

# RESEARCH BRIEFING

Department Of Education

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## THE EFFECTS OF THE SELECTIVE SYSTEM OF SECONDARY EDUCATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND

### Introduction

1. Northern Ireland has operated a selective system of secondary and grammar schools since 1947. Between 1976 and 1979 the Labour government attempted to move Northern Ireland away from the selective arrangements, but this was halted by the Conservative government elected in 1979. Following the election of the Labour government in 1997, discussion on this topic led the then Education Minister, Tony Worthington, to decide 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 delayed selection system used in the Craigavon area and was published by the Department of Education in 1998. The second, which is summarised in this Briefing Paper, comprises an examination of the effects of the selective system of secondary and grammar schools.

### Methodology

2. 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. The second comprised a detailed consideration of the impact of selection across a number of more specific domains including: post-primary schools; pupil motivation and attitudes; teachers; primary schools; coaching and Test preparation; and, public attitudes and perceptions of education.

3. The data collected and analysed for the study included:
- interviews with teachers and pupils in secondary and grammar schools drawn from across Northern Ireland;
  - an examination of the inter-relationship between secondary and grammar schools within one area of Northern Ireland, and comparison with schools in a similar area in Scotland;
  - interviews, observations and pupil data on teaching and learning in primary schools;
  - postal questionnaires on preparation for the Transfer Tests sent to every primary school in Northern Ireland;
  - postal questionnaires to a sample of parents drawn from across Northern Ireland;
  - focus group interviews with groups of parents, young people, employers, and training and third level education providers;
  - analysis of statistical data held by the Department of Education, the Department for Education and Employment, London, and the Scottish Executive Education Department; and,
  - reviews of research and policy on the organisation of schools in other European and OECD countries.

The main findings of the research are described below.

### **Impact on primary schools**

4. Preparation for the Transfer Tests has a backwash effect on the Key Stage 2 curriculum. This results in a narrowing of the curriculum as attention is focused on Test preparation and memorisation of information. In consequence, pupils are not receiving the broad and balanced experience envisaged by the statutory curriculum. In addition, Test preparation encourages teachers to adopt a teaching and learning style which is not to the benefit of all pupils.

5. Practically all primary schools prepare pupils for the Transfer Tests and most begin in Year 6. Out-of-school coaching is widespread and parents who can afford it pay up to £15 per hour for this support. The main reason is to enhance their child's chance of achieving a higher grade. While primary principals feel that in-school preparation is of value to pupils, they believe that out-of-school coaching does not provide an educational benefit.

6. In recent years the parents of about a third of pupils opt their children out of the Tests. The main reason is a belief that their children will not achieve a grade that will gain entry to a grammar school. Many parents say that the decision to opt-out is informed by advice from their child's

teacher. However, there is a significant minority of primary schools where few pupils opt out of the Transfer Tests, yet a high proportion of pupils receives a grade D.

### **Impact on post-primary schools**

7. The most important factor governing entry to grammar schools is the achievement of a high Transfer Test grade. However, due to the link between Transfer Test performance and social background, the intake to grammar schools is predominantly comprised of pupils from non-manual backgrounds, while the intake of secondary schools is largely comprised of pupils from manual backgrounds.

8. Since 1990 the proportion of pupils who enter grammar schools has increased. This was caused by the impact of open enrolment in combination with demographic trends, and the opening of two new Catholic grammar schools in the 1990s. The secondary schools that are still over-subscribed say that the ability profile of their intake has changed. Secondary teachers believe that open enrolment has created instability in the size and quality of their intakes and increased the challenge they face.

9. Teachers in secondary schools say that many pupils arrive with a sense of failure. In consequence the schools set a high priority on providing a supportive environment and work to enhance the self-esteem and self-confidence of their pupils. By contrast, grammar teachers say that their pupils arrive with a sense of success and most pupils can be motivated to work towards the high academic standards expected in their schools.

10. Interviews with post-primary teachers indicate that there is limited curriculum continuity between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3. This is attributed to the impact of Transfer Test preparation on Key Stage 2.

11. Despite the increased proportion of pupils going to grammar schools, there is limited evidence that the schools have altered their curriculum or ethos to take account of this change. There is more evidence of innovation and change in secondary schools. In particular, a minority of secondary schools have developed innovative whole-school measures geared towards enhancing academic standards.

