

## **Impacts of academic selection in Northern Ireland – literature review for Independent Review of Education**

In March 2022, the Independent Review of Education in Northern Ireland commissioned the independent think tank Pivotal to provide a literature review about the impacts of academic selection at age 11.

This short report begins with a review of the policy context for academic selection at 11, before exploring academic and third sector evidence on the impact of the transfer tests on multiple factors including social mobility, academic attainment and wellbeing. The report concludes with an overview of gaps in the evidence base that require further investigation.

### **Policy context in Northern Ireland**

#### ***Before the Good Friday Agreement – the period up to 1998***

The *Northern Ireland Education Act 1947* put into law all the elements of the *Education Act 1944* for England and Wales (the ‘*Butler Act*’), providing free education for all children aged 5 to 15. As in England and Wales, an academic selection test at age 11 determined whether a child would attend a grammar school with an academic focus, or a secondary school with a more vocational focus.

In the 1960s, growing evidence of the negative impacts of academic selection at 11, particularly about lower attainment in secondary schools, led to the introduction of comprehensive post-primary education in England in 1965 (McMurray, 2020). However, the abolition of grammar schools was strongly opposed in Northern Ireland and so selection at 11 continued. One change that did happen was the introduction of the ‘Dickson Plan’ in the Craigavon area from 1969, where all children continued from primary school to junior high school at age 11, with a selection process then at age 14 to decide what type of school they attended after this.

While evidence of the inequitable outcomes from selection at 11 in Northern Ireland continued to emerge through the 1970s and 80s, the existing system was maintained without significant change (Gallagher, 2021; McMurray, 2020). Given that ‘The Troubles’ dominated this period of Northern

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Ireland's history, this may have been because political and social focus lay elsewhere, alongside a reluctance from the then direct rule ministers to make such a controversial change.

## ***After devolution – 1999 to 2008***

Selection at 11 received more political focus after the Good Friday (Belfast) Agreement in 1998 and the establishment of the new devolved Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive in 1999. The first Education Minister, Martin McGuinness (Sinn Féin), commissioned the '*Review Body on Post Primary Education*' whose report became known as the '*Burns Report*' (DENI, 2001). It was unequivocal in its recommendation that transfer tests should end as soon as possible. Reactions to the report were less clear-cut and there was no agreement between the political parties. A public consultation elicited a large number of responses and a wide range of views. Most respondents were unhappy with the existing system of selection at 11, but supportive of some differentiation in education provision. There was no consensus on the way forward, in either political or public discourse (Gallagher, 2002; Roulston & Milliken, 2021).

By the time the consultation on the *Burns Report* was published, the Northern Ireland Assembly had gone into a period of suspension because of political disputes between the parties. During this time, a further review was commissioned by the direct rule minister. Called '*The Post-Primary Review Working Group*' (which became known as the '*Costello Report*' (Department of Education, 2003)), its aim was to look at how the recommendations in the *Burns Report* could be taken forward. The *Costello Report* recommended that the transfer tests should be abolished immediately and replaced with a system of parent- and pupil-based choice, informed by a pupil profile. Alongside, it said that an entitlement framework should be introduced to ensure a broad and relevant curriculum no matter what post-primary school a child attended. Again, however, there was no subsequent agreement between the political parties about the way forward. Public debate about the issue intensified (Roulston & Milliken, 2021; McMurray, 2020).

Despite the lack of local consensus, the direct rule minister accepted all the recommendations in the *Costello Report*, and said that the last transfer tests would take place in 2008. To enact this, the UK Government introduced the *Education (Northern Ireland) Order 2006* which prohibited post-primary schools from using academic criteria to select pupils. On the return of the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly in 2007, the Education Minister Caitríona Ruane (Sinn Féin) said that academic selection would cease, although this was done without the explicit backing of the Executive or Assembly. In November 2008, the final government-run academic selection tests took place (Roulston & Milliken, 2021).

