

## **SELECTION PROJECT**

### **SEL 6.1: Teachers and Selection in Northern Ireland**

## **SUMMARY**

### **Introduction**

The remit for this strand of the research was to assess the impact of the selective system in terms of its effects on teachers' perceptions and expectations of pupils and on teacher motivation and performance. The research involved semi-structured interviews and focus group meetings with 50 Year 6 and Year 7 teachers drawn from 18 primary schools, and 50 post-primary teachers drawn from 38 case study schools.

### **Main findings**

#### Primary school teachers

The concerns of primary school teachers are related mainly to the 'backwash' effect that preparation for the Transfer Tests has on the final two years of primary education. The majority of primary teachers stated that preparation for the Tests distorted the curriculum. It created problems for classroom organisation, particularly in relation to pupils who were not entered for the tests. There were reported instances of pupils not entered for the Transfer Tests receiving unequal or less attention than Transfer Test pupils. More generally, the reported evidence indicates that the Transfer Tests influence how teachers categorise pupils in the last two years of primary school. In addition, they said that the tests required them to adopt a narrow repertoire of teaching strategies. This included:

- an emphasis on Transfer Test technique rather than the development of concepts;
- a narrow focus on reading, comprehension and grammar in English;
- neglect of creative writing in English;
- compression of two year's Mathematics into the period before the first Transfer Test;
- teaching of Mathematics by rote and test technique;
- teaching of Science by lecture and note taking rather practical experiments;
- neglect of project work in History and Geography;
- displacement of Art, Music and PE by Transfer Test preparation;
- adoption of more didactic teaching methods.

The majority of teachers are critical of out-of-school coaching for the following reasons:

- coaching is primarily focused on the development of 'technique' for the Transfer Tests rather than broader educational goals and 'conceptual development';
- coaching 'hothouses' borderline pupils who may later not be able to keep pace with academic demands in grammar school;

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- coaching is a commercial activity, so children from less affluent backgrounds are less able to afford it and are therefore disadvantaged;
- parents may feel they are depriving their children if they do not receive coaching;
- coaching creates additional and unnecessary pressures on pupils.

In terms of primary school teacher motivation and performance, a dominant theme in the interviews with primary teachers related to frustration generated by competing demands to prepare for the Transfer Tests, fuelled by parental demand, and desire to provide a broad and balanced curriculum as required by the statutory curriculum. The majority of primary school teachers reported dissatisfaction with the amount of time they felt compelled to spend on preparation for the Transfer Tests. This included curriculum time spent in administering and marking practice papers. There is some evidence to suggest that certain teachers 'specialise' in Transfer Test preparation in some schools.

Many teachers referred to 'emotional demands' associated with the Transfer Tests. Many teachers referred to the demoralising effect of working with pupils who are entered for the Transfer Tests but have little prospect of success. Primary school teachers also identified the period after the announcement of results as particularly difficult, especially in dealing with the majority of pupils and parents who have been disappointed in not securing a grammar school place.

### Secondary School Teachers

Teachers' perceptions and expectations of pupils are influenced by the view that most secondary school pupils arrive with a 'sense of failure' due to the Transfer Tests. This generates an emphasis on 'rebuilding confidence and self esteem' in the early years of secondary school. In addition, the teachers point to specific problems they feel are created by the selective system and the Tests:

- many secondary school teachers consider that the curriculum often needs to be mediated at a different pace and pitched at a different level in terms of difficulty and relevance;
- many teachers consider secondary school pupils to require a broader range of teaching methods to maintain motivation and discipline;

Teacher motivation and morale is adversely affected by the perceived low status of secondary schools within society, and the many, and sometimes conflicting, demands which provided them with less certainty of purpose. Furthermore, many secondary school teachers felt that while their job required a broad range of teaching skills, that this was generally undervalued.

### Grammar school teachers

Most grammar school teachers regarded their pupils as arriving with a sense of achievement and readiness to learn. Two other categories of pupils were identified. The first are pupils who relax through a sense of achievement after the Transfer Tests and can

be difficult to motivate. The second comprises pupils who are perceived to have difficulty meeting the demands of academic work: some attributed this to the effects of out-of-school coaching for the transfer Tests. Both categories of pupils were considered to be in the minority but readily identifiable.

While many characterise teaching in grammar schools as relying more on didactic teaching methods, grammar teachers suggest that they face a number of specific pressures. These include:

- increased demands to provide learning support for children with special needs due to a broader intake of ability in their schools since the introduction of open enrolment;
- pressure related to academic demands and the need to secure examination results.

A significant number of grammar school teachers had concerns that changes to the system of selection would increase the challenges they would face if required to deal with a broader range of ability within the same class.

