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# The Rise and Fall and Rise of Academic Selection: The Case of Northern Ireland<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

There has been much public discussion about church-controlled schools north and south and the potential issues involved if constitutional change was to occur. However, there has been far less debate about Northern

<sup>1</sup> Read responses to this paper in *Irish Studies in International Affairs: ARINS* 32 (2) 2021, by Tony Gallagher: <https://doi.org/10.3318/isia.2021.32b.41> and Joanne Hughes: <https://doi.org/10.3318/isia.2021.32b.42>.

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Ireland's use of academic selection and its impacts. To fill the research gap in this area and based on a review of the literature on academic selection, coupled with interview data gathered from principals in both the primary and post-primary sectors, from both selective grammar schools and non-selective secondary schools in Northern Ireland, this research reports on the advantages, disadvantages and perceptions of academic selection in Northern Ireland. Evidence derived from this research suggests that participants, in line with the literature, acknowledge that there are benefits to academic selection for some students and schools. However, the vast majority were also of the view that this advantage comes at a significant disadvantage for the majority of the student population before and after the selection process has occurred. This paper calls for the cessation of academic selection in all of its unregulated shapes and forms in Northern Ireland as has occurred in other jurisdictions.

## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Almost all education systems throughout the world have in place various forms of selection that allocate places to students based on, for example, their socio-economic status and academic performance in examinations. This is particularly true in the case of entry into higher education. However, on the island of Ireland, academic selection and, by association, socio-economic segregation, exist also at the compulsory education level. In Ireland, for example, in what might be referred to as a form of intergenerational privilege, almost 7% of the school-going population attend government-subsidised 'fee paying' schools that also have the option of giving priority to a proportion of students whose parents' or siblings attended the school.<sup>2</sup> Selection based on academic performance and interlinked socio-economic status also exists in Northern Ireland, where not only are the majority of post-primary school pupils segregated based on their religious status, they can also be segregated based on their performance in what is commonly referred to as the 11+ transfer test, a highly competitive and contentious examination that is used as a means of gaining entry into what are referred to as selective grammar schools. Given the well-documented adverse effects of deprivation on educational

<sup>2</sup> Aline Courtois, 'How can we identify elite schools (where they do not exist)? The case of Ireland', in Francois Denord, Mikael Palme and Bertrand Réau, *Researching elites and power* (Cham, 2020), 169–78.

attainment, these schools already tend to have a lower proportion of students from socio-economically deprived backgrounds in comparison to other school types. Using Free School Meals Entitlement (FSME) as a proxy for social deprivation, non-grammar students are ‘much more likely than grammar school pupils to be entitled to FSME (35% compared to 13%)’.<sup>3</sup>

Nonetheless, academic selection remains a central feature of Northern Ireland’s educational landscape, where it is estimated that approximately 50% of the entire population of primary school pupils sit the transfer examination that has at times been subliminally endorsed or politely ignored across various political parties,<sup>4</sup> despite the overwhelming evidence to suggest the inequities that exist with such a system.<sup>5</sup>

The popularity of academic selection is understandable. Many parents believe that their children will gain a higher quality education by attending selective grammar schools. As Adele Bergin and Seamus McGuinness remind us: ‘Access to and take-up of high-quality educational provision is the single most important factor determining career success, wage growth and social progression and, therefore, can be interpreted as a key measure of opportunity in each region’.<sup>6</sup> Northern Ireland performs poorly when compared to Ireland, Scotland and most other parts of the UK, in the proportion of young people who complete A-levels or their equivalent. As the nature and scale of academic selection is a point of significant difference in the systems, analysis of its impact is an important part of a broader debate on potential system-wide change.

For those school leaders who operate in such a system, Tony Gallagher states that ‘[a]t the level of practice within a research and development context, the agency of school leaders is centrally concerned with the learning experiences and opportunities of the learners in their care’.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, it would be reasonable and logical to suggest that outside the realm of academic and political discourse there exist the often silent voices of school leaders and

<sup>3</sup> Department of Education, ‘Annual enrolments at schools and in funded pre-school education in Northern Ireland, 2019–2020’. Available at: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/school-enrolments-overview>, p.9.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Roulston and Matt Milliken, ‘Academic selection and the transfer test’, Integrated Education Fund, 2021.

<sup>5</sup> C. Shewbridge *et al.*, ‘OECD reviews of evaluation and assessment in education: Northern Ireland’, OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education, 2014.

<sup>6</sup> Adele Bergin and Seamus McGuinness, ‘Who is better off? Measuring cross-border differences in living standards, opportunities and quality of life on the island of Ireland’, *Irish Studies in International Affairs: ARINS* 32 (2) (2021), 143–60: 151.

<sup>7</sup> Tony Gallagher, ‘Governance and leadership in education policy making and school development in a divided society’, *School Leadership & Management* 41 (1–2) (2021), 132–51: 137.

teachers who, regardless of the school type to which they are affiliated, ultimately want the best for the children in their care.

This research paper is based on a series of semi-structured interviews conducted with primary and post-primary school leaders from Northern Ireland (two post-primary grammar, two post-primary non-grammar school and five primary school leaders). Our purpose is to fill the lacuna of research in this area to ascertain the challenges, opportunities, and ways in which these voices operate in such a system. Before doing so, however, the paper sets some context by providing an overview of the rise and subsequent decline of academic selection in the United Kingdom, with a focus on the present selective testing arrangements that exist in Northern Ireland. The next part of the paper reviews the research literature, discussing the arguments for selective grammar schools and the profile of students they cater for. This is followed by a review of the literature relating to the knock-on effects of selective education. The penultimate part of the paper presents the qualitative data derived from the interviews, concluding with a discussion and analysis of the research findings.

