

Chapter 7

ASSESSMENT OF ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL STRUCTURES

7.1 We examined a variety of models for the organisation of post-primary schools, including the present system of grammar and secondary schools, comprehensive school systems, and systems which are based on institutional differentiation, where schools offer distinctive curricula and qualifications. Each of these possible models was assessed against the Vision and the Guiding Principles which we believe should underpin our education system in the 21st Century (Chapter 5 refers). This chapter sets out our conclusions from this assessment.

Current System

7.2 Since 1947 (Chapter 1 refers), Northern Ireland has operated a selective system of grammar and secondary schools: initially about one-fifth of pupils transferred to grammar schools, whereas currently about one-third do so. Grammar schools select pupils largely on the basis of Transfer Test results taken in the final year of primary school. The form of the Transfer Tests has changed over the years and currently they comprise two attainment tests with sections on English, mathematics and science. On the basis of their performance on the Transfer Tests, pupils are awarded one of a series of grades: the top 25 per cent of the age cohort get an A grade, the next 5 per cent a B1, the next five per cent a B2, the next five per cent a C1, the next five per cent a C2, and the remaining pupils who take the tests are awarded a D grade.

7.3 Pupils can apply for places in any post-primary school. Where a school is over-subscribed, the Board of Governors will select from the applicants using previously published admissions criteria. Only grammar schools are permitted to use the Transfer Test grades as a criterion and they must give preference to pupils with higher grades over those with lower grades. Secondary schools are not permitted to use Transfer Test grades or any other criteria which may act as

proxies for academic ability. However, two secondary schools have been given permission by the Department of Education to select roughly one-third of their intake on the basis of Transfer Test grades.

7.4 About one-third of age eleven pupils in Northern Ireland do not take Transfer Tests and about one-tenth of age eleven pupils transfer to post-primary schools such as the junior high schools in the Craigavon area and to comprehensive-type schools.

Main Options Raised during the Consultation Process

7.5 The research⁽¹⁾ into the effects of the present selective system of secondary education considered five main models for the future organisation of post-primary schools. These were -

- the status quo of grammar and secondary schools, with selection at age eleven;
- delayed selection at age fourteen;
- separate academic and technical/vocational schools;
- common lower secondary schools, followed by differentiated upper secondary schools; and
- all-through eleven to eighteen comprehensive schools.

During the consultation process two main alternatives to the status quo of grammar and secondary schools were presented (a) a system with separate schools which concentrated either on academic or technical/vocational qualifications, and (b) a system of local comprehensive schools with no academic selection.

(1) *Gallagher, T., and Smith, A. (2000), The Effects of the Selective System of Secondary Education in Northern Ireland: Main Report, Bangor: Department of Education*

7.6 We had access to a wide range of information and views on the alternative models, including evidence gathered on study visits to a number of countries to examine the outworking of different types of post-primary education systems, (reference Chapter 3). The following section outlines the key considerations borne in mind by the Review Body as we reflected on the status quo and the main alternative systems of post-primary education arising both from the consultation process and research.

The Status Quo

7.7 The research study funded by the Department of Education, which preceded the establishment of the Review Body, provided considerable evidence that the present arrangements do not support the principle that all young people should be valued equally.⁽²⁾ Among the themes highlighted in the research evidence were the negative consequences of the Transfer Tests used to select pupils, the different status accorded to grammar and secondary schools in the public eye and the sense of failure carried by many young people who 'fail' the Transfer Tests.⁽³⁾

This evidence suggested that while most young people who attended grammar schools achieved measurable academic success from this opportunity, it was more difficult to discern a similar distinctive advantage that accrued to young people who attended secondary schools. This conclusion in the research was not intended as a criticism of secondary schools; indeed, the report specifically