## ***From 2008 to the present day***

Many grammar schools and their supporters were very unhappy about the abolition of the government-run tests after 2008, so they moved quickly to set up their own tests through two new consortia (called AQE and Post Primary Transfer Consortium (PPTC), which were largely used by state and Catholic schools respectively). The new tests were run by these two private companies and were unregulated. They tested English and maths only, with the first tests taking place in November 2009. As the tests were not run by the government, they were held on Saturday mornings in participating grammar schools. Depending on which grammar school they wanted to attend, some children did the AQE tests, some did the PPTC tests, and some did both tests.

Meanwhile, the Department of Education (DE) issued guidance for the 2009-10 school year “to which schools must pay due regard” saying that post-primary schools should not use academic criteria to select pupils and that primary schools should not spend time preparing children for unregulated tests (Roulston & Milliken, 2021). However, as part of the political talks at St Andrews to restore the devolved institutions in 2006, the DUP had secured a concession in the negotiations that would allow grammar schools to use academic selection if they wished. This meant that grammar schools were not compelled to follow the DE guidance and so they were able to continue to use academic selection via the new unregulated tests (Gallagher, 2021).

This system of unregulated testing continued. Some primary schools adhered to the guidance about not spending time preparing children for the tests, while others did not, often citing parental expectations. In 2015, DE repeated the previous guidance to primary schools about not preparing children for tests, but this was then reversed by the new Education Minister Peter Weir (DUP) in 2016, saying that he supported post-primary schools who wanted to use academic criteria and that primary schools could help children prepare for the tests (Roulston and Milliken, 2021).

In 2017, AQE and PPTC held discussions, supported by DE, about establishing a single transfer test, but negotiations broke down. They re-started later, and it was announced in autumn 2021 that a single transfer test would be put in place from autumn 2023.

Because of the Covid-19 pandemic, transfer tests were not held in the 2020-21 academic year. The tests were initially postponed from November 2020 to January 2021, but then cancelled for public health reasons. Grammar schools used alternative criteria to select pupils for entry in September 2021, for example having a sibling at the school, being an eldest child or attending a feeder primary school.

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The transfer tests resumed for the next cohort of Year 7 children in November 2021. Extra time was given for the tests and the range of topics covered was reduced, in recognition of the learning time lost during school shutdowns because of Covid.

Parents choose whether their children sit the tests, although this choice is made in the context of most grammar schools requiring children to sit one of the tests in order to gain admission. In November 2021, 8,280 children sat the AQE tests and 5,450 sat the PPTC tests (Meredith, 2021), out of a total Year 7 cohort of around 25,000. As a rough indication, we would estimate that around 50% of Year 7 children sit one or both of the tests. A more accurate estimate is not possible as there is no information available about how many children sit both tests.

In conclusion, we offer the following three reflections on this policy summary:

- Academic selection at 11 has been and remains a very politically contentious issue in Northern Ireland. There are strongly held views and interest groups on both sides of the debate.
- There is a long history of reviews of academic selection, but there has been little change as a result, despite the weight of the evidence provided and the strength of the recommendations made. Politicians have been unable or unwilling to find an agreement on the way forward.
- Political positions on academic selection largely divide along unionist/nationalist lines. This political divide has contributed to the failure to reach any political consensus.

## **Impacts of academic selection**

This section explores the effects, if any, of academic selection on the following factors: social mobility, GCSE attainment, Higher Education participation, curriculum delivery and wellbeing. A review of the reliability and validity of transfer tests and alternative models of selection are provided. The section ends with an overview of gaps in the evidence base that require further investigation.

### ***Social mobility***

This section begins with an overview of the available evidence that supports selective education as an enabler of social mobility, before exploring the factors that relate to the attainment gap between selective and non-selective schools.

Supporters of selective education propose a number of benefits from grammar school education, including the belief that it enables social mobility as these schools typically obtain better academic

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outcomes than non-selective schools. Supporters says that children with different abilities benefit from different types of education and that assessment operates elsewhere in the educational system. These issues will be explored below, initially focusing on the role of academic selection and social mobility, which is perhaps one of the most commonly cited benefits of grammar schools.

Some advocates for academic selection highlight findings from Mansfield (2019) who claimed that grammar schools in England offer significant social mobility opportunities to disadvantaged children that are not available in non-selective schools. However, a number of academics have undermined Mansfield's argument, challenging the methodology (Dickson & Macmillan, 2020) and analysis method (Boliver & Capsada-Munsech, 2020). Furthermore, data from longitudinal cohort studies does not support the view that grammar schools are positive agents of social mobility (Sullivan, 2020).

