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# Academic Selection

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The Purpose of this paper is to provide the Education Committee with an overview of the selective school system in Northern Ireland. The paper will consider the history of academic selection and the lead up to the current system of two privately run exams. The paper will also consider the administration and structure of both exams as well as their validity and comparability. It will examine the impact of academic selection on educational outcomes for children, particularly how it may affect those from disadvantaged backgrounds. The paper will explore implications of the selective school system for key stakeholders - children parents and teachers. Finally, it will finish by briefly exploring any implications that the current system may have for children's rights and the broader purposes of education.

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# 1. Key Points

The role of academic selection and its determinant effects on pupil's attainment has been a constant feature of concern and debate in Northern Ireland.

Criticisms that are levelled at the transfer process include that it is socially inequitable, distorts the curriculum and causes stress in pupils. Proponents of the system argue that it presents an opportunity for every child, regardless of social background, to access a grammar school education.

In the early-mid 2000's several attempts were made to reform the academically selective system. However, political parties were never able to reach consensus on a common approach and the current system of two unregulated, private exams have emerged as a result.

The Post-Primary Transfer Consortium Ltd. (PPTC) was formed to manage and administer what is commonly known as the GL Assessment test. The test is currently used in 33 of Northern Ireland's (mainly catholic) grammar schools.

The Association of Quality Education (AQE Ltd) is the company formed to manage and administer the AQE test. The test is currently facilitated by 34 of Northern Ireland's grammar schools – locally designated as protestant grammars.

In total, 16,257 children sat an unregulated transfer test in 2019. Of those who sat the tests 8,637 pupils were entered for the AQE assessment and a further 7,620 were entered for the GL assessments.

Concerns have been raised about the validity, reliability and comparability of both private exams.

Neither the test providers nor schools make any assessment data publicly available with respect to outcomes or test performance. There is also no available information regarding the quality of the items being used in the tests or how they fare under live test conditions.

The OECD have highlighted that there is no guarantee that the unregulated transfer tests adequately align with the Northern Irish knowledge and skills based curriculum and that the tests are a prime example of driving and possibly distorting the curriculum.

The prevalence of academic selection has led to Northern Ireland's education system being publicly perceived as high performing with proponents of academic selection pointing to successful outcomes for grammar school students in state exams and their higher overall attainment compared to other jurisdictions as a strength of the current system.

Critics argue that this disguises a 'long tail of underachievement' which disproportionately affects socially disadvantaged children.

Department of education data indicates that there are greater concentrations of disadvantaged students in non-grammar schools than in grammars using free school meal

(FSM) entitlement as a proxy for deprivation. In 2019/20, 21.9% of Year 8 pupils entitled to FSM attended a grammar, compared to 78.1% who attended a non-grammar.

Data from the DE also shows that in 2018/19, 94.3% of students at grammar schools achieved the GCSE threshold measure of five GCSEs at grades A\*-C including English and maths. At non-grammars, just over half (51%) of students achieved this measure.

Research highlights the potentially negative impacts of the current system on the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people. A report from the Right to Education group found that of the 300 pupils surveyed, 60% felt the test was bad for them/did not make them feel more confident or able.

Research also indicates that some children who failed to attain a grammar school place never regain their confidence or overcome the sense of having failed to meet their parents' or their own expectations.

The majority of teachers reported being frustrated by the competing demands of preparing for the transfer tests, driven by parental demand, and a desire to provide a broad and balanced education as required by the statutory curriculum.

Gallagher and Smith reported that teaching strategies were strongly influenced by methods that teach to the test. The transfer procedure can become so important that it overshadows other aspects of school and commenters have argued that this had led to children being tested rather than educated for much of their last 2 years of primary school.

The majority of parents are unhappy with participating in the process of academic selection but feel of powerless to affect any change to the system.

There is also a perception among parents that the unregulated tests possess a degree of prestige due to the fact that they act as gateway into particular academically high-performing schools.

All children are entitled to an effective education in line with Article 29(1) of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. The use of academic selection at transition has been identified as presenting a challenge to the provision of an effective education and has been repeatedly criticised by the (UNHCR).

## 2. Introduction

The role of academic selection and its determinant effects on pupil's attainment has been a constant feature of concern and debate in Northern Ireland.<sup>1</sup>

In the early-mid 2000's several attempts were made to reform the academically selective system. However, political parties were never able to reach consensus on a common approach and the current system of two unregulated, private exams have emerged as a result.<sup>2</sup> Commentators highlight, that to a large extent, the debate has fizzled out – all of the arguments have been presented, there has been limited new or fresh approaches suggested, and there seemed to be little interest or energy in pursuing the matter.<sup>3</sup>

Criticisms that are levelled at the transfer procedure are that it is socially inequitable; distorts the curriculum; causes stress in pupils; is open to abuse through coaching for the test, and leaves a sense of failure and stigma amongst those who 'fail'.<sup>4</sup> Internationally the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child and the Organisation for Economic Development (OECD) have expressed concern regarding the social inequity resulting from what is described as a two tier education system.<sup>5 6</sup>

Proponents of the system argue that it presents an opportunity for every child, regardless of social background, to access a grammar school education, it creates a culture of academic excellence and avoids the alternative of a system that is driven by parental wealth.<sup>7</sup>

Supporters also point to the large numbers of children who sit the exams each year as proof of the system's popularity.<sup>8</sup>

The impact of COVID-19 on the administration of the transfer tests for 2020/21, as well a commitment by the government in the 'New Decade, New approach' document to undertake a review of the education system has brought academic selection into the spotlight once more. It remains to be seen whether this fresh impetus will spur change in the current stalemate that exists on the debate.

This paper will consider the history of academic selection, the administration and structure of both exams as well as their validity and comparability. It will also examine the implications of the selective school system for key stakeholders - children parents and teachers. The paper

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<sup>1</sup> Gardner, J. (2016) "Education in Northern Ireland since the Good Friday Agreement: Kabuki theatre meets the danse macabre" Oxford Review of Education Vol.42, No.3, pp. 346-361

<sup>2</sup> Gallagher, T (2020) *Education, Equality And The Economy* Queens University Belfast, The Centre for Education

<sup>3</sup> Gallagher, T (2020) *Education, Equality And The Economy* Queens University Belfast, The Centre for Education

<sup>4</sup> Gallagher, T and Smith A (2000) *The Effects Of The Selective System Of Secondary Education In Northern Ireland Main Report* Queen's University Belfast and University of Ulster

<sup>5</sup> UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2016. *Concluding observations on the fifth periodic report of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland CRC/C/GBR/CO/5*, Geneva: United Nations.

<sup>6</sup> Shewbridge, C., Hulshof, M., Nusche, D., Stenius Staehr, L. (2014) *OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education: Northern Ireland* OECD Publishing

<sup>7</sup> Meredith R (2020) *Transfer tests 'fairer than selection by wealth'* BBC News Website [Online] Available at:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-53007271>

<sup>8</sup> Newsletter (2016) *Weir: 2017 deadline for single transfer test 'Optimistic'* Newsroom 31st October [online] Available at:

<https://www.newsletter.co.uk/news/weir-2017-deadline-single-transfer-test-optimistic-1184663>

will also explore any implications that the current system may have for children's rights and the broader purposes of education.

### 3. An overview of academic selection in Northern Ireland

#### The origins of academic selection (1947 – 1999)

Academic selection has been a source of contention since the introduction of the Education Act (Northern Ireland) 1947 which followed the lead of the Conservative Government's implementation of selective post-primary structures in 1944. The Education Act (1944) enabled admission to grammar schools on the basis of performance in academic '11+' tests, so-called as they were administered in the child's last year at primary school, normally at 11 years of age.<sup>9</sup> The primary purpose of academic selection was to offer greater educational opportunity to children from disadvantaged backgrounds. However, from the 1960's onwards reports began to emerge both in Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK that highlighted problems with the system, primarily the poorer academic outcomes among the sizeable group of pupils who each year failed to get a place in a grammar school.<sup>10</sup>

Similar findings and concerns in the rest of the UK prompted the abolition of academic selection and the establishment of a comprehensive style system. However, there was strong opposition to their abolition in Northern Ireland and the process of academic selection remained largely untouched for 50 years.<sup>11</sup>

It was not until the election of the first Tony Blair government in 1997 that the issue achieved renewed focus. Tony Worthington, the new Direct Rule Minister with responsibility for Education, commissioned research to inform a debate on the future arrangements for education. Two studies were published as a result of this, one providing an evaluation of the two-tier system operated in the Craigavon area<sup>12</sup> and the other by Gallagher and Smith which offered a detailed and wide ranging examination of the effects of the selective system on secondary education.<sup>13</sup>

The findings of the Gallagher and Smith report were that:

- Performance on the selection tests and entry to grammar schools was mediated by social background;

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<sup>9</sup> Gardner, J. (2016) "Education in Northern Ireland since the Good Friday Agreement: Kabuki theatre meets the danse macabre" Oxford Review of Education Vol.42, No.3, pp. 346-361

<sup>10</sup> Gallagher, T and Smith A (2000) *The Effects Of The Selective System Of Secondary Education In Northern Ireland Main Report* Queen's University Belfast and University of Ulster

<sup>11</sup> Gallagher, T and Smith A (2000) *The Effects Of The Selective System Of Secondary Education In Northern Ireland Main Report* Queen's University Belfast and University of Ulster

<sup>12</sup> Alexander J et al (1998) *An Evaluation of the Craigavon Two Tier System Research Report Series Number 12* Department of Education Bangor

<sup>13</sup> Gallagher, T and Smith A (2000) *The Effects Of The Selective System Of Secondary Education In Northern Ireland Main Report* Queen's University Belfast and University of Ulster

- The curriculum of primary schools was disrupted as a consequence of time spent on preparation for the selection tests; and
- The selective arrangements produced a bi-polar distribution of school performance and, in particular, a long tail of schools with low performance outcomes<sup>14</sup>

The report recommended a move away from academic selection.

