Research Update

Shared Education: Views of Children and Young People

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Introduction

Shared education refers to schools collaborating across sectors to ensure that all pupils have opportunities to learn together regardless of their religion, ability or socio-economic circumstances. However, achieving this for all pupils will require fundamental changes to how the education system in Northern Ireland is organised and the way schools operate. Beyond that, the support of teachers, parents and learners is crucial if the Government is to meet the targets outlined in the Ministerial Advisory Group's report for the advancement of shared education – namely that all children have the opportunity to participate in shared education programmes and that there is a substantial increase in the number of schools sharing facilities by 2015 (DENI, 2013).

General population surveys of adults and parents in Northern Ireland have shown that there is growing support for shared education, as have studies with teachers and post-primary pupils taking part in initiatives such as the Sharing Education Programme (SEP). However, little is known about the attitudes of the more general population of children and young people in Northern Ireland towards shared education. This Research Update uses data from two surveys carried out by ARK in 2012 – Young Life and Times (YLT) and Kids' Life and Times (KLT) – to explore the views of children and young people on this important issue. YLT is an annual postal survey of 16 year olds and, in 2012, 1,210 young people participated. KLT is an annual online survey of Primary 7 (P7) children carried out in school and, in 2012,

4,200 P7 children participated. A number of questions were asked in both surveys which provided an opportunity to compare the attitudes to shared education of primary school pupils and their post-primary school counterparts.

Experience of shared education

Respondents were asked whether they had ever experienced shared education by doing projects with other schools or sharing classes or facilities with them. Overall, more children than young people said they had not been involved in sharing (30% and 18% respectively). For both groups, doing projects with pupils from another school was more common than sharing facilities or having classes with them (Table 1).

If respondents had done projects or shared classes with pupils from other schools, they were asked if they had enjoyed the experience. The vast majority of children and young people said they had enjoyed doing projects and sharing classes with pupils from other schools (Table 2).

Evidence that schools are involved in cross-community collaborative activities

was found by both surveys with 71% of YLT respondents and 61% of KLT respondents saying they had experienced shared education with pupils who were from a different religious background to them. Awareness of the religion of the pupils they were engaging in sharing with was higher among the 16 year olds than among the younger children (Table 3).

Table 2: Did you enjoy the following....

	% saying mostly enjoyed/ sometimes enjoyed	
	YLT	KLT
Projects with pupils from other schools	91	88
Classes with pupils from other schools	87	86

Attitudes to sharing

All the respondents, regardless of whether they had been involved in shared education initiatives or not, were asked whether they thought sharing facilities, classes or projects was a good idea or a bad idea. Overall, the children and young people were more enthusiastic about doing projects with

Table 1: Have you ever done any of the following....

	YLT	KLT
	%	%
Projects with pupils from other schools	55	87
Had classes with pupils from other schools	46	78
Used or shared sports facilities or equipment, like computers	25	78

Table 3: Were the children you shared with a different religion to you?

	YLT %	KLT %
Yes	71	61
No	13	10
Don't know	16	29

other schools than either having classes or sharing facilities with them, while YLT respondents were more likely than their KLT counterparts to think sharing in these ways was a good idea (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Percentage of respondents saying doing projects and sharing facilities and classes is a good idea
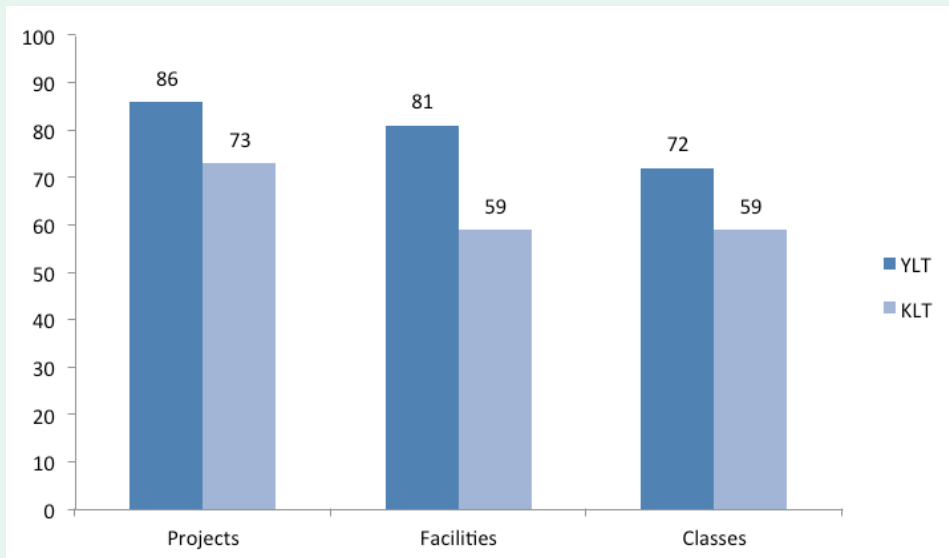
Across all three activities, respondents to both surveys who said they had been involved in shared education were more positive about sharing than those who had not (Table 4). This suggests that, in line with the 'contact theory' (Hughes *et al.*, 2007), involving pupils in positive shared learning activities, where they can meet, and engage meaningfully, with pupils from different

schools and backgrounds to themselves may be an effective way to break down possible barriers between them.