## THE RISE OF ACADEMIC SELECTION

The Education Act 1944 made post-primary education free for all children between the ages of five and fifteen in Britain and introduced a selective school system, where examination results determine the school a child attends.<sup>8</sup> The post-war education system subsequently comprised a tripartite school system made up of grammar schools for the academically talented and, for those demonstrating less academic talent, either secondary moderns or technical high schools.<sup>9</sup> Dean Garrat and Gillian Forrester,<sup>10</sup> however, point out that due to the lack of technical schools, the actual reality was a bipartite system.

<sup>8</sup> John Jerrim and Sam Sims, 'The association between attending a grammar school and children's socio-emotional outcomes: new evidence from the Millennium Cohort Study', *British Journal of Educational Studies* 68 (1) (2020) (published online 20 September 2018), 25–42; Jerrim and Sims, 'Why do so few low-and middle-income children attend a grammar school? New evidence from the Millennium Cohort Study', *British Educational Research Journal* 45 (3) (2019), 425–57; Stephen Gorard and Nadia Siddiqui, 'Grammar schools in England: a new analysis of social segregation and academic outcomes', *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 39 (7) (2018), 909–24.

<sup>9</sup> Tomas Boronski and Nasima Hassan, *Sociology of education* (London, 2015).

<sup>10</sup> Dean Garratt and Gillian Forrester, *Education policy unravelled* (London, 2012).

Children were segregated into grammar schools or secondary modern schools at the age of 11 via testing and a policy of attainment-based entry,<sup>11</sup> in what is commonly referred to as the 11+ in England or the transfer test in Northern Ireland.

This policy of academic selection was gradually eroded in much of the United Kingdom during the 1960s and 1970s, however, as the Labour government began a move towards mixed ability schooling via comprehensive education. By 1979, for example, grammar schools constituted less than 5 per cent of English and Welsh state-funded secondary schools.<sup>12</sup> Today, while there are a small number of grammar schools still in operation in England, selective schooling has largely been abolished in Scotland and Wales,<sup>13</sup> and, in contrast, has been maintained in Northern Ireland.

In the case of Northern Ireland, a system of academic selection has existed since 1947,<sup>14</sup> and the combination of both selective schooling and religious segregation means that the model of education offered in Northern Ireland is uniquely distinguishable from that of the rest of the UK.<sup>15</sup> Although academic selection was largely abandoned in the rest of the UK in favour of comprehensive schools,<sup>16</sup> it has remained a significant feature of the education system in Northern Ireland and is above the OECD average.<sup>17</sup>

For example, research published by the Department of Education reveals that a greater proportion of A-level students attend selective grammar schools (60.7%) than non-selective schools (39.3%).<sup>18</sup> A transfer test is taken at approximately 11 years of age, and those students with the highest scores on the test have the choice whether to attend a grammar school or secondary school.

<sup>11</sup> Becky Francis *et al.*, 'Exploring the relative lack of impact of research on "ability grouping" in England: a discourse analytic account', *Cambridge Journal of Education* 47 (1) (2017), 1–17.

<sup>12</sup> Edward Scott, *Extension of grammar schools and selection in education* (London, 2016).

<sup>13</sup> Gorard and Siddiqui, 'Grammar schools in England'.

<sup>14</sup> Lesley Abbott, 'Northern Ireland head teachers' perceptions of inclusion', *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 10 (6) (2006), 627–43.

<sup>15</sup> John Gardner and Tony Gallagher, 'Gauging the deliverable? Educational research in Northern Ireland', *European Educational Research Journal* 6 (1) (2007), 101–14.

<sup>16</sup> Caitlin Donnelly and Robert D. Osborne, 'Devolution, social policy and education: some observations from Northern Ireland', *Social Policy and Society* 4 (2) (2005), 147–56.

<sup>17</sup> Stephen Jenkins, John Micklewright and Sylke V. Schnepf, 'Social segregation in secondary schools: how does England compare with other countries?' *Oxford Review of Education* 34 (1) (2008), 21–37.

<sup>18</sup> Department of Education, 'Year 12 and Year 14 examination performance at post-primary schools in Northern Ireland, 2016–17', *Statistical Bulletin 10/2017* (Bangor, Department of Education).

Students who either fail the transfer test or who do not take it attend secondary schools, more commonly referred to as non-grammar schools.<sup>19</sup> As in the rest of the United Kingdom, grammar schools are considered to be high-performing schools and are strongly associated with academic success.

In the case of Northern Ireland, the minister for education has had legislative responsibility for education since the establishment of the Northern Ireland assembly in 1999. Soon after acquiring this responsibility, Martin McGuinness of Sinn Féin and then education minister initiated the abolishment of the 11+ transfer test.<sup>20</sup> The subsequent review of post-primary education recommended the abolition of academic selection, and consequently, the end of the transfer test was announced.<sup>21</sup> This was due to come into effect from 2004 and later postponed to 2008,<sup>22</sup> with some parties arguing that abolition had taken place without sufficient consultation. What was to transpire was a powerful response from grammar schools. Although the last state-sponsored transfer tests in Northern Ireland took place in 2008, grammar schools, both Catholic and Protestant, created their own unofficial examinations for selecting students, continuing in practice a policy of academic selection in what has become known locally as Protestant and Catholic tests<sup>23</sup> run by two different non-state administrative bodies. The new education minister, Catriona Ruane, also of Sinn Féin, wrote to these schools advising them that neither she nor her department supported this non-state administered selection mechanism but conceded that she was powerless to render this selection process illegal.<sup>24</sup>

On the one hand, the academic selection debate had an ending because the departmental policy introduced in 2010 did not include selective schooling and the 11+, but on the other hand, the debate did not have an ending

<sup>19</sup> Luke Kelleher, Austin Smyth and Malachy McEldowney, 'Cultural attitudes, parental aspirations, and socioeconomic influence on post-primary school selection in Northern Ireland', *Journal of School Choice* 10 (2) (2016), 200–26.

