

Academic Selection and the Transfer Test

1. The Purpose

This paper will examine the transfer testing that is still in operation across most of Northern Ireland (NI). This selection process is used to determine whether 11-year-old children attend either a non-selective post-primary school or a selective grammar school. Despite both kinds of schools delivering an identical curriculum and preparing learners for the same high-stakes examinations, one set of schools is perceived as being more academic than the other. We look at the background to this structural division and the impact of a selective system on young people and on wider society in NI.

2. Context

The Butler Act in 1944 introduced the principle of free education for five- to 15-year old children and young people in England and Wales. Pupils would attend primary school until the age of 11 and then transfer to either a vocationally-oriented Secondary Modern or a more academic grammar school. The decision as to which post-primary school each child would attend was based on the results of examinations that purported to determine intellectual ability using verbal and non-verbal reasoning tests. The process was variously known as the eleven plus (11+), the qualifying exam or the transfer test.

All of the key elements of the Butler Act were incorporated into the 1947 Northern Ireland Education Act. NI already had an established network of fee-paying, selective grammar schools founded by Protestant religious denominations (e.g. Methodist College, Belfast and Friends' School, Lisburn), Catholic Orders (e.g. Christian Brothers in Belfast, Newry and Omagh), philanthropic benefactors (e.g. The Rainey Endowed School, Magherafelt) and others. All of these schools acted as gateways to professional careers and higher education. After the Butler Act, many of them opted to become Voluntary grammar schools but other new non-selective secondary schools were needed to meet the requirements of the new system. Some of these were established within the state sector alongside a number of the grammars which did not seek Voluntary status (Controlled), whilst others were set up by the Catholic (Maintained) authorities.

In 1965 the Minister for Education in Westminster, Anthony Crosland, brought in a model of comprehensive education for England and Wales which aimed to offer all children equal educational opportunities without the use of an 11+ exam. The ruling Unionist government in Stormont did not follow suit.

Between 1965 and the end of the 1970s most Local Education Authorities (LEAs) in England and Wales discontinued their financial backing for grammar schools. Some former grammars opted to become comprehensives, whilst others became private, fee-paying schools. The Conservative party regained power in the 1970 election and their Education Minister, Margaret Thatcher, acted to allow LEAs to retain grammars if they so wished. Consequently, in some Conservative-controlled local authorities, grammar schools and the vestiges of the Butler Act remain, but there has been no wholesale return to a grammar school system in England and Wales.

In NI the Dickson Plan was introduced in 1969 for Controlled and Maintained post-primary schools in and around Craigavon. This system departed from the established tradition of selective school transfer at age 11 to a two-tier model of post-primary education. Pupils would leave primary school at 11 and transfer to a comprehensive Junior High school. Selection would take place at age 14 and pupils would then transfer to a Senior High – three of which were designated as grammar schools. Notably, the Dickson Plan made no proposals to address the separation of state (Controlled) schools and Catholic (Maintained) schools.

Educational policy during the 'Troubles' paid little attention to the 11+ but a flurry of debate and activity on the issue of academic selection followed the return of powers to the Stormont Assembly after the signing of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement in 1998. The Labour party was in power at that time and they remained committed to the Comprehensive system that they had introduced to England and Wales in the 1960s. They commissioned research into the effects of the selective system of secondary education in NI. Martin McGuinness of Sinn Féin (SF) became the first Education Minister in the devolved Assembly. In 2000, he set up the Post-primary Review body – the Burns Committee – which recommended that selection by academic ability should end as soon as possible. However, the report failed to gain favour across the political parties.¹

During one of a number of recurring suspensions of the Assembly the NI Minister, Jane Kennedy, set up a further Post-primary Review Working Group (chaired by Steve Costello, the Chairman of the NI Consumer Council) in 2002 to investigate how the recommendations contained in the Burns report could be taken forward. The Costello report recommended:

1. The transfer tests should be replaced with parent and pupil-centred decisions, informed by a pupil profile (which would help inform parents on a child's progress); and
2. An 'Entitlement Framework' would be introduced to offer a broader, economically relevant curriculum to all students irrespective of the school that they attend.²

Just as with the Burns Report, some aspects were not enacted and the replacement of the transfer test did not get political backing.

The 2006 Education (Northern Ireland) Order included provision to inhibit Boards of Governors from using academic ability as an admission criterion and the Education Minister at the time, Catriona Ruane of SF, drew on a provision in the Education Order (NI) 1997 that "the Department may issue and revise guidance as it thinks appropriate for admission of pupils to grant-aided schools". She declared, without the explicit backing of the Assembly or the Executive, that the current transfer arrangements were to cease. In November 2008, the final state-sponsored transfer test took place.

The Department of Education (DE) produced guidance for the 2009-10 school year "to which schools must have regard"³ for the transition between primary and post-primary:

- Schools must admit applicants to all available places;
- Decisions on admission should not be based on academic ability; and
- Priority should instead be given to pupils entitled to free school meals ('FSME'), those with a sibling at the school, applicants coming from feeder schools and applicants residing within a local catchment area.

