

SELECTION PROJECT
SEL1.1: Overview Paper

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to provide an outline to the selection project. The findings of the study are contained in a Project Report and a series of additional research papers. A full list of the research papers is contained in an annex to the Project Report.

The project was undertaken for the Department of Education by a consortium involving Queen's University Belfast, University of Ulster, Stranmillis and St Mary's University Colleges and BDO Stoy Hayward. The academic staff who contributed to the project included:

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SUMMARY

This paper provides an outline of the research strategy for the Selection Project. The project was organised around two main elements. The first comprised an examination of systemic change in schools over the past decade and was largely based on the analysis of quantitative data. The second comprised a series of research studies which focused on the impact of selection across a range of more specific domains. The five main thematic areas that were examined included:

- Case studies of grammar and secondary schools;
- Pupil motivation and attitudes in primary and post-primary schools;
- The perceptions and expectations of teachers;
- The nature and extent of coaching for the Transfer Tests;
- Public attitudes to, and perceptions of the effects of the selective system.

The paper describes the sampling procedure used to identify case study schools. In addition, the paper outlines the range of research questions for each thematic area and the type of data collected at each phase of the project.

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Background

Northern Ireland has operated a selective system of secondary and grammar schools since 1947. Between 1976 and 1979 the then Labour government attempted to move Northern Ireland away from the selective arrangements. This initiative was halted when Margaret Thatcher's first government was elected in 1979. Following the election of the new Labour government in 1997 there was expectation in some circles that changes to selection might occur. However, the then Education Minister, Tony Worthington, decided that any proposals for change should be based on an informed discussion and debate. Towards this end, two research projects were commissioned. The first involved an evaluation of the system of delayed selection used in the Craigavon area (Alexander et al, 1998). The second, which is reported in this and subsequent papers, comprises an examination of the effects of the selective system more generally.

Research Priorities

The research was organised around two main elements. The first comprised a consideration of systemic change in schools in Northern Ireland over the last ten years, both as a consequence of the selective system and the introduction of open enrolment following the 1989 Education Reform Order. This part of the project comprised the following:

- a statistical analysis of change in schools since 1989
- an examination of transfer grade profiles of grammar schools
- an examination of enrolment change in secondary and grammar schools
- an analysis of primary school enrolments and transfer grade results
- an analysis of school performance patterns over time

The second main element comprised a detailed consideration of the impact of selection across a number of more specific domains and included the following themes:

- post-primary schools
- pupil motivation and attitudes
- teachers
- primary school: coaching & perceptions
- public attitudes & perceptions

Post-Primary Schools

The work on post-primary schools was based on a series of in-depth case studies of schools and comprised two approaches. The first comprised a sample of grammar and secondary schools chosen from across Northern Ireland, the Main Study schools. The second comprised a set of grammar and secondary schools within a designated geographical area, the Area Study schools. The way in which the case study schools were identified is outlined below.

The Department of Education provided details of the entry patterns of pupils for all post-primary schools from 1993 to 1997. These data comprised the number of pupils entering each school disaggregated by the transfer grade status and gender. The sampling criteria

