

## Citizenship practices and political literacy in young people

Alan Smith, Una O'Connor, Jessica Bates, Matthew Milliken

### Introduction

The UNESCO Centre, Ulster University, in collaboration with ARK, developed module questions for inclusion in the 2018 Kids' Life and Times (KLT) and Young Life and Times (YLT) surveys. YLT is a postal survey of 16 year olds and KLT is an online survey of 10/11 year olds which is completed in school. The questions were designed to explore children and young people's experience of citizenship, civic participation and political literacy, and are both relevant and timely. 2017 marked ten years since the introduction of a new curriculum which included the learning areas of Personal Development and Mutual Understanding (PDMU) at Key Stages 1 and 2, and Local and Global Citizenship (LGC) at Key Stages 3 and 4. 2018 marked 20 years since the signing of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement; 2019 marked 50 years since the voting age was reduced to 18 years; it also marked two and a half years without a functioning Executive and Assembly, with local politics providing a less than wholly positive model of effective democracy. Within the divisive landscape of Northern Ireland (NI), it was envisaged that, by addressing themes of conflict, diversity, democracy, rights and freedoms, the incremental roll-out of PDMU and LGC would equip young people with the knowledge, skills and aptitudes that might allow them to participate in the process of constructing what it meant to be a citizen in Northern Ireland in the twenty-first century (CCEA, 2019).

Questions in the KLT and YLT surveys explored pupils' views on:

- What citizenship-related topics they learned in school
- Their views on the voting age
- Their views on Northern Ireland politics/politicians
- The constitutional question
- Political and social activism/participation
- Social media use

In the 2018 surveys, 1169 YLT respondents and 2603 KLT respondents answered questions on these issues. The following data provide a summary of some of the main findings relating to topics learned in school, views on the voting age, views on NI politics and politicians, and the constitution of NI.

### Citizenship Topics Covered in School

The results of both surveys identified some variance in relation to subjects covered in primary and post-primary schools. There was a consistently high level of 'Don't Know' responses (averaging around 25%) across all topics in KLT that contrasted with YLT results where a considerably higher percentage of respondents indicated they had covered the various citizenship themes in school. Participants in both surveys reported highest levels of engagement with potentially less contentious issues of *Rights and Freedom of Expression* and *Global Poverty*. Respondents in KLT reported much lower engagement (34%)

**Table 1: In school, have you ever had classes or assemblies, done projects or had class discussions about any of the following topics?**

	%					
	Yes		No		Don't Know	
	KLT	YLT	KLT	YLT	KLT	YLT
<b>Voting and Elections</b>	38	47	37	48	26	5
<b>Rights and Freedom of Expression</b>	55	77	21	20	23	3
<b>Global Poverty</b>	52	77	19	20	29	3
<b>Immigration/refugees/asylum seekers</b>	29	52	36	43	34	5
<b>Homelessness in NI</b>	40	46	40	51	20	3
<b>NI conflict</b>	34	73	39	24	27	3

with the Northern Ireland conflict than in YLT (73%), possibly reflecting teachers' greater willingness to address these issues with older age groups.

In response to a question on their knowledge of politics, ten percent of KLT respondents said that they 'Knew a lot' about Northern Ireland politics – boys were more likely than girls to have that degree of confidence in the level of their knowledge – and, whilst 60% felt that they knew a little, nearly a third stated that they knew 'Nothing'. When asked whether they thought that politicians were doing a good job; 41% of KLT respondents indicated 'No', 43% indicated 'Don't Know' and only 16% indicated 'Yes'. An open-ended question enabled participants to elaborate their responses:

In response to a question on their knowledge of politics, ten percent of KLT respondents said that they 'Knew a lot' about Northern Ireland politics – boys were more likely than girls to have that degree of confidence in the level of their knowledge – and, whilst 60% felt that they knew a little, nearly a third stated that they knew 'Nothing'. When asked whether they thought that politicians were doing a good job; 41% of KLT respondents indicated 'No', 43% indicated 'Don't Know' and only 16% indicated 'Yes'. An open-ended question enabled participants to elaborate their responses:

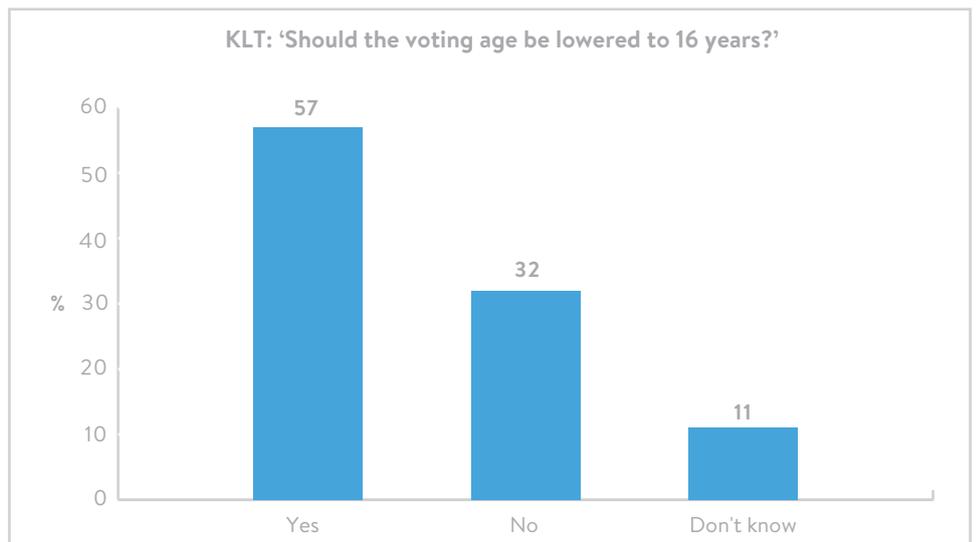
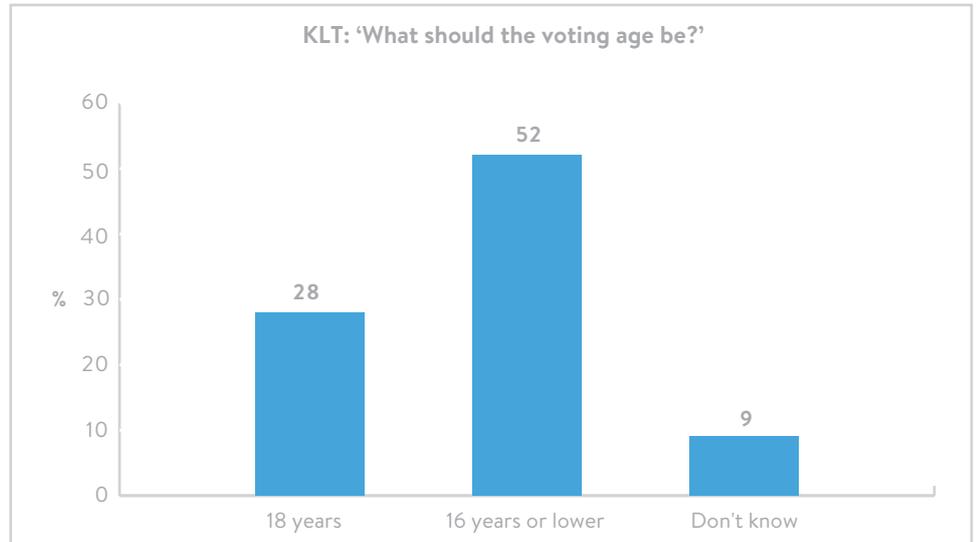
*On the news I have heard lots of bad and good things about them, so I don't know how I feel.*

*They are fighting, it's not very mature and grown-up. They argue about the most random things.*

*They really just seem like a bunch of circus clowns.*

Not all comments were negative. Some respondents felt that politicians were doing a good job, that they were working hard and being effective in spite of being faced with many difficulties:

**Figure 1: Attitudes to Voting Age**



*They have been thinking really hard and long about what to do for this country.*

Amongst YLT respondents, 28% did not think their political opinions were represented by local politicians, 26% felt that they were represented and 46% indicated 'Don't know'. Further analysis showed that Catholic respondents (44%) were much more likely to feel that their political opinions were represented by local politicians than their Protestant counterparts (27%), or those who did not belong to any religion (28%). ; females were slightly more likely to respond positively (51%) than males (49%).