### **Academic Selection following the Good Friday agreement (2000-2002)**

Following the Good Friday agreement and the inauguration of the devolved Assembly in 2000, the first Minister for Education Martin McGuinness, an advocate for the abolition of academic selection, commissioned a major review of the education system in Northern Ireland.<sup>15</sup> Officially published as the *Report of the Review Body on Post-Primary Education*, the Burns report as it became known, made several recommendations including that:

- The use of the 11+ transfer tests should cease and the system of academic selection in the transfer from primary to post-primary school should end; and
- A system of formative assessment, through a Pupil Profile, should be established to provide real educational information to teachers, parents and pupils.<sup>16</sup>

A public consultation on the recommendations of the report provoked an enormous response.<sup>17</sup> There was little consensus in the responses and some were contradictory: for example, a majority favoured the abolition of 11+ tests, but not the end of academic selection; most wanted all schools to use the same criteria for entry, and most wanted parental preference to be the most important criterion.<sup>18</sup> In 2002, just before the suspension of the NI Assembly, Minister McGuinness abolished the use of transfer tests taking effect from 2004.<sup>19</sup>

### **Attempts at reform continued during suspension (2002-2007)**

During the period of suspension Jane Kennedy, MP, established the Post-Primary Review Working Group, chaired by Steve Costello. The group's task was to take account of the responses to the consultation on the Burns Report, including the diversity of views on academic selection, and provide advice on options for future arrangements.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Gallagher, T (2020) *Education, Equality And The Economy* Queens University Belfast, The Centre for Education

<sup>15</sup> Gardner, J. (2016) "Education in Northern Ireland since the Good Friday Agreement: Kabuki theatre meets the danse macabre" *Oxford Review of Education* Vol.42, No.3, pp. 346-361

<sup>16</sup> Burns (2001) Report of the Review Body on Post-Primary Education Bangor: Department of Education

<sup>17</sup> Gallagher, T (2019) *Education, Equality and the Economy*. Belfast: Queens University

<sup>18</sup> Gallagher, T (2019) *Education, Equality and the Economy*. Belfast: Queens University

<sup>19</sup> Gardner, J. (2016) "Education in Northern Ireland since the Good Friday Agreement: Kabuki theatre meets the danse macabre" *Oxford Review of Education* Vol.42, No.3, pp. 346-361

<sup>20</sup> A timeline of the development of transfer policy Department of Education [online] Available at: <https://www.education.ni.gov.uk/articles/timeline-development-transfer-policy>

The Costello Report, published in 2004, broadly supported the Burns Report recommending:

- The end of transfer tests (with the last tests in 2008) for entry to second level schools with transfer instead based on parental and pupil choice, informed by a pupil profile; and
- Introducing an entitlement framework offering a broader curriculum.<sup>21</sup>

Kennedy accepted all of the Costello recommendations and confirmed that the last tests would take place in 2008.

In 2005, the then Secretary of State Angela Smith, drew up proposals for a new Education (Northern Ireland) Order, which would include the abolition of selection on academic grounds.<sup>22</sup> The proposals included the caveat that the Education Order would not abolish grammar schools and would not impose a system of all-ability comprehensive schools. A further consultation on the proposed changes was launched and published in the same year.<sup>23</sup>

In 2006, the Labour Government introduced the Education (Northern Ireland) Order which included provision to inhibit Boards of Governors from implementing admission criteria which included academic ability as a consideration.<sup>24</sup> However, during the St Andrews negotiations, in an effort to encourage a return to government, Tony Blair amended the provisions so that a renewed administration would make a decision on selection once power was restored.<sup>25</sup>

When the Assembly was restored in 2007 there was no consensus on the issue. The new Sinn Féin Minister for Education Minister Cairtriona Ruane MLA submitted proposals for future transfer arrangements which would not involve a state sponsored transfer test, but would allow a three year period of transitional tests, leading to an end to academic selection. Following discussions between the Minister and education stakeholders a paper with the proposals was submitted to the Executive Committee of the Assembly in 2008. However, it was not discussed and as a result the last official transfer tests were held in 2008.

### **Unregulated academic selection emerges (2008 – 2015)**

In the absence of a regulated approach, the Department of Education (DE) published guidance and policy for transfer procedures in 2009 and 2010, to which schools were required to 'have regard'.<sup>26</sup> Key features of the policy were that:

- Schools must admit applicants to all available places (statutory duty);

<sup>21</sup> Costello (2004) *Future Post-Primary Arrangements in Northern Ireland: Advice from the Post-Primary Review Working Group* Bangor: Department of Education

<sup>22</sup> *A timeline of the development of transfer policy* Department of Education [online] Available at: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/timeline-development-transfer-policy>

<sup>23</sup> Consultation on new admission arrangements, Department of Education [online] Available at: <https://www.educationni.gov.uk/articles/consultation-new-admission-arrangements>

<sup>24</sup> *The Education (Northern Ireland) Order 2006* [online] Available at: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/2006/1915/article/28/made>

<sup>25</sup> Walker, A. (2010) *Selection challenged: The case against selection for 11+ Newtownards*: Colourpoint Book

<sup>26</sup> Perry C (2017) *Academic Selection: a brief overview*. Northern Ireland Assembly



- Decisions on admissions should not relate to academic ability;
- Recommendations for admissions included:
  - giving priority to pupils entitled to free school meals,
  - applicants with a sibling at the school,
  - applicants coming from a named primary schools
  - applicants residing in a defined catchment area; and
- Primary schools must not depart from their statutory obligations to deliver the curriculum, and should not facilitate unregulated tests in any way.<sup>27</sup>

The St Andrews Act 2006, contained a provision allowing grammar schools to use selection if they so wish, therefore they were not legally compelled to follow the Department's guidance. As a result, grammar schools were free to continue using academic selection and two private test bodies emerged, representing two consortiums of grammar schools:

- The Association for Quality Education (AQE) which mainly caters for controlled grammar schools; and
- The Post-Primary Transfer Consortium (PPTC) which mainly caters for catholic maintained grammar schools and a small minority of non-denominational grammars and integrated colleges.

This had the knock on effect of putting schools and teachers in a difficult position where they were under pressure from parents to prepare students for the tests but had been explicitly told not to do so by the DE.<sup>28</sup>

### **Renewed government support for academic selection (2016 to Present)**

On the 7<sup>th</sup> September 2016 the Minister for Education, Peter Weir MLA, released revised guidance reversing the previous policy on preventing primary schools from facilitating unregulated tests. It allows schools 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.

The guidance also removed the provision within the previous guidance that decisions on admissions should not relate to academic ability, instead stating that it 'supports the right of those schools wishing to use academic selection as the basis for admission'.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Department of Education (2015) *Post-primary transfer policy Bangor*: Department of Education

<sup>28</sup> Black, R (2015) *Transfer test: Warning letters to Northern Ireland schools over coaching sparks new row* Belfast Telegraph [online] available at: <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/transfer-test-warning-letters-to-northern-ireland-schools-over-coaching-sparks-new-row-30949506.html>

<sup>29</sup> Department of Education (2016) *Guidance to primary school principals, post-primary schools' Boards of Governors and principals, and the Education Authority on the process of transfer from primary to post-primary school* from September 2016

In 2016-17 the Department of Education convened a working group chaired by academic Peter Tymms in an attempt to streamline the two parallel testing systems into one and effectively restore academic selection to its pre-2008 status.<sup>30</sup> The report received criticism from a number of stakeholders including the Human Rights Commission who highlighted that the paper did not consider the human rights implications of academic selection and failed to even consider the option of removing academic selection.<sup>31</sup>

Further attempts to streamline the two exams into one were made in 2018 with draft proposals for a common test put forward and agreed by negotiators representing the PPTC and the AQE. The draft proposal was put out for consultation among school principals and governors who were largely supportive of the proposals.<sup>32</sup> However, the board of the AQE subsequently disagreed with the proposals claiming they had been kept in the dark when discussions were taking place between principals about a joint exam. The board went on to state that:

‘Based on the very limited information available, the board are adamant that the proposal for two tests with one to count does not meet the standard which is required to combat criticism from experts who oppose the concept of academic selection’.<sup>33</sup>

The board also raised concerns about the quality of the proposed common test and how it would be run and paid for. There is no indication that this has been resolved and a continuing stalemate exists as a result.

### **Stalemate exists in the debate on academic selection**

There are a small number of Grammar schools who opt out of academic selection with the support of the Department of Education and there are also schools in Armagh that are part of the Dickson Plan system where academic selection for senior high schools takes place at age 14 after pupils complete their first three years of post-primary education at a junior high school. However, academic selection remains the primary means by which children access a place in a grammar school in Northern Ireland.