There was also an instruction to primary schools that they must adhere to their statutory obligation to deliver the curriculum and refrain from facilitating unregulated tests in any format (including supplying materials, coaching within core teaching hours, offering afternoon tutoring or familiarisation with a test environment).

The matter was, however, far from being resolved. Many of the grammar schools and their advocates were deeply unhappy and, with a common transfer test undertaken by pupils in both Maintained and Controlled primary schools no longer available, they decided to set their own admission tests. Two consortia emerged – each broadly aligned with the two sides of the traditional, sectarian divide. The Post-primary Transfer Consortium (PPTC) representing mainly Catholic grammars and the Association for Quality Education (AQE) catering for Protestant/British tradition grammars established two totally different transfer procedures; young people spoke of "sitting the Protestant test or the Catholic test".⁴ AQE formed a limited company to manage and administer their own Common Entrance Assessment (CEA) while PPTC bought in tests through the GL Assessment company. Both claimed that their tests were based on Key Stage 2 Maths and English, but notably not Science which had been part of the previous Selection process. Neither of the tests are officially regulated. The first of these tests took place in November 2009.

The tests remain popular. Around 50% of P7 pupils sit tests in one or other system and a proportion sit the tests organised by both providers. The Belfast Telegraph recorded that in the 2018/19 academic year 8,637 pupils sat tests created by AQE and 7,620 sat the GL tests. It is not known how many of those pupils sat both tests.⁵

In June 2012 the Catholic bishops endorsed the plans to phase out academic selection. Loreto College in Coleraine and three Christian Brothers/Edmund Rice Trust schools (in Newry, Omagh and Belfast) announced that they would follow the bishops' guidance and become comprehensive.⁶

In 2015 DE reiterated the guidance on transfer that they had given schools in 2009-10. However, in September 2016, Peter Weir, the new (Democratic Unionist Party - DUP) Minister for Education, reversed the previous policy on preventing primary schools from facilitating unregulated tests saying that he "supports the right of those schools wishing to use academic selection as the basis for admission".⁷ Responsibility for the transfer process was left in the hands of private companies, a decision described by one political commentator as "absurd".⁸ However, primary schools were henceforth permitted to: supply support materials, carry out preparation for tests during core teaching hours, coach pupils in exam technique, provide a location for testing and provide familiarisation with a testing environment.

AQE and PPTC came together in 2017 to seek to produce a common test but, even though most schools were in favour of a single unified test, efforts broke down in May 2019 with the chair of AQE saying that the proposals that emerged were "not fit for purpose".⁹

¹<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/report-review-body-post-primary-education-burns-report>.

²<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/costello-report-full>.

³<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/timeline-development-transfer-policy>.

⁴Norton, C. (2017) http://www.youngfabians.org.uk/grammar_school_northern_ireland.

⁵<https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/education/decade-after-end-of-11-plus-transfer-tests-popular-as-ever-with-parents-38890320.html>.

⁶<https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/three-catholic-grammar-schools-vow-to-bin-academic-selection-28765942.html>.

⁷<https://www.irishnews.com/news/northernirelandnews/2020/04/21/news/education-minister-has-no-legislative-authority-to-halt-11-plus-1908922/>.

⁸Alex Kane tweet 4th January 2021.

⁹<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-48369322>.

The two unregulated sets of tests are still operating. To date, no non-Catholic grammars have moved away from academic selection and not all of those Catholic schools who made commitments to phase out their use of the GL test have done so.¹⁰

The lockdown of schools under Covid-19 regulations delayed registration for both sets of the 2020-21 tests which were initially deferred to January 2021. Questions were raised about how well pupils in the 2021 intake to post-primary schools would be prepared for the selection tests, and the fairness of this preparation, given the disruption to many schools by the pandemic. That the tests were mooted at all during such an unprecedented crisis was described as “shameful” by a mental health expert, and the NI Commissioner for Children said that “the decision not to cancel the test is the wrong one”.¹¹ After a number of options were considered and some briefly implemented, eventually a selection test for 2021 entry into post-primary schools was abandoned altogether, and selective schools had to develop their own entry criteria.¹²

In May 2020 the head of the Catholic Church in Ireland, Archbishop Eamon Martin, had urged Catholic grammars not to test pupils for admission for the 2021-22 academic year. In response, a number of Catholic grammar schools announced that they would operate school transfer without recourse to testing for one year. However, none of the Catholic grammars in Belfast agreed to respond to Archbishop Martin’s plea¹³ and had been intent on using selection tests, until their cancellation.