12. In grammar schools, performance of pupils at 16 years is closely linked to the academic quality of the schools' intake. In secondary schools performance at 16 years is more closely linked with, although not wholly explained by, social disadvantage. Across all school types girls achieve higher attainment than boys.

13. Overall, grammar schools show particularly high levels of academic achievement. However, the corollary of this is that there is a long tail of low-achieving secondary schools. This may be an inevitable consequence of a selective system.

14. In non-selective systems the average enrolment of schools is higher than is the case in Northern Ireland. An analysis of enrolment numbers against available school places suggests that the current total of 238 grammar and secondary schools could be reduced to 178 in a non-selective system. An expansion of integrated education and/or co-educational schools would allow this number to be reduced still further.

### **The impact on teachers**

15. In part due to parental pressure for 'good' results, primary teachers say that the final years of primary school are organised around the demands of the Transfer Tests. Pupils are often categorised on the basis of their likely Test performance. Teachers often have low or modest expectations of pupils who are not entered for the Tests and there is some suggestion that less consistent attention is devoted to their education needs.

16. Teachers say that they have faced considerable pressure from the wave of reforms and initiatives over the past decade. Secondary teachers say that this is exacerbated by the lower status accorded to their schools, the instability in their intakes and the diverse needs of their pupils. Furthermore, secondary teachers feel that, despite the diversity of their pupils, their schools are largely judged on their academic performance. By contrast, grammar teachers say they primarily focus on achieving high academic standards. While some expressed sympathy for the task facing secondary teachers and concern about the unfairness of the Transfer Tests, others were more concerned about whether they could cope if there was a move towards non-selective arrangements.

### **The impact on pupils**

17. The most important factor for a pupil in achieving a high GCSE score is gaining a place in a grammar school. All other things being equal, being in a grammar school will add almost 16 GCSE points, equivalent to three GCSEs at grade C, to a pupil's attainment at 16 years.

18. After taking GCSEs, grammar pupils are most likely to return to school to take A Levels and work towards higher education. Secondary pupils follow a much wider range of routes, the most common of which is to enter further education.

19. There are few differences between the attitudes to school of grammar and secondary pupils. Also, there are few differences between pupils in Northern Ireland and pupils in Scotland on these attitudinal measures. Overall pupils view their own school in positive terms and focus on it rather than comparing it with others.

20. Interviews with Year 8 and Year 12 pupils showed that they were aware of differences between the school types. Often the differences indicate an awareness of the higher public esteem and status in which grammar schools are held. Many pupils lose contact with primary school friends who take a different route through post-primary education. However, it was only among

the secondary pupils that there was any sense of resentment that former friends at grammar schools now saw themselves as somehow or other better than them.

## **Society**

21. People's views on selection and the education system more generally appear to be related to their own experience. Those who passed the Transfer Test or who went to grammar schools tend to hold more positive views of the current system than those who either 'failed' the Tests or went to secondary schools. Despite this, most people have positive memories of their post-primary school.

22. The high academic standards achieved by grammar schools are held in high regard throughout society. However, many people also worry about the potential unfairness of the system as a whole and, more particularly, the level of low achievement that exists. Employers and others are adamant that their views of individuals are not affected by an individual's Transfer status. They say they are more interested in subsequent achievements and qualifications.

## **Models for the organisation of schools**

23. There appear to be perhaps five main models for the future organisation of schools in Northern Ireland. The first of these is a system of delayed selection as currently operated in the Craigavon area of Northern Ireland. The second model is to establish a system of all-through comprehensive schools, as currently operates in Scotland. The third model is to use common primary and lower secondary schools, followed by differentiated upper secondary schools, as currently operate in a number of European countries including France and Italy. The fourth model is a system of differentiated post-primary schools with distinctive academic and vocational/technical routes. The fifth model is the status quo, that is selection at age 11 years and a system of grammar and secondary schools.

24. Research into the Craigavon system carried out for the Department of Education concluded that the system was popular in the area in which it operated perhaps because a high proportion of pupils achieved places in grammar schools. The primary schools in the system had been relieved of the constraints imposed by the Transfer Tests. However, the evidence suggested that the pupils who were not selected at age 14 years were not as well served by the system.