Alan Smith, Ursula Birthistle, Alison Montgomery and Seamus Farrell

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## **PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS**

The overall remit for this strand of the research was to assess the impact of the Transfer Procedure in terms of its effects on:

- Teachers' perceptions and expectations of pupils and;
- Teacher motivation and performance.

### **Methodology**

This strand of the research involved focus groups and semi-structured interviews with teachers from primary, secondary and grammar schools. The sample included representation from controlled, maintained and integrated schools; urban and rural locations and socio-economic backgrounds. The number of primary school teachers interviewed was as follows:

- fieldwork involved teachers from 18 primary schools from three geographic areas;
- a total of 50 teachers were interviewed individually;
- those interviewed included Principals, P6 and P7 teachers;
- additionally, 3 focus group sessions (P6 and P7 teachers) were held in each geographic area – these involved a further 15 teachers.

Interviews involved 2-3 teachers from each school, depending on the size of the school. Topics covered in the individual interviews included:

- teacher profile, including teachers' own experiences of the Transfer Procedure and (if appropriate) choices which they had made for their own children;

- the impact of the Transfer Procedure on curriculum planning and delivery;
  - strategies for working with pupils opting in/out of the Transfer tests;
  - the teacher's views on coaching for the Transfer tests;
  - the nature of teacher contact with parents pre- and post-Transfer tests;
  - preparation for and nature of the transition to post-primary school.
- To gain further insight into the 'annual cycle', a small number of P6 and P7 teachers completed a single-page 'grid' on which they recorded the perceived impact of the Transfer Procedure at various stages of the school year in terms of:
- the curriculum – planning and delivery;
  - the degree and nature of parental contact;
  - effects on pupils;
  - provision for non-test pupils.

Three focus groups were held. Approximately five P6 or P7 teachers attended each focus group. Focus group discussions addressed similar issues to those explored in the interviews. Each session concluded with a discussion concerning the future of the Transfer Procedure and views on potential changes in the present system. All interviews were transcribed and provided the basis for this report. Teachers were guaranteed anonymity in terms of the views expressed and undertakings were given that no individual school would be named in the research. The following sections present findings from the interviews under a number of thematic headings. The final section draws conclusions from the interviews in terms of primary school teachers' perceptions and expectations of pupils and motivation and performance.

## 1. Curriculum Distortion

A number of thematic areas emerged from the interviews with primary school teachers. Almost all teachers interviewed spoke about the distorting effects of the Transfer Tests on the delivery of the Northern Ireland Curriculum. A significant number expressed their frustration at the requirement to reconcile the delivery of a broad, balanced curriculum with the demands of preparation for the Transfer Tests:

*“Can anybody explain to me how you can deliver a broad and balanced curriculum in Key Stage 2 and at the same time prepare for the ‘eleven plus’? It is simply not possible.”*

Several noted a dichotomy between the focus on the curriculum at inservice meetings against the classroom reality of having to concentrate on the Transfer Tests.

*“The Inspectorate asks you to prepare pupils for the Tests through the teaching of the curriculum, but this is not realistic in practice.”*

A very small number commented on feeling a sense of achievement and a ‘buzz’ from the hard work that goes into the preparation for the tests and on the receipt of results.

A significant number believed that the distorting impact of the Transfer Tests “*is moving earlier and earlier into Key Stage 1*” but the majority view was that it is “*not really until after Easter in primary 6*”. It was evident from the responses that in a majority of cases one of the strategies that had to be employed to enable the required work for the Transfer Test to be done was to set aside other areas of the curriculum. The consensus from most teachers was that from Easter of P6, and in a number of cases much earlier, it was not possible to provide a broad and balanced

curriculum. The following statement is a typical description of the distorting effect of the Transfer Tests on the curriculum:

*“The first two terms in Year 6 are relatively normal, in that you’re teaching Maths, Science, English but you are teaching fully History, Geography, RE, PE and all of those things. In other schools I’ve taught in, that isn’t always the case. In the third term of Year 6 things begin to go. You know you have got to teach the material, you want to give the children every opportunity you can. You are saying to yourself, that you have to teach this and have to get it done in so many weeks. The pressure is on. Practice tests in the third term used to be done earlier but we found it was taking too much teaching time, so now we leave it until the third term. That takes up sometimes three hours a week, giving the test and going through it. They need the practice. The first term in Year 7 you’re English, Maths and Science and that’s it. It’s unfortunate, but that’s the only way to do it. The third term in Year 6 and the first term in Year 7 the heat is definitely on.”*

During the interviews primary school teachers made specific reference to a number of curriculum areas that tend to be affected during the final two years of primary school.

