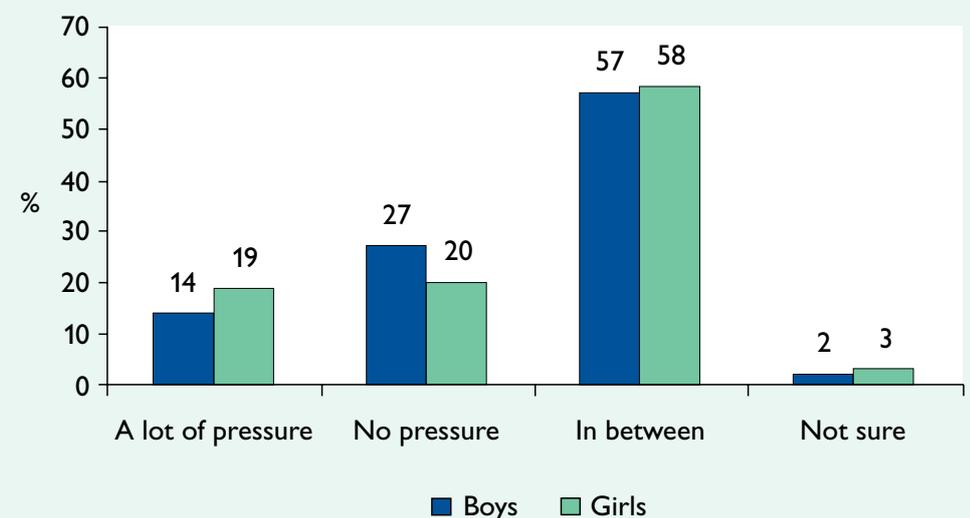
The children were asked when they had felt most worried during the transfer process and the response options they were given can be seen in Figure 2. Around one third of children (35%) said they had been most worried while waiting for the results of the tests (this may reflect the timing of the survey which took place just after they had received their results), 16 per cent said they were not really worried any time and 9 per cent said they were worried all the time. More

Table 3: Psychological wellbeing and worry about tests by gender

	Psychological wellbeing	
	Mean Scores	
	Boys	Girls
Not really worried at any time	55.73	55.56
Waiting for the results	54.14	52.74
In P7 preparing for the tests	53.58	50.74
Waiting to see what school got into	53.44	50.45
In P6 thinking about the tests	53.38	50.03
Actually sitting the tests	52.17	53.08
Worried all the time	48.20	45.82

Source: KLT 2010

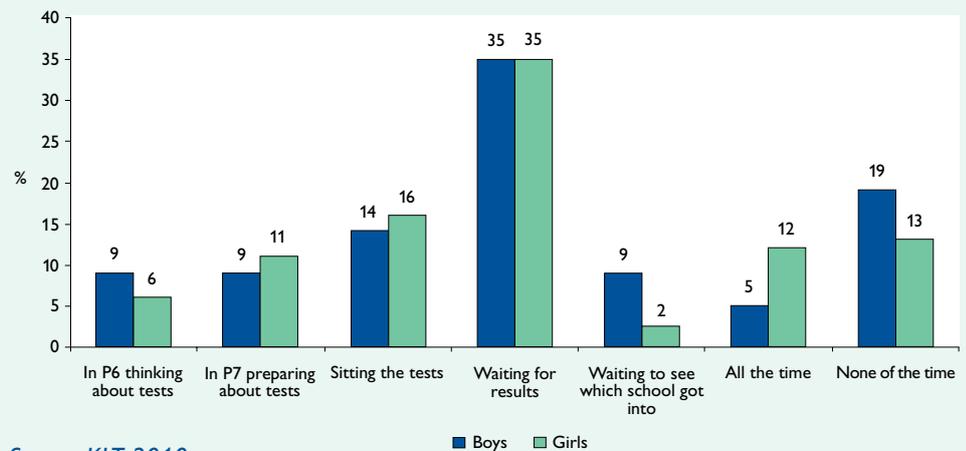
Figure 1: Felt under pressure when doing the tests by gender



Source: KLT 2010

boys than girls said they were not really worried any time and, conversely, more girls than boys said they were worried all the time (Figure 2). As Table 3 shows, for both boys and girls it was these two groups of children – those who were worried all the time and those who were not worried any of the time – who showed the most marked differences in psychological wellbeing. The former had the lowest scores on the psychological wellbeing scale and the latter the highest. Girls who said they were worried all the time had the lowest scores (45.82), and therefore the poorest psychological wellbeing of all.

