

Chapter 4

KEY ISSUES FROM THE PUBLIC CONSULTATION

4.1 There were over two thousand written submissions from parents, schools, pupils, education bodies, teachers and many others: a quantitative analysis of these submissions is at Appendix F. Organisations such as the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), the education and library boards and schools undertook their own consultation exercises before responding and their written submissions reflected the views of much larger numbers of interests than those tabulated. Others chose to respond personally. Not everyone commented on every issue covered by the Review, but it would be fair to say that the large majority of parents who responded were opposed to selection based on academic ability. Rather they supported transfer arrangements based on an extension of parental choice and a more flexible and more relevant post-primary curriculum, with provision to cater for individual needs and vocational and technical studies. The quantitative analysis of the written submissions focuses on those issues arising out of the consultation exercise which were most pertinent to the Terms of Reference for the Review.

4.2 A number of key issues emerged from our analysis of this significant body of evidence. These were consistent with the views expressed during our public meetings, at the open days and in our discussions at school visits. The issues played an important part in informing and shaping our findings and recommendations. The following commentary indicates the nature of the debate and the range of opinion generated by this Review.

Summary of Key Issues

The Transfer Tests

4.3 The public consultation was dominated by reference to the Transfer Tests, about which almost everybody appeared to have strong and passionate views. There emerged a clear sense that the present tests impact on and

distort the Key Stage 2 (KS2) curriculum in primary schools and cause unreasonable stress to the children. We were told of pupils who did not take the tests being marginalized in P6 (Primary Year 6) and P7 (Primary Year 7) and more attention being given to those who were being taught for the tests. We heard also from people about the stigma of not passing the Transfer Tests and how this affected self-esteem and confidence.

4.4 Suggestions about alternative systems of transfer or selection focused mainly on the potential use of the KS2 tests and/or continuous assessment from P5 (Primary Year 5), with an externally moderated assessment, providing a pupil record which might be used as a basis for transfer. A small proportion of respondents supported the current testing arrangements.

4.5 A majority of responses argued for automatic pupil transfer to all-ability post-primary schools at age eleven, with parental/pupil choice being the determining factor as to the specific school. Alongside this, there was a sizeable minority view that some form of selection is inevitable and necessary, given that young people have different abilities, needs and aptitudes.

4.6 We were told by teachers, parents, pupils and others that out-of-school coaching was widespread and helped to improve pupil performance in the present Transfer Tests. There was evidence that coaching began as early as P5 and because it could not be afforded by some parents, served to reinforce social disadvantage.

4.7 The point was made that the Transfer Tests might contravene new legislation on human rights and equality. The Tests were seen by some as an additional and unnecessary source of division in an already divided and segregated society.

4.8 The effects of the Transfer Tests were the most emotive of the issues that emerged and people were passionate about their views, experiences and reflections.

Age of Transfer

4.9 To a large extent the views expressed represented people's experience in their own area. A majority of people put forward reasons why transfer should continue at age eleven. Some put forward views in favour of transfer at age twelve, while those with experience of junior high schools in the Craigavon area argued for a two-tier system with a second, selective, transfer at age fourteen. In overall terms, there was no strong view that the age of transfer to post-primary education should change. Many made the point that age fourteen would be a key stage for pupils' choice of curricular pathway.

Pupil Assessment

4.10 There was a clear sense from the community that the information about pupils' performance forwarded by the primary to the post-primary school was incomplete and inconsistent, due to the influence of the Transfer Tests, and as a result, its usefulness in assisting curriculum progression between primary and post-primary education was very limited. There was a clear view that continuous assessment would be a more informative and fairer way of assessing pupils' abilities and needs. However, objective measurement of specific aptitudes and key skills needs further development.

4.11 Most people thought that in a non-selective system, without the disruption, coaching and pressure associated with the Transfer Tests, the undertaking of these additional assessments by the primary school teacher would be routine and manageable. More objective and fairer assessment would be beneficial in informing parental choice, and the availability of robust and consistent information about pupils' abilities would be extremely useful for the post-primary school. At the same time, we were left in no doubt that primary school teachers would be under severe pressure if pupil assessment was used to determine admission to post-primary schools within a selective post-primary system.

Equality of Opportunity

4.12 Social exclusion was at the heart of a number of submissions which concluded that only a system based on automatic transfer to a local comprehensive school could be fair and just to all.

4.13 Concern was raised by many about the anomalies in access to grammar schools for pupils with the same Transfer Test grade, due to differences in individual school enrolment capacities and the numbers applying for admission in different areas.

4.14 We were told also that pupils with special educational needs were disadvantaged or discriminated against in the current system, for example, children with dyslexia, and that other children with disabilities were not being catered for properly in post-primary schools.