*“Only Transfer Test English, Maths and Science are covered, which is not the same as curriculum English, Maths and Science. In Maths it’s not about methodology, but getting the answer. In English the whole creative side is left out. In Science, group work and investigation are out and it’s chalk and talk and remember this and learn that - putting into them as many facts as you can”.*

The subjects that appear to be most affected for those pupils sitting the Transfer Tests are:

***History and Geography.*** Many teachers referred to the necessity to shelve topic work in these subjects, especially in the first term of P7. This means in some cases that the non-transfer test pupils in P7 also miss out in this regard. It was reported that the focus of these subjects can shift quite dramatically as the Transfer Tests approach:

*“By the time you get to the third term in P6 the majority of the curriculum is English, Maths and Science and any History and Geography you’re doing is really English orientated, so you’d be covering comprehension and reading through that.”*

**Creative writing in English.** Nearly all teachers mentioned that the nature of the English dimension of the Transfer Tests required a narrow focus on reading, comprehension and grammar. The tests demand short answers not conducive to the encouragement of continuous writing.

*“Pupils’ capacity to write in sentences is lost through absorption in choices and phrases – not what English is about at all of course. They regress and it has to be recovered. English especially is a victim of the type of thing required for the Transfer Test.”*

*“There’s no room for story writing. It’s about taking a passage, dissecting it, looking for the ‘catches’.”*

*“One of the most serious areas for me that gets cut is extended writing.”*

*“We try to keep the reading of novels going because it’s interpretative work related to English and it helps keep the creative side of English going when the Transfer Test stuff is killing it.”*

Most teachers commented that the creative writing skills that are being developed up to P5 are often lost in P6 and P7. This observation was reiterated by comments from many teachers in the post-primary schools who expressed the view that material learned for the Transfer Tests was not retained.

**Mathematics.** Many teachers criticised the necessity of having to rush through the syllabus to complete what is a two-year course in just over one year. This was perceived to have a major impact on pupils’ understanding of the basic concepts. References were made to teaching

pupils *'tricks'* or teaching children to *'jump through hoops'* so that they were prepared. This resulted in teachers having to revisit themes after the Transfer Tests in order to re-explain and reinforce key concepts and skills.

**Science.** There was a consensus among teachers that Science, essentially a practical subject, had become increasingly *"bookish"* with *"an emphasis on learning facts"*. Some teachers commented that it took the enjoyment out of teaching Science. A minority mentioned that they attempt to maintain a practical basis for work in Science but the following is typical of views expressed by the majority:

*"By P7 Science has become cramming...it's like what you would expect children to do when they are 15 or 16. They are just sitting note-taking and writing things down and observing what we are doing. Practical work is nearly always a demonstration, not a hands-on thing."*

**Art, Music, PE.** Most teachers made some comment about the more creative and expressive elements of the curriculum being either curtailed or set aside to accommodate preparation for the Transfer Tests. The degree to which this happens varies considerably and appears, at least in some cases, to be at the discretion of the individual teacher. In some schools there is a deliberate policy to maintain PE, Art and Music as part of the curriculum on the basis that *"pupils need an outlet from the pressure of Transfer work"*. The following comments from a P6 teacher give some indication of the dilemmas caused for these areas by competing demands created by the need to find space within curriculum time to prepare for the Transfer Tests:

*"Music I would try and do, but I would link it to History. I have tapes from the Vikings and a tape from the War, which I use that links up to a novel that we are doing. So I try to link everything. PE, I find, just has to fit in if we get the time for it. This class over here is complaining that they are not getting Art. My class is complaining that they are not getting enough PE."*

A significant number of teachers referred to having a '*recovery programme*' after the Transfer Tests to cover areas of the curriculum that had been rushed or neglected during test preparations. A few teachers maintained that any imbalance in the curriculum caused by the Transfer Tests could be restored afterwards, but the majority felt that this was difficult to achieve. After the Transfer Tests, other priorities come into play including, "*Key Stage 2 assessment, confirmation, sports and outings*".

## **2. Preparation for the Transfer Tests**

The most common form of preparation for the Transfer Tests within schools was the completion of practice tests. All teachers interviewed used test papers in class. This was considered essential in teaching pupils to read the questions, spot "*trick questions*" and learn basic test techniques. A few started their own "*easy P6 tests*" from February. Most teachers started practice test papers with pupils after Easter in P6. These were administered with varying degrees of frequency. In some schools pupils undertook one per week; in others the frequency was three per week; and in some schools in P7, one per day. In some cases pupils were also given a weekend test to complete.