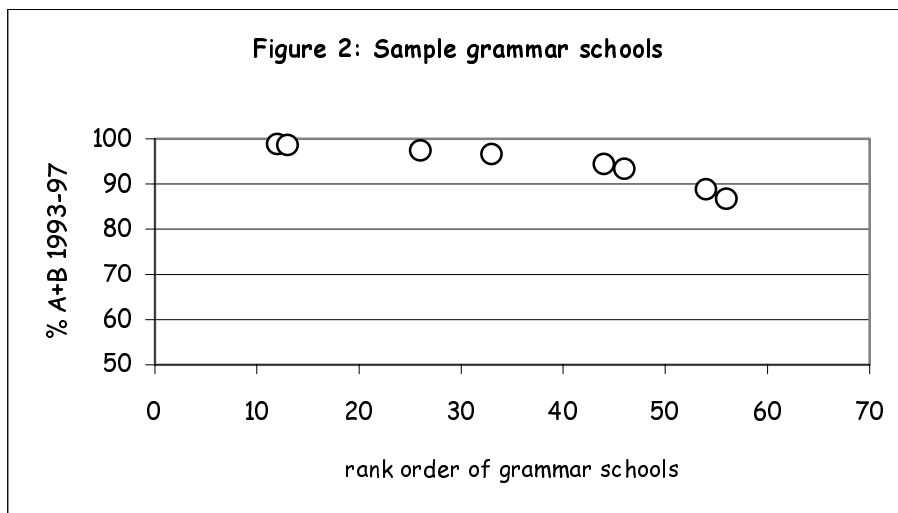
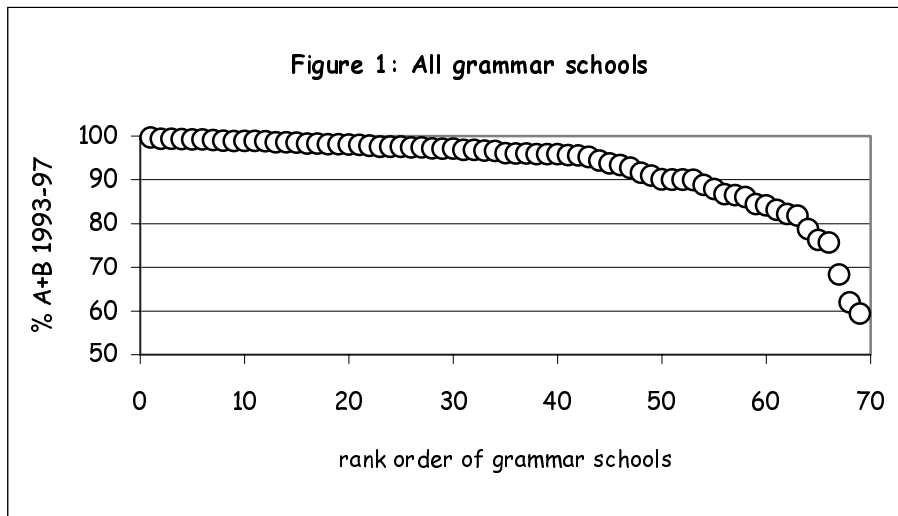
used for the Main Study schools made use of transfer status (that is, the proportion of pupils with Transfer grades A or B), entry numbers and gender patterns.

The defining characteristic of grammar schools is that they are permitted to select pupils on the basis of their academic ability, as measured by the Transfer Tests. Since the introduction of open enrolment the proportion of pupils entering grammar schools has increased resulting in a widening of the ability profile of grammar entrants. In addition, there is a known relationship between academic attainment and gender (Gallagher, 1997; 1998). Therefore, it was decided to use these two criteria, academic ability as measured by the Transfer Test, and gender, as the two criteria for identifying the sample of grammar schools.

The proportion of pupils with A or B grades entering each grammar school was calculated over the period 1993 to 1997. The schools were rank-ordered on the basis of these data and then divided into four equal groups. In the top group the proportion of pupils entering with A or B grades varied between 99 and 100 percent, for the second group it varied between 96 and 98 per cent, for the third group it varied between 90 and 96 percent, and for the fourth group it varied between 59 and 90 per cent. Within each group the grammar schools were rank ordered on the basis of the proportion of girls. Then, within each cohort the grammar schools at the 33rd and the 66th percentiles were selected for the sample. This provided a total of eight schools, all of which agreed to participate in the study.

Entrants to grammar schools

The two figures below illustrate the entry pattern for all grammar schools and for the sample schools. Figure 1 shows that for all but a handful of grammar schools, 80 percent or more of their entry comprises pupils with A or B grades. The entry pattern for the sample grammar schools shown in Figure 2 reflects this overall pattern, with the apparent 'pairing' of the schools across the distribution arising from the use of gender composition as the secondary criterion for sampling.



