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by Martin Brown *et al.*

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Nothing of Benefit

A RESPONSE TO ‘THE RISE AND FALL AND RISE OF
ACADEMIC SELECTION: THE CASE OF NORTHERN
IRELAND’, BY MARTIN BROWN *ET AL.*

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In 2009 my middle son was in the first cohort of primary school children not to sit the ‘abolished’ state-sponsored transfer test. When it became clear that grammar schools would be offering alternative, unregulated tests, the result of which would determine their intake, we explained to my son that we would not be entering him for them. Then age 10, his response, and I repeat it here verbatim, was direct and uncompromising: ‘I want to go to a grammar school, and if youse don’t let me sit the test I will come back to you in a few years’ time to let you know that youse ruined my education’.

This exchange became ingrained in my memory as a vignette for all that is wrong with an education system that sieves children at the age of 10 and 11 according to limited measures of ability. The conversation with my son also chimes with many of the themes picked up in Brown and colleagues’ critique

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of academic selection in Northern Ireland. For instance, that children (and indeed many parents) believe that a grammar school education is ‘superior’ and that at a young age, children in Northern Ireland have an acute sense that a good performance in the test and securing a grammar school place is a measure of worth, while not doing so represents failure. Sadly, a failure that continues to dog many years after sitting the transfer test.

Unpacking these positions, Brown *et al.*’s paper presents compelling research evidence to challenge received wisdom that grammar schools ‘out-perform’ non-selective schools in high-stakes examinations, contending instead that ‘when poverty and socio-economic status are controlled for, grammar schools are no more or less effective than non-selective schools’, and that the differences between school types are primarily due to ‘heritable characteristics in pupil admissions’. Added to this and abrogating the perpetual argument of transfer test supporters, that it offers social mobility for those from the most deprived backgrounds, Brown *et al.* position that, ‘the opposite effect can be seen at a system level, with more selection creating a less equal society’. Indeed, the paper points to the perversion of social justice in arguments that selective schools promote social mobility for individuals, against the reality that outside of Northern Ireland, grammar schools have been abolished precisely because they perpetuate social class divides: ‘the performance benefit to grammar school pupils is offset by an adverse effect for those in nearby non-selective schools’.

The travesty of a system that disadvantages the already disadvantaged intensifies when we consider that in a society transitioning from conflict, the transfer tests introduced following the abolition of the state sponsored test are organised on a controlled and maintained school basis, leaving many pupils with the unenviable choice of taking a Catholic or a Protestant test. In a parallel development, where there has been significant state level investment in ‘shared education’,¹ aimed at delivering educational benefits to children and young persons through the promotion of equality of opportunity, good relations, and effective use of resources, academic selection at age 11 acts as a countervailing force. As noted in the Ministerial Advisory Group report for Shared Education,² the reasons for this are three-fold:

¹ See the Department of Education (Northern Ireland) for details: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/what-shared-education> (last accessed 5 July 2021).

² Paul Connolly, Dawn Purvis and P.J. O’Grady, *Advancing Shared Education: Report of the Ministerial Advisory Group* (Belfast, 2013). Available at: <https://pure.qub.ac.uk/en/publications/advancing-shared-education-report-of-the-ministerial-advisory-gro> (5 July 2021).

1. The clear evidence of a class divide between children who attend grammar schools and those who do not, with the odds of entitlement to free school meals for those taking up a grammar place (a proxy indicator of social class) being five times lower than pupils at non-selective schools.
2. There are differences in the educational outcomes for pupils attending grammar and secondary schools, with the odds of a young person achieving the basic standard at 16 of five or more GCSE passes at grades A*-C, including English and maths, more than three times higher if they attend a grammar school.
3. Maintenance of distinct grammar and secondary schools ensures there are a larger number of schools than needed and impedes a rationalisation of the schools' estate at post-primary level in NI that could offer better educational opportunities for all pupils.

The report calls for legislation to end the current system of academic selection, arguing:

The consequences of the particular selective system in operation in Northern Ireland therefore not only generates divisions and militates against children and young people from different socio-economic backgrounds working together but, equally importantly, it undermines the fundamental rights of all children and young people, under the universal United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), to non-discrimination.³

The Ministerial Advisory Group's recommendations for ending academic selection were never implemented. Indeed, in unfathomable support of unregulated testing, then DUP education minister, Peter Weir, in 2016 reversed a previous decision preventing primary schools from facilitating transfer tests.

Lockdown and COVID-19 brought new uncertainties and test-related trauma for parents and children in 2020, with tests proposed, then revised and ultimately cancelled, and last year post-primary schools had to devise entry criteria other than transfer tests to determine intake. In response to a plea from the head of the Catholic Church in Ireland for Catholic schools not to use

³ Connolly *et al.*, *Advancing Shared Education*.

the tests for the 2021/22 intake, a small number of Catholic grammars have announced that they will not use the tests for another year. Although it might be argued the seeds for change have been sown, recent history dictates that the end to an unfair and morally repugnant system will not happen from the ground up while parents still believe *their* child's life chances depend on it.

In 2021, an Independent Review of Education in Northern Ireland was initiated, as per a Northern Ireland Executive commitment in the *New Decade, New Approach* deal. In the wake of the pandemic and the social and moral arguments for transformation, perhaps this will be the window of opportunity to re-imagine at systemic level what quality education might look like, and to abandon for good a testing regime that Brown *et al.*'s research participants agree has nothing of benefit to offer Northern Ireland.