All teachers complained about the time required to administer and correct practice test papers during class, commenting that these activities displace teaching time. Several teachers estimated that administration and marking of tests could deduct 4-5 hours out of a 25 hour teaching week on the basis that it took approximately 1 hour to do the test and another 1-2 hours to correct. In many cases it was considerably more than this by the end of P6 and the first term of P7.

Practice tests were administered in different ways, from simulated test conditions to completion within a less formal atmosphere. In a significant number of cases, practice tests were administered to a whole class in P6, including 'less able' pupils. Criticism was frequently voiced about the negative effects on the self-esteem of some of less academic pupils who consistently scored low marks. In some cases these pupils were taking part in the practice tests because decisions had not yet been made about whether they would take the Transfer Tests. In other cases it was because parents insisted that their child sat the Test, sometimes against the advice of the teacher.

Almost all primary schools in the sample provide parents with special test packs to be worked through during the summer holidays. A few schools had tried to resist this trend, but eventually gave in due to "*competitive forces driving the system*". The numbers of papers distributed varied. In a number of cases these were provided free. Most schools charged a set fee that varied from school to school. In other schools parents were advised where packs could be purchased. In most cases commercial packs were used, although a few schools compiled their own material. It was generally left to the pupil and parents to correct these from answer sheets supplied, as it was considered impossible to deal with these after the holidays due to time constraints.

A majority of teachers interviewed held the view that preparation for the Transfer Tests encourages an emphasis on 'speed' and 'accuracy' rather than 'the understanding of concepts'. A number of these teachers commented that preparation for the Transfer Tests is taught so quickly that it has to be revisited and consolidated afterwards. This view was echoed by comments from post-primary teachers who felt that many pupils arrived with poor or inadequate grasp of basic concepts in Maths and Science. Attempts to revisit basic concepts at post-primary school often

encounter protests from pupils that they “*have already covered that and this makes it difficult to motivate pupils*”.

### **3. Coaching**

The most controversial form of preparation for the Transfer Tests identified by teachers is coaching. Teachers distinguished coaching from school-based preparation in that it takes the form of private tuition outside the school and is normally provided on a commercial basis. It was clear from the interviews that coaching does not always consist of one-on-one attention. One example was cited of 16 pupils being ‘coached’ simultaneously at a cost of £15 per pupil.

Teachers in all of the sample schools were aware of coaching taking place. The degree to which coaching occurred varied considerably from areas where it was considered to be rare, to areas where it was “*almost 100%*”. Generally it started in P6, but in one case reference was made to a P5 child receiving coaching.

The pressure to avail of coaching was considered to be growing, with pressure coming not only from parents, but from the children themselves in response to peer pressure and to the competitive culture generated by the selection procedure itself. Whilst most teachers disapproved of coaching in principle, some felt that it could be beneficial in certain cases, for example, if a pupil needed help with certain topics in Maths, had been ill or moved to a new school. There was a feeling that one-to-one attention had to be of some benefit, especially in “*borderline cases*”. Some teachers considered that coaching had the potential to give confidence to a nervous child.

A number of teachers made reference to the implications of coaching for pupils coming from “*more deprived backgrounds*”, that is, those less able to pay for coaching or from communities where education is not given a high priority.

*“The parents of these children cannot afford to employ coaches. It’s a competition and the pitch is far from level and that’s a fact. It is so unfair. I try to compensate for that in the first term of P7 by keeping the Test children back for an hour after school and in the six weeks before the Tests I take them again on Sundays. Some people wouldn’t agree with me on that, but I have to give them the best shot they can get. They can’t afford tutors; I’m their tutor. I know where I came from – academically able but from a sub-culture that was anti-education and had so many forces pulling you away from investing in books and study. It’s the same here.”*

A significant number of teachers felt that the pressure to avail of coaching is related to the choices faced by parents in the local area. Factors included perceptions of the quality of the local secondary schools and the number of grammar school places available in the area.

Almost all teachers interviewed made some reference to concerns about the impact on children who “*get into grammar schools on the back of coaching and are subsequently unable to cope academically*”. Many specific examples of such pupils were cited. Other comments referred to “false expectations” about future performance that coaching can create for pupils and parents. It was also the perception of some teachers that coaching can give a false impression of a pupil’s progress in class. An example was given of a pupil attaining a high mark in a practice test in class because the test had already been completed with the tutor.

Some teachers mentioned that their own children had been coached for the Transfer Tests and a few mentioned that one reason for this was that children are often unwilling to accept tutoring from parents, especially if

the parent is a teacher. However, a significant number of teachers considered that any involvement with coaching might place an extra strain on the relationship between parent and child. Many teachers referred to feelings of anxiety and guilt that may be experienced by children who are conscious of the monetary cost to parents.