<sup>20</sup> Samuel J. McGuinness, 'Education policy in Northern Ireland: a review', *Italian Journal of Sociology of Education* 4 (1) (2012), 205–37.

<sup>21</sup> Tony Gallagher and Alan Smith, 'Attitudes to academic selection in Northern Ireland', *Research Update* 16 (2003) (ARK: Northern Ireland Social & Political Archive).

<sup>22</sup> John Gardner, 'Education in Northern Ireland since the Good Friday Agreement: Kabuki theatre meets danse macabre', *Oxford Review of Education* 42 (3) (2016), 346–61.

<sup>23</sup> Vani Borooah and Colin Knox, 'The contribution of "shared education" to Catholic-Protestant reconciliation in Northern Ireland: a third way?' *British Educational Research Journal* 39 (5) (2013), 925–46.

<sup>24</sup> Derek Birrell and Deirdre Heenan, 'Policy style and governing without consensus: devolution and education policy in Northern Ireland', *Social Policy & Administration* 47 (7) (2013), 765–82.

because political parties did not reach consensus.<sup>25</sup> This turmoil and political stalemate is outlined by Jannette Elwood:

The continued operation of this new transfer system at 11+ is immensely controversial as it defies current education policy commitments and is not statutory for primary schools to administer. The Minister for Education has statutorily removed selection from the NI system, yet its proponents (mostly from opposing political parties) have continued to counteract this action. Thus, a policy stalemate exists, the impact of which has serious implications for the educational experience of children going through this process...in the political vacuum that surrounds selection, a non-statutory, un-regulated and private transfer system operates without evaluation or scrutiny but yet continues to decide the educational fate of many children. With two different tests being used, possible issues of variability in validity, reliability, comparability and difficulty arise which have major implications for the consequential use of these tests.<sup>26</sup>

Further proposals for new criteria for post-primary school selection that included community and geographical factors had the effect, whether intended or not, that children could ultimately be segregated not only by academic ability or gender but also, in effect, whether intended or not, by religion.<sup>27</sup> In most recent times, the official government guidance and policy for transfer has been revised, and the previous policy that prevented primary schools from facilitating any unregulated tests was reversed.<sup>28</sup> This new guidance and policy supports the right of primary schools wishing to use academic selection as the basis for admission and allows primary schools to carry out test preparation during core teaching hours, coach pupils in exam technique and familiarise them with a testing environment.<sup>29</sup> Northern Ireland, therefore,

<sup>25</sup> Elisabeth Haland Berglund, 'The battle of academic selection: a study of the debate on the selective education system in Northern Ireland, 2000–2011' (Master's thesis, University of Bergen and Bergen University College, 2013).

<sup>26</sup> Jannette Elwood, 'Educational assessment policy and practice: a matter of ethics', *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice* 20 (2) (2013), 205–20: 211.

<sup>27</sup> Kelleher, Smyth and McEldowney, 'Cultural attitudes, parental aspirations, and socioeconomic influence on post-primary school selection in Northern Ireland', 10.

<sup>28</sup> Perry, 'Academic selection: a brief overview', Paper 48/16.

<sup>29</sup> Perry, 'Academic selection: a brief overview', Paper 48/16.



in actual practice, continues to operate a system of academic selection<sup>30</sup> and a highly differentiated school performance, embodied by high performing grammar schools and a 'long tail of underachievement'.<sup>31</sup>

## ARGUMENTS FOR SELECTIVE GRAMMAR SCHOOLS

Despite the role of grammar schools as an 'essential structural feature of the English school system' having long passed, there have been repeated calls for their re-introduction,<sup>32</sup> including from the government.<sup>33</sup>

Several years ago, Richard Harris and Samuel Rose<sup>34</sup> described how those in favour of a return to an academically selective system argued that there are not only educational benefits, such as higher learning outcomes for students, but that selective schools such as grammar schools also offer social mobility to 'academically able students' from the lowest income groups. More recently, the government has moved to increasing academic selection, which requires no direct legislation. Gorard and Siddiqui suggest that those in favour of academic selection can justify this stance by claiming that:

- Pupils generally perform better at grammar schools than they do at non-selective schools.
- The poorest children attending grammar schools do even better so that such schools actually reduce the poverty attainment gap and promote social mobility.
- There is little or no harmful consequence for the other pupils in the rest of the schools.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Gavin Duffy and Tony Gallagher, 'Shared education in contested spaces: how collaborative networks improve communities and schools', *Journal of Educational Change* 18 (1) (2017), 107–34.

<sup>31</sup> Quoted from Vani Borooah and Colin Knox, 'Inequality, segregation and poor performance: the education system in Northern Ireland', *Educational Review* 69 (3) (2017), 318–36: 219: 'Northern Ireland has high end achievers and a long tail of under-achievement: 95% of grammar school pupils attained five GCSEs A\*–C, including English and Maths in 2014/2015 compared to 46.8% of non-grammar pupils, reducing to 29.6% for males attending non-grammar schools on free schools meals.'

<sup>32</sup> Rebecca Morris and Thomas Perry, 'Reframing the English grammar schools debate', *Educational Review* 69 (1) (2017), 1–24.