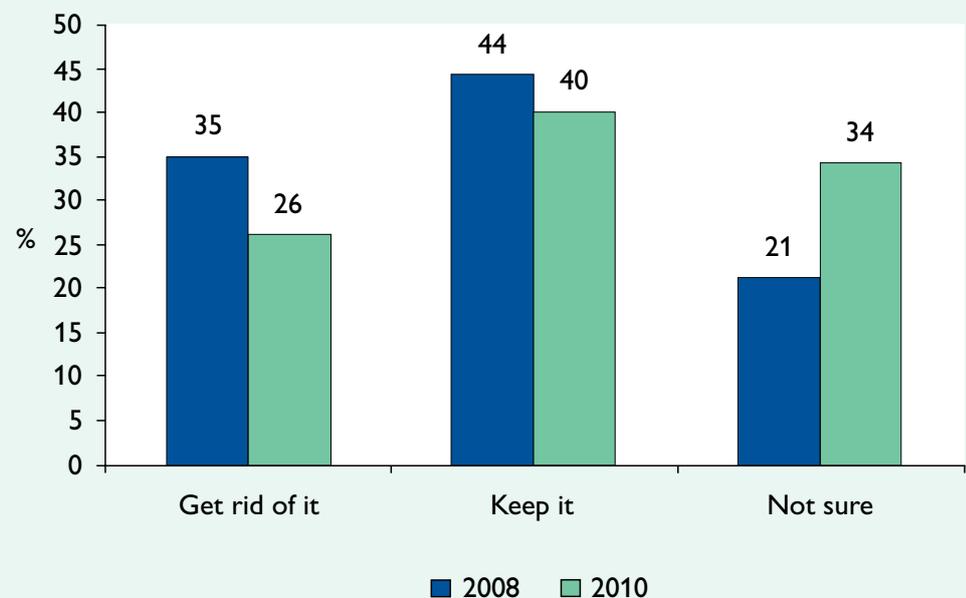
Figure 2: When most worried by gender



Source: KLT 2010

There was no significant difference in psychological wellbeing scores in relation to the grade the children got in their tests. Where there was a link, however, was in relation to how the children felt about their grade. As Table 4 shows, children who said they were disappointed with their test result had poorer psychological wellbeing than children who said they were pleased with their result or who said they didn't really care. Once again, similar findings emerged from the 2008 KLT survey.

Figure 3: What should happen to the transfer tests by survey year



Source: KLT 2010 and KLT 2008

Table 4: Psychological wellbeing and feelings about test result by gender

	Psychological wellbeing	
	Mean Scores	
	Boys	Girls
I was pleased	55.16	52.98
It was OK	52.63	51.17
I was disappointed	48.82	48.68
I didn't really care	53.72	53.82

Source: KLT 2010

The 2010 and 2008 KLT surveys asked what the children thought should happen to the transfer tests. As Figure 3 shows, around four in ten respondents in both years were in favour of keeping the transfer tests. However, there appeared to be more uncertainty among the children taking part in the new transfer system than the old system about what they thought should happen to the tests.

Conclusion

The data reported in this Research Update present an interesting picture of the associations between transfer procedures and psychological wellbeing. It is notable that there were no statistically significant differences in the psychological wellbeing between children who had sat the transfer tests and those who had not. In addition, there were no differences according to the actual grade the children achieved in the tests either in the 2010 KLT survey under the new transfer system or in the 2008 KLT survey when the old system was in place. However, in both years, there was a strong and statistically significant relationship between children's psychological wellbeing and their perception of how

much pressure they were under, how worried or not they had been throughout the transfer process, and how they felt about their grade.

It was also notable – and disturbing – that children taking part in the 2010 KLT survey who had been mostly unhappy in their P7 year had particularly poor psychological wellbeing. The measure of psychological wellbeing used in the study was one scale from the KIDSCREEN-27 health related quality of life measure, which has a rather narrow focus within children's psychological health. However, this is a finding that warrants further research to try to identify the underlying causes of unhappiness among these children in what should be the happiest days of their lives.

As these were cross-sectional surveys, it is not possible to identify cause and effect. It may be that children who have poor psychological wellbeing find the transfer procedure particularly stressful. Alternatively, it could be that the tests themselves, or the perception of the achieved grade, place so much stress on the children that it affects their psychological wellbeing. Nevertheless, it is clear from the results of the two years of KLT data that it is the transfer system itself which many children find stressful.

References

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The KIDSCREEN Group Europe. (2006). *The KIDSCREEN Questionnaires: Quality of life questionnaires for children and adolescents handbook*. Lengerich: Pabst Science Publishers.

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Key Points

- 83% of children participating in the 2010 KLT survey were mostly happy in their P7 year, 5% were mostly unhappy and the remaining 12% were undecided.
- Children who said they were mostly unhappy in their P7 year had poor psychological wellbeing, particularly when compared to those who said they had been mostly happy in their P7 year, and this was the case for both boys and girls.
- There were no statistically significant differences in psychological wellbeing between children who had sat the transfer tests and those who had not; nor were there any differences according to the actual grade the children achieved in the tests.
- Children who had felt under a lot of pressure had poorer psychological wellbeing than those who said they were under no pressure at all and those who felt somewhere in between.
- Respondents who said they were disappointed with their test result had poorer psychological wellbeing than those who were pleased with their result or who said they didn't really care.
- The relationship between the transfer procedure and children's psychological wellbeing that was found in 2010 was also found in 2008 when the old transfer system was in place. This suggests that it is the transfer process itself that many children find stressful.

Kids' Life and Times is carried out annually and documents children's opinions on a wide range of social issues. In 2010, 5192 children in Primary 7 completed the survey online in schools.

The survey is a joint initiative of the two Northern Ireland universities and aims to provide an independent source of information on what P7 pupils think about the issues that affect them. Check the web site for more information on the survey findings (www.ark.ac.uk/klt) or call the survey director on 028 9097 3585 with any queries.

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