YLT and KLT respondents were given a list of things that could potentially be good about sharing education and asked to identify their two favourites. As Table 5 shows, 16 year olds were most keen on doing interesting projects with pupils from other schools (68%) while P7s chose making new friends as their favourite thing about sharing (50%). For both groups, getting different (YLT survey wording) or

fun (KLT survey wording) teachers was the option that was least likely to be selected as the favourite thing about sharing with other schools.

When asked to select two things that might be bad about sharing, there was agreement between the older and younger respondents on the worst thing (Table 6). Both groups

Table 4: Think sharing is a good idea by experience of shared education

	% saying good idea			
	YLT		KLT	
	Has shared	Has not shared	Has shared	Has not shared
Projects with pupils from other schools	89	77	80	63
Used or shared sports facilities or equipment, like computers	83	76	64	52
Had classes with pupils from other schools	76	57	66	48

Table 5: Good things about sharing – two favourite things

	YLT %	KLT %
Doing interesting/ fun projects	68	40
Making new friends	65	50
Doing classes we don't normally get to do at our school, like learning a new language	48	27
Using their sports facilities and computers or equipment	33	27
Getting different/ fun teachers	18	18

thought that the worst thing about sharing would be having to be with pupils who were rough, disruptive, nasty or annoying (different adjectives were used in the two surveys to reflect the age of the respondents).

Table 6: Bad things about sharing – two worst things

	YLT %	KLT %
Having to be with children I think are rough/disruptive/ nasty/annoying	75	68
Having to travel to get to the other school	49	14
Having to mix with people who are very different from me	18	22
Having to be with young people/children of a different religion	5	12
Having to share our sports facilities or computers	5	9
I don't mind any of these	20	12

Overall, mixing with children from a different religious background did not appear to be a particular issue for most children and young people; however, KLT respondents were more likely than YLT respondents to

identify having to be with children from a different religion to them as one of the worst things about sharing (12% and 5% respectively). The YLT and KLT respondents were asked whether they would mind if pupils from a range of different school types were coming to do a project with their class. The school types included in both surveys were all boys/all girls, children from a different religion and children with special needs or disabilities and, as Table 7 shows, YLT respondents were more likely to 'not mind at all' than KLT respondents.

Table 7: Would you mind if pupils came to do a project at your school if they were from these kinds of schools....

	% who would not mind at all	
	YLT	KLT
An all-girls secondary (YLT)/primary school (KLT)	89	61
An all-boys secondary (YLT)/primary school (KLT)	85	54
A school where most of the children are a different religion to you	82	53
A school for children with special needs or disabilities	79	61

Overall, females were more open to sharing with pupils from a different religious background and pupils with special educational needs than males. Perhaps unsurprisingly, males and females at the post-primary level were more positive about sharing education with the opposite sex than were primary school children (Table 8).

Respondents to the YLT and KLT surveys were asked whether they would mind or not mind if a school nearby closed and all the pupils came to their school (Figure 2). While 16% of respondents to both surveys said they would 'mind a lot', more of the P7 pupils (21%) than their post-primary peers (14%) said it would depend on the pupils. When asked in an open-ended question what they would mind about the pupils, one of the main issues raised by both groups

Table 8: Would you mind if pupils came to do a project at your school by gender of respondents

	% who would not mind at all			
	YLT		KLT	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
An all-girls secondary (YLT)/primary school (KLT)	94	85	47	73
An all-boys secondary (YLT)/primary school (KLT)	81	89	69	42
A school where most of the children are a different religion to you	78	85	48	56
A school for children with special needs or disabilities	73	83	56	65

related to the capacity of their school to deal with an influx of pupils from another school which some respondents felt could cause disruption and lead to tension. This is illustrated by the following quotes:

- 'Classes would be fuller and the school might be cramped and this could make the school more disruptive and tension could be caused' (YLT respondent).
- 'Having too many pupils in the one class so there were too many for the teacher to cope with' (KLT respondent).

There were some notable differences in the potential characteristics of the other pupils that YLT and KLT respondents would mind. For many primary school children there was a concern that the incomers would be bullies; more of the older age group mentioned issues such as a lack of mixing

between religious groups and between pupils with different academic ability as the following quotes highlight:

- 'I would mind if they took away your friends or started to bully you or call other friends names and bully them' (KLT respondent).
- 'I would mind if they were cheeky or nasty and rough and bullied you' (KLT respondent).
- 'I am convinced that if the amalgamation of certain schools in turn led to the integration of pupils of varied academic ability within one establishment, it may prove a hindrance to productive teaching as well as learning. Moreover if the school was comprised of pupils harbouring extremely varied religious views there may be many verbal and even physical contentions' (YLT respondent).
- 'I would mind because the school I am