Whilst the transfer tests in Northern Ireland may enable children from less privileged backgrounds to attend selective schools, data shows that students from lower socio-economic status (SES) households are very under-represented in grammar schools. Northern Ireland Department of Education (DE) data consistently indicates that there are higher concentrations of disadvantaged children in non-selective schools than in grammar schools, using Free School Meals (FSM) as a measure of deprivation. 22% of Year 8 pupils entitled to FSM attended a grammar, compared to 78% who attended a non-grammar (DE, 2019/20). Previous research has also highlighted the link between parental income and grammar school attendance (e.g. Jerrim & Sims, 2018) and *"the odds of those entitled to free school meals securing a place at a grammar school are nearly five times lower than others"* (Connolly et al, 2013). This finding is consistent with previous research in England which indicates that only 3% of grammar school pupils are eligible for FSM, despite accounting for 13% of the national pupil population (Andrews, Hutchinson and Johnes 2016).

In contrast to the argument that selection enables social mobility, evidence shows that the selective system prevents children from different socio-economic backgrounds and different academic abilities learning together. Academic selection may act as a structural barrier to equity (Shewbridge, et al., 2014, P.20) with the transfer tests acting as a social sorting mechanism (Wilson, 2016, P.117). This issue was highlighted by a previous policy review completed by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 2016. Furthermore, evidence shows that increasing the social mix of students within schools can increase the relative performance of disadvantaged students, without any apparent negative effects on overall performance (Causa and Chapuis, 2009). This suggests that distributing students more evenly across schools might benefit low performers without disadvantaging better performing students.

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The reasons why low proportions of children from lower SES backgrounds attend grammar schools are complex and multi-factored. This point is demonstrated by a 2017 comprehensive study which explored key factors associated with achievement and deprivation (Leitch et al., 2017). Whilst the authors did not focus exclusively on academic selection, the method of the study and findings are relevant to the current review. Leitch et al., (2017), described three levels of factors that may enhance or reduce educational achievement: immediate (individual-home-community), school and structural/policy. The authors found, amongst other factors, that students with parental support, strong community and parental links and high quality learning environments were more likely to meet their potential than if these factors were weak. Low expectations and poor home-school relationships, school absenteeism and inadequacy of support for those with SEN were found to inhibit attainment. If we apply these findings to academic selection, this study would suggest that children from more disadvantaged family and community backgrounds are less likely to be successful in the transfer tests.

Children from less privileged backgrounds may be already educationally disadvantaged prior to sitting the transfer tests due to the increased likelihood of historical exposure to adversity, reduced opportunities for learning and other social factors. Using an English sample of students, the Educational Policy Institute (2016) claims that approximately 40% of the gap in attainment between advantaged and disadvantaged pupils emerges before children start school. By the age that children in Northern Ireland sit the transfer tests, 60% of the attainment gap has emerged, equivalent to 10 months of learning.

The role of academic tuition is another factor that may explain the differences in transfer test success between families of different backgrounds. Those with more privilege and disposable income may have the capacity to utilise private tutoring to prepare their child for the transfer tests (Jerrim & Sims, 2018). Although there is little published evidence on the impact of tuition on transfer test success, Jerrim & Sims (2018) found that 80% of those receiving tuition subsequently attended a grammar school, compared to 40% of those who were not tutored. Parents from socially disadvantaged areas may be less likely to afford tuition fees and have an expectation that primary schools will provide adequate preparation for the test (Gallagher & Smith, 2000). Further work is needed in this area to ascertain the impact of tuition on outcomes and ascertain the role, if any, policy may have on access to tuition for those from less privileged backgrounds.