<sup>33</sup> Jerrim and Sims, 'The association between'; Jerrim and Sims, 'Why do so few low-and middle-income children attend a grammar school?'; Gorard and Siddiqui, 'Grammar schools in England'.

<sup>34</sup> Richard Harris and Samuel Rose, 'Who benefits from grammar schools? A case study of Buckinghamshire, England', *Oxford Review of Education* 39 (2) (2013), 151–71: 152.

<sup>35</sup> Gorard and Siddiqui, 'Grammar schools in England', 39.

Indeed, it has long been argued that grammar schools can compensate ‘poor but able’ children,<sup>36</sup> as places are available for students who have the capacity to excel in a particular subject but would otherwise not fit the criteria to be accepted.<sup>37</sup> Since entry to grammar schools is based on aptitude as opposed to criteria, such as parental income or neighbourhood location, ‘poor but able’ children can theoretically attend grammar schools and perform better than they would in comprehensive education.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, not only are grammar schools proposed as being meritocratic, but there are claims that it is appropriate for different types of pupils with different needs to have different kinds of education, and that teaching can best be targeted at a narrow ability range via selection.<sup>39</sup>

### THE EFFECTIVENESS OF GRAMMAR SCHOOLS

In Northern Ireland in 2016/17, 96.5% of grammar school students achieved five or more GCSEs at grades A\*-C, compared with 74.4% of non-grammar school pupils (9),<sup>40</sup> and when consideration is given to achievement in 7 or more GCSEs (including equivalents) at grades A\*-C, the gap widens, with 91.2% of grammar school pupils achieving this standard compared with 54.0% of non-grammar school pupils.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, in the final year of schooling, grammar schools had a higher percentage than non-grammar schools of pupils gaining three or more A-levels (including equivalents) at grades A\*-C. In 2016/17, 78.1% of grammar school students achieved this standard, compared with 55.0% of non-grammar school pupils.<sup>42</sup> It is also the case that disadvantaged students in grammar schools have higher attainment than those in non-grammar schools in all key performance indicators.<sup>43</sup>

However, despite claims made about grammar school effectiveness, it has previously been said that most existing studies report no clear advantage to

<sup>36</sup> Tony Edwards and Geoff Whitty, ‘Specialisation and selection in secondary education’, *Oxford Review of Education* 23 (1) (1997), 5–15: 6.

<sup>37</sup> John Coldron, Ben Willis and Claire Wolstenholme, ‘Selection by attainment and aptitude in English secondary schools’, *British Journal of Educational Studies* 57 (3) (2009), 245–64.

<sup>38</sup> Morris and Perry, ‘Reframing the English grammar schools debate’, 14.

<sup>39</sup> Robert Coe *et al.*, *Evidence on the Effects of Selective Educational Systems: A Report for the Sutton Trust* (Durham, 2008).

<sup>40</sup> Department of Education, ‘Year 12 and Year 14 examination performance’.

<sup>41</sup> Department of Education, ‘Year 12 and Year 14 examination performance’.

<sup>42</sup> Department of Education, ‘Year 12 and Year 14 examination performance’.

<sup>43</sup> Department of Education, ‘Year 12 and Year 14 examination performance’.

either selective or non-selective systems as a whole.<sup>44</sup> These studies have, however, reported that pupils who attend grammar schools do better than equally academic pupils in comprehensive schools.<sup>45</sup> More recently, research by Gorard and Siddiqi,<sup>46</sup> with the full 2015 cohort of pupils in England, has shown that the results from grammar schools are no better or worse than in other school types in England once poverty and socioeconomic status are accounted for. This research contends that grammar schools are no more or less effective than non-selective schools once their clear difference in intake has been taken into account.<sup>47</sup> In addition, there is further research in the United Kingdom that shows that ‘genetic and exam differences’ between school types, including state-funded selective and non-selective schools, are primarily due to the heritable characteristics involved in pupil admission,<sup>48</sup> and that grammar school attendance has little effect on young people’s social-emotional outcomes.<sup>49</sup> In the latter study, of which the findings are applicable to both England and Northern Ireland, while some positive impact of attending a grammar school was found for academic outcomes, it was also found that ‘three years into their time at secondary school, grammar pupils seem to have similar levels of engagement and self-confidence in school, as well as aspirations and expectations for the future, as their matched (non-grammar) peers’<sup>50</sup>—and this might help explain why grammar schools do not improve academic attainment—they do not improve pupils’ engagement with school.<sup>51</sup>

#### THE COMPOSITION OF STUDENTS IN GRAMMAR SCHOOLS

According to Jonathan Cribb *et al.*,<sup>52</sup> in England, less than 3% of entrants to grammar schools qualified for free school meals, and pupils were less likely to attend a grammar school if their primary school had a high concentration of pupils from deprived backgrounds.

<sup>44</sup> Coe *et al.*, ‘Evidence on the effects of selective educational systems’.

<sup>45</sup> Coe *et al.*, ‘Evidence on the effects of selective educational systems’.

<sup>46</sup> Gorard and Siddiqi, ‘Grammar schools in England’, 39.

<sup>47</sup> Gorard and Siddiqi, ‘Grammar schools in England’, 39.

<sup>48</sup> Emily Smith-Woolley *et al.*, ‘Differences in exam performance between pupils attending selective and non-selective schools mirror the genetic differences between them’, *Science of Learning* 3 (3) (2018), 1–7: 1.

<sup>49</sup> Jerrim and Sims, ‘The association between’.

<sup>50</sup> Jerrim and Sims, ‘The association between’, 14.