Figure 2: Would you mind if a school nearby closed and the all the pupils came to your school?
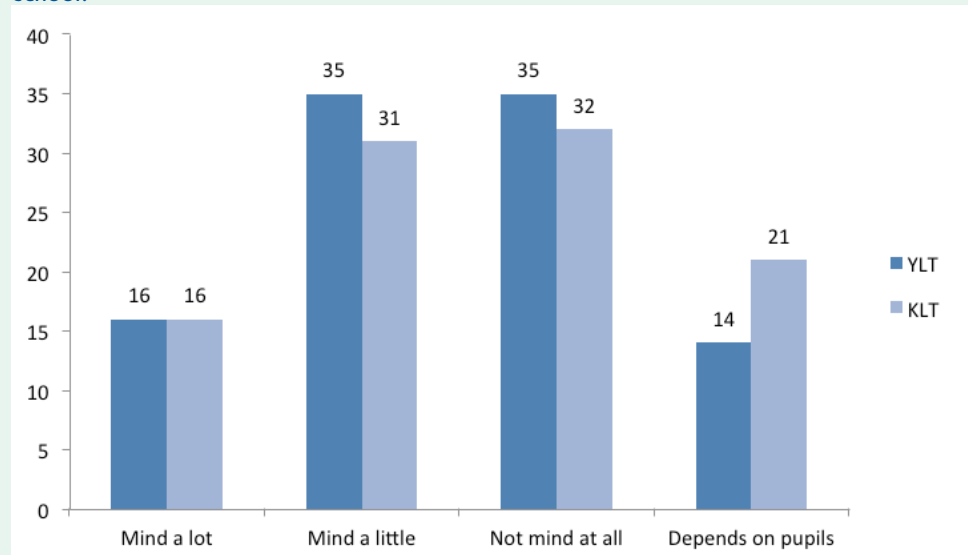
currently attending is over-crowded and could not hold any more students. The fact that the students are of a different religion wouldn't bother me however I feel other people in my year may feel prejudice towards these students of a different background' (YLT respondent).

- *'I think that schools should cater to different abilities; by making 'all-ability' schools you are only holding back the best and putting undue pressure on those at the bottom'* (YLT respondent).

Conclusion

Overall, the evidence from the 2012 YLT and KLT surveys suggests that the majority of children and young people feel that doing projects and sharing facilities and classes with pupils from other schools is a good idea. Furthermore, those who have taken part in shared education programmes tend to have more positive attitudes towards sharing than pupils who have not. However, some children and young people raised a number of concerns in relation to the types of pupils they would have to share with. These included worries regarding being bullied, having to mix with pupils from a different religious background and concerns about the appropriateness of pupils from grammar and non-grammar schools engaging in shared activities and classes.

The findings from the YLT and KLT surveys reflect the mostly positive attitudes towards shared education reported by the parents and pupils who took part in focus groups and consultation workshops carried out by Parenting NI and NICCY (DENI, 2013) and the findings from general population studies in Northern Ireland.

However, whilst acknowledging the benefits of shared education including opportunities for pupils from different backgrounds to meet and interact and enhanced learning opportunities, there remain a number of common concerns that focus on a range of logistical issues regarding the problems of timetabling and the transportation and supervision of pupils between schools. There is also the issue of the safety of pupils in relation to the existing levels of segregation and community divisions which have been brought sharply into focus with the ongoing flag protests. Nonetheless, within the context of reduced budgets for education from Westminster and falling pupil numbers (BBC, 2011), the reality is that advancing shared education may provide an opportunity to improve the quality of education and outcomes for all children and young people in Northern Ireland.

Key points

- The vast majority of respondents to YLT and KLT who have taken part in sharing classes and doing projects with pupils from other schools said they had enjoyed the experience.
- Overall, respondents were more enthusiastic about doing projects with other schools than either having classes or sharing facilities with them, while YLT respondents were more likely than their KLT counterparts to think sharing in these ways was a good idea.
- Respondents to both surveys who said they had been involved in shared education were more positive about sharing than those who had not.
- The 16 year olds who took part in YLT were most keen on doing interesting projects with pupils from other schools (68%) while the P7s who took part in KLT chose making new friends as their favourite thing about sharing (50%).
- Both groups thought that the worst thing about sharing would be having to be with pupils who were rough, disruptive or nasty.
- 82% of YLT respondents and 53% of KLT respondents said they would not mind at all if pupils from a different religion to them came to do a project with their school.

The questions on shared education on YLT and KLT were funded by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY). The survey questions were developed by NICCY and ARK and piloted with children and young people. A full report outlining the findings from the surveys and the consultation exercise, along with a version for young people, are available on the NICCY website at www.niccy.org

References

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The **Young Life and Times** survey is carried out annually and documents public opinion of 16 year olds on a wide range of issues. The **Kids' Life and Times** is an annual online survey of P7s. Both surveys are carried out by ARK which is a joint initiative of the two Northern Ireland universities. Check the web site for more information on the survey findings (**www.ark.ac.uk**) or call the survey director on 028 9097 3947 with any queries.

In collaboration with Queen's University Belfast and University of Ulster