The debate between the proponents of academic selection and those who oppose it continues seemingly without any hope for resolution or consensus on the issue. Various Government and stakeholder reports continue to question the process of academic selection and highlight the negative outcomes that a two tier education system has for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Notably, In February 2017, the DE published the *Report of the*

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Bangor: Department of Education

<sup>30</sup> Department of Education (2017) *Towards a Common Assessment for Academic Selection - Discussion Paper* [Online] Available at: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/towards-common-assessment-academic-selection-discussion-paper>

<sup>31</sup> NIHRC (2018) *The 2018 Annual Statement Human Rights in Northern Ireland*. Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission

<sup>32</sup> Meredith, R (2018) *Academic selection: Plans for common transfer test agreed* [online] Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-44598805>

<sup>33</sup> Meredith, R (2019) *Transfer test: Plans for single exam 'not fit for purpose'* BBC News Website [Online] Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-48369322>

*Strategic Forum Working Group on Inclusion and Prosperity* which stated that the effects of academic selection together with the open enrolment policy are widely accepted as putting children from economically and socially deprived areas at a disadvantage.<sup>34</sup> In 2018, the Human Rights Commission made a strong recommendation in its annual statement for the abolishment of a two tiered education system in Northern Ireland.<sup>35</sup>

At the same time proponents of the academic selection system, including the current Education Minister Peter Weir, highlight that academic selection retains strong public support, citing the numbers of pupils who sit the test each year as evidence.<sup>36</sup> The Minister also states that academic selection affords ‘Every child, regardless of background, postcode, social group, religion or ethnicity the opportunity to get into one of our grammar schools’.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore those in favour of the system argue that post-primary transfer will happen by ‘one form of selection or another’ and a move away from academic selection ‘would lead quickly to a situation in which selection by assessment was replaced by selection by parental wealth’<sup>38</sup>

In the New Decade, New Approach agreement there was a requirement that the Executive would establish an expert group to examine and propose an action plan to address links between persistent educational underachievement and socio-economic background. In July 2020 Minister Weir announced the establishment of the expert group to be chaired by Dr Noel Purdy director of the Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement (CREU).<sup>39</sup> When questioned whether the panel would be allowed to examine the implications of academic selection on educational underachievement Mr Weir responded that:

‘The obsession with transfer tests as being critical to underachievement massively misses the point. It creates both a distraction and also actually I think focuses in, largely speaking, on the wrong issue.’<sup>40</sup>

However, the Minister further stated that academic selection could be looked at as part of a forthcoming wider review of the education system also promised in the New Decade, New Approach deal. The Minister’s response stands in contrast to a recent report authored by Dr

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<sup>34</sup> O’Neill, L (2020) *Schools have right to select pupils based on academic ability: Weir* Belfast Telegraph <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/schools-have-right-to-select-pupils-based-on-academic-ability-weir-38890317.html>

<sup>35</sup> Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (2018) *The 2018 Annual Statement Human Rights in Northern Ireland*.

<sup>36</sup> Newsletter (2016) *Weir: 2017 deadline for single transfer test ‘Optimistic’* Newsroom 31st October [online] Available at: <https://www.newsletter.co.uk/news/weir-2017-deadline-single-transfer-test-optimistic-1184663>

<sup>37</sup> O’Neill, L (2020) *Schools have right to select pupils based on academic ability: Weir* Belfast Telegraph <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/schools-have-right-to-select-pupils-based-on-academic-ability-weir-38890317.html>

<sup>38</sup> Meredith R (2020) *Transfer tests ‘fairer than selection by wealth’* BBC News Website [Online] Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-53007271>

<sup>39</sup> *Official Report (Hansard)* Tuesday 28 July 2020 Volume 129, No 9 [online] Available at: <http://data.niassembly.gov.uk/HansardXml/plenary-28-07-2020.pdf>

<sup>40</sup> Meredith R (2020) *Educational underachievement in NI ‘entrenched’* - Peter Weir <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-53568487>

Noel Purdy, the chair of the new Underachievement Committee, which identified academic selection as having significant economic, social and educational consequences for pupils.<sup>41</sup>

## 4. An Overview of the AQE and PPTC Examinations

According to media reports, 16,257 children sat an unregulated transfer test in 2019. Of those who sat the tests 8,637 pupils were entered for the AQE assessment and a further 7,620 were entered for the GL assessments. It is also estimated that about 2,000 of these children sat both the AQE and GL exams.<sup>42</sup>

### **The Post-Primary Transfer Consortium Ltd. (PPTC) – The GL assessment**

The Post-Primary Transfer Consortium Ltd. (PPTC) is the consortium that was formed to manage and administer what is commonly known as the GL Assessment test.<sup>43</sup> The test is currently used in 33 of Northern Ireland's grammar schools. Children sit two tests, on one Saturday in November with the option to sit a third test in December (for those absent on first date).<sup>44</sup> Children attend a grammar school to sit the exam. On the day there is a short practice session before each of the papers and, between the papers, the children have time for a snack and a toilet break. The test is free to take for any pupil who wishes to apply.<sup>45</sup> The tests are purchased from a commercial group, Granada Learning.<sup>46</sup> Items on the GL have been pre-tested on appropriate populations for the production of the test and the completed papers are machine marked.<sup>47</sup>

### **The Association of Quality Education (AQE Ltd) – The AQE test**

The Association of Quality Education (AQE Ltd) is the company formed to manage and administer the AQE test, also known as the Common Entrance Assessment (CEA).<sup>48</sup> The test is currently facilitated by 34 of Northern Ireland's grammar schools.<sup>49</sup> Those taking the AQE tests also sit up to three papers across three Saturdays in November and December. Children are not obliged to sit three tests but it is generally recommended as the best scores from two out of the three tests are aggregated.<sup>50</sup> The tests are held in a grammar school

<sup>41</sup> Henderson, L., Harris, J., Purdy, N. and Walsh, G. (2020) *Educational Underachievement in Northern Ireland: Evidence Summary*. Stranmillis University College, Belfast: Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement

<sup>42</sup> BBC news website Transfer test: *Thousands of NI children receive results* [online] Available at:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-politics-51243592>

<sup>43</sup> *The Transfer Test Website PPTC Entrance Assessment (GL)* [online] Available at: <https://www.thetransfertest.com/pptc-gl-assessment>

<sup>44</sup> *The Transfer Test Website PPTC Entrance Assessment (GL)* [online] Available at: <https://www.thetransfertest.com/pptc-gl-assessment>

<sup>45</sup> *The Transfer Test Website PPTC Entrance Assessment (GL)* [online] Available at: <https://www.thetransfertest.com/pptc-gl-assessment>

<sup>46</sup> Elwood, J (2013) *Educational assessment policy and practice: a matter of ethics*, *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 20:2, 205-220

<sup>47</sup> Elwood, J (2013) *Educational assessment policy and practice: a matter of ethics*, *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 20:2, 205-220

<sup>48</sup> The official Website of the Common entrance assessment in Northern Ireland *Homepage* [online] Available at:

<https://aqe.org.uk/>

<sup>49</sup> The official Website of the Common entrance assessment in Northern Ireland *AQE Member Schools* [online] Available at:

<https://aqe.org.uk/schools/>

<sup>50</sup> The transfer test website *Information & Help with the Northern Ireland Transfer Test* [online] Available at:

with children attending for a familiarisation session prior to taking the exam. The three assessments last for 1 hour each (with the exception of extra time candidates). The exam costs £52 pounds to enter but is free to children entitled to free school meals.<sup>51</sup> The test is set by a chief examiner and items appearing on the AQE have not been pre-tested. The completed papers are marked by experienced markers.<sup>52</sup>

### **Academic criteria and assessment practices**

The GL Assessment exam is mainly used by Catholic grammar schools, while the AQE is mainly used by other grammar schools, locally designated as 'Protestant' grammar schools.<sup>53</sup> Most schools accept only one version of the test results however a small number of schools will accept either result. The onus is on parents to register their child for the correct test or tests and find out which school uses each test.<sup>54</sup>

While both tests claim to be based on Key Stage 2 maths and English, the tests differ significantly in structure, style and format.<sup>55</sup> The AQE test structure is comparable to the previous '11+' tests with similar type items, structures of papers and children writing responses on question booklets. The child receives an aggregated score based on the best two performances from three tests which are age-adjusted.<sup>56</sup> The GL test structure involves two multiple-choice tests in English and maths. Children have to transfer answers onto multiple-choice mark sheets and there is a right/wrong, single-mark structure to the items. The child receives an aggregated score based on performance across the two papers and age-adjusted scores are given which are further translated into grades.<sup>57</sup> Table 2 provides an overview of the structure and content of the tests.

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<https://www.thetransfertest.com/aqe-common-entrance-assessment-cea>

<sup>51</sup> *The Transfer Test Website PPTC Entrance Assessment (GL)* [online] Available at:

<https://www.thetransfertest.com/pptc-gl-assessment>

<sup>52</sup> Elwood, J (2013) *Educational assessment policy and practice: a matter of ethics* *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 20:2, 205-220

<sup>53</sup> *11 plus in Northern Ireland* Eleven Plus Exams Website [online] Available at:

<https://www.elevenplusexams.co.uk/schools/regions/northern-ireland-11-plus>

<sup>54</sup> PPTC Entrance Assessment The Transfer Test Website (GL) [online] Available at: <https://www.thetransfertest.com/pptc-gl-Assessment>

<sup>55</sup> Perry C (2016) *Academic Selection: A brief Overview* Northern Ireland Assembly.