In summary, there is limited evidence to support the argument that grammar schools are a significant tool for social mobility. Whilst some children from less privileged backgrounds may succeed in accessing a grammar school, high quality education should be accessible to all children. In fact,

academic selection poses a structural challenge to equity in Northern Ireland, as those children who attend grammar schools are more likely to achieve better academic attainments than those who do not, and we know that children from better-off backgrounds are much more likely to attend grammar schools. As a result there is a risk that transfer tests perpetuate an ‘inter-generational transmission of privilege’ (Tomasevski, 2003a, p.10) within education in Northern Ireland (Henderson, 2020). Furthermore, the cognitive and social segregation created by academic selection creates unequal access to high performing schools (Boorah and Knox, 2015).

## ***GCSE attainment***

Students in Northern Ireland obtain some of the highest GCSE results in the UK and advocates of academic selection link the role of grammar school education to this success. However, the achievements of these high performers potentially mask the ‘long tail of underachievement’ which disproportionately affects socially disadvantaged children (Boorah and Knox, 2015). Low levels of GCSE attainment in non-selective schools compared to grammar schools prompted the OECD to describe the education system in Northern Ireland as having ‘clear structural challenges to equity’ (Shewbridge et al., 2014).

Pupils in selective schools consistently obtain a higher proportion of 5 GCSEs A\*-C compared to their peers in non-selective education. This pattern has been observed for decades in Northern Ireland, although there has been some recent progress in narrowing the gap through programmes to address educational underachievement. Data from the DE in Northern Ireland shows that 94% of students at grammar schools achieved five GCSEs at grades A\*-C including English and maths compared to 51% of students from non-selective schools (DE, 2020). This data is consistent with studies of English pupils which found that 97% of grammar school pupils obtain five A\*-C GCSEs versus the national average of 57% in non-selective schools (EPI, 2016). This is a familiar pattern which indicates that the most significant factor that influences GCSE attainment in Northern Ireland was whether a student had attended a selective school or not (e.g. Gallagher & Smith, 2000, Connolly et al., 2013 etc.).

Whilst attainment rates may vary year-by-year, the likelihood of a young person obtaining the ‘basic standard’ of five GCSE passes at grades A\*-C in Northern Ireland are over three and half times higher if they attend a grammar school compared to a non-grammar school (Henderson, Harris, Purdy & Walsh, 2020). Previous research has found that children in England who are not in receipt of FSM are three times more likely to obtain 5 GCSEs A\*-C than those in receipt of FSM, and four times more likely in Northern Ireland (Connolly et al., 2013).

Educational underachievement has been found in other standardised tests such as The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), a study of educational achievement organised by the OECD. The PISA is used to assess pupils aged 15 on the areas of reading, mathematics and science. The data indicates that those from less privileged backgrounds in Northern Ireland have poorer academic outcomes than their more privileged peers and that academic selection is a factor in these sustained achievement gaps (Connolly et al., 2013).

Whilst there is agreement that the majority of pupils at selective schools consistently obtain higher academic achievements than their peers in non-selective schools, there is less agreement on the reasons behind this finding. It is likely related to a complex interaction of individual, societal, parental and structural factors. Further research is required to understand these factors and develop evidence-based policies to support those most in need.

### ***Higher Education participation***

Students from Northern Ireland have some of the highest participation rates in Higher Education (HE) in the UK. Although access to HE has significantly increased over the past decade, social inequalities continued to occur in terms of course level, field of study and institutional status (Delaney et al., 2020). This report has highlighted that attainment levels of pupils in selective schools are higher than their non-selective school peers. Therefore, it is not surprising that there are marked differences in the numbers of students from selective education backgrounds attending Higher Education compared to peers from non-selective settings. The long-term advantage provided to those who attend selective education over those who attend non-selective schools has attracted criticism from leading academics and the Northern Ireland Commission for Human Rights (NICHR) (Lundy et al., 2012).

Whilst Mansfield (2019) reported that grammar schools offer enhanced opportunities for children to enter highly selective universities, their findings are not universally accepted. Academic selection at age 11 may widen the socioeconomic gap in students' aspirations and abilities to continue to HE (Jerrim & Sims, 2019). Some students may have developed a negative learner identity following the failure of the transfer test whilst others may fail to access specialist learning support in non-selective education. Furthermore, HE admission processes have been described as 'unfair' (Croxford & Raffe, 2014, pg 90) with respect to social class.