*“You have children sitting here saying, “I have to pass my ‘eleven plus’ because it’s cost my mum and dad so much to have me tutored”.”*

*“Parents are getting into serious debt and it’s so often money down the drain.”*

*“It affects parent - child relationships, ‘We’ve put this money into coaching you and you had better do something with it’.”*

Further strains on relationships may arise from promises of substantial rewards for Transfer Test results that may or may not materialise.

Overall, there was some ambivalence among teachers in their views of coaching. The majority was, in principle, not in favour of coaching. However, tensions were evident between the personal/parental and professional perspectives. Professionally, most disapproved, but acknowledged that all parents, including themselves, “*want the best for their children*” and that this often means “*buying into the coaching culture*”. There was a sense that teachers felt that coaching undermined them professionally. It implied that they were “*not capable of delivering the goods*”. A view often expressed was, if pupils who are being tutored achieve good results the tutor receives the credit, whereas if the pupil does not do as well as expected, the teacher and the school are blamed.

At times, during the interviews, considerable anger was expressed. Respondents often used emotive language when discussing coaching and terms such as “*unprofessional*”, “*immoral*” and “*unjust*” were used

frequently. The existence of coaching has clearly created “*an unspoken rivalry*” between teachers and those who provide coaching, yet many teachers also referred to colleagues who provide coaching, “*it’s teachers who are doing the coaching and such people are a real embarrassment to our profession*”. Strong views were expressed about the morality of coaching for financial gain and the inequalities that arise between those who can and cannot afford to pay. One Principal commented,

*“Tuition is rampant in Northern Ireland. To say to children at 10 or 11 ‘you’re of more value if your parents have the money to pay’, is very early for such a tangible message about the child’s worth to get across.”*

A more detailed study of coaching has been undertaken as part of the overall research. However, from this strand of the research the evidence suggests that most teachers are critical of coaching for the following reasons:

- coaching is primarily focused on the development of ‘technique’ for the Transfer Tests rather than broader educational goals and ‘conceptual development’;
- coaching ‘hothouses’ borderline pupils who may later not be able to keep pace with academic demands in grammar school;
- coaching is a commercial activity, so children from less affluent backgrounds are less able to afford it and are therefore disadvantaged;
- parents may feel they are depriving their children if they do not receive coaching;
- coaching creates additional and unnecessary pressures on pupils.

#### **4. Relationships with Parents**

Each of the schools in the sample held a series of meetings with parents both as a group and at one-to-one level in P6 and P7. In addition all

schools had opportunities for informal contacts and many said they operated an 'open door' policy where parents were able to visit the school at any time. The arrangements for contact varied considerably from school to school. A few schools had specific time slots every week. One school had half an hour of "directed time" at 8.45a.m.; another reserved Wednesday afternoons for parent appointments that could be arranged the day before. In all cases these arrangements were in addition to formal meetings with the parents of each pupil at some stage in P6 to discuss progress.

Clear distinctions were evident in the interviews with teachers working in schools in different socio-economic areas. Teachers working in 'middle class' areas reported more instances of "*pressure to deliver*" whilst the typical discourse of teachers working in more deprived areas was more preoccupied with engaging parents, "*who don't really understand the system, although we try to explain it.*" Teachers from such schools also cited the lack of parental support as a factor that puts their pupils at a disadvantage in the Transfer Tests,

*"Most of the children are from a family background which is not conducive to supported study at home. We do a lot of work with parents to help them take pride in their school and to know that they have a great contribution to make. For some that is very contrary to their own personal childhood experience of school and they just don't have the skills."*

Teachers reported a variation in the approach taken by their schools in providing parents with information about the Transfer Procedure. Some schools make the assumption that all pupils will sit the Tests whilst others actively encourage parents to opt out,

*"We tell parents it's not about what your children knows. It's a competition and a selection procedure."*

*“We tell the parents that if they opt for the Test, their curriculum will have to be skewed and narrowed. For three afternoons each week they will not get music or history or PE or whatever.”*

*“The Principal encourages as many as possible to opt out. Unless you want your child to go to a grammar school why bother. At the end of the day it’s their decision. We would have a drop out rate of 25-30%.”*

Some schools use a video featuring local presenter Wendy Austin to explain the purpose of the transfer Procedure to parents. This emphasises that the Selection Procedure is a selection mechanism for grammar schools and explains that there is no need for a pupil to sit the Transfer Tests if he or she wishes to go to secondary school.

The frequency of contact with parents in P6 and P7 varied. Some teachers reported that there was no increase in the frequency of contact, but the majority of teachers did feel that there was increased contact with parents throughout P6 and P7. Instances were reported of Principals meeting with parents who requested extra interviews to take some of the burden off the teachers involved in the Transfer Procedure. One Principal considered that he acted as a “*buffer*” to prevent parents approaching teachers unnecessarily during the lead up to the Transfer Tests.