Entrants to secondary schools

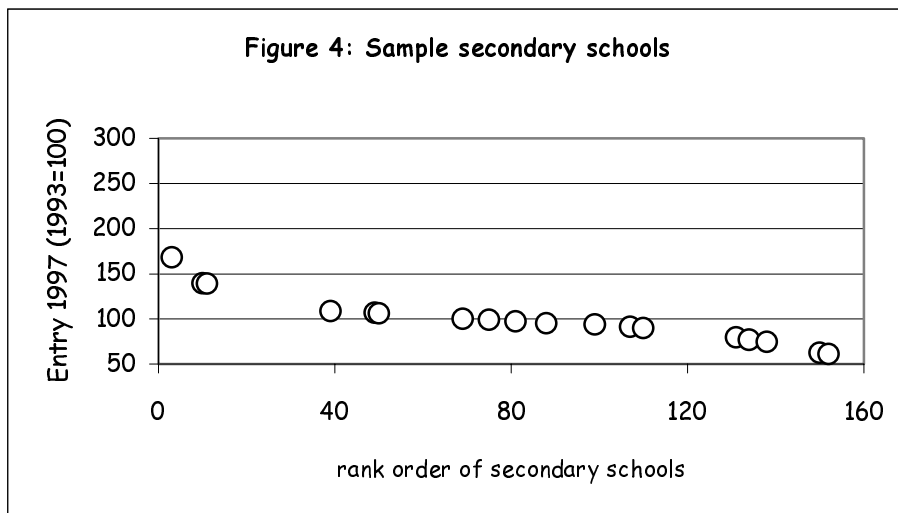
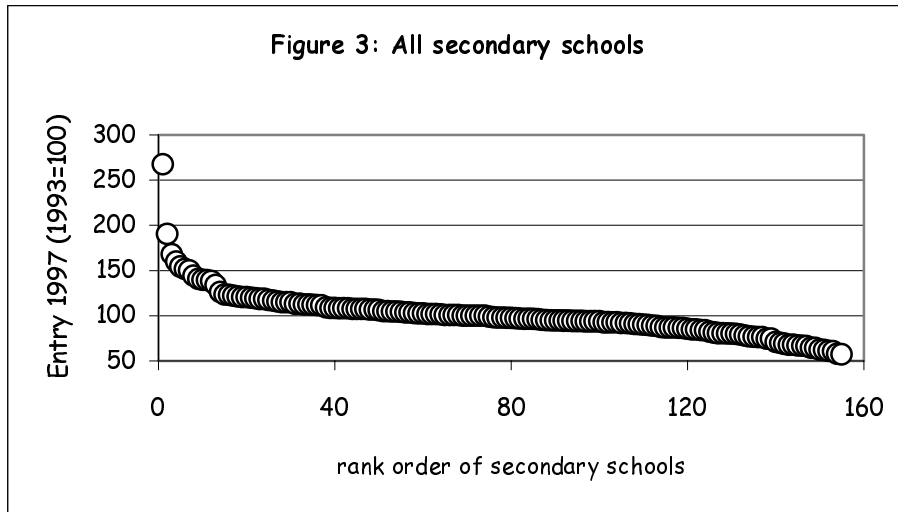
Secondary schools are permitted to use a variety of criteria for identifying entrants from amongst pupils who apply, but they may not include academic ability. Thus, while many of the pupils entering secondary schools will hold Transfer grades, a significant proportion of entrants will have opted not to take the tests (details of these statistical patterns are discussed in SEL2.1). As noted above, one consequence of open enrolment has been an increase in the proportion of pupils entering grammar schools and a

consequent overall decrease in the proportion entering secondary schools. As a measure of enrolment change we used the number of pupils entering schools in 1997 as a proportion of the number of pupils who entered in 1993. Thus, an entry level of 100 would mean that the same number of pupils entered in both years, an entry number below 100 would suggest that fewer pupils entered a school in 1997 than in 1993, while an entry number above 100 would suggest that a higher number of pupils entered in 1997 than in 1993. On this basis we used entry number and gender as the two criteria for selecting the sample secondary schools.

Using the data provided by the Department of Education all secondary schools were rank-ordered on the basis of the change in the number of Year 8 pupils entering the schools between 1993 and 1997. Schools in the delayed selection system in the Craigavon area, and secondary schools that had opened or closed within those years, were excluded from the data. When the secondary schools had been rank-ordered they were divided into twelve equal groups, and within each group the secondary schools were rank-ordered on the basis of the proportion of girls in each. Following this, the secondary schools at the 33rd and 66th percentiles were selected for the sample. This gave a total of 24 secondary schools. Eight of these schools declined to participate in the study. A further eight schools, as similar as possible to those which had declined to participate in the study, were identified and invited to participate. Of this group, two accepted the invitation to participate. This gave a final total of eighteen secondary schools in the Main Study sample. Subsequently it proved not to be possible to agree arrangements for collecting data in one of the secondary schools so that the achieved sample comprised seventeen secondary schools.

The two figures below illustrate the pattern of Year 8 entry change between 1993 and 1997 for all secondary schools (figure 3) and the sample schools (figure 4). The sample secondary schools appear to represent the overall distribution reasonably well, with the only apparent gap being for those schools where the number of Year 8 entrants in 1997 was ten per cent or more higher than the number of Year 8 entrants in 1993: whereas a

little over 20 per cent of all secondary schools fell into this category, this was so for 17 per cent of the sample.



The purpose of the Area Study was to examine the dynamics of a local educational market. The intention was to identify a distinctive geographical area and to collect case study data from all the secondary and grammar schools in that area. The identification of the area to be used was based in part on local knowledge, published data on schools and discussions with members of the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI). Once the area was identified all the schools were approached to take part in the study and all

agreed. There was a total of nine case study schools in the Area Study, with some of these schools also having been selected to participate in the Main Study.

Overall the case study schools comprised 11 grammar schools and 20 secondary schools. Of these, eight grammar and 17 secondary schools were in the Main Study, while four grammar and five secondary schools were in the Area Study. In the Main Study, three of the grammar schools and nine of the secondary schools operate under Catholic management, and there was one Grant Maintained Integrated school. In the Area Study, two of the grammar schools and one secondary school operate under Catholic management, and there was one Grant Maintained Integrated school. In the Main Study there were two single-sex boys' schools and two single-sex girls' schools. The remaining 21 schools were co-educational, with the proportion of girls ranging from a low of 29 per cent to a high of 62 per cent. In the Area Study there were two single-sex boys' schools and two single-sex girls' schools.