Graduates have higher employment and earning potential than non-graduates, and the link between transfer tests, selective education, access to HE and future earning potential is concerning. Drawing on FSM as an indicator of SES, Northern Ireland data has consistently highlighted that those entitled to FSM are less likely to go to HE, compared to those who are not in receipt of FSM. This effect is greater for boys than girls. In 2018/2019 68% of students from selective schools attended HE compared to 21% of non-selective schools (NISRA, 2020). Considerably higher proportions of students from non-selective schools attended Further Education (FE) (43%) compared to pupils from selective schools (20%) in the same time period. This pattern of higher FE attendance from non-selective schools is commonplace. Similar patterns have been found within large scale studies of selective education in England which criticise grammar schools for creating further segregation for those who already experience disadvantage through structural racism and/or poverty (EPI, 2016; Gorard & Siddiqui, 2018).

### ***Impact of academic selection on curriculum delivery in primary schools***

The content of the current transfer tests is not regulated and so there is no assurance that it is aligned with the Key Stage 2 curriculum for Northern Ireland (OECD, 2014). Having reviewed information on the two transfer test providers' websites, the OECD review also noted important differences in the topics covered by the different tests.

Evidence shows that the academic selection process may have a significant impact on curriculum delivery in the final two years of primary school. Time is devoted to test preparation, with children categorised in teachers' minds depending on their likely performance in the tests. There has been some suggestion that teachers gave less consistent attention to children who were not doing the tests. Teaching in the period before the tests had a narrow focus on the test content and test technique, with some teachers saying they made up for this by covering a broader range of topics in the remaining time in Year 7 after the tests (Gallagher and Smith, 2000).

There was a similar finding in the recent '*A Fair Start*' review into educational under-achievement (Purdy et al, 2021), where evidence emerged of academic selection skewing teaching in Key Stage 2 towards literacy and numeracy at the expense of other areas of learning.

Post-primary teachers reported that the focus on preparing children for transfer tests in Years 6 and 7 meant that some children arrived in Year 8 lacking the breadth of knowledge of other parts of the curriculum. Teachers reported having to 'start again' on some areas because of this (Gallagher and

Smith, 2000). Whilst this research is over twenty years old and there has been some changes in the test format, it seems likely that the skewing of teaching in Year 6 and 7 remains the case.

### ***Impact of testing on wellbeing***

Advocates of academic selection highlight that some children are confident in their academic abilities and the system encourages excellence, enabling some children to become more resilient by preparing for future assessments. However, there is limited published evidence to support these views. In studies where students demonstrate some positivity about the beginning of the test preparation process, this novelty period appears to be short lived and the same students tend to be critical of the process (Leonard & Davey, 2001a)

There is a clear and consistent evidence base on the influence of anxiety on test performance (e.g. Howard, 2020). Whilst examinations are common place in post-primary settings, the impact of assessment on 10-11 year olds is significant due to a lack of developmental maturity, the 'high stakes' nature of the transfer tests and the lack of experience in completing formal examinations. The transfer test is unique in that it cannot be repeated and the consequences of failure may have long-term implications for a child's academic outcomes.

The emotional impact of the transfer test has been highlighted for over two decades in numerous academic and third sector reports. A report commissioned by the Department of Education and Save the Children (2001) found that the majority of transfer test students were anxious and fearful about the test. Similar findings were reported by subsequent study (Horgan, 2007) which also documented the pressure children feel to please their parents by doing well in the test. The Northern Ireland Children and Young People's Commissioner completed a comprehensive consultation with children and parents/carers in 2010 which also documented the negative emotional impact of transfer tests on children (NICCY, 2010). This report highlighted parents' concerns about their children's wellbeing and anxiety levels.

Whilst many of these studies are over a decade old, there is little evidence to suggest that testing conditions or indeed mental health support services have improved to compensate for the distress that may be associated with the transfer tests. Indeed a recent small-scale study of the impact of the transfer tests in Northern Ireland found that 60% of 300 surveyed pupils felt that the test was 'bad for them/did not make them feel more confident/able' (Right 2 Education, 2019).

