

Attitudes to Academic Selection in Northern Ireland

Tony Gallagher and Alan Smith



The education system has always played a key role in debates on public policy in Northern Ireland. In particular, one key theme has taken prominence within these debates: the selective system of secondary and grammar schools. Reflecting the high level of public interest, as well as ongoing research and policy discussions, the Education module of both the 1999 and 2001 **Life and Times Surveys** incorporated this theme.

This issue has been hotly debated since the establishment of a selective system of post-primary education in 1947. Unlike most of the rest of the United Kingdom (UK), Northern Ireland did not shift towards a comprehensive system of schools in the 1960s and 1970s. There was a move in this direction towards the end of the 1970s, but this was halted when

the Conservative Government was elected in 1979. Research in the 1980s highlighted some significant problems with the selective system (Sutherland and Gallagher, 1986; Wilson, 1986; Sutherland and Gallagher, 1987; Gallagher, 1988; Teare and Sutherland, 1988), but there was little interest in change at a policy level. This altered when the Labour Government was elected in 1997 and the then Minister with responsibility for Education, Tony Worthington, commissioned two major research projects on the effects of the selective system of education (Alexander, Daly, Gallagher, Gray and Sutherland, 1998; Gallagher and Smith, 2000). Following the publication of the Gallagher and Smith (2000) report, the Minister for Education, Martin McGuinness, established the Post-Primary Review Body to consult on options for the

future organisation of post-primary education. The findings of this body were published as the Burns Report (Post-Primary Review Body, 2001) and recommended the abolition of academic selection in the transfer from primary to post-primary school. It advocates the establishment of a new formative assessment system to run from the upper primary school and through post-primary school, and the establishment of collaborative collegiates of post-primary schools.

A consultation on the recommendations of the Burns Report concluded in June 2002 and the results were published in October 2002 (Department of Education, 2002; see also Gallagher, 2002), just days before the Northern Ireland Assembly was suspended. Martin McGuinness announced the end of the eleven-plus tests as almost his last act as Minister for Education and this decision was confirmed by Jane Kennedy, Minister with responsibility for education under direct rule. However, until the current political impasse is resolved it is unclear what will happen next.

This paper provides an overview of the results of findings from the 1999 and 2001 Life and Times surveys, both of which contained questions related to the issue of selective education, as well as exploring possible alternatives to the current system.

In addition, we link these data to the findings of the consultation on the recommendations of the Burns Report. The results of the consultation were based on five areas of evidence:

a response form distributed to every household in Northern Ireland and returned by 16 per cent of the adult population; a series of questions included in the annual Northern Ireland Omnibus survey; focus groups with young people; detailed response forms distributed to schools and other education organisations, and voluntary and community organisations working with young people; and written submissions made to the Department of Education.

The eleven-plus and attitudes to academic selection

The first set of Life and Times questions asked respondents whether they agree or disagree with a series of statements on various aspects of the eleven-plus and selection. Table 1 shows that there is no simple consensus on the current system.

Table 1: Attitudes to selection

	% who strongly agree or agree	
	1999	2001
Selection has to happen at some time in a child's education	82	84
The eleven-plus puts too much pressure on 10 and 11 year olds	78	75
Children who don't get places at grammar schools still get a first class education	75	69
Children are far too young at 10 or 11 for selection tests	70	69
The eleven-plus system means that most children feel that they are failures	61	58
Grammar schools provide the best standard of education anywhere in the UK	48	47
A system of separate secondary and grammar schools is unfair	40	44
The eleven-plus is a good measure of ability	30	32



Thus, most respondents feel that the eleven-plus tests put too much pressure on young people, that children are too young at that age for selection tests and that the eleven-plus means that most children feel they are failures. However, most respondents also feel that selection has to happen at some time and that children who do not get to grammar school still get a first class education. On the remaining questions, opinions are more evenly divided. There is little difference between the attitudes of respondents in 1999 and those in 2001.

This lack of consensus was evident also in responses to the consultation on the Burns Report. In particular, while a majority of respondents across all categories agree that the eleven-plus tests should be abolished and that transfer should continue at age 11 years, a majority of respondents on the household response form and the opinion survey disagree that academic selection should be abolished. Institutions are split on this issue, with grammar schools opposing the abolition of academic selection while secondary and primary schools, and a majority of voluntary and community organisations, favour the end of academic selection.

