

# Chapter 1

## INTRODUCTION

### Background to the Selective System of Education in Northern Ireland

#### *The Development of our Schools System*

1.1 When Northern Ireland came into being, primary education was provided through a system of national schools but attendance was poor. There was a separate system of private fee-paying secondary schools which catered for a fraction of the school age population and were known as secondary schools. These were schools with an academic bias and a curriculum which was totally orientated towards examination success and entry to higher education.

1.2 The new Northern Ireland Government made education compulsory from the age of four to fourteen. Following Government policy in England, it introduced a system of partial local control over education, involving rate support in addition to grant-aid from central Government. The amount of rate support related to the extent to which a school was under the control of the local Government authority.

1.3 Under the Education Act (Northern Ireland) 1923, the national schools became public elementary schools for pupils aged four to fourteen. There were three types of elementary school with different levels of capital and recurrent funding. The Act provided for elementary, and secondary, schools to be transferred to the control of the local education authority and for local authorities to build new schools. Also, the system of funding secondary schools based on examination results was changed to a system based on school inspection reports with the aim of enhancing the quality of education provision.

1.4 This and subsequent legislation laid the foundation for an increase in school attendance, the beginnings of a school building programme and the evolution of what we know today as the controlled and the voluntary, including

the voluntary maintained, school sectors. However, very little building work was carried out in the secondary sector between the two World Wars. By 1947 only nine out of the seventy-five secondary schools had transferred to local authority control, although most Protestant elementary schools had transferred.

1.5 The 1923 Act also provided for a state system of technical education and for the urban technical education authorities to be independent of the regional education committees. Technical education developed extensively and by 1944 there were over sixty technical schools in towns throughout the Province, most of which had affiliated out-centres.

1.6 By this time there was an increasing realisation of the importance of education but many school leavers did not receive secondary education. In the rural areas, most public elementary schools were one-teacher or two-teacher schools with small enrolments. It was difficult for them to cater for the older pupils with regard to academic studies and instruction and training in practical subjects. Secondary education in elementary schools in urban areas was similarly deficient. However, pupils aged thirteen and fourteen could take two-year courses at technical schools in academic, vocational and work-related subjects.

### *The Northern Ireland Public Education System*

1.7 The Education Act 1947 formed the basis for our present public education system. The lower and upper compulsory school ages changed to five and fifteen respectively and the public elementary schools were replaced with separate schools for primary and secondary education. The age of transfer was set at eleven when it was believed that the average child had mastered the skills of reading, writing and arithmetic and was ready to learn new subjects. It was possible for early and late developers to transfer a year earlier or later as appropriate.

1.8 The new intermediate secondary schools offered a general education for the first two years and the opportunity, in the last two years, to specialise in particular academic, practical or commercial subjects. Pupils had the option to transfer to a technical school at the age of thirteen. The existing secondary schools which provided full time academic education up to the age of seventeen

or eighteen were renamed grammar schools and remained fee-paying institutions.

1.9 It took some thirteen years to provide enough secondary schools to meet the needs of the population. The number of grammar schools doubled over the same period and their enrolments increased. Grammar school scholarships were awarded on a competitive basis. The availability of these scholarships enabled children from working class backgrounds to attend grammar schools and to progress to higher education and professional careers.

### *The Selective System of Education*

1.10 The aim of the 1947 Act was to provide an education system which would give children in Northern Ireland equal opportunity to develop their abilities to the full. The Government of the day decided that no young person should be denied access to a grammar school due to the inability of parents to pay the fees.<sup>(1)</sup> All young people, of whatever means, were eligible to enter a qualifying entrance test which was to be conducted centrally by the Ministry of Education.

1.11 The qualifying test (later known as the Eleven-Plus) was based on written examinations in attainment in English and arithmetic. Grammar schools were required to admit all who qualified, with the choice of school being left so far as was possible to the parents and the school concerned. Each grammar school was allowed to reserve up to 20% of its annual Form 1 admissions for pupils to be selected independently of this test. Those who qualified but whose parents were not able to pay the costs were given financial assistance, in the form of scholarships, by the local education authorities.

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(1) Hyland A., Milne K., Byrne G., Dallat J. (1995), *Irish Educational Documents, Vol III* Dublin: Church of Ireland College of Education

1.12 In 1965 the Labour Government in England decided to abandon selection and to adopt a comprehensive system of education. Northern Ireland did not follow suit. The reasons given related to school size, costs, parental choice, concern about the lowering of high academic achievements and the development of a private school sector. Instead, local variations in the bipartite secondary system were encouraged. The Craigavon Dickson Plan system - involving delayed selection at age fourteen - was introduced in 1968 and the number of comprehensive-type schools in other areas increased.