The available evidence on the long-term impact of ‘failing’ the transfer test raises concerns about students developing a negative ‘learner identity’ (Rees et al., 1997; Furlong & Lunt, 2020). However, there is limited high quality evidence on the long-term impact with a Northern Ireland population and further work is required in this area.

### ***Reliability and validity of the transfer tests***

This section explores two key factors: the measurement and definition of intelligence, and reliability issues associated with the current unregulated transfer tests.

‘Intelligence’ and ability are contentious concepts within cognitive and development literature, with numerous quality research projects highlighting that both concepts are inherently linked to multifactorial, biological, psychological and sociological factors. Thus it is commonly accepted that ability is a fluid, multi-dimensional concept. Transfer tests are premised on the idea that a child’s ‘suitability’ for grammar school can be captured by a small number of tests which cannot be repeated. There are no other tests in the UK that have such a pivotal role in a child’s future education.

As children develop and mature their capacity to learn, process and analyse information significantly changes. Some children may experience mental health problems, neglect, trauma and/or poverty which reduces their ‘ability’ at age 10-11, but through support this may change in their teenage years. However, these children may have already been labelled as a ‘failure’ and be on a trajectory of reduced success compared to their peers in selective schools.

The authors of this review found no published evidence on the reliability and validity of the current, non-government supported, transfer tests used in Northern Ireland. The transfer tests provide a single score but there is no published evidence available on what single attribute the tests measure or how this score relates to the concepts that it claims to assess (e.g. English, Mathematics). Nevertheless, the transfer tests are used to determine a student’s capacity to benefit from a grammar school education.

The issue of validity and reliability was explored extensively by Gardner and Cowan (2005) who used three versions of the government approved (pre-2009) transfer tests with 52 primary schools. The authors analysed over 3,000 tests to find that tests were technically unreliable and could only be trusted to differentiate the cohort into the top 12% and lowest 18% performing pupils. Their analysis showed that only 18 marks (out of 150) spanned the five grade boundaries and separated the top A band from the lowest D band. The candidate ranking system had a potential to misclassify up to two-

thirds of their sample by up to three grades. Whilst government approved testing was discontinued in 2008, there is no evidence to suggest that the private providers of the current transfer tests have improved reliability and validity measures.

The transfer tests do not adhere to standardised conventions of other statutory tests in the UK. The tests are not underpinned by published standards of practice or technical fidelity. The lack of publicly available data to ascertain the reliability and validity of the assessments raises concerns about basic ethical requirements in testing. Furthermore, the reliance on commercial tests to dictate a child's future raises concerns about the legitimacy of the process.

Due to the lack of publicly available data it is not possible to compare the measurements used in the PPTC and AQE tests and assess the relative difficulty of the two tests. Previous research has indicated a gender bias of the PPTC test, as boys typically perform better on multiple choice tests than girls (Elwood, 2013). Similarly, girls may be at an advantage over their male peers who complete the AQE test due to the comprehension style of questions.

### ***Alternative models of selection***

There are multiple approaches to academic assessment across the world, influenced by a country's unique social and political context. Countries that favour a more holistic and egalitarian approach to assessment tend to have more inclusive policies towards education, childcare and health and social care.

In OECD countries there is a general trend for assessment at a later stage than age 10-11, however some countries do use selection processes at age 10 (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2011). Children who are less privileged perform better in systems which do not operate early academic testing or 'tracking', whilst the performance of high SES children is not affected (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2011, p. 155; Henderson, 2021).

Some countries rely on continuous teacher assessment to inform decision making for post-primary school placement. This approach reduces the pressure on students to demonstrate knowledge under one or two specific test dates and allows teachers to monitor progress and develop support strategies for those who need it. However, the process of continuous assessment may impact on the student-teacher and/or parent-teacher relationship. Continuous assessment may also be difficult to moderate and subject to parental legal challenge.

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Continuous assessment informs the Belgian approach to academic assessment which occurs at the age of 12 within the Flemish community and at 14 years old for the remainder of Belgian students. The differing ages reflects the diverse communities of Flemish, German and French speaking families within Belgium. Children are provided with four school options which include provision for technical training. Grade repetition is quite high in Belgium (34% compared to 11% OECD average) with some children repeating the school year for social and/or academic reasons (e.g. failing to reach a standard of learning). Notably educational reform in Belgium was influenced by a systemic response to inequality which involved additional funding for language support in pre-school children and childcare support for low-income families.