Some teachers reported that the nature, rather than the frequency, of contact with parents changed, with parents becoming more focused on the Transfer Tests and developing more anxieties about it. The issues raised by parents were for the most part questions about their child’s progress; the likelihood of their child achieving an ‘A’; how their child compared with peers; and concerns about the ‘stress’ their child was feeling. Some parents complained about the amount or difficulty of the homework.

Parents also raised concerns about whether the school was starting preparation early enough and requests were made for practice papers and extra work. Several teachers felt under pressure from parents to start preparation for the Transfer Tests earlier and suggested that this was possibly due to parents becoming aware of what was happening in other schools, *“Parental pressure on us to start early can be very strong.”*

All of the teachers interviewed reported the dilemmas arising from parents seeking guidance about whether their child should be entered for the Transfer Tests. All of the teachers interviewed felt it was inappropriate for them to decide whether a child should sit the Transfer Tests or not. It was seen as a decision that properly belongs to parents.

*“It’s never happened that I’ve advised a parent not to let a child sit the test, it’s entirely up to them what they want to do”.*

*“It’s trying to give professional advice, but still you’ve got to leave it to the parent. It also would be dangerous for us to take responsibility because that could then come back on us. “You told us not to do it or you told us to do it.””*

However, many teachers felt that often parents were unrealistic in their expectations. This often resulted in parents deciding that their child sit the Transfer Tests, even when there was little likelihood of success. Reasons quoted for such choices included that their child, *“should at least have the opportunity”*; would receive less attention in class if they were not entered for the Transfer Tests; and *“if you don’t do the ‘eleven-plus’ you’ll end up in a bad class in secondary school”*.

Many teachers sent the results of practice tests home along with the class average mark and an indication of the sort of grades the pupil needed to be achieving regularly in order to ‘do well’ in the Transfer Tests. One P6/7 teacher reported that in the past there would have been higher levels of

unrealistic expectations amongst parents but these had been reduced since the school had changed its method of communication with parents. The Principal now talked to parents early in primary 6, stressing the purpose of the Transfer Tests. The school now sends home practice papers, which was never done previously. In addition they gave parents an indication of the sort of marks the child needed to be getting (approximately 75% - in order to get an 'A'), *"because even someone getting 45%, the parents are still thinking 'not bad' because in their day near 'half marks' was 'quite good'."*

A few interviews implied that some schools give more direction than others and in one instance it was reported that, *"you are basically told your child is not doing it"*. However, the overwhelming majority of teachers drew a very clear line between providing information about pupil progress that stops short of recommending whether a pupil should be entered for the Transfer Tests. One Principal characterised this as a contradiction between Key Stage assessment and the Transfer Tests,

*"Parents should be much more aware of their child's performance and ability right from the word go and throughout, but the system is against us. Up to primary 6 we are telling parents about their child's progress in terms of their personal development, their growth in self-esteem and their 'achievements'. And then suddenly we have to more or less change tune and say, "Yes, he is all of that, a great child, but he is not grammar school material.""*

Advice about coaching is also sought routinely by parents. In this regard most teachers also felt they had to tell parents that it was their decision. Some teachers felt that if they advised against coaching there would be a *"backlash"* from the parent if the required grade was not achieved

Most of the teachers interviewed also referred to the period following announcement of the results of the Transfer Tests as a difficult time.

Principals in particular are involved in interviews with parents about the choices concerning post-primary school. Often admissions criteria have to be interpreted for parents,

*“Sometimes parents are often so emotionally traumatised because the grade is not giving them straight access. It’s very difficult to get across to them this is what the criteria actually means.”*

One Principal gave her home phone number to parents on the weekend that the results come out so that they could contact her on the Saturday. Another Principal described how she phoned the teachers with the results because they might meet the parents at church on the following Sunday.

*“So we discuss over the phone these are the children we need to watch out for on Monday and their parents are going to be here, and the teachers will be able to quote me very clearly, that’s why that child got a B1 not an A. It is a very sensitive and traumatic day when everybody in the school, not just the P7 teachers, but the secretary, the caretaker, everybody needs to be watching out for these children who are distressed.”*

*“If a child doesn’t achieve the grade that’s expected, you would then at that stage get negative feedback from parents who may say, ‘The teacher was off on too many inset days and this affected him’ or, ‘Something happened in the playground’, or ‘happened at home.’ And you get parents then inventing special circumstances, but there certainly would be some negative feedback at that stage”.*

Overall, teachers reported a number of areas related to the Transfer Tests that add extra complexity to their relationships with parents. These included:

- the need to communicate the difference between Key Stage assessment that measures pupil attainment and the purpose of Transfer Tests;

- the need to communicate to parents a realistic view of their child's likelihood of success in the Transfer Tests whilst leaving the ultimate decision to the parent;
- parental requests for guidance about coaching;
- pressures to meet unrealistic parental expectations for their children;
- post-test contact with parents that sometimes involved recriminations.