<sup>51</sup> Jerrim and Sims, ‘The association between’, 15.

<sup>52</sup> Jonathan Cribb *et al.*, *Poor grammar: entry into grammar schools for disadvantaged pupils in England* (London, 2013).

Thus, grammar schools can be strongly associated with social segregation.<sup>53</sup> The evidence also suggests that selective admissions criteria are not only associated with high performing students and low levels of poverty, but with low levels of special educational needs.<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, this segregation may be in the interest of grammar schools. Due to the importance and value attached to league tables in England, for example, schools face greater pressures to attract students more likely to perform well in examinations, and selective schools may therefore operate dubious practices that are socially selective.<sup>55</sup>

In Northern Ireland, students from deprived backgrounds and students with special education needs (SEN) are very under-represented in grammar schools.<sup>56</sup> The selective system could therefore be considered as being anti-inclusionist,<sup>57</sup> in that it is far from any school model that could be regarded as inclusive.<sup>58</sup> The acceptance of students from deprived backgrounds into grammar schools is purely based on how they fare in the transfer test compared with other students, while in order for SEN students to gain acceptance, they need to be deemed as being capable of benefitting from an academic setting.<sup>59</sup> What largely tends to occur is that more affluent, non-SEN students gain acceptance to grammar schools while the remaining cohort go to non-selective secondary schools. The outcome of this segregation is that educational disadvantage can be intensified. As Tony Gallagher and Alan Smith<sup>60</sup> earlier pointed out, the disproportionate number of schools in which lower ability students and disadvantaged students are combined ultimately compounds the educational disadvantage of both factors.

<sup>53</sup> Coldron, Willis and Wolstenholme, 'Selection by attainment and aptitude in English secondary schools', 57.

<sup>54</sup> Anne West and Audrey Hind, 'School choice in London, England: characteristics of students in different types of secondary schools', *Peabody Journal of Education* 82 (2-3) (2007), 498-529.

<sup>55</sup> John Coldron, Caroline Cripps and Lucy Shipton, 'Why are English secondary schools socially segregated?', *Journal of Education Policy* 25 (1) (2010), 19-35: 25.

<sup>56</sup> Borooh and Knox, 'Inequality, segregation and educational performance'.

<sup>57</sup> Jacqueline Lambe, 'Northern Ireland student teachers' changing attitudes towards inclusive education during initial teacher training', *International Journal of Special Education* 22 (1) (2007), 59-71.

<sup>58</sup> Jacqueline Lambe and Robert Bones, 'Student teachers' attitudes to inclusion: implications for initial teacher education in Northern Ireland', *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 10 (6) (2006), 511-27; Lambe and Bones, 'Student teachers' perceptions about inclusive classroom teaching in Northern Ireland prior to teaching practice experience', *European Journal of Special Needs Education* 21 (2) (2006), 167-86; Lambe and Bones, 'The effect of school-based practice on student teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education in Northern Ireland', *Journal of Education for Teaching* 33 (1) (2007), 99-113.

<sup>59</sup> Lambe and Bones, 'The impact of a special school placement on student teacher beliefs about inclusive education in Northern Ireland', *British Journal of Special Education* 35 (2) (2008), 108-16.

<sup>60</sup> Tony Gallagher and Alan Smith, *The effects of the selective system of secondary education in Northern Ireland* (Bangor, 2000).

## THE KNOCK-ON EFFECTS OF GRAMMAR SCHOOLS

Arguably the most significant concern surrounding selective schooling is that there are unintended consequences for students in schools less advantaged. It has been argued that grammar schools maintain social order between social strata<sup>61</sup> and facilitate inequality of opportunity.<sup>62</sup> According to Neil Carmichael and colleagues,<sup>63</sup> the principal reason for the discrepancy between the performance of grammar school students and comprehensive school students is resource allocation and sorting, with grammar schools taking an inequitable amount of resources, teachers, and pupils from local non-selective schools. Grammar schools, for example, are better funded per pupil compared to other schools, often because they have bigger sixth forms where pupils are allocated more government resources per pupil head—these other schools, even though they may have additional funding for SEN, may be more reliant overall on needed finances for school improvement, which adds to a feeling of unfairness—for example:

A selective system costs more to operate than a non-selective system because students are less likely to attend the school closest to their home and therefore require public subsidies for transporting them to school.<sup>64</sup>

Grammar schools also tend to have fewer unqualified or inexperienced teachers, more teachers with an academic degree in the subject they teach, and lower overall teacher turnover,<sup>65</sup> as teachers may be less willing to teach in bottom-rung schools.<sup>66</sup> In terms of the pupils, when poor pupils are educated in schools with concentrations of other poor pupils, they do not progress as well as they would in a school with a more balanced intake.<sup>67</sup> If children's

<sup>61</sup> Gary McCulloch, 'Education and the middle classes: the case of the English grammar schools, 1868–1944', *History of Education* 35 (6) (2006), 689–704.

<sup>62</sup> Terry Haydn, 'The strange death of the comprehensive school in England and Wales, 1965–2002', *Research Papers in Education* 19 (4) (2004), 415–32.

<sup>63</sup> Neil Carmichael *et al.*, *Evidence check: Grammar schools: Fourth Report of Session* (2017).

<sup>64</sup> Rosalind Levačić and Alan Marsh, 'Secondary modern schools: are their pupils disadvantaged?' *British Educational Research Journal* 33 (2) (2007), 155–78: 171.

<sup>65</sup> Rebecca Allen and Joanne Bartley, 'The role of the eleven-plus test papers and appeals in producing social inequalities in access to grammar schools', *National Institute Economic Review* 240 (1) (2017), R30–R41.