3. The Impact of Educational Selection

It is challenging to find any arguments made by researchers in favour of a selective system of education and, indeed, there is “a broad consensus against grammar schools among Educationalists.”¹⁴ One exception is Iain Mansfield. In his 2019 paper, Mansfield, a former senior civil servant, argues that grammar schools promote social mobility. He asserts that those areas in England where selective education is available are more likely to enable progression to elite universities than non-selective areas. He also claims that Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) pupils are more than five times as likely to go to Oxford or Cambridge University if they live in an area that has selective schools. Some polls show, he argues, “...a decisive majority for bringing back a selective system of grammar schools and secondary moderns”.¹⁵ Researchers have queued up to dismantle Mansfield’s findings¹⁶ arguing that he based his findings on incomplete data, that there were not the major positive differences that he claims and, even if there had been, “any positive benefits for individuals from attending grammar schools are outweighed by negative effects on those who do not pass the 11+.”¹⁷

3.1 Promotion of Social Mobility?

It is often claimed that having selection at age 11 allows learners from those families who have not had a background in grammar schools to achieve through merit, providing a route for academically gifted children to develop their talents irrespective of background, benefitting both themselves and wider society.

Unfortunately for those who support grammar schools, there would seem to be little evidence that social mobility is increased by academic selection and there is considerable evidence that it generally does not happen. It is particularly clear that, if FSME is used as a proxy for deprivation, there are more disadvantaged students in non-grammar schools in NI than in grammars.¹⁸ In 2019-20, there were 30,833 FSME pupils in non-grammar schools in NI, 37.8% of all pupils at such schools. By contrast, there were 8,665 FSME pupils in grammar schools, just 13.7% of their total enrolment.¹⁹ This disparity is also illustrated in Figure 1. Put another way, in NI “...the odds of a child securing a place at grammar school [are] five times less if they are entitled to free school meals compared to all other children”.²⁰ The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) argues that this raises “clear structural challenges to equity”²¹ in NI. While most schools in NI are sharply divided by community identity, the “gross educational divide is by social class, as indicated by two proxies: whether the child attends a grammar or non-grammar secondary and whether s/he is a recipient of free school meals”.²² The result is that “...the division into grammar and non-grammar schools facilitates a form of social segregation.”²³ In the Department of Education’s Report of the Strategic Forum Working Group, it was recognised that academic selection and open enrolment policies syphoned lower achieving pupils into certain schools and that “this concentration of disadvantage in some schools further exacerbates the negative influences of academic selection”.²⁴

¹⁰<https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/two-catholic-grammars-fail-to-phase-out-selection-36523347.html>.

¹¹https://www.belfastlive.co.uk/news/belfast-news/transfer-test-plans-appalling-should-19350813?utm_source=linkCopy&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=sharebar.

¹²<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-55654314>.

¹³<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-53173507>.

¹⁴Hillman, N. in Furlong, J. and Lunt, I. (2020) *Social Mobility and Higher Education: Are Grammar Schools the Answer? Occasional Paper 22*. Higher Education Policy Institute. p.5.

¹⁵Mansfield, I. (2019) *The impact of selective secondary education on progression to higher education*. Higher Education Policy Institute. p.42.

¹⁶Furlong, J. and Lunt, I. (2020) *Social Mobility and Higher Education: Are Grammar Schools the Answer? Occasional Paper 22*. Higher Education Policy Institute.

¹⁷Furlong, J. and Lunt, I. (2020) p.5.

¹⁸Shewbridge, C., Hulshof, M., Nusche, D., Stenius Staehr, L. (2014) *OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education: Northern Ireland*. OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education, OECD Publishing.

¹⁹Department of Education (2020) *Annual enrolments at schools and in funded pre-school education in Northern Ireland, 2019-2020*. <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/school-enrolments-overview>.

²⁰Connolly, P., Purvis, D. and O’Grady, P.J. (2013) *Advancing Shared Education. Report of the Ministerial Advisory Group on Shared Education*. Department of Education (Northern Ireland). https://pure.qub.ac.uk/files/14596498/Fileupload_382123_en.pdf.

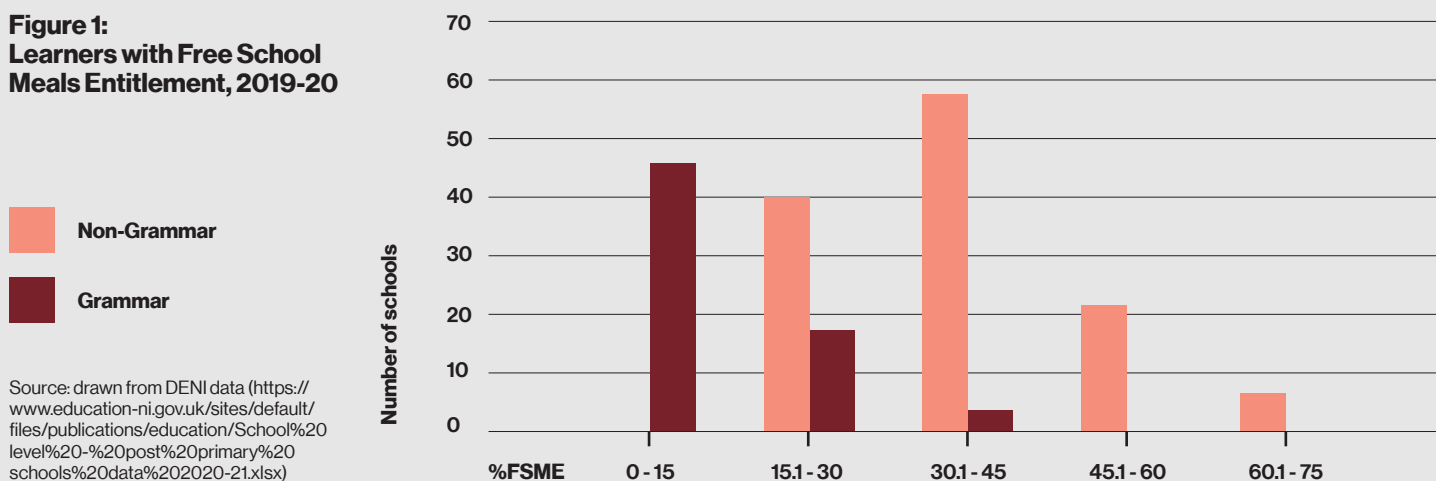
²¹Shewbridge, C. et al. (2014).