1.13 There was however a change to the method of selection. Over the years criticism of this had mounted, largely due to the effect on the work of primary schools and the psychological impact it was claimed to have on some children. Therefore, from 1966, selection was based on a combination of verbal reasoning quotients and teachers' estimates.

1.14 The first steps towards the introduction of a non-selective system of education in Northern Ireland took place in the 1970s. A report of the Advisory Council on Education in 1971 questioned the validity of the principle of selection. A further report by the Council in 1973 recommended the elimination of selection by a restructuring of secondary schools. The Labour Government took this forward in 1975 under direct rule but local opposition developed from the grammar school sector and plans for restructuring were set aside in favour of an alternative system of selection, as an interim measure. This was based on teacher assessment and reporting, parental choice and education and library board approval, and lasted for three years from 1978 to 1980. A Conservative Government was elected in 1979 and the Eleven-Plus was reinstated in 1981.

1.15 The Eleven-Plus operated alongside a system of intake controls. The voluntary control of intakes formed part of the transfer arrangements. The intake to each grammar school was determined by a formula, which was introduced following consultation. The formula took account of the clear view which emerged during consultation that the objective should be to retain the position whereby some 27% of the transfer cohort were admitted to grammar schools and 73% to secondary schools. Intakes to controlled and maintained secondary schools were determined by the school authorities in co-operation with the education and library boards.

1.16 In 1986, the Conservative Government issued a consultation document on the removal of intake controls in the secondary sector in Northern Ireland, in order to afford parents greater choice of school. This was overtaken by the education reform policies of central Government, including the policy of Open Enrolment, which was established by the Education Reform (NI) Order 1989. The method of selection again changed to written examinations based on attainment in English, mathematics and (later) science, which were compulsory components of the new common curriculum at primary level. Also, the method of grading the results changed to that used today.

## Context for the Review

1.17 The appointment of an independent Review Body to examine the selective system of education in Northern Ireland was announced by the Minister for Education, Martin McGuinness, MP, MLA, in September 2000. The Review Body on Post-Primary Education was chaired by Gerry Burns and comprised members from a wide range of educational, professional and business backgrounds. A Panel of Education Advisers was also appointed to assist the Review Body in its work. Full details of the membership of the Review Body and the Panel of Advisers are at Appendix A.

1.18 The selective system of secondary and grammar schools had re-emerged as a political issue with the election of a Labour Government in 1997, and the then Education Minister, Tony Worthington MP, decided that detailed research should be undertaken to assess the effects and effectiveness of the current arrangements. The research, which was led by Professor Tony Gallagher, Queen's University of Belfast, and Professor Alan Smith, University of Ulster, culminated in the Report, "The Effects of the Selective System of Secondary Education in Northern Ireland". The Report was published in September 2000.

1.19 The research considered the nature of systemic change in schools over the previous ten years, following the introduction of Open Enrolment, and went on to examine the impact of selection on primary and post-primary schools, on teachers, pupils, public attitudes and perceptions, and also identified the strengths and weaknesses of the system. The researchers concluded that the

debate about the future development of our education system should start with the social, educational and economic objectives which young people should achieve from their educational experience, and then go on to focus on how those objectives could best be delivered. This approach is reflected in the following Terms of Reference for the Review.

### *Terms of Reference*

1.20 Our Terms of Reference were:

“To consider research and other relevant information on the impact of selection on pupils, parents, teachers, the economy and society, and undertake widespread consultation in order to:

- identify and consider key issues arising from the current selective system of post-primary education;
- assess the extent to which the current arrangements meet the needs and aspirations of children and their parents and the requirements of the economy and society; and
- report to the Minister for Education our conclusions and recommendations on the future arrangements for post-primary education.”

We were also required to address the following specific issues:

- the most appropriate structures for post-primary education, including the age or ages at which transfer should occur;
- the administrative arrangements for transfer;
- the implications for the curriculum at primary and post-primary levels;
- the implications for current school structures;
- the implications for further and higher education and training;

- the anticipated impact of any proposed new arrangements on the economy;
- the costs of any revised arrangements; and
- the timing and phasing of any new proposed arrangements.