The second set of Life and Times questions explored respondents' views on the future of selection, beginning with a question that asked whether they felt the current system works well enough or whether it should be changed. Most tend to favour change, and this proportion has

increased slightly from 55 per cent in 1999 to 59 per cent in 2001. Only 37 per cent in 1991, and 32 per cent in 2001 say that the system works well enough.

Table 2: Attitudes to 11+

	%	
	1999	2001
Works well enough	37	32
Should be changed	55	59

Respondents who felt that some aspects of the current system should be changed were asked whether they thought that the eleven-plus tests, the system of secondary and grammar schools, or both should be changed. Table 3 shows that the most unpopular aspect of the current system is the eleven-plus tests, a pattern confirmed in the responses to the consultation on the Burns Report. Almost all respondents say that the eleven-plus tests should be changed, while 58 per cent say that the system of secondary and grammar schools should be changed.

Table 3: Aspects of current system that should be changed

	%	
	1999	2001
The eleven-plus test only	42	39
System of secondary and grammar schools only	9	6
Both eleven-plus and the system of secondary and grammar schools	49	55

In 1999, respondents who felt that only the eleven-plus tests should be changed were given a list of options and asked to suggest whether they think that these options were useful or not useful as possible alternatives to the current eleven-plus procedure. The options available were using primary teacher assessment for selection, delaying the eleven-plus tests until the end of the P7 year, using a different type of test, or delaying the point of selection to age 14 years or age 16 years.

Table 4 shows that those who would like to see the eleven-plus tests changed appear to prefer a delay in the point of selection to age 14 years, and are very much less supportive of a delay in selection until age 16 years. The second most favoured option is a different type of test, closely followed by a preference for the use of teacher assessment. This mirrors the responses of different educational interests in the consultation on the Burns Report: the grammar schools tend to favour the retention of academic selection and so prefer that some alternative selective mechanism to the eleven-plus tests be used. By contrast, secondary and primary schools tend to favour the abolition of academic selection at age 11 years and offer a range of alternative procedures, including selection being delayed to a later age (or, in a formal way, to be removed altogether).

Table 4: Usefulness of alternative selection procedures (1999)

	% saying option was very or fairly useful
Selection later at age 14 years	81
Use a different type of test	61
Use teacher assessment instead of test	58
Selection later at age 16 years	46
Take eleven-plus test at the end of P7	42

Respondents who said that the system of secondary and grammar schools should be changed were given three alternatives to the current system and asked if each one would be useful or not useful. These options were:

- All children go to the same school until age 14 years and then split to either secondary or grammar schools.
- All children go to the same school until age 16 years and then split to do either 'A' levels or vocational training.
- Allow all secondary schools that wish to select up to a third of their pupils for a 'grammar stream'.

As Table 5 shows, all the stated options are seen as being useful by the majority of respondents. The most preferred scenario is for all pupils to go the same school to age 14 years, followed by all pupils going to the same school to age 16 years.

Table 5: Usefulness of alternative school systems (1999)

	% saying option was very or fairly useful
All to same school to age 14 years	73
All to same school to age 16 years	60
Allow secondary schools to select a third of their intake	57

Debates over the merits or otherwise of the selective system of schools in Northern Ireland and the procedures used to allocate pupils within the system have gone on for many years. This survey evidence highlights the complexity of opinions on these issues. Most people can readily identify problems with the current system, while believing that some form of selection is probably inevitable. However, while many advocate change in the system there is little consensus on the form that change should take. This is almost exactly the pattern of responses that emerged from the consultation on the Burns Report. Thus, while a majority favoured the

end of the eleven-plus tests, the development of better, that is, more informative, assessment arrangements and more collaboration and co-operation between post-primary schools, there was a distinct lack of consensus on the abolition of academic selection and the Burns Report proposal for a system of formally collaborating 'collegiates'.

While the responses to the consultation on the recommendations of the Burns Report highlight the continuing disagreement over future educational arrangements, the responses appear to be mediated by two variables (Gallagher, 2002). First, at an institutional level the highest level of support for the retention of academic selection comes from those associated with grammar schools, as compared to those associated with the rest of the educational system. Second, there is an association between social background and views on these issues, such that respondents from socially advantaged backgrounds are less likely to support change, while those from socially disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to support change. This is particularly important given that one of the major critiques of the selective system is that it works largely to the benefit of the socially advantaged (Gallagher and Smith, 2000).