²²Wilson, R. (2016) *Northern Ireland peace monitoring report No.4*. Belfast, Community Relations Council. www.community-relations.org.uk/sites/crc/files/media-files/p.99.

²³Nolan, P. (2014) *Northern Ireland Peace Monitoring Report No.3*. Belfast, Community Relations Council. <http://www.community-relations.org.uk/sites/crc/files/media-files/Peace-Monitoring-Report-2014.pdf> p.93.

²⁴<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/Report%20of%20the%20Strategic%20Forum%20Working%20Group%20on%20Inclusion%20and%20Prosperity.PDF>.

**Figure 1:
Learners with Free School
Meals Entitlement, 2019-20**



Source: drawn from DENI data (<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/School%20level%20-%20post%20primary%20schools%20data%202020-21.xlsx>)

A proportion of children sitting the selection tests will have had private tutoring²⁵ and it has been shown that children who have that experience perform better in the Transfer Test²⁶ while the lack of private tuition has a negative impact on access to a grammar school.²⁷ Parents with a working class background are generally less able to afford the cost of additional help²⁸ while “...upper- and middle-class parents are more likely to be able to afford extra tutoring, which can help their children to pass the exam and secure positions in the higher-performing grammar schools.”²⁹ Tomaševski’s phrase “inter-generational transmission of privilege” has been used to describe this feature of the NI education system.³⁰

Proponents of grammar schools often see attendance at such schools as a routeway into Higher Education,³¹ and they are right to do so. There is already a strong socioeconomic skew in university admissions partly at least because so few disadvantaged pupils apply.³² Rather than the selection process offering opportunities to disadvantaged learners, “...expanding academic selection at age 11 may further widen the socioeconomic gap in pupils’ aspirations to continue to university”³³ and this can exacerbate earnings gaps between social classes. If grammar schools do help learners to enter the elite universities, “...the benefit is disproportionately to children from better-off families, which seriously undermines any claim that [grammar schools] promote social mobility.”³⁴ In any case, it is argued that educational interventions must happen much earlier in a child’s education to help change outcomes as “selecting at age 11 is unlikely to help many poor children to attain higher grades and to succeed in life.”³⁵

Recent research in English grammar schools concluded that “segregation, whether racially or by religion or social class, may have alarming and dangerous consequences for the school system and for society more widely in the longer term”.³⁶ Given the intense and apparently intractable social divisions already apparent in NI, this may be an even larger problem here with grammar schools acting as yet another mechanism to segregate children in NI.

3.2 Robust, Reliable and Fair?

It might be thought self-evident that any high-stakes testing such as a selection test with such an effect on life chances would be demonstrably reliable and robust. However, the state-sponsored 11+ tests administered in NI before the introduction of the AQE and GL tests were not underpinned by any standards of practice or technical fidelity, unlike almost every other statutory test in the UK at that time. They appeared to be reliable only for the top 12% and the bottom 18% of candidates, and there were only 18 marks – out of 150 – separating those on the margin of the top band (the A/B boundary) from those on the margin of the bottom band (C/D boundary).³⁷ It was estimated that “...more than 30% of the pupils who take the Transfer Tests will be assigned the wrong grade”,³⁸ an error which had the potential to affect over 12,000 children in NI each year.³⁹ The 11+ selection tests currently in use in parts of England are also unreliable, with evidence that 22% of candidates are wrongly allocated,⁴⁰ thus making “the decision to offer a grammar school place something of a lottery”.⁴¹

The tests which replaced the previous 11+ in NI from 2009 have also come in for criticism. It has been noted that “there is no regulation of the content of the transfer tests and no guarantee that these are adequately aligned with Northern Ireland’s knowledge and skills-based curriculum”,⁴² and the conclusion is that these tests “...are of dubious validity, reliability or comparability”.⁴³

Additionally, even if any of the 11+ tests were reliable, it can be argued that “the assumption that ability is something fixed by the age of 11 is highly problematic... identifying a subset of pupils for special treatment at the age of 11 is therefore both arbitrary and unfair”.⁴⁴

²⁵Bunting, B. and Mooney, E. (2001) The effects of practice and coaching on test results for educational selection at eleven years of age. *Educational Psychology*, 21, 243–253.