## **5. Classroom Management and Grouping of Pupils**

It was clear from the interviews with primary teachers that the existence of the Transfer Tests has a significant effect on how schools organise classes in the upper primary school and how teachers group pupils to manage teaching and learning within the classroom.

Many schools in the sample provided extra classes for their Transfer Test pupils. The organisation of these classes varied from school to school. Some teachers gave their own time to provide extra classes either before or after normal school hours, at weekends or during the summer holidays. Some schools organise 'eleven plus' clubs in an attempt to "*level the playing field*" for pupils, whose families could not afford private coaching. One respondent described how the school had identified Wednesdays as Transfer preparation day, but also reported that this was challenged by an Inspector on the grounds that the school was not then providing the whole curriculum. Numerous instances were reported where preparation for the Transfer Tests displaced time-tabled areas of the curriculum or after school activities such as sport and social clubs.

At school level a number of structural issues arise. For example, one respondent explained that the school has more than one P7 class and had made a conscious decision,

*“not to have a ‘top P7 class’ as it was felt that this puts enormous pressure on the teacher to deliver good results and could have a detrimental effect on the reputation of the teachers of pupils in the less able classes”.*

Small schools with composite classes also face dilemmas about placing pupils from different year groups in the same class in the period leading up to the Transfer Tests. There was some evidence to suggest that, in some schools, particular teachers have become identified as ‘specialising’ in preparation for the Transfer Tests and that extra status is afforded to those teachers involved in preparation for the Transfer Tests.

By far the most difficult and contentious issue related to classroom management concerned arrangements for pupils who would not be sitting the Transfer Tests. The interviews highlighted various arrangements that schools have adopted. In some cases the Principal, another teacher or a classroom assistant taught those who had opted out of the Transfer Tests, while the class teacher took those who were entered for the Test. In other schools a classroom assistant supervised the practice tests thereby affording the teacher an opportunity to give attention to the other pupils. Not all schools had the necessary resources for such arrangements, but the evidence suggests that the separation of pupils who are and are not entered for the Transfer Tests is a common occurrence in many schools for at least part of the school day. A number of teachers questioned the morality and social impact of such separation, particularly where the level of attention given to each group conveys an implicit message about their worth or capabilities.

Even where Transfer and non-Transfer Test pupils are taught in the same class, teachers expressed reservations. Some teachers tried to maintain mixed-ability groups, believing that more able pupils could help others, but even these teachers found it necessary to distinguish between Transfer

and non-Transfer Test pupils on occasions. This problem was exacerbated for teachers of composite classes having different year groups within the same class. For example, in one small rural school the Principal taught P5-P7. In this situation the P5 pupils missed out on educational visits due to the pressures of preparation for the Transfer Test. P7 pupils missed out on school trips and projects at the end of the year because of pressure on the teacher to continue Transfer Test preparation with the P6 pupils.

Teachers reported dilemmas in allocating equal attention to the Transfer Test pupils and non-Transfer Test pupils. Several teachers spoke of having to give those not sitting the Tests something 'quiet' to do while they focused on the Transfer Test pupils. Many teachers expressed concern that those not doing the Tests were inadequately catered for in spite of their best efforts. Several teachers admitted with regret that they did not give equal attention to those opting out of the Transfer Tests. Many teachers were concerned about the situation but felt they were in an impossible position.

*“However much you try the pupils opting out suffer. I keep on being adamant that they won’t, but they do. Where we can get a classroom assistant or maybe another teacher to supervise the Transfer Test children while they are doing test papers, I can work with the others. But with the major focus on the Transfer Test, you very often have to resort to giving them something to do to keep them out of your hair. The whole thing is horrendous.”*

*“Your attention and your focus is still on the ‘eleven- plus’ children and the others, no matter what you say, do suffer. I could say that they’re fine and they work away, but you are still not giving them that equality that they deserve.”*

*“But I have to say that I have a remit to all the children in this class and I feel that I did not discharge that remit to those who weren’t doing the Test. If there had to be a choice, and most often there did, it was in favour of the Test children. That is unfair, grossly unfair, and I have to acknowledge it.”*

Teachers also reported dilemmas concerning the progress of pupils who had been entered for the Transfer Tests. On the one hand, many teachers felt the pressure to ensure that the most able pupils performed to the best of their ability and secured the highest grade possible in the Transfer Tests. A number of respondents referred to teachers being judged by colleagues and parents in terms of the Transfer Test grades achieved each year. Part of the pressure for many teachers is the view that the performance of their pupils is a reflection on their teaching ability.