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- (2) *Sutherland, A. (2000), Interview with groups of Year 8 pupils in **The Effects of the Selective System of Secondary Education in Northern Ireland: Research Papers Volume 1**, Bangor: Department of Education.*
*Johnston, J. and McClune, B. (2000), Pupil motivation and attitudes – self-esteem, locus of control, learning disposition and the impact of selection on teaching and learning, in **The Effects of the Selective System of Secondary Education in Northern Ireland: Research Papers Volume 2**, Bangor: Department of Education.*
*D'Arcy, J. (2000), Pupil views on selection, in **The Effects of the Selective System of Secondary Education in Northern Ireland: Research Papers Volume 2**, Bangor: Department of Education.*
- (3) *Gallagher, T. (2000), Statistical patterns in schools, in **The Effects of the Selective System of Secondary Education in Northern Ireland: Research Papers Volume 1**, Bangor: Department of Education.*
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highlighted the commitment and concern of secondary school teachers towards their pupils. Rather the conclusion recognised the invidious position in which secondary schools were placed within the selective system. The pupils attending secondary schools have a much wider range of ability in comparison with pupils attending grammar schools, and a much higher proportion of them come from disadvantaged backgrounds. For these reasons, teachers in secondary schools are faced with meeting a very wide range of needs among their pupils. However, in the public eye all schools are largely judged in terms of a narrow set of academic indicators, under which grammar schools appear to be more successful. The lack of parity of esteem between the school types has significant consequences for individual pupils.⁽⁴⁾

7.8 While schools are autonomous in character, the circumstances of one school often affect the others. Under Open Enrolment, competition between schools for pupils can establish conditions which encourage some schools to prosper, but have a negative impact on other schools because of the implications for pupil enrolments and financial resources. This relationship of “negative interdependence” between grammar and secondary schools, largely to the disadvantage of the latter, is a feature of the selective system. Grammar schools in Northern Ireland have consistently produced high academic results but it has been argued that the circumstances which enable them to achieve these results are also the circumstances that create such challenging circumstances for many secondary schools.⁽⁵⁾

(4) *Byrne, G. (2000), Interviews with principals of post-primary schools, in The Effects of the Selective System of Secondary Education in Northern Ireland: Research Papers Volume 1, Bangor: Department of Education.*
Gallagher, T. (2000), Interviews with members of senior management teams, in The Effects of the Selective System of Secondary Education in Northern Ireland: Research Papers Volume 1, Bangor: Department of Education.
Smith, A., Birthistle, U., Montgomery, A., and Farrell, S. (2000), Teachers and selection in Northern Ireland, in The Effects of the Selective System of Secondary Education in Northern Ireland: Research Papers Volume 2, Bangor: Department of Education.
Leonard, M., and Davey, C. (2001), Thoughts on the 11-Plus, Belfast: Save the Children.

(5) *Gallagher, T. (2000), Interviews with members of senior management teams, in The Effects of the Selective System of Secondary Education in Northern Ireland: Research Papers Volume 1, Bangor: Department of Education.*

7.9 The current system of grammar and secondary schools does little to promote parity of esteem for vocational and academic educational opportunities. Indeed the system, in some ways, has reinforced the perception among pupils, parents and employers that vocational qualifications have a lower status and value. In addition, there is considerable evidence which points to the conclusion that the current system does little to promote equality of opportunity.⁽⁶⁾

7.10 From the evidence and views obtained from the consultation process and in our visits to schools, we acknowledge that the delayed selection arrangements operated in the Craigavon area avoid some of the problems of selection at age eleven arising from the Transfer Tests. In particular, selection in the Craigavon system is based largely on school work rather than on one or two external tests. However, we consider that this system also displays differences in the relative status of the grammar and secondary schools and may not best serve the needs of the least able pupils.⁽⁷⁾

7.11 On the basis of all the available evidence, we have concluded that the current system of grammar and secondary schools does not adequately meet the conditions advanced in our Key Principles for the education system. In particular, the system does not ensure that all young people are valued equally, nor is their love of learning developed sufficiently. The schools' bias towards academic studies limits the time and opportunity for vocational and personal development, there is re-enforcement of a lack of esteem for vocational qualifications and equality of opportunity is not available to all. We feel that these conclusions are valid whether selection for grammar schools takes place at age eleven or fourteen years. We are convinced that significant change is