²⁶Egan, M. and Bunting, B. (1991) The effects of coaching on 11+ scores. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 61, 85–91.

²⁷Burns, S., Leitch, R. and Hughes, J. (2015) *Education inequalities in Northern Ireland. Final report to the equality commission for Northern Ireland*. The School of Education, Queen’s University, Belfast. P.340.

²⁸West, A., Noden, P. and Edge, A. (1998) Parental involvement in education in and out of school. *British Educational Research Journal*, 24, 461–484.

²⁹Skipper, Y. and Douglas, K.M. (2016) The impact of a selective entry examination on children’s feelings as they approach the transition to secondary school. *British Educational Research Journal*, 42(6), pp.945–961. p.956.

³⁰Henderson, L. (2020) p.6.

³¹Perry, C. (2016) *Academic Selection: a brief overview*. Northern Ireland Assembly, Research and Information Service Briefing Note. <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/27352/1/4816.pdf> p.6.

³²Anders, J. (2012). The link between household income, university applications and university attendance. *Fiscal Studies*, 33, 185–210.

³³Jerrim, J. and Sims, S. (2019) How Do Academically Selective School Systems Affect Pupils’ Social-Emotional Competencies? New Evidence from the Millennium Cohort Study. *American Educational Research Journal*, 56(5), pp.1769–1799. p.1794.

³⁴Furlong, J. and Lunt, I. (2020).

³⁵Andrews, J., Hutchinson, J. and Johnes, R. (2016) *Grammar schools and social mobility*. Education Policy Institute. p.10. https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Grammar-schools-and-social-mobility_.pdf.

³⁶Gorard, S. and Siddiqui, N. (2018) Grammar schools in England: a new analysis of social segregation and academic outcomes. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 39(7), pp.909–924. p.913.

³⁷Gardner, J. and Cowan, P. (2005) The fallibility of high stakes ‘11-plus’ testing in Northern Ireland. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 12(2), 145–165.

³⁸Gardner, J. and Cowan, P. (2005) p.160.

³⁹Gardner, J. (2016) Education in Northern Ireland since the Good Friday Agreement: Kabuki theatre meets danse macabre. *Oxford Review of Education*, 42(3), pp.346–361. p.356.

⁴⁰Coe R., Jones K., Searle J., Kokotsaki D., Kosnin A., Skinner P. (2008) *Evidence on the effects of selective educational systems. A report for the Sutton Trust*. CEM Centre, Durham University, UK.

⁴¹Furlong, J. and Lunt, I. (2020).

⁴²Shewbridge, C. et al. (2013) p.69–70.

⁴³Perry, C. (2016) p.4.

⁴⁴Furlong, J. and Lunt, I. (2020) p. 13.

Supporters of the grammar system in NI often point to what they see as the success of NI education compared to countries which have rejected academic selection. However, even if this were to be true, it has come at a cost: “the Northern Ireland education system is highly differentiated in terms of school performance [with] high performing grammar schools but a long tail of underachievement in secondary non-grammars”.⁴⁵ The chances of “...young people entitled to free school meals not achieving the basic standard of five GCSE A*-C passes at 16 are three times higher than other young people in England, and this figure rises to being four times higher in Northern Ireland”.⁴⁶ The impact on achievement seems to fall hardest on some groups as “Protestant FSME boys are close to the very bottom, just above Irish Travellers and Roma children.”⁴⁷

In any case, there is considerable evidence that grammar schools may not be the ‘high performing’ schools that is often assumed. While pupils at grammar schools generally do achieve better results than non-selective schools, as measured by percentages of A*-C at GCSE for instance, this can largely be accounted for by the fact that grammar students are selected at the age of 11,⁴⁸ even if by a process which is neither robust nor fully reliable. It can therefore be argued that the grammar school adds relatively little value to these students’ performance. In fact, “if the intakes to grammar schools really are already on a path to success ...subsequent success at Key stage 4 (KS4) aged 16 must not be mistakenly attributed to having attended a grammar school in the meantime.”⁴⁹ English grammar schools, after adjusting for the selective intake, have results which are no better or worse than other schools and it has been argued that “...the evidence-informed way forwards would be to phase out the existing 163 grammar schools in England”.⁵⁰ In NI, the gap between the proportion of learners achieving five or more A*-C GCSE grades at grammar and non-selective schools has been steadily narrowing. The difference was just 16.4% in 2018/19, having dropped from 43% in 2008/09,⁵¹ and this has been achieved despite a continued process of selection supposedly separating children by academic ability. While ‘high performance’ is an accolade often given to NI’s grammar schools, it may be that it is really non-selective schools that are transforming many children’s life chances.