<sup>56</sup> Elwood, J (2013) *Educational assessment policy and practice: a matter of ethics* *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 20:2, 205-220

<sup>57</sup> Elwood, J (2013) *Educational assessment policy and practice: a matter of ethics* *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 20:2, 205-220

**Table 2: AQE and GL test characteristics adapted from NICCYP 'Talking Transfer' report<sup>58</sup>**

AQE Test Characteristics	GL Test Characteristics
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Two papers (English and Maths) - content based on upper primary curriculum</li> <li>• English – long response items using stimulus materials (poems, passages of fiction) and short response verbal reasoning items</li> <li>• Maths – items requiring method and correct response across aspects of measurement, number, shape and space, handling data</li> <li>• Responses recorded on test booklets</li> <li>• Results given as standardised scores and age range adjustments used</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Two multiple choice (m/c) papers used</li> <li>• Paper 1- 65 m/c items based on 3 reading passages as stimulus material to complete within 50 minutes</li> <li>• Part 2 – 45 m/c items across aspects of measurement, number, shape and space and handling data to be completed in 45 minutes.</li> <li>• Children record answers on an m/c mark sheet</li> <li>• Score is combined to a standardised score which is put into grades A, B1, B2, C1, C2 and D and age range adjustments used</li> </ul>

### Validity, reliability and comparability of tests

Controversy concerning the reliability and validity of the transfer test procedure has been ongoing for many years. A paper published by Gardner and Cowan in 2005, *The fallibility of high stakes '11-plus' testing in Northern Ireland*, revealed several issues with the DE administered test being used at the time.<sup>59</sup> Notably, the highest and lowest grades (A and D) were separated by as few as 18 of the total of 150 available marks and the standard error of measurement was of the order of 4.75.<sup>60</sup> The implication of this finding was that the candidate ranking system had the potential to misclassify up to two-thirds of the test-taking cohort by as many as three grades.<sup>61</sup> The study highlighted other issues with the design of the paper including its 'easiness', which caused children who answered 70% of the answers correctly to be awarded a D grade. The paper also argued that given the 'high stakes' nature of the tests more information should be made publicly available on the assessment data, in order to comply with international educational testing standards.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (2010) *Talking transfer: pupils perspectives of the transfer process in 2010*.

<sup>59</sup> Gardner J & Cowan P (2005) The fallibility of high stakes '11-plus' testing in Northern Ireland *Assessment in Education*, 12 (2), pp. 145-165

<sup>60</sup> Gardner J & Cowan P (2005) The fallibility of high stakes '11-plus' testing in Northern Ireland *Assessment in Education*, 12 (2), pp. 145-165

<sup>61</sup> Gardner J & Cowan P (2005) The fallibility of high stakes '11-plus' testing in Northern Ireland. *Assessment in Education*, 12 (2), pp. 145-165

<sup>62</sup> Gardner J & Cowan P (2005) The fallibility of high stakes '11-plus' testing in Northern Ireland. *Assessment in Education*, 12



Similar concerns exist with the current set of privately administered tests. The OECD has stated that the commercial tests are 'driving and possibly distorting the curriculum'.<sup>63</sup> While Elwood suggests that they are of 'dubious validity, reliability or comparability'.<sup>64</sup>

Since the tests are privately operated there is no onus on test providers or the schools who use the tests to make any assessment data publicly available with respect to outcomes or test performance. There is also no available information regarding the quality of the items being used in the tests or how they fare under live test conditions.<sup>65</sup>

Elwood has highlighted the lack of available information on the relative difficulty of the tests (research has suggested that the GL test might be easier than the AQE test<sup>66</sup>) and whether they are even comparable (whether similar constructs are being used across both exams).<sup>67</sup>

Research indicates that boys are more likely than girls to do well on multiple-choice tests while girls generally perform better on test items that require longer responses.<sup>68</sup> As a result, boys who take the GL test may be more advantaged than their female counterparts due to it's a multiple choice format.<sup>69</sup> Similarly, girls who take the AQE test which is based on more comprehensive style questions may be more advantaged than their male counterparts.<sup>70</sup>

In a paper published in 2000, *Testing the Test*, Gardner questioned the rationale of awarding a single grade when pupils were being tested in three different subjects; mathematics, English and science.<sup>71</sup> In the DE administered test, a single score was awarded to students suggesting that the test measured a single attribute of the candidates, with the commonly held perception that a child with an A is 'smarter' or 'more able' than a child with a B1 or a B2 and consequently more suitable for a grammar school education.<sup>72</sup> However no information was ever published on what single attribute the Test was designed to measure. It was known

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(2), pp. 145-165

<sup>63</sup> Shewbridge, C., Hulshof, M., Nusche, D., Stenius Staehr, L. (2014) *OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education: Northern Ireland* OECD Publishing

<sup>64</sup> Elwood, J. (2011) *Assessment and Opportunity to Learn in the context of Northern Ireland: Assessment and Examination policy and practice development –for what and for whom?* Keynote address to the Association of Educational Assessment Europe 12<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference, Belfast, November 2011

<sup>65</sup> Elwood, J. (2011) *Assessment and Opportunity to Learn in the context of Northern Ireland: Assessment and Examination policy and practice development –for what and for whom?* Keynote address to the Association of Educational Assessment Europe 12<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference, Belfast, November 2011

<sup>66</sup> NICCYP (2010) *Talking Transfer. Pupils' Perspectives of The Transfer Process In 2010* A report by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People

<sup>67</sup> Elwood, J (2013) Educational assessment policy and practice: a matter of ethics, *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 20:2, 205-220

<sup>68</sup> Murphy, P. (1995). Sources of inequity: Understanding students' responses to assessment. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 2, 249–270.

<sup>69</sup> Elwood, J (2013) Educational assessment policy and practice: a matter of ethics *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 20:2, 205-220

<sup>70</sup> Elwood, J (2013) Educational assessment policy and practice: a matter of ethics *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 20:2, 205-220

<sup>71</sup> Gardner and Cowan (2000) *Testing the Test: A Study of the Reliability and Validity of the Northern Ireland Transfer Procedure Test in Enabling the Selection of Pupils for Grammar School Places*. Full Report. Belfast: Queen's University Graduate School of Education.

<sup>72</sup> Gardner and Cowan (2000) *Testing the Test: A Study of the Reliability and Validity of the Northern Ireland Transfer Procedure Test in Enabling the Selection of Pupils for Grammar School Places*. Full Report. Belfast: Queen's University Graduate School of Education.

only that questions selected for the Test were based on the Key Stage 2 programmes of study in mathematics, English, science and technology. Gardner argued that:

‘In the same manner that it would normally not be good practice to add the marks from GCSE mathematics, English and science tests, their addition in the Transfer Procedure Test is questionable’<sup>73</sup>

Since the Test did not measure a singular attribute of candidates it could not be used as a proxy for any particular attribute, for example children's ability or their potential to benefit from a grammar school education. The same logic could be applied to the current set of tests where students are being awarded a single grade to decide their academic suitability for grammar school despite being tested on two different subjects.<sup>74</sup>

The above findings have raised questions regarding the fairness and equity of using such tests for the allocation of grammar schools places given the lack of available data and transparency around how schools are using test scores and making judgements about accepting one child over another.

## 5. Selection and academic outcomes for students

### **Academic selection and a long tail of underachievement**

Proponents of academic selection point to successful outcomes for grammar school students in state exams and their higher overall attainment compared to other jurisdictions as a strength of the selective school system. However, the achievements among the top performers in Northern Ireland mask what has been described as ‘a long tail of underachievement’ which disproportionately affects socially disadvantaged children.<sup>75</sup> There is clear evidence that non-grammar schools have a much higher concentration of disadvantaged pupils who perform poorly at GCSE and A level compared to their grammar school peers.

While reporting to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee on education funding in Northern Ireland, prominent academic Sir Robert Salisbury referred to the ‘enduring myth’ that Northern Ireland has one of the best education systems in Europe. He went on to state that the country:

‘Has a long tail of underachievement and that long tail of underachievement is still there and it's stubbornly there, and it's not really being tackled’<sup>76</sup>

<sup>73</sup> Gardner and Cowan (2000) *Testing the Test: A Study of the Reliability and Validity of the Northern Ireland Transfer Procedure Test in Enabling the Selection of Pupils for Grammar School Places*. Full Report. Belfast: Queen's University Graduate School of Education.

<sup>74</sup> Gardner and Cowan (2000) *Testing the Test: A Study of the Reliability and Validity of the Northern Ireland Transfer Procedure Test in Enabling the Selection of Pupils for Grammar School Places*. Full Report. Belfast: Queen's University Graduate School of Education.

<sup>75</sup> Gallagher, T (2020) *Education, Equality And The Economy* Queens University Belfast

<sup>76</sup> Meredith, R (2019) *Officials 'talking NI schools into gutter', says Paisley* BBC News Website [online] Northern Ireland <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-47393230>



Boorah & Knox also describe how the prevalence of academic selection has led to Northern Ireland's education system being publicly perceived as high performing. However, their analysis showed significant differences persist in the performance of sub-groups of children in external examinations at GCSE and A Level.<sup>77</sup>

In 2015 the Northern Ireland Audit Office highlighted 'a significant tail of underachievement, especially amongst pupils suffering social disadvantage'.<sup>78</sup> The Community foundation of Northern Ireland reported that 'this in large measure is a product of selection: with middle class pupils more likely to attend Grammar Schools, while working class pupils are more likely to attend non-Grammar Schools.