⁽⁶⁾ *Gallagher, T., McKeown, P., and McKeown, E. (2000), Patterns of participation in grammar and secondary schools, in **The Effects of the Selective System of Secondary Education in Northern Ireland: Research Papers Volume 1**, Bangor: Department of Education.*

*Byrne, G. (2000), Interviews with principals of post-primary schools, in **The Effects of the Selective System of Secondary Education in Northern Ireland: Research Papers Volume 1**, Bangor: Department of Education*

⁽⁷⁾ *Alexander, J., Daly, P., Gallagher, A., Gray, C., and Sutherland, A. (1998), **An evaluation of the Craigavon two-tier system. Research Report No. 12**. Bangor: Department of Education in Northern Ireland.*

needed in order to develop an education system that meets the needs of **all** pupils, and to meet the education, economic and social challenges of the 21st Century.

A System of Academic and Technical/Vocational Schools

7.12 Some of the difficulties faced by secondary schools are exacerbated by a situation where all post-primary schools are required to provide the same statutory curriculum and to prepare the majority of their pupils for the same examination. Some of these pressures might be eased if grammar and secondary schools had clear and distinctive missions, and offered different curricula and qualifications. During the consultation, many who advocated the retention of differentiated post-primary schools also suggested that schools should be more clearly distinctive in the educational routes they were offering. This approach is akin to the differentiated post-primary systems operated in Germany, Austria, Switzerland and the Netherlands, where there are academic schools which largely prepare young people for higher education, and separate technical or vocational schools which have a more applied focus.⁽⁸⁾

7.13 These systems acknowledge that young people have different needs and abilities and they seek to provide tailored pathways to meet those different needs. There is some evidence that the provision of parallel academic and vocational curricular pathways helps to enhance the status of vocational qualifications, and that this is further enhanced if there are also separate institutions providing training for vocational qualifications. In addition, we understand that employers appreciate the greater clarity and coherence provided by distinctive vocational qualifications.

7.14 We believe, however, that there are disadvantages within these types of systems, most notably the early age at which significant decisions affecting

(8) *The evidence for this section of the Report is drawn from Gallagher, T. (2000), Comparative perspectives on school systems, in **The Effects of the Selective System of Secondary Education in Northern Ireland: Research Papers Volume 2**, Bangor: Department of Education; and the results of study visits carried out by members of the Review Body (see appendix H).*

young people's future are made. Although they appear to provide flexibility for the movement of pupils from one track to another, in practice the uptake of such flexibility tends to be limited. In this way, systems which involve a fairly rigid institutional differentiation do appear to have significant and enduring consequences for young people, with relatively few being able to take advantage of second or third chances. We question whether this type of outcome values each young person equally, or provides a proper basis for equality of opportunity, access and excellence.

7.15 Despite the elective nature of differentiated systems of this type, our research has led us to conclude that they do not achieve full parity of esteem between school types, with the highest status being accorded to the schools that provide the academic routes. There is a general trend that the proportion of pupils gaining entry to the academic routes has increased over time, and it was also drawn to our attention that many 'elective' systems are making increasing use of tests as filters to educational opportunities. There is evidence also that social background mediates participation in the different school routes. Thus, institutional differentiation into academic and technical/vocational schools appears also to carry a burden of 'negative interdependence'. The distinctiveness of the schools may serve to ameliorate some of the problems evident in a selective system of grammar and secondary schools, but clearly does not remove the systemic problems.

7.16 Young people increasingly need skills appropriate to a knowledge-based economy, where creativity, flexibility and learning ability will be essential. In a situation where the dichotomy between the academic and the vocational is much less clear than was once assumed, we consider that it is essential that all young people should gain some experience of these different learning pathways. This is not likely to be achieved in a system of differentiated schools.