25. The main strength of all-through comprehensive systems, or systems which operate common lower secondary schools, lies in the flexibility they provide for pupils as they maintain opportunities and choices for a longer period in a pupil's educational career. A further strength is that the schools provide diverse pupil bodies from which some social benefits may be derived. The main weaknesses of these systems are that: they limit the achievements of pupils of the highest levels of ability; if they practice rigid streaming among pupils on the basis of academic ability, then the potential social benefits arising from diversity are reduced; and, if enrolment is based on catchment areas then the social composition will reflect the social status of residential areas.

26. A number of countries, including Germany, Austria and the Netherlands use systems with different types of post-primary schools. These systems have a number of important differences from the arrangements in Northern Ireland. Their main strength is that they provide distinctive technical/vocational routes for pupils. These distinctive routes provide different curriculums, qualifications and post-school destinations and appear to enhance the employability of pupils. In addition, most incorporate a higher degree of flexibility and pupil movement between all school types than is found in Northern Ireland. Parental choice plays a significant role in post-primary allocations, thereby implying that the different routes have more equal status than is the case in Northern Ireland. However, there are significant social differences between pupils following each route, and different school types are accorded varying levels of status.

## **Conclusions**

27. Some of the strengths and weaknesses of the selective system of secondary and grammar schools have been noted above. Perhaps the most significant strength lies in the high academic standards achieved by many grammar schools. A minority of post-primary teachers feel that the teaching of science at Key Stage 2 and its inclusion in the Transfer Tests has enhanced the teaching of the subject. In addition, a minority of primary teachers welcomes the challenge provided by Transfer Test preparation.

28. A weakness in the current system is the backwash effect on the primary school curriculum. The importance attached to 'passing' the Test means many parents feel obliged to pay for out-of-school coaching, but not all parents can afford this. There are weaknesses in the links between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3. Many complain that the Transfer Tests are unfair and place undue pressure on young children, a concern shared by teachers, employers and society more generally. Secondary schools are accorded lesser status than grammar schools in the eyes of most people. Teachers in secondary schools are aware of this difference in status and many believe this judgement is unfair and inappropriate. In addition, a selective system appears to produce a longer tail of low-achieving schools.

29. Teachers in grammar schools define their role mainly as the achievement of high academic standards. By contrast, teachers in secondary schools are required to meet a wide range of objectives simultaneously, but believe they are judged largely by society on academic criteria that cast grammar schools in a more positive light. One consequence is that grammar and secondary teachers often discuss the priorities of teaching and learning quite differently. Another is that some secondary schools place undue emphasis on academic objectives in order to be seen to compete with grammar schools. More generally it enhances the problem of relative status for secondary schools in the eyes of the public. Nevertheless, for an individual pupil, achieving a grammar school place matters in academic terms and does lead to measurable gains in qualifications.

30. There has been a gradual shift towards more comprehensive systems across the OECD. In the past this shift was partly motivated by a perceived need to enhance educational equality. In fact only limited gains in this direction have been made, as all systems seem to involve some element

of social differentiation between schools. The only procedure that avoids this problem is where the allocation of pupils to post-primary school is on the basis of a lottery or random allocation. More recently, across OECD countries, debates have focused less on educational structures and more on raising standards, and there is evidence of greater convergence between the different models of school organisation. All systems potentially face problems due to the transition from one school type to another. In addition, all systems require some procedure for selecting pupils when some post-primary schools have more pupils seeking entry than there are places available.

31. High academic standards are important and schools are encouraged to increase the performance of their pupils. For individual pupils, qualifications open the way to further educational opportunities and enhance employment prospects. However, the desirable objectives for an education system encompass a wider range of social, educational and economic outcomes. Furthermore, it is important to recognise the ways in which children develop and learn and to create conditions that allow all pupils to maximise their potential. A debate that simply revolves around school structures may unduly narrow the terms of the discussion, encourage the inaccurate view that significant problems are easily solved and lose sight of the broader purposes of education. The starting-point for discussion ought to be the social, educational and economic objectives young people should achieve from their educational experience. Then the education structure that seems best placed to provide these ends can be determined.

### **The Project**

32. The project was carried out for the Department of Education by Tony Gallagher, Alan Smith and colleagues from Queen's University Belfast, the University of Ulster, Stranmillis University College, St Mary's University College and BDO Stoy Hayward. The research cost £110,000.