3.4 Helping children to be the best they can be?

There is evidence that failing to gain access to a grammar school has a negative impact on self-esteem.⁵² Transition to post-primary schools can be a traumatic experience for many children, and those who either do not sit the test, which is around 50% of pupils, or who ‘fail’ it, can find such a change even more challenging. Similarly, pupils’ feelings towards their school and their teachers can be impacted on by their success or otherwise in the 11+ examination.⁵³ It has been found that these effects can endure into adulthood with attitudes to education, even by those in their 60s, influenced by whether they ‘passed’ or ‘failed’ that examination half a century before.⁵⁴

The curriculum can also be distorted by the presence of transfer testing, with a reduced set of teaching approaches and a lessening in the breadth of content as pupils are prepared for the examination. This means that “...pupils are not receiving the broad and balanced experience envisaged by the statutory curriculum.”⁵⁵ The presence of the selection test in Year 7 has led to “a narrow coverage of the curriculum areas”.⁵⁶ This will impact on the potential educational experience throughout much of a child’s primary school experience with a lack of coverage of material outside the focus of the test, but it also has an effect on the teaching in post-primary schools as “...many post-primary teachers felt that they almost had to start again in these areas in order to ensure that all pupils had acquired a common core of knowledge.”⁵⁷ Rather than helping children be the best they can be, academic selection may be having a negative impact on many children’s educational experiences and their life chances.

3.5 Providing all parents and children with a choice?

Providing choice might be thought of as a self-evident good, but it can result in negative effects such as growing educational differentiation. In that case, it will be the poorest in society who increasingly suffer the negative consequences of having ‘choice’, such as increased inequality in education, and increased social segregation.⁵⁸ Wealthy and well-connected parents can leverage ‘choice’ to ensure access to grammar schools for their children, thus effectively separating their children from those of a lower socioeconomic status.⁵⁹ Selection, in a system which measures schools by their academic success, unfairly ensures structural inequalities which are replicated down the generations.⁶⁰

Schools are required to admit applicants to all places available through open admissions policies, but it is those schools perceived as ‘high performing’ that are more likely to be oversubscribed. It is consequently more difficult to gain access to them. At the other end of the spectrum are some schools for which the selection system causes “particular difficulties...by combining social differentiation with ability differentiation”.⁶¹

When post-primary pupil numbers are falling, grammar schools can continue to hold their enrolments steady by taking children with lower 11+ results.⁶² This impacts negatively on non-selective schools as some of their potential pupils are ‘creamed off’, creating concern that “... grammar schools accepting lower grades in the transfer test [will take] per-pupil funding from all-ability schools”.⁶³ Having schools compete for learners in a ‘free market’ provides a choice for parents which is illusory for most. There are enormous opportunities for those children whose parents can afford additional tutoring, for example, but the positioning of one school type as ‘elite’ perpetuates inequalities, and those who cannot afford it are, in effect, disenfranchised.⁶⁴

The net result is schools which are, in large part, socially segregated and “the evidence indicates that the higher concentrations of disadvantaged students in non-grammars have a significant impact on academic outcomes, as well as on other contributing factors such as school attendance”.⁶⁵ The OECD express concern that an outcome of the selective system is “...a high concentration of less socially and economically advantaged students in the non-selective post-primary schools”.⁶⁶ Thus a selective system which promises improved attainment and increased choice may actually have the effect of reducing overall educational achievement, particularly for those learners from the most deprived areas,⁶⁷ as well as reducing choice for most parents.

⁴⁵Boroah, V.K. and Knox, C. (2017) Inequality, segregation and poor performance: the education system in Northern Ireland. *Educational Review*, 69(3), pp.318-336, p.320.

⁴⁶Connolly, P., Purvis, D. and O’Grady, P.J. (2013). p.xxii.

⁴⁷Nolan, P. (2014) p.97.

⁴⁸Manning, A., and J.Pischke. 2006. *Comprehensive versus Selective Schooling in England and Wales: What Do We Know?* IZA Discussion Paper No. 2072. <http://ssrn.com/abstract=898567> p.17.

⁴⁹Gorard, S. and Siddiqui, N. (2018) Grammar schools in England: a new analysis of social segregation and academic outcomes. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 39(7), 909-924, p.912.

⁵⁰Gorard, S. and Siddiqui, N. (2018) p.921.

⁵¹Department of Education (2019) *Year 12 and 14 Examination Performance at Post-primary Schools in Northern Ireland* https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/Year%20%2012%20and%20Year%2014%20Examination%20Performance%20at%20Post%20Primary%20schools%20in%20NI%202018_19.pdf p.24.

⁵²Skipper, Y. and Douglas, K.M. (2016). p.954.

⁵³Skipper, Y. and Douglas, K.M. (2016). p.954.

⁵⁴Furlong, J. and Lunt, I. (2020). p.14.

⁵⁵Gallagher, T. and Smith, A. (2000) *The Effects Of The Selective System Of Secondary Education In Northern Ireland. Main Report*. ResearchGate. p.62.

⁵⁶Gallagher, T. and Smith, A. p.62.

⁵⁷Gallagher, T. and Smith, A. p.63.