<sup>66</sup> Carmichael *et al.*, 'Evidence check'.

<sup>67</sup> Coldron, Cripps and Shipton, 'Why are English secondary schools socially segregated?' 25, 19.

performance at school depends on that of their peers, higher levels of social segregation lead to greater inequality in academic achievement and hence to greater inequality in later-life outcomes.<sup>68</sup>

The Association of School and College Leaders<sup>69</sup> contends that although the minority of deprived students that do gain access to a grammar school may benefit from being enrolled and benefit from social mobility at an individual level, the opposite effect can be seen at a system level, with more selection creating a less equal society. Arguments for selective schools, therefore, stand against the primary reason most grammar schools were abolished: ‘because they were seen as elitist, perpetuating social class divides and limiting the educational prospects of the greater number of pupils not attending those schools’.<sup>70</sup> In short, it could be argued that grammar schools are not serving the students to whom they claim to be offering opportunities and social mobility, and that the performance benefit to grammar school pupils is offset by an adverse effect for those in nearby non-selective schools.<sup>71</sup>

It must also be noted that not every child wishing to attend a grammar school can do so. Therefore, notions of winners and losers are attached to the transfer test,<sup>72</sup> which places tremendous pressure on students, and the literature on this aspect of education in Northern Ireland sets out a stark picture. According to Jacqueline Carlin,<sup>73</sup> one of the main criticisms of the selection procedure is that 60% of pupils taking the transfer test do not gain selection for a grammar school and may, therefore, at such a young age, perceive themselves failures. The acute personal disappointment of not gaining a place at a grammar school (where siblings may have already attended) is something that children may never recover from.<sup>74</sup> In Gavin Byrne and Tony

<sup>68</sup> Stephen Jenkins, John Micklewright and Sylke V. Schnepf, ‘Social segregation in secondary schools: how does England compare with other countries?’ *Oxford Review of Education* 34 (1) (2008), 21–37: 21.

<sup>69</sup> Association of School and College Leaders, *Will increasing selection improve social mobility?* (Leicester, 2016).

<sup>70</sup> Harris and Rose, ‘Who benefits from grammar schools?’ 39, 152.

<sup>71</sup> Morris and Perry, ‘Reframing the English grammar schools debate’, 69.

<sup>72</sup> Elisabeth Haland Berglund, ‘The battle of academic selection: a study of the debate on the selective education system in Northern Ireland, 2000–2011’ (Master’s thesis, University of Bergen and Bergen University College, 2013).

<sup>73</sup> Jacqueline Carlin, ‘The Northern Ireland selective system: a wind of change’, *Irish Journal of Education* 34 (2003), 15–29.

<sup>74</sup> John Gardner and Pamela Cowan, ‘The fallibility of high-stakes “11-plus” testing in Northern Ireland’, *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice* 12 (2) (2005), 145–65.

Gallagher's research with grammar schools and secondary schools,<sup>75</sup> it was found that considerable importance was attached to induction and pastoral care in secondary schools, with an explicit aim of rebuilding the self-esteem and confidence of their pupil intake, particularly in the aftermath of selection. They report that senior staff often talked about dealing with the casualties of selection and of having to pick up the pieces. For example, one secondary school principal spoke of having to nurse students' mental health and raise their perceptions:

Just really trying to get them to believe in themselves. There is no question that some (pupils) when they arrive here do perceive themselves as not good enough. They maybe don't perceive themselves as failures necessarily, but they perceive themselves to be not as good as some of their friends who have gone elsewhere. We really need to start working on that very quickly.<sup>76</sup>

Importantly and crucially, the intense pressure to perform in the transfer test has also been reported as unduly impeding the provision of a wide breadth of curriculum, and the quality of teaching and learning in primary schools,<sup>77</sup> as teachers try to devote sufficient time to testing associated work to prepare students for such a high-stakes examination. Carlin<sup>78</sup> offers the following perspective from a student to reflect the experience of children undergoing intense examination preparation for the transfer test:

The work leading up to the 11+ was very hard and it put me under a lot of pressure. There was a lot of work and homework to get through, so it was non-stop every day. During the summer we got a lot of tests to do. So, I did a few every night and day. Coming into November the work was even harder, and there were 3 practice tests a week. My mum and dad were

<sup>75</sup> Gavin Byrne and Tony Gallagher, 'Systemic factors in school improvement', *Research Papers in Education* 19 (2) (2004), 161–83.

<sup>76</sup> Byrne and Gallagher, 'Systemic factors in school improvement', 171.

<sup>77</sup> Gallagher and Smith, 'The effects of the selective system of secondary education'; Tony Gallagher, 'The impact of devolution on education policy: two case studies', in Caitlin Donnelly, Penny McKeown, Robert Osborne, *Devolution and pluralism in education in Northern Ireland* (Manchester, 2006), 139–48.

<sup>78</sup> Carlin, 'The Northern Ireland selective system: a wind of change', 19.

helping me all the way. On the morning of the 7th, I came to school not feeling very nervous, but when I settled down in the room I felt very nervous.

## KEY FINDINGS

This section provides an analysis of the key findings derived from a series of interviews with school principals and teachers in both the primary and post-primary sectors, from both selective grammar schools and non-selective secondary schools.

### *The advantages of academic selection in Northern Ireland*

The consensus among interviewees was that attending a grammar school was beneficial for those particular students in that it would open up many doors and provide opportunities the students were unlikely to receive if they had attended a non-selective school. This was reflected in comments made by those at primary and post-primary level, both in selective and non-selective schools:

What I see in academic selection is that some students are advantaged, maybe 30 or 40% of students that I deal with, when they get through to the transfer process, and are at a distinct advantage in the area that I serve to the vast majority of children (primary school principal 1).