This gap in achievement between high achievers and the significant number of low performers have prompted the OECD to describe the Northern Ireland education system as one that presents 'clear structural challenges to equity'.<sup>79</sup>

### **Distribution of pupils to grammars and non-grammars**

International evidence indicates that socio-economic background is one of the key predictors of academic performance at school.<sup>80</sup> This is of particular concern given that access to and performance in the transfer tests, and eventual placement in a grammar school in Northern Ireland have been found to be mediated by socio-economic status.<sup>81</sup>

Several reports have highlighted the relationship between socio-economic status and the type of post primary school attended. Notably, in 2017, the Department of Education published '*The Report of the Strategic Forum Working Group on Inclusion and Prosperity*'. It noted that the effects of academic selection, together with open enrolment policy, are 'widely accepted as major contributory factors in concentrating lower achieving pupils, often from socially and economically deprived areas, into a small group of 11-16 schools'.<sup>82</sup>

International observers have also commented on the link between academic selection and the achievement gap between pupils in relation to socio-economic background with the OECD stating that 'the concentration of less socio-economically advantaged students in some schools is a recognised challenge in Northern Ireland'.<sup>83</sup>

<sup>77</sup> Boorah and Knox (2015) Segregation, inequality, and educational performance in Northern Ireland: Problems and solutions *International Journal of Educational Development* Volume 40, Pages 196-206

<sup>78</sup> Northern Ireland Audit Office (2015) *Sustainability of Schools Report By The Comptroller And Auditor General* Department of Education Bangor

<sup>79</sup> Shewbridge, C., Hulshof, M., Nusche, D., Stenius Staehr, L. (2014) *OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education: Northern Ireland* OECD Publishing

<sup>80</sup> OECD (2011) *Against the Odds: Disadvantaged Students Who Succeed in School Paris*: OECD Publishing

<sup>81</sup> Henderson, L., Harris, J., Purdy, N. and Walsh, G. (2020) *Educational Underachievement in Northern Ireland: Evidence Summary*. Stranmillis University College, Belfast: Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement

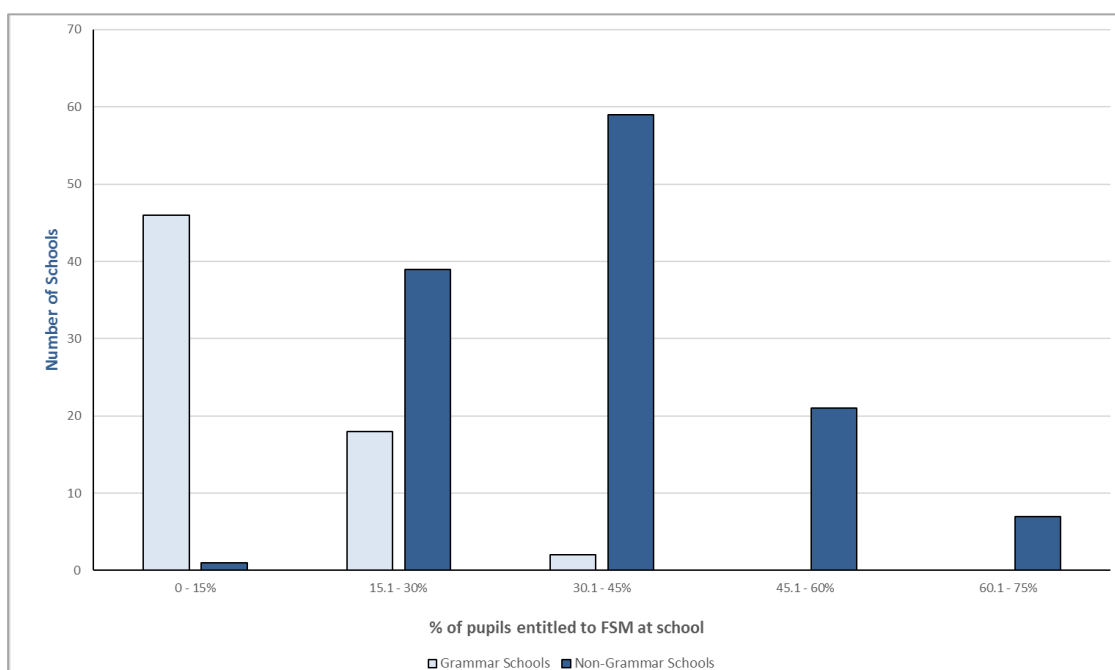
<sup>82</sup> Department of Education (2017) *Report of the Strategic Forum Working Group on 'Inclusion and Prosperity'. Recommendations to secure improved outcomes from education* Department of Education: Bangor

<sup>83</sup> Shewbridge, C., Hulshof, M., Nusche, D., Stenius Staehr, L. (2014) *OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education: Northern Ireland* OECD Publishing

Department of Education data on post-primary school enrolments for 2019/20, showed that the majority of students 15,683 (62.2%) attended a non-grammar, while 9,518 (37.8%) attended a grammar.<sup>84</sup> The data further indicates that there are greater concentrations of disadvantaged students in non-grammar schools than in grammars (using free school meal (FSM) entitlement as a proxy for deprivation).<sup>85</sup> In 2019/20, 21.9% of Year 8 pupils entitled to FSM attended a grammar, compared to 78.1% who attended a non-grammar.<sup>86</sup>

Figure one 1 bellow illustrates the larger concentration of students from disadvantaged backgrounds in non-grammar schools together with more socially advantaged intake in Grammar Schools.<sup>87</sup> At over two-thirds of grammar schools, fewer than 15.1% of pupils attending grammar schools are entitled to FSM, while only one non-grammar schools fall into this bracket. At 28 non-grammar schools, over 45% of pupils have FSM entitlement.<sup>88</sup>

**Figure 1: Distribution of students entitled to FSM, 2019/20**



### Academic outcomes at grammar and non-grammar schools

The ‘Grammar school effect’ whereby pupils at grammar schools do better than their peers in non-grammar schools is evident in the results of NI pupils at GCSE level.<sup>89</sup>

<sup>84</sup> Data from the Department of Education (2020) *School enrolments – school level post primary schools data* [online] Available at <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/school-enrolment-school-level-data-201920> (analysis by RaiSe)

<sup>85</sup> Perry, C(2016) *Academic Selection: A brief Overview Northern Ireland Assembly*

<sup>86</sup> Data from the Department of Education (2020) *School enrolments – school level post primary schools data* [online] Available at <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/school-enrolment-school-level-data-201920> (analysis by RaiSe)

<sup>87</sup> Data from the Department of Education (2020) *School enrolments – school level post primary schools data* [online] Available at <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/school-enrolment-school-level-data-201920> (analysis by RaiSe)

<sup>88</sup>Data from the Department of Education (2020) *School enrolments – school level post primary schools data* [online] Available at <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/school-enrolment-school-level-data-201920> (analysis by RaiSe)

<sup>89</sup> Coe, R., Jones, K., Searle, J., Kokotsaki, D.,Mohd Kosnin, A. and Skinner,P. (2008) *Evidence on the effects of selective educational systems: A report for the Sutton Trust*. Durham: University of Durham.

Data from the DE shows that in 2018/19, 94.3% of students at grammar schools achieved the GCSE threshold measure of five GCSEs at grades A\*-C including English and maths.<sup>90</sup> This has remained relatively static over the past seven years. At non-grammars, just over half (51%) of students achieved this measure in 2018/19.<sup>91</sup>

With regard to A levels, 63% of grammar school students achieved 3+ A levels A\*- C compared to 22% of non-grammar students.

### International data on academic outcomes

Various international benchmarking surveys that are undertaken on academic attainment also indicate preferential outcomes for students at grammar schools in Northern Ireland. The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is a study of educational achievement organised by the OECD. PISA assesses the knowledge and skills of pupils aged 15. Pupils are assessed on their competence to address real-life challenges involving reading, mathematics and science and the assessments are carried out on a 3-year cycle.<sup>92</sup>

Reading was the main domain assessed in PISA 2018. Positively, Northern Ireland's pupils achieved a mean score of 501 in reading which was higher than the OECD average of 487 for the first time.<sup>93</sup> The study also looked at the overall attainment gap between the reading scores of the highest and lowest achievers in each country. The attainment gap between Northern Ireland's highest and lowest achieving pupils was 255 points. This was not significantly different from the OECD average of 260 points.<sup>94</sup> However, the data also revealed that while scores amongst NI's higher achieving pupils have significantly improved since 2015, the scores of lower-achieving pupils have not significantly changed during that time.<sup>95</sup>

A closer look at the data also revealed differences in the mean reading scores between grammar and non-grammar schools in NI when compared with the OECD average. Table 2 shows that pupils at non-grammar schools achieved, on average, a reading score of 454 which was lower than the OECD average of 487. Pupils at grammar schools scored significantly higher, on average, than both pupils at non-grammar schools and the OECD average, with a mean score of 559.<sup>96</sup>

<sup>90</sup> <sup>90</sup> Northern Ireland Statistics Agency (2020) *Qualifications and Destinations of Northern Ireland School Leavers 2018-19* Bangor Department of Education

<sup>91</sup> Northern Ireland Statistics Agency (2020) *Qualifications and Destinations of Northern Ireland School Leavers 2018-19* Bangor Department of Education

<sup>92</sup> Sizmur, J., Ager, R., Bradshaw, J., Classick, R., Galvis, M., Packer, J., Thomas D. and Wheater R. (2019). *Achievement of 15 year-old pupils in Northern Ireland: PISA 2018* National report. Slough: NFER

<sup>93</sup> Sizmur, J., Ager, R., Bradshaw, J., Classick, R., Galvis, M., Packer, J., Thomas D. and Wheater R. (2019). *Achievement of 15 year-old pupils in Northern Ireland: PISA 2018* National report. Slough: NFER

<sup>94</sup> Sizmur, J., Ager, R., Bradshaw, J., Classick, R., Galvis, M., Packer, J., Thomas D. and Wheater R. (2019). *Achievement of 15 year-old pupils in Northern Ireland: PISA 2018* National report. Slough: NFER

<sup>95</sup> Sizmur, J., Ager, R., Bradshaw, J., Classick, R., Galvis, M., Packer, J., Thomas D. and Wheater R. (2019). *Achievement of 15 year-old pupils in Northern Ireland: PISA 2018* National report. Slough: NFER

<sup>96</sup> Sizmur, J., Ager, R., Bradshaw, J., Classick, R., Galvis, M., Packer, J., Thomas D. and Wheater R. (2019). *Achievement of 15 year-old pupils in Northern Ireland: PISA 2018* National report. Slough: NFER

**Table 2: School Type and PISA Reading Scores; Northern Ireland**

School type	Reading score	OECD average	Score point difference Northern Ireland-OECD
Non-grammar	454	487	-33
Grammar	559	487	72