The Finnish education system had some overlaps with the UK model until it experienced reform in 1972 to address educational inequality and raise overall academic attainment for all pupils. This reform included the removal of academic selection at age 11 and increased funding for a comprehensive school system with options for vocational training at age 16. The reform included enhanced provision for those with additional needs and access to school counsellors. The reforms reduced variation between schools and challenged educational inequalities as evidenced through low variations in PISA scores in an OECD review.

In New Zealand concerns over an emphasis on summative assessments or 'end point testing' led to the creation of continuous assessment within education (Ministry of Education, 2010, p5). Emphasis is placed upon developing children's identities as learners and children attend primary school until the age of 10 at 'contributing' primary schools or 13 at 'full' primary schools. 'Contributing schools' provide education for children aged 5-10 years old whilst children can attend 'full' schools until they transition to comprehensive school. The transition to comprehensive school is based on localities, with the majority of children attending the closest school in their area (Carter, 2008). Children may attend schools outside of their designated areas but places are not guaranteed. As a result, the system has received some criticism for reducing parental/child choice.

In Northern Ireland, an alternative to selection at age 10-11 was introduced in 1969 in Craigavon, referred to as the 'Craigavon model' or the 'Dickson model'. This model does not include a transfer test at age 11. Instead, all children move to junior high school for three years to complete Key Stage 3, before transferring to other schools for Key Stage 4 at age 14. Decisions about a pupil's Key Stage 4 school are based on continuous assessment and school examinations.

Advocates for later stage assessment report that older children may be better prepared for testing demands whilst allowing teachers more time in post-primary school to understand the child's needs.

Furthermore, later stage assessments are less disruptive to Key Stage 2 learning and may remove the sense of 'failure' that some children may experience at age 10-11.

The Craigavon model was evaluated in 1998, but it was difficult to compare attainment levels of pupils with the rest of Northern Ireland due to student movement within and out of the schools. There was no evidence to suggest that the model provided a better alternative to transfer tests at 11, nor was evidence found that this model provided a better educational experience for less academically able students (DENI, 1998). The Craigavon model would benefit from an updated evaluation which includes measures of wellbeing and key-stakeholder experiences (e.g. children, parents and educators).

## **Academic selection in the United Kingdom**

### *England*

Academic selection at age 10-11 is less common in England than in Northern Ireland, with only 5% of state-funded post-primary students attending a grammar school in 2019 (DE, 2020). There were 163 registered grammar schools in 2019, 60% of which are based in 11 Local Education Authorities (LEA) in England. The South East and South West of England have the largest proportion of grammar schools in England.

Tests and testing procedures used by grammar schools vary across England, making it difficult to compare the process with the model used in Northern Ireland. In areas with high levels of academic selection, grammar schools may work together to process their transfer tests, for example the 'Kent Test'.

In England, the [Department for Education's Schools Admissions Code](#) prohibits non-grammar state schools from using ability as a new selection criteria. All schools must give the highest priority in admissions to looked after children. If over-subscribed, factors like sibling attendance, feeder primary schools and distance from the school are used. In addition, faith schools are allowed to use faith-related criteria to select a proportion of pupils if over-subscribed. Specialist schools can select up to 10% of pupils because they have a particular aptitude for the school's specialism, e.g. performing arts, technology or sport.

Some English independent schools, which are not in receipt of government funding, use their own entrance assessments and work together with other schools to reduce administrative processes associated with testing (e.g. The London 11+ Consortium).

## *Scotland and Wales*

There are no state funded grammar schools in Scotland and Wales, although some schools retain the title 'grammar' school but do not use selection tests.

In summary, academic selection at aged 10-11 is relatively uncommon across the UK. In areas with higher concentrations of grammar schools it is difficult to compare testing processes with the model used in Northern Ireland due to the lack of publicly available outcome data.