Those children who do go down that route...to grammar school... probably have a greater choice in life or careers, academic and credential careers (primary school principal 2).

[This affects] the choice of careers but also the networking (non-grammar school principal 1).

The advantages are that you are taking children on a journey and they are automatically—well not automatically as we work very hard, and some of the children have huge socioeconomic issues, but because we have the ability of a greater chance of a child getting seven passes or five passes—they're kind of 'quid's in' (selective grammar school principal 1).



It was pointed out by some primary school principals that academic selection can have a positive impact on the mindset and confidence of the selected students:

For those children, it's a great sense of achievement (primary school principal 2).

Some children see themselves as absolutely amazing (primary school principal 1).

Grammar schools were also considered advantageous for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, in particular, providing them with the same provision as students from more privileged backgrounds. While it was noted that the advantages available to some could disadvantage those attending non-selective schools, attending a grammar school was deemed advantageous nonetheless:

I suppose I'm looking at it from the perspective of the area where my school is in. There is certainly a distinct advantage for those children. It is disadvantageous to others, I don't take away from that but from the perspective of working in a very working-class area, I see children from very poor backgrounds, I suppose having equal advantage to those from a middle-class background (selective grammar school principal 1).

### *The disadvantages of academic selection in Northern Ireland*

The discussions around the advantages of academic selection inadvertently brought the disadvantages to the fore. As per above, the feeling was that grammar schools undisputedly provided advantages to those deemed eligible to attend, but there was a concern about the unintended consequences for other students:

[Seeing] what are the advantages just continues to highlight the flaws and the disadvantages and as I listen to all of you as my colleagues I can concur with everything, having been that child, having seen that in my school, having seen children with aspirations to have a choice of schools or to better themselves

from the community or family that they've grown up [in], but all it says back to me is that the advantage is to the disadvantage of most children in the north (primary school principal 4).

Aside from making schools 'very competitive with each other for the wrong reasons' (primary school principal 8), the test itself was not regarded as being fair on children:

A lot of these children still suck their thumb and believe in Santa and to have such a high-stake thing where their entire future is decided... (primary school principal 1).

It's not very nice, its completely unfair, focused very narrowly, completely unregulated. Now it's more regulated than it used to be because enough years have gone past (primary school principal 2).

The test is skewed, the test is narrow and academic selection is not suited to all children (primary school principal 3).

It's not something that is being done with the children; it's something that is being done to the children (primary school principal 4).

A key issue for those interviewed was the impact that such a testing and sorting regime had on students. The impact of a system of winners and losers on students could be detrimental:

Children view themselves as being a failure...and it's the devastation to the children themselves who are waiving on a score, and that score defines them, and in one moment of opening an envelope they are defined as a success or failure at the age of 10 or 11, and we've talked about that for many years (primary school principal 3).

That's creating an unnecessary stress for a child at that age, and that child is having to deal with that, and secondly, it is creating quite often an unnecessary disappointment (primary school principal 5).

A lot of children are absolutely gutted, and they have no school for September. As far as they feel, not only have they failed that

examination, but nobody wants them, and more so the special needs children. I have about ten special needs children who are trying to get in with us, and those poor children have their own difficulties but imagine what that is doing to their mental health and not only that but what it's doing to the family unit (non-grammar school principal 2).

### *The perception of academic selection in Northern Ireland*

There was a feeling among participants that grammar schools were highly valued in society and that because of this, they were powerless to improve the current situation. The selective school system, which was acknowledged as offering both opportunities and challenges to school students, depending on which form of post-primary school they attended, was upheld by a societal belief in Northern Ireland that academic selection is needed. As one participant stated: 'there is a perception in our society that it is a must to succeed, and until we change the perception of what society values as a quality education, then I think that academic selection is here for a very long time' (primary school principal 3). For now, because parents considered grammar schools to be the best schools, they were eager for their children to attend them as this was considered to be the best form of education:

It corrupts the parents' view of what's important in education (primary school principal 1).

At the end of the day, it's parents that are driving it because if parents didn't want it for their children, they wouldn't do the examination (selective grammar school principal 2).

I know from last year, we had a young child who was put into us [in a non-grammar] and then a couple of weeks later he was offered a place in the grammar school. He [had been] very, very happy. His father had commented on how happy he was, and yet his father decided to take up the place, and when I questioned him, he said, it's all about perception. When you see two children walking down the school together, one in a secondary school uniform and one in a grammar school uniform, the neighbours will perceive and think that he's the smartest of the two. The whole idea of the

grammar school being a better school, the teachers are better, the students are smarter, that still exists, and the children are growing up in that, and the parents' attitudes are obviously seeping down to the children (non-grammar school principal 2).

One participant even pointed out that parents' attention to academic selection was starting at an extremely young age:

For us with a nursery, one of the disadvantages is that parents who end up here look at the next eight years of their primary school career. When they come to visit the nursery, they ask, 'What are your transfer results?' (primary school principal 3).

In complete contrast, however, in areas of socioeconomic disadvantage, it was felt that any possible benefits of academic selection were significantly reduced, as parents were far less engaged with this process than parents in more affluent areas who valued grammar schools and aspired for their children to attend:

The area that I'm working in we would have about 80% free school meals. It's a very socially disadvantaged area. It is a Protestant area and does, I believe, suffer from that lack of ambition from the parental point of view. For those students in our school, the barrier they have is quite often convincing their parents that they want to do the test, those children who are able and those children who can sort of work along with ourselves and the parents (primary school principal 2).