4.15 There was widespread agreement on the need for greater flexibility within the post-primary system, for children after the age of eleven, to be able to transfer between post-primary schools to address their developing needs and aptitudes.

Objectives and Principles for Education

4.16 Many respondents, including the churches, schools, educational bodies and teacher unions, stressed the importance of articulating and reinforcing the Guiding Principles which should underpin the education system in the 21st Century. They considered that these should:-

- value all young people equally and present each of them with the opportunity to succeed;
- enable all young people to develop personality, talents and abilities to their fullest potential and to accept responsibility for their own lives;
- provide for the development of all aspects of our young people, in particular the intellectual, spiritual, moral, physical, emotional and creative, and respect for self and others;

- hold all schools in equal regard and promote parity of esteem for vocational and academic education;
- promote the capacity for creativity, initiative and opportunities for lifelong learning;
- ensure equality of access to high quality education for all;
- provide a breadth of curricular pathways that will accommodate flexible learning and personal choice;
- take account of the changing needs of society and the economy;
- promote respect for and appreciation of diversity of cultures;
- ensure that equivalent standards of education are provided in all post-primary schools.

Curriculum Issues

4.17 There was a general view that the curriculum at present was neither sufficiently focused towards a strong and vibrant economy nor the preparation of young people for lifelong learning in an ever changing world. Also it was pointed out that recent research supports the view that intelligence is multi-faceted and that the curriculum is not sufficiently sensitive to the wide range of children's abilities. It was advocated that there should be scope within the curriculum to develop the wider potential of each child and that to do this, the curriculum should be learner-centred.

4.18 Related to this were the concerns expressed by teachers, both at our public meetings and during our school visits, about the need for a reduction in the compulsory components of the curriculum to enable them to respond more appropriately to the needs and interests of individual children in the classroom. Teachers in secondary schools stressed that the common curriculum was too academically focused to meet the needs of young people in their schools and, in the eyes of their pupils, was irrelevant and demotivating.

4.19 Support was registered by a number of key interests for improved careers guidance, even stronger relationships and links with business and industry, and the development of business skills. Particular reference was made also to the development of creativity, problem-solving and communication within the curriculum objectives.

4.20 There was general agreement that our Review and the Review of the Statutory Curriculum by CCEA were inextricably linked and should be taken forward in parallel. We were told that the curriculum does not meet the needs of all young people in society, including minority groups such as the children of Travellers.

4.21 There was a clear consensus throughout the public consultation that the broad common curriculum at KS3, and more particularly at KS4, was not relevant to the needs of all young people. Many of the submissions proposed that there should be a smaller common core at KS3 and a greater variety of academic, vocational and technical routes at KS4. There was much emphasis placed on the need for parity of esteem between academic and vocational education, to promote a properly focused and differentiated curriculum for all young people. The involvement of business interests in the development and delivery of curricular pathways and collaboration between schools, industry and further education colleges was put forward by various interests as essential for the effective development of vocational and technical education.

4.22 The importance attached to early careers guidance, with specialist help available at the end of KS3, was a feature of many submissions. We were told that this would assist learners to be decision makers with regard to their own learning and career pathways. A number of schools and individual teachers drew attention to the benefits of links between post-primary schools and their feeder primary schools in ensuring a continuum from KS2 to KS3, particularly with regard to the key skills of numeracy and literacy.

Standards/Qualifications

4.23 Where people mentioned standards, their main interest was in the development of arrangements which would assist in raising educational standards for all, with a view to ensuring that everyone would have access to Training, Further Education (FE), Higher Education (HE), or job opportunities.

4.24 A term used frequently was 'maintaining the best and raising the rest', and in addition to emphasising the academic standards of grammar schools, recognition was given to the achievements of many post-primary schools.

4.25 The argument was made to us that the current system does not allow co-operation or sufficient flexibility of movement between schools, and between schools and FE, to provide pupils with access to a wider range of qualifications, because these institutions are often competing for the same pupils.

School Structures

4.26 There was no consensus on the form and structure of the post-primary education system. There were many varying and strong views about the strengths and weaknesses of grammar, comprehensive and other school systems, and comments about the existing arrangements ranged from "retain the present system but with more resources" to "the status quo is not an option".

4.27 Generally, those advocating the retention of the current system were from the grammar school community. The main points made included grammar schools' long history of excellence; their distinguished contribution to society in Northern Ireland; their record of high academic achievement; access for pupils from all social backgrounds, and diversity of choice for parents and pupils.

4.28 Some of those situated in rural areas proposed local arrangements founded on common principles, thereby encouraging flexibility between schools, with the possibility of a common sixth form college. The entitlement of rural community areas to public sector educational investment was stressed.

