

Children's Perspectives on the SEAG Test in Northern Ireland

Erin Early

Academic selection is an important topic in education research and policy. Despite its direct impact on pupils, there remains limited data on children's own experiences and attitudes on this matter. As Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child outlines that children have the right to express their views on matters affecting their lives, it is important that children's voices on academic selection are heard. In 2026, the *Kids' Life and Times (KLT)* survey asked Primary 7 (P7)-aged children (10–11-year-olds) about their experiences and attitudes towards academic selection in Northern Ireland. This Research Update explores participation in the SEAG (Schools' Entrance Assessment Group) test, experiences of pressure because of the test, and children's attitudes on its future.

Academic selection was introduced in Northern Ireland in 1947 through the Education Act (Northern Ireland) and continues to play a central role in primary to post-primary school transition. The process of academic selection involves an assessment of pupils' academic ability during their final year of primary school, when children are aged between 10 years and 11 years old. In the past, the assessment was commonly known as the transfer test or 11-plus.

The state sponsored transfer test ceased in 2008, and in 2009, was replaced by independent assessments administered by two private test bodies: the Association for Quality Education (AQE) and Post-Primary Transfer Consortium (PPTC). Broadly, AQE assessments were

commonly used by controlled schools while PPTC assessments were more widely used by Catholic maintained schools. The existence of two separate tests was criticised due to their unregulated nature, alongside concerns of comparability, validity and reliability (Elwood, 2013).

In 2023, a single entrance test was introduced – SEAG – which is currently used by schools across Northern Ireland that include academic selection within their admissions criteria. Pupils' test results, alongside individual school admissions criteria, determine the allocation of available places in these schools. Although the SEAG test is not state sponsored (that is, it is not under the control of the Department of Education, or the Education Authority), its content is based on the statutory Key Stage 2 Northern Ireland curriculum on language and literacy, and mathematics and numeracy. Participation in the SEAG test is not compulsory as many non-grammar schools do not require the test as part of their admission criteria. However, choosing not to take the SEAG test can restrict pupils' choice of post-primary school.

The transition to post-primary school in Northern Ireland remains somewhat distinct in the wider UK context due to the continued use of academic selection across the region. In 2025/26, 43 per cent of post-primary pupils attended grammar schools, with this school type accounting for 35 per cent of all post-primary schools (Department of Education, 2026). The retention of

academic selection at age 10–11 years continues to be a subject of debate. Those in favour of the selective education system support its meritocratic structure while others suggest it reinforces educational and social inequalities. The issue remains of importance to education policy discussions, as reflected in the Independent Review of Education (2023).

The KLT survey has collected data from 10–11-year-old children in Northern Ireland on their experiences of the transfer test in previous survey rounds. For example, 63 per cent of respondents did the transfer test in 2011, 62 per cent in 2016 and 52 per cent in 2022. The survey has also captured pupils' experiences of the pressure associated with academic selection. The most recent data on this were collected in 2011, when 22 per cent of respondents reported lots of pressure related to the transfer test, 18 per cent reported no pressure and 58 per cent indicated feeling somewhere between lots of pressure and no pressure.

In 2026, the KLT survey included questions on children's experiences of the SEAG test and attitudes on its future. The 2026 KLT survey was completed online by 4,250 children from 153 primary schools in Northern Ireland. Data collection took place between 2nd March and 24th April 2026, which followed the administration of the SEAG test (November 2025) and the release of the test results (January 2026).