⁵⁸Kelleher, L., Smyth, A. and McEldowney, M. (2016) Cultural attitudes, parental aspirations, and socioeconomic influence on post-primary school selection in Northern Ireland. *Journal of School Choice*, 10(2), pp.200-226, p.205.

⁵⁹Ladd, H.F. (2002). School vouchers: A critical view. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 16(4), 3-24.

⁶⁰Henderson, L. (2020) p.6.

⁶¹Gallagher, T. and Smith, A. (2000) Section 4.27.

⁶²Belfast Telegraph 26th Jan 2019. <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/revealed-transfer-test-grade-intake-for-northern-ireland-schools-2018-37746718.html>.

⁶³Belfast Telegraph 26th Jan 2019.

⁶⁴Henderson, L. (2020) p.7.

⁶⁵Perry, C. (2016) p.6.

⁶⁶Shewbridge, C. et al. (2014) p.21.

⁶⁷Furlong, J. and Lunt, I. (2020) p.9.

3.6 Cost neutral?

By adding another layer of duplication, selection adds to the already high costs of schooling in NI. A combination of faith schools, some divided by gender, alongside schools that apply a selection process at age 11, has produced complex overlapping school catchment areas, and duplication of facilities and supporting services.⁶⁸ It deserves repeating that all schools in NI follow a common curriculum and that their learners are entered for examinations set and assessed by the same examination and assessment boards, with the exception of academic selection. Additionally, all teachers in NI must satisfy the General Teaching Council that they have the qualifications to teach; these standards are no different in non-selective or grammar sectors. Nevertheless, in 2014, only 11.7% of those pupils enrolled in grammar schools across NI attended their nearest post-primary school. In the Belfast area, it was just 5.1%.⁶⁹

Pupils at grammar schools disproportionately benefit from current school transport arrangements with those pupils accounting for "... nearly 40% of young people receiving transport assistance and a third of school transport expenditure", despite grammar school pupils comprising only 19% of all school enrolments in 2020/21. In addition, "if free school transport was restricted to the nearest school ...approximately 14,000 fewer pupils would be entitled to receive transport [saving] £10 million per year from the current expenditure of approximately £43 million".⁷⁰ Back in 2004, after a comparison of transport costs with those in Scotland and in the Republic of Ireland, it was estimated that, in NI, "the selective and segregated nature of the schooling system costs the education budget more than \$28 million [£20 million] per year".⁷¹ The result is "...significantly inflated costs for ...school transport" in a selective system.⁷²

If pupils were to attend their nearest school, one study estimates that this would reduce the average journey length to post-primary schools by about one mile per pupil. While this sounds minor, retaining present travel patterns would "...tend to lead to significantly higher levels of greenhouse gas generation and reduced social cohesion and integration across the religious divide."⁷³

4. Alternative Transfer Arrangements

It was recommended in both the Burns and Costello reports that the first major decision point about learning pathways in a pupil's education should normally be at about age 14 – a vision largely consistent with the model adopted in Craigavon under the Dickson plan. In accordance with these recommendations the Education Minister, Catriona Ruane, outlined her vision for the education system in NI in December 2007. She abolished the statutory system of academic selection at age 11 and proposed a move to 'informed election' at age 14. Instead, general provision for all pupils was to be provided in schools for 11-14 year olds, after which pupils would have the option of transferring to an academic pathway that would be "accessed by intelligent, well-informed and mature election and available through modern, organisational flexibility".⁷⁴ It was considered that, by this age, parents would have largely assessed the abilities of their children and that the children would themselves, having developed a greater capacity for informed self-selection, be active participants in the process.

This proposed system was seen to offer a number of practical, organisational benefits, including:

- enhanced links between primary schools and junior high schools, and between junior high schools and senior high schools;
- the absence of adverse effects for pupils in Key Stage 2 caused by preparation for the transfer tests; and
- fewer appeals against 14+ placements.

It was, however, noted that such a major change would cause significant disruption including difficulties in planning and delivering the curriculum for 11- to 16-year-olds across the various school types.⁷⁵ The proposed changes failed to garner the required cross-party support and the proposals have been effectively moth-balled.

Almost all school systems in the developed world feature some sort of age-determined separation between those schools that provide general, elementary or primary education and those that are structured around a more focussed, subject-orientated curriculum. The World Economic Forum (WEF) produces a Global Competitiveness Report on the state of the world's economies which ranks countries according to the "12 pillars of competitiveness" – primary education is one of these pillars alongside factors such as the soundness of banks and the sophistication of businesses.⁷⁶ WEF ratings have been widely used as a determinant of those nations providing the best quality of education as have those calculated by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) – the OECD's measurement of 15 year olds' ability to use their reading, mathematics and science knowledge and skills to meet real-life challenges.⁷⁷ The education systems in the following three countries have been ranked consistently highly by both of these measures. Apart from New Zealand, each practices selection, but at a later age than in NI. Clearly alternative systems are available and continue to deliver high quality education while avoiding the damage that academic selection at 11 can cause.