7.17 Based on this analysis, we have concluded that systems with differentiated academic and technical/vocational schools are unable to provide the necessary equality of opportunity or basis for encouraging young people to develop the wide range of qualities and skills which education should address in the 21st Century. These systems do not offer sufficient guarantee that all young people will be valued equally.

Comprehensive Schools

7.18 The second main structural alternative which emerged from the consultation process was a comprehensive school system. Since the 1960s many school systems in Europe have become comprehensive, usually in pursuit of a goal of equal opportunities. The main distinguishing feature of comprehensive systems is that they specifically eschew selective decisions based on academic criteria. In the past many of these systems involved the allocation of pupils to post-primary schools by local authorities. This is now much less common as parents have increasingly been given a degree of choice over the schools which their children will attend. This means that some schools are likely to be over-subscribed and hence some procedure is required to allocate pupils to schools. In most comprehensive systems non-academic criteria are used to make these decisions, although in practice a geographical criterion often plays an important role as the final arbiter on the allocation of places. In some countries random allocation procedures play a partial or total role in these placements.⁽⁹⁾

7.19 Comprehensive systems are often claimed to be fairer in social terms, in that the pupil intake reflects more completely the social profile of the population or community served by the school. Some claim that this encourages greater social integration. It is also said that the size of comprehensive schools permits most, if not all, schools to provide a wide range of curriculum options and enables all pupils to have access to an appropriate balance of academic and vocational courses to meet their individual needs. Related to this, a third claimed advantage of comprehensive systems is that they provide greater flexibility in terms of curricular routes and, more particularly, provide better opportunities for young people who develop or identify their interests at different, and especially later, ages.

(9) *The evidence for this section of the Report is drawn from Gallagher, T. (2000), Comparative perspectives on school systems, and Gallagher, T., and McKeown, E., Case study schools in Northern Ireland and Scotland, both in **The Effects of the Selective System of Secondary Education in Northern Ireland: Research Papers Volume 2**, Bangor: Department of Education, and the results of study visits carried out by members of the Review Body (see appendix H).*

7.20 We have concluded, however, that some of these claimed advantages are more apparent than real. For example, when geography is used as the final criterion for admission purposes, comprehensive school systems can display a relatively high level of social differentiation, particularly in cities. In practice this can mean that socially advantaged parents are likely to live in areas served by the highest status schools and are better placed to take advantage of any flexibility in their admissions arrangements. Alongside this, there is the prospect that cities are likely to contain sufficient demand for private schools in circumstances where parents are dissatisfied with the admissions arrangements or other aspects of local schools. In response to this, some advocates of comprehensive systems argue that an ability mix is more important than a social mix for overall academic performance. However, these factors are not independent and, while academically selective systems often exacerbate the interaction of ability and social position, comprehensive systems do not avoid this problem. In any event, it would seem to be egregious to lay aside the criterion of social differentiation so easily when one of the main planks for a comprehensive system lies in its claim to social inclusion.

7.21 Comprehensive schools manage diversity in a range of ways, including sometimes using quite rigid internal differentiation or streaming of pupils. Moreover, in order to provide as wide a range of curriculum options as possible, comprehensive schools need to be quite large. Not all post-primary schools in Northern Ireland would be able to attract the level of enrolment which would permit these economies of scale to be achieved, because of the dispersed nature of many rural communities and the segregated nature of our schools system.

7.22 Where parental choice is available, comprehensive schools also compete in ways which display the problems of 'negative interdependence'. Thus, when Open Enrolment places individual schools in a situation where they feel obliged to compete for pupils simply in order to maintain financial stability, this can cause them to maximise academic performance levels, concentrate attention on students currently sitting below key indicator levels, and pay less attention to pupils who are not expected to meet these key indicator levels. Furthermore, this may increase the social and performance variation across schools and contribute to the over-valuing of a narrow set of academic indicators.