Participation in the SEAG Test

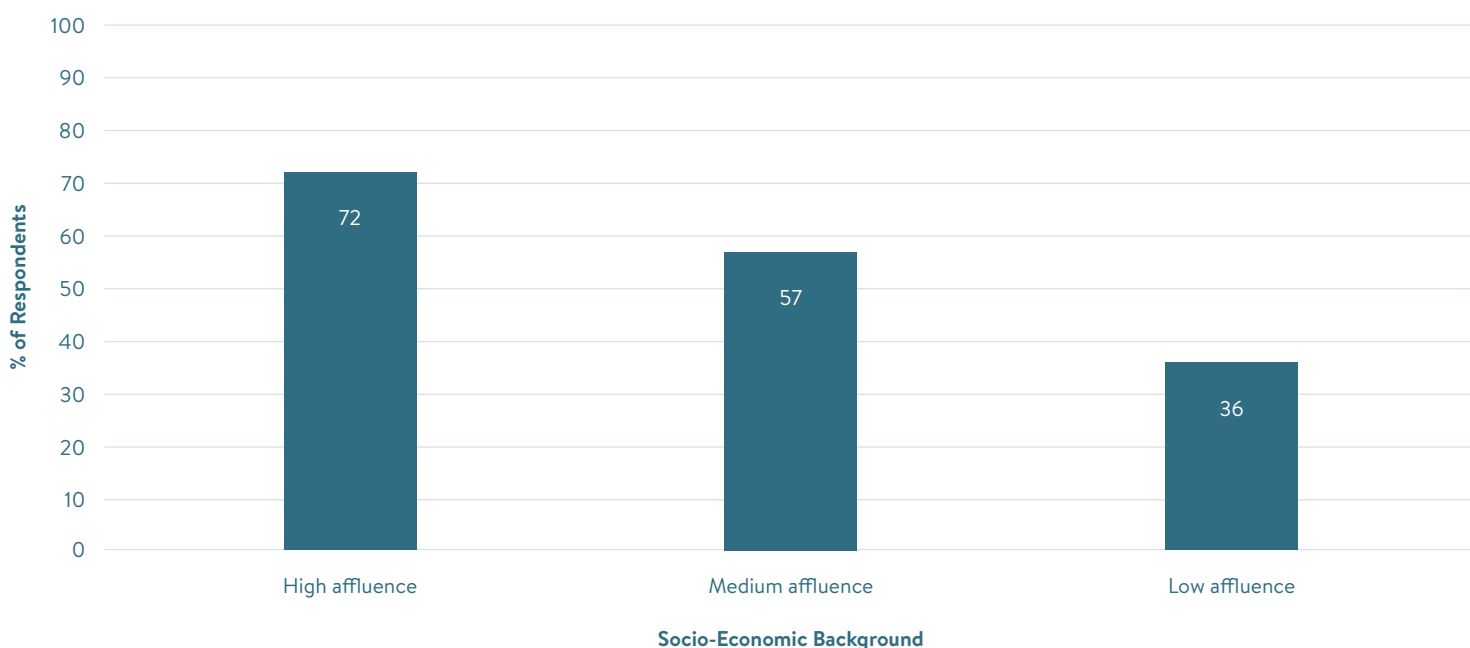
According to SEAG (2026), approximately 13,000 children sit the entrance assessment each year (approximately half of all P7 children in Northern Ireland). In the 2026 KLT survey, 60 per cent of respondents took the SEAG test and 40 per cent did not. A similar proportion of boys (61%) and girls (60%) did the SEAG test, but there were differences according to the socio-economic background of children, as measured by the Family Affluence

Scale. For example, a higher proportion of respondents from high affluence backgrounds had taken the SEAG test (72%) compared to those from medium affluence (57%) and low affluence (36%) backgrounds (Figure 1).

The differences in taking the SEAG test according to the socio-economic background of children reflects later socio-economic disparities evident in the post-primary education system. For example, using Free School Meals Eligibility (FSME) as a proxy for deprivation, the Expert Panel on

Educational Underachievement in Northern Ireland (2021) highlighted the lower transfer test outcomes of FSME pupils compared to non-FSME pupils. This disparity impacts post-primary school attendance and in 2024/25, there was a 21-percentage point difference between the proportion of non-grammar and grammar school pupils entitled to Free School Meals (32% compared to 11% respectively) (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency and Department of Education, 2025).

Figure 1: SEAG test uptake, by socio-economic background (KLT 2026)



Experiences of the SEAG test

In 2026, KLT respondents who had taken the SEAG test (n=2,367) were asked “did you feel under pressure because of the SEAG test?”. The highest proportion reported somewhere between lots of pressure and no pressure (47%), while a similar proportion reported lots of pressure (25%) or no pressure (24%).

Feelings of lots of pressure because of the SEAG test were similar for girls (26%) and boys (24%) but a higher proportion of girls reported somewhere between lots of pressure and no pressure (52% compared to 42% of boys). In contrast, a higher percentage of boys reported no pressure because of the SEAG test (30% compared to 19% of girls) (Table 1).

Table 1: SEAG test and experiences of pressure, by gender (KLT 2026)

	%		
	Boys	Girls	All
Lots of pressure	24	26	25
Somewhere in between lots of pressure and no pressure	42	52	47
No pressure	30	19	24

There were also differences in the experiences of feeling pressure according to socio-economic background (Table 2). For example, a higher proportion of respondents from low affluence backgrounds reported lots of pressure compared to those from high affluence backgrounds (36% compared to 24%), while the highest proportion of KLT respondents who reported feeling somewhere between lots of pressure and no pressure were from medium affluence backgrounds.