4.29 The German education system, with separate vocational and academic schools, was compared favourably by some to our own pre-1960 grammar and

technical system, however, the predominant view which emerged was that combined vocational and academic curricula should be available to all pupils.

4.30 The Dickson Plan (Craigavon) two-tier system, with junior high and senior high schools, and involving delayed selection and transfer to grammar or secondary school, was viewed by some as a successful local, almost comprehensive arrangement, and by others as having similar difficulties to the mainstream system, with selection simply delayed to fourteen years of age.

4.31 Respondents referring to the Scottish comprehensive system presented contrasting views. One set of analyses highlighted the rise of the independent schools sector and lower academic achievement as compared to Northern Ireland, whereas others stressed the absence of a long tail of underachievement, the high percentage of pupils remaining in education at post-16, and the increasing numbers of young people going into higher education.

4.32 Reference was made to experiences of comprehensive systems, in Canada, Australia, Republic of Ireland and other parts of the world, and how they benefitted social integration. Others referred to the "postcode" syndrome, that is where more advantaged families in societies with comprehensive systems choose to move closer to more popular schools, usually former grammar schools.

4.33 Responses from the integrated sector, and from schools organised on non-selective, comprehensive lines, suggested that all-ability education is being successfully offered to some pupils at present in Northern Ireland.

4.34 Others believed that it was difficult to comment on alternative structural systems in the absence of detailed models.

4.35 There was a very wide range of views on the question of school structures, including some suggestions that our education system should be tailored to the specific circumstances of Northern Ireland rather than "borrowed from" systems operating in other countries.

Resources

4.36 There was a perception that grammar school facilities were of a higher standard and that grammar schools had access to greater and better resources. The argument was that all pupils merited the same standards of accommodation and other resources.

4.37 We were told that open enrolment procedures impact unfairly on secondary school Year 8 admissions, because grammar schools are able to admit all who apply up to the limit of their physical capacities, with resultant resource and planning implications for other schools.

4.38 More generally, the submissions divided into two strands in relation to educational resources. On the one hand, there was a clear sense that education, both at primary and post-primary level, is seriously under-resourced, and schools have not been given the resources needed to recover from the effects of the cutbacks imposed by earlier Governments. On the other hand, attention was drawn to the rural nature of Northern Ireland, the central role of the school in rural communities, the consequential pattern of small and medium sized schools, and the potential resource and educational implications resulting from diseconomies of scale. Specific areas highlighted as in need of extra resources at present were pastoral care, provision for children with special needs or disabilities, and relevant careers guidance. Some pointed to the scope for redistribution of available resources, others argued for real additionality to address historic under-funding.

Teachers

4.39 The commitment of teachers, and the good quality of teaching in schools in Northern Ireland, were highlighted in many written submissions and applauded at our public meetings.

4.40 It was widely acknowledged that there were more social and curricular challenges in secondary schools and that, generally, teachers responded positively to these demands.

4.41 We were told that the issues of teacher:pupil ratio, the requirements for teaching disaffected pupils, and teachers' pastoral care role needed to be

addressed regardless of the system of education. Many argued that the opportunity should be taken to adequately resource teacher development to enable teachers to re-energize their skills and adopt new teaching methods.

Implementation and Timetable for Changes

4.42 There was a body of opinion that held that change could occur rapidly, without any delay, but the majority view expressed to us was that change, if it were to occur, should be evolutionary, and the transition planned in a systematic and principled manner to ensure that the best interests of all pupils and teachers are met.

4.43 The main issues identified as potential obstacles to change were:-

- parental perceptions that vocational and academic education are not of equal worth;
- a perceived shortage of teachers of vocational subjects;
- financial resourcing of equipment for vocational education;
- the creation of flexible pathways between schools;
- the challenge of managing and administering a programme of major change, whatever its content.

Summary

4.44. Our terms of reference recognise that education is of relevance to everyone, is the foundation for an inclusive and prosperous society, and influences the quality and pattern of each individual's life. There was consensus throughout the public consultation process that our education system should provide for the development of the potential of every individual to contribute to society and the economy, both locally and internationally. There was recognition during the public consultation process of the need for better links between education and business to be developed and formally integrated into the education system.

4.45 A number of other areas attracted significant majority support during the process of consultation. These were that:

- the Transfer Tests in their present form should be abolished;
- there should be parity of esteem between post-primary schools and between curriculum pathways;
- there should be equality of opportunity for all pupils;
- education standards should be raised generally.

4.46 At the same time, strong differences of opinion were expressed about a number of issues to which the Review Body has paid close attention. These included, in particular, the nature of the arrangements for transferring pupils to post-primary schools, different forms and uses of pupil assessment, and the school structures which would best support post-primary education.