Conclusions

One of the most distinctive aspects of the education system in Northern Ireland, as compared with schools in the rest of the UK, lies in the continued use of selection at age 11 years to divide pupils between grammar and secondary schools (Gallagher and Smith, 2000; Post-Primary Review Body, 2001).

However, the Life and Times data identifies a high degree of dissatisfaction with key aspects of the selective system of secondary education and, in particular, the tests used to select pupils at age 11 years, a pattern confirmed by the results of the consultation on the Burns Report. At the same time, the Life and Times evidence points to a widespread view

that some form of selection is probably inevitable and that grammar schools provide a high quality of education. Most respondents favour the end of the eleven-plus tests and many feel that pupils should attend the same school until age 14 or even 16 years. However, while there was general agreement that some change should occur, there is limited consensus on the exact nature of that change.

Key Points

- There is little consensus of opinion about the current academic selection system.
- Most respondents feel that the eleven-plus tests put too much pressure on young people, that 11-year-old children are too young for selection tests and that the eleven-plus system means that most children feel they are failures.
- However, most respondents also feel that selection has to happen at some time and that children who do not get to grammar school still get a first class education.
- Three out of five respondents feel that the current system should be changed and the most favoured alternative to the current system is for all pupils to attend the same school until age 14 years.
- Although there is general agreement that some change should occur, there is limited consensus on the exact nature of the change.
- The high degree of dissatisfaction is mirrored by the results of the consultation on the Burns report.

References

Alexander, J., Daly, P., Gallagher, A. M., Gray, C. and Sutherland, A. E. (1998) *An Evaluation of the Craigavon Two-tier System* (Bangor: Department of Education for Northern Ireland).

Department of Education (2002) *Review of Post Primary Education: report on responses to consultation* (Bangor: Department of Education).

Gallagher, A. M. (1988) *Transfer Pupils at 16* (Belfast: Northern Ireland Council for Educational Research).

Gallagher, T. (2002) *Results of the consultation on the Burns Report*. Seminar presentation, Graduate School of Education, Queen's University Belfast (available at www.leeds.ac.uk/educol)

Printed by the University of Ulster

4100R0003/1793/2/2003

Gallagher, T. and Smith, A. (2000) *The effects of the selective system of secondary education in Northern Ireland: Main Report*. (Bangor: Department of Education for Northern Ireland).

Post-Primary Review Body (2001) *Education for the 21st Century* (Belfast: Post-Primary Review Body) <<http://www.deni.gov.uk/review/index.htm>>

Sutherland, A. E. and Gallagher A. M. (1987) *Pupils in the Border Band* (Belfast: Northern Ireland Council for Educational Research).

Sutherland, A. E. and Gallagher, A. M. (1986) *Transfer and the Upper Primary School* (Belfast: Northern Ireland Council for Educational Research).

Teare, S. and Sutherland, A. E. (1988) *At Sixes and Sevens* (Belfast: Northern Ireland Council for Educational Research).

Wilson, J. A. (1986) *Transfer and the Structure of Secondary Education* (Belfast: Northern Ireland Council for Educational Research).

The Education module was funded by The Nuffield Foundation. Figures do not always add up to 100 because of rounding.

Tony Gallagher is Professor of Education, Queen's University Belfast. Alan Smith holds the UNESCO Chair of Education at the University of Ulster.

The **Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey** is carried out annually and documents public opinion on a wide range of social issues. In 2001, 1800 adults were interviewed in their own home. Interviews were carried out by Research and Evaluation Services.

The **Life and Times Survey** is a joint project of the two Northern Ireland universities and aims to provide an independent source of information on what the public thinks about the social issues of the day. Check the web site for more information on the survey findings (www.ark.ac.uk/nilt) or call the survey directors at Queen's University (028 90 273034) with any queries.

In collaboration with Queen's University of Belfast
and University of Ulster

Aberfoyle House
Magee Campus
University of Ulster
Northland Road
Londonderry BT48 7JA

Tel: 028 7137 5513

Fax: 028 7137 5510

E-mail: dm.hughes@ulster.ac.uk

Institute of Governance
Public Policy and Social Research
Queen's University Belfast
Belfast
BT7 1NN

Tel: 028 9027 3034

Fax: 028 9027 2551

E-mail: dm.hughes@ulster.ac.uk