Table 2: SEAG test and experiences of pressure, by socio-economic background (KLT 2026)

	%			
	High Affluence	Medium Affluence	Low Affluence	All
Lots of pressure	24	25	36	25
Somewhere in between lots of pressure and no pressure	46	48	38	47
No pressure	26	22	23	24

Future of academic selection

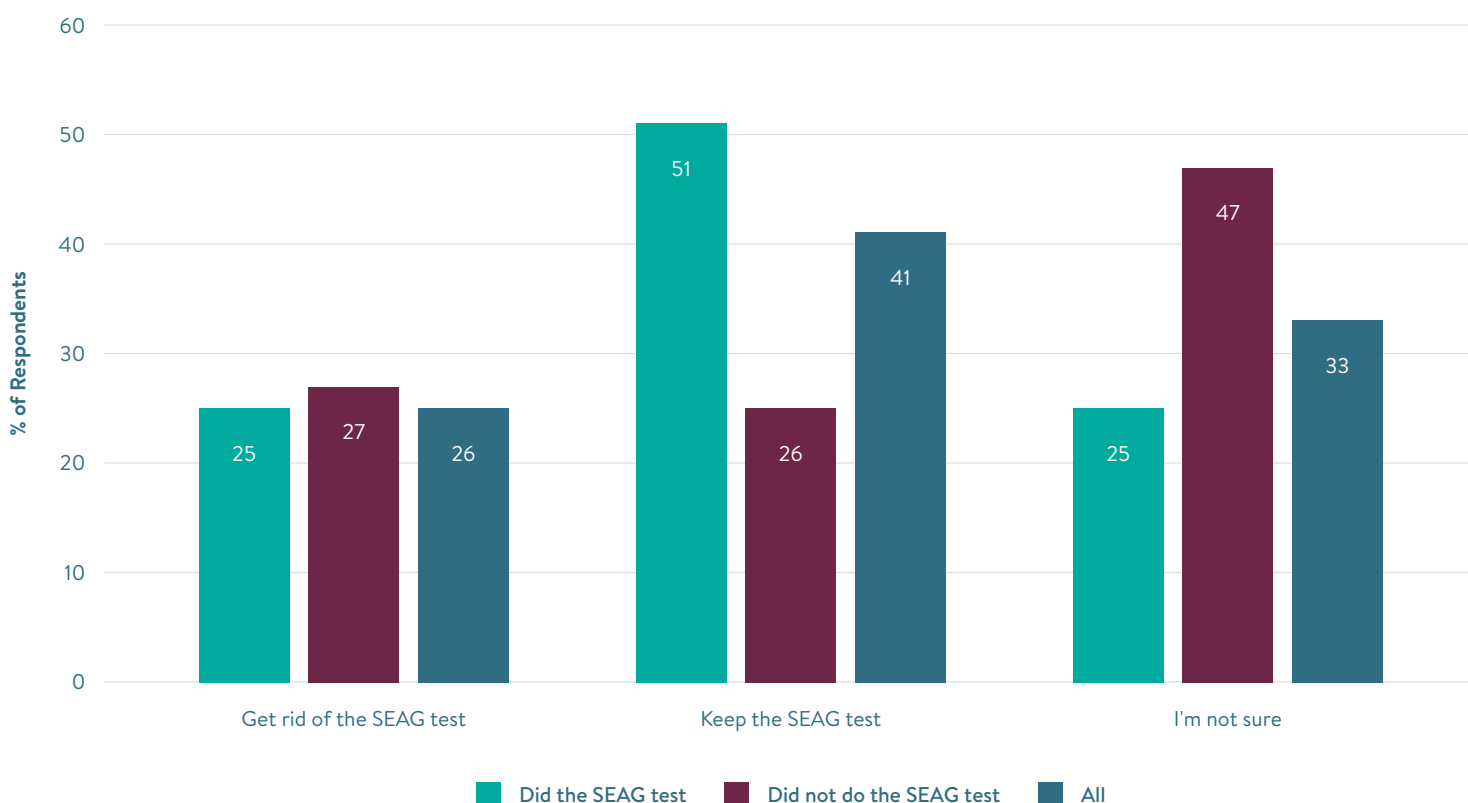
To understand what P7 aged children think about academic selection, the 2026 KLT survey asked “some people in Northern Ireland want to get rid of the SEAG test but other people want to keep it. What do you think should happen?”. Forty one per cent of KLT respondents answered that the SEAG test should be kept, 33 per cent were

not sure and 26 per cent reported the SEAG test should be removed. As KLT respondents received their SEAG test result prior to participating in the survey, their attitudes towards the future of the test may be influenced by their individual test outcome.