## **Summary**

- This review has shown that the transfer test debate is situated within the context of multiple previous policy reviews and academic studies, but with little political or public consensus about the desirability of academic selection or about alternatives to it.
- Grammar school education is often cited as a 'levelling up' mechanism that enables social mobility. However, the available research indicates that there is a lack of robust evidence to suggest that academic selection enhances social mobility, with some studies demonstrating the opposite effect.
- There is little-to-no evidence to suggest that grammar schools have a socially redistributive effect based on data from the Department of Education (DE), large-scale studies in England and research completed specifically in Northern Ireland. In fact, the available evidence suggests that academic selection contributes to social segregation.
- The available evidence also raises concerns about the use of unregulated tests to measure dimensions of intelligence that are difficult to validate due to the lack of published outcome data from test providers.
- Whilst the 'Craigavon plan' provides an alternative model of academic selection in Northern Ireland, there is a lack of recent evidence to compare the outcomes from this model with those from the current system of selection at 11.

## **Areas for further investigation**

The authors of this brief review noted a number of areas that require further research:

1. There is a need for a comprehensive statistical analysis of pupil attainment which takes account of the complexity of factors associated with differential achievement similar to the study completed by Leitch et al., (2017), to explore factors that may enhance or reduce educational achievement including: immediate (individual-home-community), school and structural/policy issues.
2. There is a lack of evidence on the experiences of ethnic minority populations in completing the transfer tests. Studies in England have indicated that BAME communities may be disproportionately disadvantaged by transfer tests. Further work is required in Northern Ireland to explore the experiences of ethnic minority children and the transfer tests.
3. There is limited evidence about the long-term impact of children 'failing' the transfer tests using a Northern Ireland sample. Future research should include key stakeholders such as children, parents/carers and teachers to ascertain the long-term impact, if any, of transfer test failure on a child's learner identity and future outcomes.
4. An alternative model of selection at 14 (the 'Craigavon model') has been in operation in Northern Ireland for over 50 years. However, there is limited current evidence about the impact of this model on student wellbeing and student outcomes, including a lack of robust comparisons between the 'Craigavon model' and the transfer test model used in the rest of Northern Ireland.
5. Further work is needed to ascertain the impact of private tuition on outcomes and ascertain the role, if any, policy may have on access to extra tuition for those from less privileged backgrounds.

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**8 April 2022**



## Appendix

### Report of the review body on post-primary education – ‘Burns report’ (2001)

#### Summary of proposals

- Transfer tests should end as soon as possible. Schools would not be allowed to use any test or other measure of academic ability to select pupils.
- A Pupil Profile would collect information about a child during the last three years of primary school. This would include information about how well a child is doing in all areas of schoolwork, how hard they work and concentrate, what they enjoy, how they get on with other pupils etc.
- In the last year of primary school, the head-teacher or teacher would discuss a child’s Pupil Profile with parents, in order to help inform parents’ decisions about suitable post-primary schools.
- Parents then decide on school choices for their child, ranked in order of preference.
- Post-primary schools would not be allowed to use the Pupil Profile, or any test, to select pupils.
- Academic criteria should not be used to decide on places at post-primary schools. Instead, schools would use a defined list of criteria to determine who gets a place: order of preference; sibling attendance at school or eldest child in family; parent employed by school; special circumstances; distance of home from school.
- Education in post-primary schools should meet each child’s individual needs. Curriculum in the first three years of post-primary school would be broadly the same across all schools. In Years 11 and 12, there might be flexibility to offer a broader range of subjects or for some schools to develop a specialism.
- Networks of different types of schools in an area would be developed (called ‘Collegiates’). These school networks would work together to offer children a wider range of subjects and to help raise standards for all children. ‘Collegiates’ would also have a role in providing continuing professional development for teachers.

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The Burns report emphasised that no decisions had been taken about its recommendations. It stated that the earliest opportunity for the transfer tests to end would be 2002, but that this would depend on the outcome of the consultation, decision-making in the Executive and Assembly, and any necessary legislation.

If agreed, the report estimated that the full implementation of its proposals, including the Pupil Profile and the Collegiate system, could take up to eight years.

A [six-page summary of the proposals](#) in the Burns report and [an Executive Summary of the report](#) are available on the Department of Education's website.

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