⁶⁸Kelleher, L., Smyth, A. and McEldowney, M. (2016) Cultural attitudes, parental aspirations, and socioeconomic influence on post-primary school selection in Northern Ireland. *Journal of School Choice*, 10(2), pp.200-226.

⁶⁹Thornthwaite, S.E. (2014) *The Report of The Independent Review of Home to School Transport*, DENI. p132.

⁷⁰Thornthwaite, S.E. (2014) p168.

⁷¹Kelleher, L., Smyth, A. and McEldowney, M. (2016) p.203.

⁷²Kelleher, L. and Smyth, A. (2011) *School Choice, Education Reform and Fiscal Austerity: A UK Perspective on their Implications for School Transport*. Paper submitted to and presented at 2012 TRB Conference, Washington, DC.

⁷³Kelleher, L. and Smyth, A. (2011).

⁷⁴Hansard <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/assembly-business/official-report/reports-07-08/4-december-2007/>.

⁷⁵NI Assembly (2008) *School Transfer at Age 14. Research and Library Services Research Paper 18/08* <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/committees/2007-2011/education/research-papers/school-transfer-at-age-14.pdf>.

⁷⁶http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_TheGlobalCompetitivenessReport2019.pdf.

⁷⁷<https://www.oecd.org/pisa/>.

Country	Age and Selection Process	System Features
Finland	Age of selection: 16 Choice – augmented by examination results, entry tests and interviews	Age 6: One year pre-school
		Age 7-16: Comprehensive school – not streamed
		Age 16-19: 3 years academic or vocational upper school
		Few private schools
		Teachers require Post-Graduate /Master's degree
Belgium	Age of selection: 12 Choice and primary school recommendation – no examination	Minimal central state involvement – federal matter
		Schools separated by language: French or Dutch (+ a few German)
		Age < 6: Pre-school
		Age 6-12: Primary school
		Age 12-18: choice of four school options: General, Technical, Vocational or Arts
New Zealand	Age of selection: None Pupils transfer to local (comprehensive) secondary school	Private schools exist without government support: fee-paying
		'State-integrated' schools are run mainly by religious communities, they receive some government support
		Age 5-11 (or 5-13): Primary schools
		Age 12-18 (or 14-18): Secondary school
		There are also a small number of 'Composite' (5-18) schools

5. Conclusions

The arguments articulated here are not new. The evidence overwhelmingly indicates that the current arrangements for school transfer at age 11 contribute to the social and financial costs of a stressful process that serves to benefit a few (generally already privileged) pupils while damaging the life-chances of a large proportion of the school population. Children in NI now have the unenviable choice of separate 'Protestant' and 'Catholic' test systems for grammar schools; test systems with serious ethical questions to answer. Academic selection has been shown to lack rigour and, especially when outsourced to private providers, is without oversight by government. Rather than promoting social mobility and opening pathways through merit, it seems to achieve exactly the opposite. While promising increased choice, it actually diminishes it, as it increases social segregation within communities. Selection does not raise achievement across the system and may be one of the main contributors to the long tail of underachievement in NI. It is traumatic for many children, creating damage which often endures into adulthood. It often distorts the curriculum of children in primary and post-primary schools and achieves little other than protecting the advantages of a few.

The arguments that are played out by those politicians who support the status quo appear to be ideological rather than evidence-based. It is hard to escape the observation that many of the political class responsible for making decisions on the future of selection, will themselves be the products of the same grammar school system that they seek to defend, and their children in all likelihood also attend such schools. It seems that "...people who had come through grammar schools tended to support academic selection, while people who had come through secondary schools favoured reform of the system".⁷⁸

In the context of academic selection at 11 in NI, the various actors have retreated to their traditional positions. The Catholic Church seems to swither between deploring state-sponsored disadvantage and protecting its top grammar schools; the Governing Bodies Association (representing Voluntary grammars) vigorously defends what it sees as the cream of UK education; the DUP seem to ignore the negative impact of selection on their heartland working-class constituencies; and Sinn Féin continue to be somewhat ambivalent despite their public pronouncements about removing selection. Meanwhile learners are a political football. While politicians vie for position "the future life-chances of thousands of children play second fiddle to party politics and middle-class pressure."⁷⁹

Time is ripe for change. Stresses on the economy after Covid-19, including the almost inevitable recession which will follow, particularly impacting on NI, mean that society cannot continue to subsidise duplication and segregation of schools, whether that be by community background, social class or apparent academic ability. There are strong economic reasons for changing a flawed system, and the social and moral arguments for fundamental transformation are even stronger.

⁷⁸Gallagher, T. (2021) Governance and leadership in education policy making and school development in a divided society. *School Leadership & Management*, pp1-20. p.7.

⁷⁹Gardner (2016) p.357.



transforming education

Report 10
Published March 2021

Academic Selection and the Transfer Test



Dr Stephen Roulston and Dr Matthew Milliken
Ulster University
Cromore Rd
Coleraine
BT52 1SA
www.ulster.ac.uk



Integrated Education Fund
Forestview
Purdy's Lane
Belfast
BT8 7AR
www.ief.org.uk