Looking at outcomes for the 24% of NI pupils in the sample who were entitled to FSM's, on average, their reading score was 51 points lower than NI pupils not eligible for free school meals. This data is illustrated in table 3.<sup>97</sup>

**Table 3: FSM eligibility and PISA reading scores: Northern Ireland**

	Number of pupils	Per cent	Mean score
Not entitled to FSM	1810	76	515
Entitled to FSM	547	24	465*

Note: \* indicates statistically significant difference from the 'not eligible for FSM' group

With regard to outcomes for the other subjects examined in the research, the mean science score for NI was 491 which was slightly above the OECD average score of 489. However, the study authors highlight that this is the third consecutive PISA study in which the mean science score for NI has decreased.<sup>98</sup> The results represent a statistically significant decrease compared to results from PISA 2012. Northern Ireland's performance in mathematics has remained stable (492) and similar to the OECD average (489) since 2006.<sup>99</sup>

The findings from this international data demonstrate limited evidence that the current selective system in Northern Ireland bestows any advantage on young people overall.<sup>100</sup> While NI reading scores compare favourably to the OECD average, student's scores in mathematics have remained stable and similar to the OECD average for a number of years and scores in science are decreasing on a yearly basis. The data does reveal however, that those from disadvantaged backgrounds in NI have poorer academic outcomes and suggests

<sup>97</sup> Sizmur, J., Ager, R., Bradshaw, J., Classick, R., Galvis, M., Packer, J., Thomas D. and Wheeler R. (2019). *Achievement of 15 year-old pupils in Northern Ireland: PISA 2018 National report*. Slough: NFER

<sup>98</sup> Sizmur, J., Ager, R., Bradshaw, J., Classick, R., Galvis, M., Packer, J., Thomas D. and Wheeler R. (2019). *Achievement of 15 year-old pupils in Northern Ireland: PISA 2018 National report*. Slough: NFER

<sup>99</sup> Sizmur, J., Ager, R., Bradshaw, J., Classick, R., Galvis, M., Packer, J., Thomas D. and Wheeler R. (2019). *Achievement of 15 year-old pupils in Northern Ireland: PISA 2018 National report*. Slough: NFER

<sup>100</sup> Connolly, P., Purvis, D., & O'Grady, P. J. (2013). *Advancing Shared Education: Report of the Ministerial Advisory Group*. Department of Education (Northern Ireland)

that the academically selective system has a role to play in these sustained achievement gaps.<sup>101</sup>

### **Final destinations of students from Grammar and Non-Grammar schools**

In 2017, the NICCYP described the disparity in educational and employment opportunities between pupils from families experiencing socio-economic deprivation and better off pupils as 'stark'.<sup>102</sup> A report by the Northern Ireland Commission for Human Rights also identified that beyond the tests themselves, there appears to be long-term advantage for children who attend grammar schools over those who attend non-grammar schools, when all other factors are taken into account.<sup>103</sup>

Data from the DE shows that in 2018/19, 68.4% of students went on to Institutions of Higher Education compared to 21.2% of non-grammar students. A further 20.2% of grammar school students went on to Institutions of Further Education compared to 42.9% of non-grammar students.<sup>104</sup>

In total, 14% of non-grammar students entered employment compared to 5.6% of grammar school students while 16% of non-grammar students entered training programmes compared to 3.9% of grammar students.<sup>105</sup>

## **6. Implications for children, parents and teachers**

### **Academic Selection and Children's emotional well being**

School life and education are a major part of a child and young person's life, and evidence suggests that in addition to being a crucial and positive part of a child's social and emotional development, school life can also be a source of stress and anxiety.<sup>106</sup> Exams are a significant source of this stress and this is particularly true where the exams are considered to be 'high stakes'.<sup>107</sup>

There is a significant body of research indicating the potentially negative impacts of the transfer test system on the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in Northern Ireland. Most recently, in 2019, a report from the Right to Education group, explored

<sup>101</sup> Connolly, P., Purvis, D., & O'Grady, P. J. (2013). *Advancing Shared Education: Report of the Ministerial Advisory Group*. Department of Education (Northern Ireland)

<sup>102</sup> NICCYP (2017) *Educational Inequalities and Inclusion Position Paper* [online] available at: <https://www.ief.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/educational-position-paper-july-2017-final.pdf>

<sup>103</sup> Lundy, L., Emerson, L., Lloyd, K., Byrne, B., & Yohanis, J. (2012). *Education Reform in Northern Ireland: a human rights review*. Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission.

<sup>104</sup> Northern Ireland Statistics Agency (2020) *Qualifications and Destinations of Northern Ireland School Leavers 2018-19*  
Bangor

Department of Education

<sup>105</sup> Northern Ireland Statistics Agency (2020) *Qualifications and Destinations of Northern Ireland School Leavers 2018-19*  
Bangor

Department of Education

<sup>106</sup> Howard, E (2020) *A review of the literature concerning anxiety for educational assessments* The Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation

<sup>107</sup> Howard, E (2020) *A review of the literature concerning anxiety for educational assessments* The Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation

parents, pupils and teachers experiences of academic selection. Of the 300 pupils surveyed, 60% felt the test was bad for them/did not make them feel more confident/able.<sup>108</sup> Students described experiencing increased stress as a result of preparing for and taking the transfer tests:

'I hated doing it and all the tests before it - I now get really nervous and have had panic attacks. I did not do well. I felt really stupid when I got my mark and really, really sad'<sup>109</sup>

These findings reflect earlier research on the impact of '11+' exam on children's well-being. A 2001 study commissioned by the Department of Education and Save the Children examined attitudes of pupils that were sitting the test. The study authors found that the majority of students approached the tests with fear and anxiety.<sup>110</sup> A further study by Save the Children and the Rowntree foundation in 2007 found that the 11+ and other tests were overwhelmingly the main cause of worry about school among the children. Children commented on the stressful nature of the tests and worry about their parents and others expectations – that they would 'let them down' by not doing well enough.<sup>111</sup>

During a consultation carried out by the NICCY in 2010, pupils and parents expressed a variety of concerns around how the transfer test process negatively impacts pupil's mental health. These concerns included the nerve-wrecking nature of sitting the tests and the anxiety of taking them on Saturday mornings in unfamiliar school settings.<sup>112</sup> Parents reported that their children experienced 'sleepless nights', showed unusually high levels of tiredness and were 'very low' during the run up to the results.<sup>113</sup>

Research has also demonstrated a relationship between higher levels of test anxiety and lower levels of performance and resulting grades. This can have significant implications where the tests are 'high stakes' and have a determinant effect on a child's future entry to subsequent education.<sup>114</sup> In the context of the post primary transfer system in Northern Ireland, the consequences can be far-reaching and irreversible as children only have one sitting of the test and a lower grade may simply remove the child from any chance of a place in the school of their choice.<sup>115</sup>

<sup>108</sup> Right 2 Education Group (2019) '*Could Make or Break a child*' *The State of Human Rights and Academic Selection in Northern Ireland*. Participation and the Practice of Rights and The Irish National teachers Organisation

<sup>109</sup> Right 2 Education Group (2019) '*Could Make or Break a child*' *The State Of Human Rights and Academic Selection in Northern Ireland*. Participation and the Practice of Rights and The Irish National teachers Organisation

<sup>110</sup> Leonard, M and Davey, C (2001) (Report) *Thoughts on the 11+: A Research Report Examining Children's Experiences of the Transfer Test* Belfast: Save the Children

<sup>111</sup> Horgan, G (2007) (Report) *The Impact of Poverty on Young Children's Experience of School* York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation

<sup>112</sup> Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) (2010) *Talking transfer: Pupil's perspectives of the transfer process in 2010. A report by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People*

<sup>113</sup> Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) (2010) *Talking transfer: Pupil's perspectives of the transfer process in 2010. A report by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People*

<sup>114</sup> Putwain, D (2020) Examination stress and test anxiety *The British Psychological Society* Vol 21 pp. 1026 -1029

<sup>115</sup> Gardner, J and Cowan, P (2000) *Testing the Test: A Study of the Reliability and Validity of the Northern Ireland Transfer Procedure Test in Enabling the Selection of Pupils for Grammar School Places*. Queens University Belfast, Graduate School of Education

## Transfer test result and children's feelings of self-worth are closely aligned

Research has also revealed how children perceive themselves and others based on the grades they receive in the transfer test. The D grade is viewed with disdain by many with A-grade children being perceived as smart and the D-grade children being perceived as failures.<sup>116</sup> Children who received high grades felt overjoyed; while children who received low grades felt distraught. For some children, particularly in middle class schools, the knowledge that many of their friends were going to grammar school served to reinforce their feelings of inferiority.<sup>117</sup> In earlier research, Gallagher and Smith highlighted that despite the best efforts of the schools that they subsequently attend, some children who failed to attain a grammar school place never regain their confidence or overcome the sense of having failed to meet their parents' or their own expectations.<sup>118</sup> This stigma of having failed the transfer test can carry on into adult life.<sup>119</sup>

Findings from the National Foundation for Educational Research which looked at the effects of the selective school system in England revealed that:

‘With very few exceptions, head teachers reported that children were deeply affected by the test results, and consequently primary school staff had to devote considerable time to ‘picking up the pieces’, providing counselling and support for children who perceived themselves as failures’<sup>120</sup>

## Confidence in academic ability can mitigate exam stress and anxiety

It is important to note that not all students see assessments negatively and commentators have argued that the positive aspects of testing are often overlooked in the literature. In a study which examined the experiences of English primary school pupils sitting Standardised Achievement Tests (SAT's) many children were reported by teachers as enjoying the challenge presented by the tests.<sup>121</sup> Similarly research by the NICCY identified that not all children who sat the post primary transfer tests reported being negatively affected. Those who were more confident in their academic capabilities displayed lower levels of anxiety and concern as well as being more positive about the process in general.<sup>122</sup>

<sup>116</sup> Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) (2010) *Talking transfer: Pupil's perspectives of the transfer process in 2010. A report by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People*

<sup>117</sup> Gardner, J. (2016) "Education in Northern Ireland since the Good Friday Agreement: Kabuki theatre meets the danse macabre" *Oxford Review of Education* Vol.42, No.3, pp. 346-361

<sup>118</sup> Gallagher, T and Smyth, A. (2000) *Department of Education for Northern Ireland. The effects of the Selective System of Secondary Education in Northern Ireland* Bangor: DENI.