## The Voting Age

In KLT, there was a balanced consensus from both boys and girls that the voting age should be lowered to 16 years or under. Respondents in YLT were slightly more circumspect and females (62%) almost twice as likely than males (37%) to support lowering the voting age to 16.

Interestingly, the proportion of KLT pupils expressing uncertainty about the issue (i.e. Don't know) was lower than among YLT respondents. Whilst most of those who completed KLT made a clear choice on voting age, responses from YLT respondents suggested they were

more aware of the responsibility attached to voting as open-ended responses illustrated:

*The voting age should remain at 18 because most young people would be swayed very easily in school and by parents [they] wouldn't vote by what the manifesto says, rather what their "side" says... When I am 18, I will be more ready than I am now.*

In contrast, a minority of others argued that the current age of 18 was arbitrary and that maturity could not simply be inferred by virtue of chronological age:

*The law says that at 16 you can marry, create life and serve in the army, yet you aren't mature enough to vote!*

The United Kingdom's (UK) vote to leave the European Union was specifically cited as having impacted upon some young people's attitude to the issue of extending the option to vote:

*I was denied a democratic and human right in not being able to vote in the Brexit vote. The outcome of that vote will affect me for a much longer time than many of the older people who voted.*

It was also suggested that, since younger people could not vote, politicians simply overlooked their concerns.

*Politicians feel no pressure to listen to the needs of young people... Introducing policy which harms young people will not make a difference to their share of the vote, as young people aren't included in the elections.*

## The Constitutional Question

A series of questions relating to sovereignty and the constitutional question were included in both KLT and YLT. Respondents were asked whether Northern Ireland should be governed as part of the UK, as part of the Republic

**Table 2: The Constitutional Question**

	%							
	Strongly Agree or Agree		Neither		Strongly Disagree or Disagree		Don't Know	
	KLT	YLT	KLT	YLT	KLT	YLT	KLT	YLT
<b>NI part of UK</b>	52	38	11	18	18	35	19	9
<b>NI part of ROI</b>	38	27	14	21	19	43	29	9
<b>NI jointly governed by UK and ROI</b>	26	21	15	20	23	48	36	11

of Ireland (ROI) or be jointly governed by the UK and the Republic of Ireland. Responses to these questions showed considerable variation by age and community identity.

A simple majority of KLT pupils (52%) favoured retaining the link with UK – support for this proposition was strongest amongst those attending Controlled schools (54%) compared to Maintained schools (38%); of those who 'Disagreed' or 'Strongly Disagreed', the majority (84%) were pupils from Maintained schools. One-in-five (19%) responded 'Don't Know'.

Slightly more YLT respondents 'Agreed' or 'Strongly Agreed' that NI should be part of the UK (38%) compared to those who 'Disagreed' or 'Strongly Disagreed' (35%); 27% were Neutral (18%) or 'Don't Know' (9%). Protestant respondents made up nearly half of those supportive of the UK union (46%), closely followed by respondents of no religion (38%); those respondents who identified as Catholic made up two thirds (65%) of those who 'Disagreed' or 'Strongly Disagreed'.

Thirty-eight percent of those who completed the KLT survey expressed support for Northern Ireland to be governed as part of the Republic of Ireland – this option was more frequently preferred by pupils from Maintained

schools (67%); two thirds (66%) of those who 'Disagreed' or 'Strongly Disagreed' attended Controlled schools. Nearly one third (29%) responded 'Don't Know'.

YLT figures show that 27% of respondents 'Agreed' or 'Strongly Agreed' and 43% 'Disagreed' or 'Strongly Disagreed' that NI should be part of the Republic of Ireland. Support for all-island governance was highest amongst Catholic respondents (75%) whilst Protestant respondents (45%) and those of no religion (39%) were most likely to 'Disagree' or 'Strongly Disagree'.