A higher percentage of respondents who sat the SEAG test believed it should be

retained compared to those who had not taken it (51% compared to 26%). Although there was little variation among those who wanted to get rid of the test, a higher proportion of those who had not taken the SEAG test were unsure about what should happen the test in the future (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Attitudes towards retention of SEAG test, by SEAG test participation (KLT 2026)



Forty three per cent of boys and 40 per cent of girls reported the SEAG test should be retained, while 27 per cent of boys and 24 per cent of girls reported the test should be removed. A higher proportion of girls (36%) compared to boys (30%) were not sure what should happen the SEAG test (Table 3).

Differences in attitudes were also apparent by socio-economic background. A higher proportion of KLT respondents from high affluence backgrounds reported that the SEAG test should be retained (46%) compared to those from medium (39%) and low (34%) affluence backgrounds. Although a similar

proportion of respondents across socio-economic backgrounds reported the SEAG test should be removed (Table 3), those from low affluence backgrounds had a higher proportion that were unsure about the future of the test (40%) compared to those from medium (36%) or high (28%) affluence backgrounds.

Table 3: Attitudes towards retention of SEAG test, by gender and socio-economic background (KLT 2026)

	%				
	Gender		Socio-economic background		
	Boys	Girls	High Affluence	Medium Affluence	Low Affluence
Get rid of the SEAG test	27	24	27	25	26
Keep the SEAG test	43	40	46	39	34
I'm not sure	30	36	28	36	40

Conclusion

The 2026 KLT survey highlights the influential role that academic selection continues to play in the lives of children in Northern Ireland. Academic selection remains a common experience, with six

in ten respondents taking the SEAG test. However, participation, experiences of pressure and attitudes on the future of test were not evenly distributed across socio-economic groups. These findings

raise important questions about the selective education system of Northern Ireland, including its equity, impact on pupil wellbeing and socio-economic disparities.

Key Points:

- In the 2026 KLT survey, 60 per cent of 10-11-year-old respondents had taken the SEAG test.
- A higher proportion of KLT respondents from a high affluence background had taken the SEAG test (72%) compared to those from medium affluence (57%) and low affluence (36%) backgrounds.
- Of those P7 children who took the SEAG test, 47 per cent reported somewhere between lots of pressure and no pressure, 25 per cent reported lots of pressure and 24 per cent reported no pressure.
- Considering the future of academic selection in Northern Ireland, 41 per cent of KLT respondents thought the SEAG test should be kept, while 26 per cent thought that it should be removed. Thirty three per cent were not sure.

References

Department of Education (2026) *School enrolments – Northern Ireland summary data. Schools and pupils in Northern Ireland 1991-92 to 2025-26*. Belfast: Department of Education. <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/school-enrolments-northern-ireland-summary-data>

Elwood, J. (2013) Educational assessment policy and practice: a matter of ethics. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 20(2), pp. 205–220. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0969594X.2013.765384>

Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement in Northern Ireland (2021) *A Fair Start Final Report & Action Plan*. Belfast: Department of Education. <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/A%20Fair%20Start%20-%20Final%20Report%20and%20Action%20Plan.pdf>

Independent Review of Education (2023) *Investing In A Better Future: The Independent Review Of Education In Northern Ireland. Volume 2*. Belfast: Department of Education. <https://www.independentreviewofeducation.org.uk/files/independentreviewofeducation/2024-01/Investing%20in%20a%20Better%20Future%20-%20Volume%202.pdf>

Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) and Department of Education (2025) *School Meals in Northern Ireland 2024/25*. Belfast: NISRA. <https://datavis.nisra.gov.uk/DEstatistics/school-meals-statistical-bulletin-202425.html>

School Entrance Assessment Group (SEAG) (2026) *What We Do*. Belfast: SEAG. <https://seagni.co.uk/about-us/what-we-do>

Authors

Dr Erin Early is Director of the Kids' Life and Times survey and a Lecturer in Social Policy in the School of Applied Social and Policy Sciences at Ulster University.

The Kids' Life and Times (KLT) survey is carried out annually and provides an independent source of information on what children think about social issues affecting their lives. KLT is a joint project of Ulster University and Queen's University Belfast. In 2026, 4,250 10/11-year-olds completed the survey in school. For more information, visit the survey website at www.ark.ac.uk/klt.

Questions on academic selection in the KLT 2026 survey were funded by the Integrated Education Fund (IEF).



In collaboration with Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University

School of Applied Social and Policy Sciences
Ulster University
York Street, Belfast, BT15 1ED

Tel: 028 9536 5611 Email: info@ark.ac.uk

School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work
Queen's University Belfast
20 College Green, Belfast, BT7 1LN

Tel: 028 9097 3034 Email: info@ark.ac.uk