The difficulty is it is a socially deprived area, a very closed community where the children have very little ambition, and if the children do not want to do it, the parent listens to the child. Then the child's choices are limited, and any advantages that academic selection offers for them are also limited, so it is a very difficult circle to get those children out of (primary school principal 3).

Significantly, while it was felt that parents placed a different value on academic selection depending on their socioeconomic background, the participants themselves did not think that Northern Ireland benefited in

any way from academic selection. When asked this question, the response was stark, and no benefits were reported:

Nothing (primary school principal 1).

I don't see anything (primary school principal 2).

No, nothing (primary school principal 5).

No (primary school principal 3).

One particular participant expressed grave concerns about the knock-on effect of schools and teachers orientating their work towards the transfer test. It was felt that by schools doing this, children are deprived of other aspects of their education—aspects that are not measured and do not count in the 11+:

One of the biggest disadvantages for the children in my school [is] the curriculum, particularly in Year 6, becomes catered to teaching literacy and numeracy for academic selection that they're going to be posed with in the test and then for September, October, November and the start of December in Year 7. For those children who choose to do academic selection, those four months are used for preparation for the test and other very valuable curricular areas like art, PE, drama and music; they become treats...that you try to fit in, so the children get a break. And then on top of that are the other students who aren't doing academic selection. They are pulled along in the midst of all of this, and all the schools are driven by this because all of us have such a desire to meet the needs of all of our children...but the two cannot be married, to give the children the best curriculum and the best education, so it narrows their education, it puts the teachers under their specific teaching style (primary school principal 3).

This participant then elaborated further, explaining how a system with such a narrow focus can hinder the country's workforce in years to come:

If it is affecting the skills of people for life and for work, that then again affects their own prosperity. When you are employing people, you want people who use and have those skills and are not just academic, and I think from my perspective as a Year 6 and 7 teacher. Now as a principal the biggest thing is the skills that we

teach them that we don't do so that has to have a knock-on effect if they aren't there when they go to Key Stage 3 and 4 [curriculum for 11 to 16 year olds in Northern Ireland] because we've been preparing for the 15 months for a test and then that links into prosperity for themselves, which has to have an effect on the community that they're living in, because they're deprived of the type of education that they should have gotten at Key Stage 2. But that quality of education is skewed because of the whole system, not because of the test, the test is three days. It's the whole system leading up to it (primary school principal 3).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This research has highlighted the many benefits of academic selection for those students gaining entry to selective grammar schools. Aside from merely boosting high performance, selective grammar schools can provide a culturally enriching experience for students, as well as building their confidence—it is an achievement in itself to be selected for these schools. For students from disadvantaged backgrounds, in particular, selective grammar schools were seen as having the potential to level the academic playing field by offering them the same opportunities that are available to students from more affluent backgrounds. All participants who were interviewed were in full agreement that this was the case. However, at what cost is this happening?

Attending a grammar school was deemed advantageous but disadvantageous for those attending non-selective schools. Academic selection, it was felt, has far-reaching unintended negative consequences for students who are unsuccessful in the selection process. The test preparation alone can bring undue stress on students, their families and on primary schools who prepare students for the 11+ transfer examination, often to the detriment of essential developmental areas of the primary curriculum, such as art and physical education.

Nonetheless, despite the reservations about academic selection, some participants also stated that grammar schools were highly valued in society and that because of this, they were maintained and held in high regard. The perception that parents had of grammar schools meant that they aspired for their children to prepare extensively for the 11+ transfer examination. On the other hand, however, less engaged parents might not perceive grammar schools

in the same light, and because of this, their children might be less likely to attend selective grammar schools and avail of any of the benefits that this segregated system has to offer. While the debate on grammar schools might centre around socioeconomics, it was noteworthy that the participants did not consider academic selection as having any form of benefit for Northern Ireland more generally.

In conclusion, Northern Ireland is praised as an education system that provides high-performance levels, and this is undoubtedly true for grammar schools, but it conceals the level of inequality disadvantaged children face in not only accessing grammar schools,<sup>79</sup> but in attending non-grammar schools, for that matter. The qualitative data presented here also concurs with past research in Northern Ireland that reported that secondary school principals and senior managers believe that their schools are disadvantaged by academic selection, in that parents had a higher regard for grammar schools and the fact that grammar schools can select all of their pupils based on academic achievement.<sup>80</sup> However, it should be noted that more recent research suggests that teachers' perceptions of the negative effects of failing to gain entry to grammar schools were out of line with how pupils experienced the process.<sup>81</sup>

Nonetheless, the overall evidence is firm in contending that selection at such a young age, whether by socio-economic or interlinked academic status, is not a worthwhile policy and exacerbates the existing inequities in society. It also lessens the perceived value placed on successive governments by the electorate, where on the one hand, there are constant orations by governments for parity of equity in society, while on the other hand, many politicians defend the current education system. Taking prior research into account and to concur with Gorard and Siddiqui, 'The quality of education available in a national school system should not depend upon where a student lives or which school they attend'.<sup>82</sup> In creating education systems where children at such an early stage of their development can be deemed winners and losers, the winners enjoy the advantages, but ultimately, the losers suffer the most.

<sup>79</sup> Borooah and Knox, 'Segregation, inequality, and educational performance'.

<sup>80</sup> Byrne and Gallagher, 'Systemic factors in school improvement'.

<sup>81</sup> Jerrim and Sims, 'The association between'.

<sup>82</sup> Gorard and Siddiqui, 'Grammar schools in England', 2.