In all the case study schools a wide range of data were collected. The quantitative data included the GCSE results and post-16 destinations for the Year 12 cohort in 1998/99. In addition, a questionnaire was administered to all Year 8 and Year 12 pupils in the schools. Both questionnaires included a series of items seeking social and demographic data on the pupils. In addition, the Year 12 questionnaire included an 'attitudes to school' questionnaire that was used with permission from the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER). Thereafter a range of qualitative data were collected focusing on aspects of within-school processes.

Our interest here lay in policy and practice in the schools and at department level, the impact of selection on the perception of teachers and pupils, and the way in which schools had responded to the changes that have occurred since 1989. In order to collect data on these issues in each case study school interviews were held with the principal and members of the senior management; the Heads of Department of Maths, English and Science; the teacher or teachers with special responsibility for Year 8 pupils; and a group of classroom teachers. In addition, interviews were held with a group of Year 8 pupils

and a group of Year 12 pupils: in most cases each group comprised six pupils. Where possible the interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Pupil Motivation and Attitudes

The next strand of the project focused on pupil motivation and attitudes. This was based on an existing project funded by the Equal Opportunities Commission through which data had been collected on 1,700 pupils and 63 teachers in a sample of 22 primary schools. For the selection project, additional data on pupil motivation and self-esteem, and their transfer grade outcomes, were gathered.

Teachers

The next strand of the project focused on teachers and involved focus groups and semi-structured interviews with teachers from primary, secondary and grammar schools. A balance was kept between Catholic, other voluntary, controlled and integrated schools, urban/rural contexts, geographical location and socioeconomic backgrounds. Fifty teachers from 18 primary schools were interviewed from three geographical areas. The teachers included principals, and Year 6 and Year 7 teachers. In addition, three focus group sessions for 15 Year 6 and Year 7 teachers were held in each of the areas. The interviews with the primary teachers sought information on:

- each teacher's biography, including their own experiences of the Transfer Tests and (if appropriate) choices which they had made for their own children
- the impact of the Transfer Tests on curriculum planning and delivery;
- strategies for working with pupils opting in/out of the Transfer Tests
- the teacher's views on coaching for the Transfer Tests;
- the nature of teacher contact with parents pre and post Transfer Tests;
- the preparation for and nature of the transition to post-primary school.

To gain further insight into the 'annual cycle', each Year 6 and Year 7 teacher completed a single page 'grid' on which they recorded the perceived impact of the Transfer Tests at various stages of the school year in terms of:

- the curriculum - planning and delivery;
- degree and nature of parental contact;
- effects on pupils;
- provision for non-test pupils.

The data collected through the interviews with teachers in the case study schools were used to examine the perceptions and attitudes of teachers in post-primary schools. The main objectives of this strand were to assess the teachers' views on their self-motivation and performance, and their perceptions and expectations of pupils. Clearly it was important to examine the extent to which these were mediated by the teachers' position in the selective system.

Preparation and Coaching

The next strand of the project focused on preparation for the Transfer Tests and coaching outside normal school time. This sought to identify the extent and nature of preparation within school and out-of-school coaching, the reasons why parents were prepared to pay for out-of-school coaching, and the impact of out-of-school coaching on schools.

The wider society

Selection may impact not only on pupil in schools, but society at large. The next strand of the project focused on this by gathering evidence from a number of key constituencies. Interest here focused on a range of issues including parents' attitudes to education generally and the reasons why some parents opted not to enter their children for the transfer tests. In addition, information was sought on the way employers, and tertiary education and training providers, viewed the education system generally, and viewed

individuals who had come through our schools. In particular, there was interest in exploring whether a transfer label stayed with individuals after they had completed compulsory education. These data were collected through questionnaires, secondary analysis of existing data, interviews and consultations, and focus groups.

Comparative Dimension

An additional comparative dimension was added to the project after it had begun. This strand focused on a review of policy and practice in other jurisdictions. In addition, it included the collection of data from a sample of schools in Scotland.

Project Schedule

Fieldwork for the project was carried out during the 1998/99 school year. By Summer, 1999, the fieldwork was largely completed. In Autumn, 1999, data on GCSE results and post-16 destinations for Year 12 pupils in the case study schools were requested from the schools. Of the total of 30 case study schools, 25 were able to supply GCSE data and 21 were able to supply data on post-16 destinations for their Year 12 pupils.

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