7.23 In addition, a key issue for Northern Ireland, in the introduction of a system of local comprehensive schools, would be the small size and location of many of our post-primary schools. In order to realise the potential advantages of comprehensive schools, it would be necessary to pursue a programme of school amalgamation to achieve schools large enough to offer the breadth of curriculum and other learning opportunities needed for young people in the 21st Century. This major upheaval would entail both opportunity and financial costs on a large scale.

7.24 Our analysis leads us to conclude that a system of free-standing comprehensive schools, although capable of reflecting many of our Key Principles, would not offer sufficient assurance that all young people would be valued equally and have equal opportunity to develop their talents to the full. Neither do we believe that such a system would enhance sufficiently the contribution of education to the promotion of a culture of tolerance.

Public Examination Performance of Alternative School Systems

7.25 One other issue arising from our assessment concerns the examination outputs of these alternative systems. During the consultation process advocates of differentiated and comprehensive systems both claimed that their preferred model produced the highest overall level of academic performance. Much of this debate used performance data from schools in the United Kingdom and tended to ignore the evidence that all parts of the UK lag significantly behind many OECD systems, including those based on comprehensive or differentiated schools. The comparative evidence of academic performance is therefore equivocal. ⁽¹⁰⁾

⁽¹⁰⁾ See Gallagher, T., and Smith, A. (2000), *The Effects of the Selective System of Secondary Education in Northern Ireland: Main Report*, Bangor: Department of Education;

Gallagher, T. (2000), *Statistical patterns in schools*, in *The Effects of the Selective System of Secondary Education in Northern Ireland: Research Papers Volume 1*, Bangor: Department of Education; and

Gallagher, T. (2000), *Comparative perspectives on school systems*, in *The Effects of the Selective System of Secondary Education in Northern Ireland: Research Papers Volume 2*, Bangor: Department of Education.

7.26 Comprehensive systems may reduce the variability in performance levels between schools. This may suggest that school improvement is structurally easier to achieve in a comprehensive system, although some would claim that this might be at the expense of higher ability pupils. By contrast, differentiated systems may enhance the qualification outcomes for young people who gain places in the academic schools while, at the same time, emphasising the inequality of outcome between the different school types in the system. Given the importance of educational qualifications in providing access to higher levels of opportunity, both in education and employment, we can understand the reasoning of those who advocate the retention of a selective system of secondary and grammar schools. Parents who send their children to grammar schools may or may not have an interest in the aggregate level of performance of pupils in other schools. However, they have an understandable and compelling interest in the achieved level of performance of their own children. This perspective may appear to reflect narrow self-interest, but it is nevertheless real and, if ignored, may provide the basis for the development of private schools, which can exacerbate both social and educational differentiation in the education system.

Conclusion

7.27 In our assessment of alternative arrangements for the future organisation of post-primary education in Northern Ireland we examined three broad models: the status quo of grammar and secondary schools with selection at age eleven or fourteen years, offering largely the same curriculum and qualifications; a differentiated system of schools offering different curricula and qualifications; and a comprehensive system with no academic selection. The main criteria used in the consideration of these alternatives were our Key Principles for education in the 21st Century.

7.28 We have concluded that a selective system of grammar and secondary schools does not provide a satisfactory basis for the future organisation of schools. We concluded also that the two main alternatives to the status quo both fall short of a number of the Key Principles on which we believe our education system should be founded. In addition, each of these types of arrangements encourages 'negative interdependence' which can oblige schools

to engage in competitive practices within which the needs and interests of all pupils may not be given appropriate priority. Our aim, therefore, has been to identify structural arrangements which will encourage and support mutual respect, co-operation and partnerships between schools in order to deliver a range of positive outcomes for all young people. A system, in other words, which should provide conditions of 'positive interdependence' between schools. This system, which we call a Collegial system, is based on local collaborative networks of schools. The details of this system which, we feel, meets the particular demands, needs and circumstances of Northern Ireland as it moves into the 21st Century, are described in detail in Part II of our Report.