<sup>119</sup> Gardner, J. (2016) "Education in Northern Ireland since the Good Friday Agreement: Kabuki theatre meets the danse macabre" *Oxford Review of Education* Vol.42, No.3, pp. 346-361

<sup>120</sup> Schagen, S and Schagen, I. P. (2001) *The impact of the structure of secondary education in Slough: final report*. National Foundation for Educational Research.

<sup>121</sup> Connors, L, Putwain D, Woods K and Nicholson, I (2001) *Causes and consequences of test anxiety in Key Stage 2 pupils: The mediational role of emotional resilience Examination Anxiety in Primary, Secondary and Sixth Form Students* Symposium presented at the British Educational Research Association Conference 2nd – 5th September 2009 [online] Available at: <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/184268.pdf>

<sup>122</sup> Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) (2010) *Talking transfer: Pupil's perspectives of the transfer process in 2010. A report by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People*



Those in favour of retaining academic selection highlight that the system encourages excellence and can offers an enriching environment for those children who pass the exams:

'These schools can, by setting demanding standards and offering rich educational opportunities, secure impressive outcomes for those who will derive the greatest benefit from them.'<sup>123</sup>

However, even where students successfully secured a grammar school place they were aware that the educational opportunities they were going to receive may not available to all:

'People in the high school do not have the same opportunities that we do in the grammar school...we get a better chance'<sup>124</sup>

Research by Leonard and Davey on the impact of the 11+ revealed that even for students who were more positive about the tests at the beginning of the preparation period, the initial excitement and novelty of taking practice test wore off and the majority of students across all grade levels tended to be critical of the process. They favoured instead, given that selection was inevitable, continuous assessment by the teacher.<sup>125</sup>

### Implications for teachers

During the various policy changes over the last 20 years, media reports have consistently highlighted teachers concerns about academic selection. On practical level, teachers welcomed the decision by Education Minister Peter Weir in 2017 to reverse government policy banning teachers and schools from formally preparing pupils for the unofficial transfer tests. However, they expressed their disappointment at the lack of more wide ranging changes to tackle inequality in the education system<sup>126</sup>:

'It is moving us back to the 19th Century, Northern Ireland need an education system fit for the 21st Century. All of the research suggests that a child's ability is not fixed at 11 and if you label children at 11 you create a system of haves and have not.'

Earlier research by Gallagher and Smith looked at how transfer tests affect primary school teacher motivation and performance. The majority of teachers reported being frustrated by the competing demands of preparing for the transfer tests, driven by parental demand, and a desire to provide a broad and balanced education as required by the statutory curriculum.<sup>127</sup>

<sup>123</sup> O'Neill, L (2020) *Schools have right to select pupils based on academic ability: Weir* Belfast Telegraph [online] available at: <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/schools-have-right-to-select-pupils-based-on-academic-ability-weir-38890317.html>

<sup>124</sup> Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) (2010) *Talking transfer: Pupil's perspectives of the transfer process in 2010. A report by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People*

<sup>125</sup> Leonard, M. & Davey, C. (2001a) *Thoughts on the 11+*. Research commissioned by the Department of Education and Save the Children.

<sup>126</sup> Flanagan, E (2016) *Academic selection: Teachers allowed off the 'naughty step'* [online] Available: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-37295214>

<sup>127</sup> Gallagher, T and Smyth, A. (2000) *Department of Education for Northern Ireland. The effects of the Selective System of Secondary Education in Northern Ireland* Bangor: DENI.



At the Post Primary level some teachers in Grammar schools felt that due to the narrow focus on testing in P6/7 children were transferring to their schools with inadequate cover of a number of curriculum areas and that they had to engage in remedial work to ensure that all children had acquired a common core knowledge.<sup>128</sup> Teachers in secondary schools were frustrated that for many children and parents, attending secondary school was seen as lesser educational experience. Furthermore, many secondary school teachers felt that while that their job required a broad range of teaching skills, to match a broader range of academic abilities that this was generally undervalued.<sup>129</sup>

Research also highlighted the emotional toll of preparing students for the transfer tests. Many teachers referred to the demoralising effect of working with pupils who are entered for the transfer tests but have little prospect of success. Primary school teachers also identified the period after the announcement of results as particularly difficult, especially in dealing with the majority of pupils and parents who have been disappointed in not securing a grammar school place.<sup>130</sup> In 2018, the Right to Education group's survey revealed that 92% of teachers felt that the transfer test had a negative impact on children's mental health:

'I am saddened to see such capable children suffer from such low self-esteem as caused by this test – it can take years to restore their self-belief'<sup>131</sup>

Recently the ability range of pupils admitted to grammar schools has widened with an increasing number of pupils with lower transfer grades being admitted to grammar schools.<sup>132</sup> It has raised questions about the appropriateness of the curriculum offered and the teaching approaches needed for a much broader ability range of pupils in these schools.<sup>133</sup> The greater numbers of children entering grammar schools also has an adverse on the academic profile of students, with Grammar schools accused of 'creaming' higher achievers from non-selective schools - thus depriving pupils in the non-grammar sector of positive (peer) role models.<sup>134</sup>

Principals have also described the impact of academic selection on secondary schools highlighting that they are often not recognised by parents as 1<sup>st</sup> option for their children due to their perceived lack of quality. They highlighted the need for more 'efforts to bring parity of

<sup>128</sup> Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) (2010) *Talking transfer: Pupil's perspectives of the transfer process in 2010. A report by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People*

<sup>129</sup> Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) (2010) *Talking transfer: Pupil's perspectives of the transfer process in 2010. A report by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People*

<sup>130</sup> Gallagher, T and Smyth, A. (2000) *Department of Education for Northern Ireland. The effects of the Selective System of Secondary Education in Northern Ireland* Bangor: DENI.

<sup>131</sup> Right 2 Education Group (2019) 'Could Make or Break a child' The State of Human Rights and Academic Selection in Northern Ireland. Participation and the Practice of Rights and The Irish National teachers Organisation <https://www.pprproject.org/sites/default/files/R2E%20Report%202019%20Final%201%20%281%29.pdf>

<sup>132</sup> *Even the lowest grade can get you into grammar school*, Belfast Telegraph [online] available at:

<https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/education/even-the-lowest-grade-can-get-you-into-grammar-school-28683932.html>

<sup>133</sup> Costello (2004) *Future Post-Primary Arrangements in Northern Ireland: Advice from the Post-Primary Review Working Group* Bangor: Department of Education

<sup>134</sup> Leitch, R., Hughes, J., Burns, S., Cownie, E., McManus, C., Ievers, M., Shuttleworth, I., (2017) *Investigating Links in Achievement and Deprivation (ILIAD): Volume III*. Belfast: Queen's University Belfast.

respect to academic and vocational education.<sup>135</sup> Similarly, falling numbers at post primary level coupled with a preference by parents and children for grammar schools over secondary schools leaves them vulnerable to cuts in funding and potential closure.<sup>136</sup> Some head teachers have described how in addition to considering reform of the academically selective system, reform across the entire school estate is necessary.<sup>137</sup>

### Parental attitudes to academic selection

Research indicates that many parents are unhappy with participating in the process of academic selection but feel of powerless to affect any change to the system. While fundamentally disagreeing with it, they nevertheless are obliged to participate in the hope of achieving the best access to resources and support for their child.<sup>138</sup>

There is also a perception among parents that the unregulated tests possess a degree of prestige due to the fact that they act as gateway into particular academically high-performing schools.<sup>139</sup> This has been illustrated through the comments of Minister Weir who suggests: 'The prospect of getting into the grammar school, and the opportunities that it creates, encourages aspiration in our children and their parents'. He adds: 'Through the selection process, grammar schools have been an essential vehicle for social mobility'.<sup>140</sup>

Parent's fundamental concerns about the testing process include the inequalities in outcomes that exist and the perceived lack of opportunities afforded children who do not perform well in the test.<sup>141</sup> Parents are also concerned about the mental health implications of sitting high stakes tests at such a young age.<sup>142</sup> Several media reports also highlight the stress that parents experience when children are undertaking the transfer process. Parents tend to discuss it in negative terms such as 'stressful' and 'difficult on everyone'.<sup>143</sup> There is also significant pressure on parents to pay for private tuition to ensure their children have the best chance to pass the exams – often when it causes them considerable financial strain to do so.<sup>144</sup>

<sup>135</sup> Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) (2010) *Talking transfer: Pupil's perspectives of the transfer process in 2010. A report by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People*

<sup>136</sup> Mebhan, A (2011) Grammar school intake – hoovering up pupils at the expense of local secondary schools? Slugger O'Toole Website [online] Available at: <https://sluggerotoole.com/2011/09/03/grammar-school-intake-hoovering-up-pupils-at-the-expense-of-local-secondaryschools/>

<sup>137</sup> Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) (2010) *Talking transfer: Pupil's perspectives of the transfer process in 2010. A report by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People*

<sup>138</sup> Right 2 Education Group (2019) 'Could Make or Break a child' The State of Human Rights and Academic Selection in Northern Ireland. Participation and the Practice of Rights and The Irish National teachers Organisation

<sup>139</sup> Shewbridge, C., Hulshof, M., Nusche, D., Stenius Staehr, L. (2014) *OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education: Northern Ireland* OECD Publishing

<sup>140</sup> Weir, P (2016) *Peter Weir: Why I'm lifting bar on transfer test preparation in schools* Belfast Telegraph [online] Available at: <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/opinion/peter-weir-why-im-lifting-bar-on-transfer-test-preparation-in-schools-35027906.html>

<sup>141</sup> Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) (2010) *Talking transfer: Pupil's perspectives of the transfer process in 2010. A report by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People*

<sup>142</sup> Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) (2010) *Talking transfer: Pupil's perspectives of the transfer process in 2010. A report by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People*

<sup>143</sup> Stewart, A (2019) *Transfer test: How to prepare for results day* BBC News Website [online] Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-46948602>

<sup>144</sup> Leitch, R., Hughes, J., Burns, S., Cownie, E., McManus, C., Ievers, M., Shuttleworth, I., (2017) *Investigating Links in Achievement and Deprivation (ILIAD): Volume III*. Belfast: Queen's University Belfast.