### **Reports**

33. The Main Report on the research is entitled 'The Effects of the Selective System of Secondary Education in Northern Ireland' and limited copies are available, free of charge, from the Department of Education (address on back page). The report is based on a set of detailed research papers which are published in two separate volumes and are listed on page 8 overleaf. Copies of all the reports can be accessed on the DE Internet site at [www.deni.gov.uk](http://www.deni.gov.uk)

*This paper is a summary of the research report and the views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Department of Education.*



## RESEARCH PAPERS

- SEL1.1: Overview paper (T Gallagher and A Smith)
- SEL2.1: Statistical patterns in schools (T Gallagher)
- SEL2.2: Schools in a non-selective system (T Gallagher, P McKeown and E McKeown)
- SEL3.1: The pattern of performance at GCSE (I Shuttleworth and P Daly)
- SEL3.2: After post-compulsory education: first destinations of Northern Ireland Year 12 pupils in 1999 (P Daly and I Shuttleworth)
- SEL4.1: Attitudes to education (T Gallagher and E McKeown)
- SEL4.2: Patterns of participation in grammar and secondary schools (T Gallagher, P McKeown and E McKeown)
- SEL4.3: Interviews with principals of post-primary schools (G Byrne)
- SEL4.4: Interviews with members of senior management teams (T Gallagher)
- SEL4.5: Interviews with Heads of Department of Maths (E McKeown)
- SEL4.6: Interviews with Post-primary Heads of English Departments (J Alexander)
- SEL4.7: Interviews with Heads of Department of Science (T Gallagher and B McClune)
- SEL4.8: Interviews with Special Educational Needs' Co-ordinators and Heads of Pastoral Care (R Kilpatrick and F Quinn)
- SEL4.9: Interviews with groups of Year 8 pupils (A Sutherland)
- SEL4.10: Interviews with Year 12 pupils (T Gallagher)
- SEL4.11: Area Study (P McKeown, I Shuttleworth, E McKeown, A Smith, U Birthistle and A Montgomery)
- SEL5.1: Pupil Motivation and Attitudes - Self-Esteem, Locus of Control, Learning Disposition and the Impact of Selection on Teaching and Learning (J Johnston and B McClune)
- SEL6.1: Teachers and Selection in Northern Ireland (A Smith, U Birthistle, A Montgomery and S Farrell)
- SEL7.1: Impact of coaching (L Caul, G Eason and S McWilliams)
- SEL8.1: Public views on selection (J D'Arcy, BDO Stoy Hayward)
- SEL9.1: Comparative perspectives on school systems (T Gallagher)
- SEL9.2: Case study schools in Northern Ireland and Scotland (T Gallagher and E McKeown)
- SEL9.3: Survey of selective schools in England (AM Montgomery and T Gallagher)



## **PREVIOUS RESEARCH BRIEFINGS**

DENI funded research 1993/94	RB 1/1993
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Persistent school absenteeism in Northern Ireland in 1992	RB 2/1995
Approaches to differentiation in primary schools	RB 1/1996
Education and economic development in Northern Ireland: empirical evidence and regional perspectives	RB 3/1996
DENI funded research 1996/97	RB 1/1997
A follow-up survey of teachers who qualified in 1991 and 1992	RB 2/1997
Diversification of the first foreign language - a review of the literature	RB 3/1997
An initial analysis of the impact of formula funding and local management of schools	RB 4/1997
A review of research evidence on the apparent underachievement of boys	RB 5/1997
Staying on in full-time education in Northern Ireland: an economic analysis	RB 6/1997
Science at Key Stage 4	RB 2/1998
DENI funded research 1997/98	RB 3/1998
Practice in mainstream schools for children with special educational needs	RB 5/1998
An evaluation of the Craigavon 2-tier system	RB 6/1998
Northern Ireland suspension and expulsion study (1996/97)	RB 1/1999
Supporting newly qualified teachers in post-primary schools	RB 2/1999
Literature review: integrated education in Northern Ireland	RB 3/1999
DENI funded research 1998/99	RB 4/1999
Women in teaching: equal opportunities	RB 5/1999
Three years later: a follow-up survey of teachers who qualified in 1995	RB 1/2000
Immersion education: a literature review	RB 2/2000
From pre-school to school: a review of the research literature	RB 3/2000

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This Research Briefing is also available, on request, in Irish.

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