KLT perspectives on joint governance showed a markedly different pattern – a majority (51%) were either neutral on the issue or could not decide. Although there was some balance in the numbers of those from Maintained (43%) and Controlled (49%) schools who 'Agreed' or 'Strongly Agreed' with this constitutional option, there was greater variance in the number of pupils from Maintained schools (65%) and Controlled schools (28%) who 'Disagreed' or 'Strongly Disagreed'.

YLT responses were more definite – almost half of respondents (48%) were against NI being jointly governed. Catholic respondents were more supportive of this option (49%) than respondents of no religion (39%) or Protestant respondents (11%). The proportions of those who

‘Disagreed’ or ‘Strongly Disagreed’ was more balanced, although notably higher amongst Protestant respondents (37%) in comparison to those of no religion (32%) or Catholic respondents (28%).

## Conclusions

Education can play an important role in long-term peace-building and the teaching of civic values and citizenship practices can support stable democratic societies, help democratisation in transitional societies and can aid in reconciliation in post-conflict societies (Worden and Smith, 2017).

## References

- Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA). (2019). Overview of the Northern Ireland Curriculum. Available online at: <http://ccea.org.uk/curriculum/overview>
- Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI). (2015). An evaluation of the impact of the CRED policy in schools

Yet, the task of preparing young people to be active citizens in a shared and peaceful society remains problematic: ‘One-quarter of the PDMU lessons in primary schools and one third of citizenship and personal development lessons in post-primary schools were not effective’ (ETI, 2015, p. 10). At a time of utmost relevance, the diminishing status of these subject areas, most notably in post-primary schools, has challenged pupils and teachers to be civically minded when democratic politics and society at large are not. The data here suggest that variance in the content and scope of PDMU and LGC lessons can affect the

and youth organisations, Belfast: Education and Training Inspectorate for Northern Ireland.

- Worden, E. A. & Smith, A. (2017). Teaching for democracy in the absence of transitional justice: the case of Northern Ireland. *Comparative Education*. 53 (3): 379-395.

The authors of this Research Update are all connected to the UNESCO Centre at Ulster University. This research was

funded through the Ulster University Research Challenge Fund. Prof Alan Smith is UNESCO Chair and UNESCO Centre Director, Una O’Connor is senior lecturer and Jessica Bates is lecturer. Matt Miliken completed his PhD at the UNESCO Centre.

funded through the Ulster University Research Challenge Fund. Prof Alan Smith is UNESCO Chair and UNESCO Centre Director, Una O’Connor is senior lecturer and Jessica Bates is lecturer. Matt Miliken completed his PhD at the UNESCO Centre.



## Key Points

- There was some variance between topics taught in primary and post primary schools. There was greater focus on less sensitive themes in both age groups, although lessons on the NI conflict were more widely reported amongst YLT respondents.

- Primary school children did not think that politicians are doing a good job and only a minority of YLT respondents felt that their political opinions are represented by NI political parties.
- A majority of KLT respondents felt that the voting age should be lowered to 16; YLT respondents

were slightly more equivocal in their responses.

- Overall, support for NI remaining in UK was stronger than joining the Republic of Ireland – particularly in the younger age group – joint governance was the least preferred option.

The Young Life and Times (YLT) and Kids’ Life and Times surveys are carried out annually and document the views of children and young people on a wide range of social issues. YLT and KLT are joint projects of the two Northern Ireland universities and provide an independent source of information on what the public thinks. For more information, visit the survey websites at [www.ark.ac.uk/ylt](http://www.ark.ac.uk/ylt) and [www.ark.ac.uk/klt](http://www.ark.ac.uk/klt)

### In collaboration with Queen’s University Belfast and Ulster University

School of Applied Social and Policy Sciences  
Jordanstown campus, Ulster University  
Shore Road, Newtownabbey BT37 0QB  
Tel: 028 9036 6339  
E-mail: [info@ark.ac.uk](mailto:info@ark.ac.uk)

School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work  
Queen’s University Belfast  
Belfast BT7 1NN  
Tel: 028 9097 3034  
E-mail: [info@ark.ac.uk](mailto:info@ark.ac.uk)