Elwood highlights how navigating the transfer test process has been shown to be difficult for children and parents.<sup>145</sup> Much of the difficulty is centred on confusion as to who is responsible for the system overall; a lack of transparency as to how decisions are made; the consequences for children of deciding what test to take; the impact on some children who are taking both tests; and the difficulty for children and parents from diverse community backgrounds in accessing information regarding the administration of two very different testing systems.<sup>146</sup>

## 7. Academic Selection and the broader purposes of education

The OECD have highlighted that there is no guarantee that the unregulated transfer tests adequately align with the Northern Irish knowledge and skills based curriculum. In fact the OECD highlights that the transfer tests are a prime example of driving and possibly distorting the curriculum.

In their research, Gallagher and Smith reported that teaching strategies were strongly influenced by methods that teach to the test.<sup>147</sup> The transfer procedure can become so important that it overshadows other aspects of school and commenters have argued that this had led to children being tested rather than educated for much of their last 2 years of primary school.<sup>148</sup> In addition to affecting the delivery of education, such changes adversely affect the education of pupils taking the test who have little prospect of success and must struggle to keep up, as well as those who, by parental choice, have decided not to take the transfer test.<sup>149</sup>

Young people themselves highlight several issues with the transfer test process including that the curriculum is too narrowly focused on sitting the exams at the expense of other subjects and that the system is favoured towards students who were more academically able.<sup>150</sup>

In their report on academic underachievement in Northern Ireland, Henderson et al. highlight how the Northern Ireland curriculum is meant to equip young people with skills for life and work in the 21st century.<sup>151</sup> However, there had been little change in teaching or learning and the continued dominance of core academic subjects, assessed through external examinations, act as a constraint on 21st century learning. The focus on academic subjects

<sup>145</sup> Elwood, J (2013) Educational assessment policy and practice: a matter of ethics, *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 20:2, 205-220

<sup>146</sup> Elwood, J (2013) Educational assessment policy and practice: a matter of ethics, *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 20:2, 205-220

<sup>147</sup> Gallagher, T and Smyth, A. (2000) *Department of Education for Northern Ireland. The effects of the Selective System of Secondary Education in Northern Ireland* Bangor: DENI

<sup>148</sup> Coleman, C (2020) Time to make academic selection history Sluggor O'Toole website [online] Available at: <https://sluggerotoole.com/2020/05/13/time-to-make-academic-selection-history/#more-130389>

<sup>149</sup> NICCYP (2017) Educational Inequalities and Inclusion Position Paper [online] Available at: <https://www.ief.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/educational-position-paper-july-2017-final.pdf>

<sup>150</sup> Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) (2010) Talking transfer: Pupil's perspectives of the transfer process in 2010. A report by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People

<sup>151</sup> Henderson, L., Harris, J., Purdy, N. and Walsh, G. (2020) *Educational Underachievement in Northern Ireland: Evidence Summary*. Stranmillis University College, Belfast: Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement

at the expense of life and work skills have been flagged in several policy documents examining academic selection including both the Burns and Costello report.<sup>152</sup>

The OECD has also highlighted that Department of Education policy is being undermined by the existence of the unregulated transfer tests. For example, many parents are less interested in their child's results at end of key stage assessments but respect the unregulated transfer tests.<sup>153</sup> This is concerning given that key stage assessments provide clear information on the progress pupils are making in developing their literacy, numeracy and ICT skills.<sup>154</sup> There are also indications that the overarching policy objective for the Department of Education to increase equity is compromised with this unregulated transfer system.<sup>155</sup>

## 8. Academic Selection and Children's rights

By signing the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) the Northern Irish government has committed to upholding the rights of children and young people. This includes the right of all children to an effective education in line with Article 29(1) of the UNCRC. The use of academic selection at transition has been identified as presenting a challenge to the provision of an effective education and has been repeatedly criticised by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.<sup>156</sup> As recently as 2016 UN CRC Committee recommended that the NI Executive:

'Abolish the practice of unregulated admission tests to access post-primary education in NI'.<sup>157</sup>

Several rights based bodies have also been highly critical of the process of academic selection. In 2017, The NICCYP called for an immediate end to the use of academic selection describing it as 'a discriminatory system for determining access to post primary education' that has a 'detrimental impact on the educational outcomes of economically deprived children and young people'.<sup>158</sup>

<sup>152</sup> Leitch, R., Hughes, J., Burns, S., Cownie, E., McManus, C., Ievers, M., Shuttleworth, I., (2017) Investigating Links in Achievement and Deprivation (ILIAD): Volume III. Belfast: Queen's University Belfast.

<sup>153</sup> Shewbridge, C., Hulshof, M., Nusche, D., Stenius Staehr, L. (2014) OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education: Northern Ireland OECD Publishing

<sup>154</sup> Henderson, L., Harris, J., Purdy, N. and Walsh, G. (2020) [Educational Underachievement in Northern Ireland: Evidence Summary](#). Stranmillis University College, Belfast: Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement

<sup>155</sup> Shewbridge, C., Hulshof, M., Nusche, D., Stenius Staehr, L. (2014) *OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education: Northern Ireland* OECD Publishing

<sup>156</sup> UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2016. *Concluding observations on the fifth periodic report of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland CRC/C/GBR/CO/5*, Geneva: United Nations.

<sup>157</sup> CRC/C/GBR/CO/5, 'UN Committee on the Rights of the Child Concluding Observations on the Fifth Periodic Report of the UK of Great Britain and NI', 12 July 2016, at para 72(a)

<sup>158</sup> NICCYP (2017) *Educational Inequalities and Inclusion Position Paper* [online] Available at: <https://www.ief.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/educational-position-paper-july-2017-final.pdf>

In 2018, the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission also expressed its concerns regarding the use of academic selection:<sup>159</sup>

'Noting the lack of political consensus, the Commission raises concern over the continued existence of the two tier system of education in NI. It highlights that as a result of continued unregulated post-primary academic selection and the prevalence of privately funded tutoring, children from poor socioeconomic backgrounds are disadvantaged in current academic selection processes'

The Right to Education group have been concerned with whether education bodies in Northern Ireland conduct any rights based monitoring. In 2018 the group made a freedom of information request to the DE and EA to ascertain whether they gather information pertaining to children's mental health and their confidence in the transfer system. The EA confirmed that it does not monitor the adverse impacts on student's mental health either generally or in relation to academic selection.<sup>160</sup>

The group also expressed concern that children are not given the opportunity to contribute to the debate on academic selection. In their survey of 300 school children, results revealed that 62% of the children felt that their ideas and thoughts about academic selection were not being considered by decision makers. The NICCYP also noted the lack of participation by young people highlighting that their views had not been taken into consideration with regard to the abolition of the original 11+ state exams.<sup>161</sup>

The UN has expressed concern regarding education practices that result in adopting a narrow focus on a restricted set of academic skills which place an excessive burden on children stating:

It should be emphasised that the type of teaching that is focused primarily on accumulation of knowledge, prompting competition and leading to an excessive burden of work on children, may seriously hamper advancing Shared Education and the harmonious development of the child to the fullest potential of his or her abilities and talents.<sup>162</sup>

This is particularly relevant in the case of academic selection in Northern Ireland with several research studies suggesting that efforts focused on preparing children for the transfer test result in inadequate cover of other areas of the Key Stage 2 curriculum.

<sup>159</sup> Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (2018) *The 2018 Annual Statement Human Rights in Northern Ireland*

<sup>160</sup> INTO and PPR (2018) *'Could Make or Break A Child' The State of Human rights and Academic Selection in Northern Ireland.*

<sup>161</sup> Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (2010) *Talking transfer: pupils perspectives of the transfer process in 2010*

<sup>162</sup> UN (United Nations) (2001) General Comment No. 1: *The Aims of Education (No. CRC/GC/2001/1)*. Geneva, Switzerland: United Nations, Committee on the Rights of the Child.

## 9. Conclusion

Academic selection remains a contentious subject, with proponents arguing in favour of the high grades many students in Northern Ireland achieve in comparison to other jurisdictions. However, there is clear evidence that non-selective schools have much higher concentrations of disadvantaged pupils, with a range of implications, including for academic outcomes. In addition to presenting challenges to equity, the validity and reliability of both tests have been challenged by local and international commentators. The compatibility of the academically selective system with children's rights has also been called into question. The debate remains at a stalemate seemingly without any hope for resolution or consensus on the issue. However, recent events including the re-establishment of the NI assembly and the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic have presented an opportunity to raise the issue again.