Different pressures surround pupils who have been entered for the Transfer Tests when the teacher is less confident of their ability. The majority of teachers reported instances of pupils being entered for the Transfer Tests even when there is very little likelihood of securing a grade for a grammar school place. In some instances this is a parental decision that has been taken despite contrary advice from the school.

*“Some parents think it is a lottery. I have parents of children scoring 1 out of 70 in practice tests who say, ‘But you never know’. It’s not parents’ fault. Parents want the best for their children. The Transfer system is there and parents buy into it, but they don’t want it. What needs to change is the system.”*

Many teachers reported the emotions involved in preparing pupils for the Transfer Tests who *“have no chance of success”* and become increasingly demoralised as they score very low marks in practice tests.

Another distinctive group of pupils that teachers identified were ‘borderline cases’, that is, those who may or may not achieve a grade likely to secure a grammar school place. In some areas this might be the difference between a B1 and a B2; in others the necessity to achieve an A grade. Teachers reported having to make difficult judgements about the

amount of time devoted to such pupils and whether they should receive special attention.

Overall the interviews suggest that the existence of the Transfer Tests has a significant impact on the way pupils are grouped in the upper primary school and that a major organising framework for teachers includes:

- whether or not pupils are entered for the Transfer Tests;
- whether or not Transfer and non-Transfer Test pupils are taught separately;
- how well individual pupils are likely to perform in the Transfer Tests (those expected to do very well; ‘borderline cases’; and those not expected to do well);
- the influence this has on teacher expectations and work set.

## **6. Teaching Methods and Strategies**

The majority of teachers interviewed made some reference to the impact of the Transfer Tests on teaching style. A significant number of teachers suggested that teaching style becomes more didactic in P6/P7 with more emphasis on passive learning, note taking and learning by rote, for example,

*“Good teaching styles go by the board for the first three months of P7 until after the Transfer Tests and I have a lot of regret about that.”*

Respondents reported that teaching style shifted from group learning, where there is opportunity for interaction and discussion, to whole-class teaching, where children sit in rows and are expected to listen or ask selective questions. This was described by a teacher as *“much more intense and certainly not as pupil friendly.”* Some teachers mentioned

that this approach applied more to the Transfer Test pupils, while group and project work was undertaken with those pupils who had opted out of the Transfer Tests. Reference was also made to the confusion that pupils may experience in the sudden shift from interactive teaching methods involving group work and practical projects to *“telling the children to stop talking to the person beside them, be quiet, listen to the teacher. You are giving the children confusing messages”*.

The principal of a large, urban primary school commented that primary schooling is about preparation for independent learning and the P7 year should be the highlight of this learning experience, with opportunities being given, for example, for pupils to undertake research. He felt that this aspect of education suffered because of the constraints of the Transfer Procedure.

A frank admission on the part of one teacher highlighted the impact that the Transfer Tests had on relationships with pupils,

*“I hate to say this to you, and much to my shame, I would have shouted an awful lot in my room. I would have been like a bear with a sore head, because I was feeling such pressure from the ‘eleven-plus’ that I took it out on the children. Now, I can safely say, that this last couple of years I have modified my behaviour considerably. First of all, if I do shout (which is very rare now compared to what I would have done) once I catch myself on I would immediately apologise to the child in front of the class. I realised that what was at stake was my reputation, my name, which is not fair on the children.”*

One P7 teacher described the change in teaching style after the Transfer Tests as going back into *“teacher mode”*, covering the full curriculum and often undertaking projects initiated by the pupils themselves. Many teachers referred to the Northern Ireland Curriculum in P6 and P7 as being a ‘two-year programme’. This way of thinking was partly attributed to the impact of the Transfer Tests in that the period from initial preparation in

P6 until completion of the Transfer Tests in P7 was seen as a continuous period. In some schools the same teacher takes a class through P6 and P7 and one of the benefits attributed to this is that pupils avoid a 'settling in' period with a new teacher at the beginning of P7 at a time when preparation for the Transfer Tests becomes more intense.

Teachers referred to a range of strategies that have been adopted mainly because of the Transfer Tests. In several schools there was a deliberate policy of not using the word 'fail' when referring to the Transfer Tests. Avoiding talking about results was a tactic employed in a significant number of schools,

*"When we come back in on Monday morning we never refer to children who qualify or who don't. I walk by children no matter what grade they get. I never even talk to them. They talk plenty, but we keep completely neutral."*

*"There is a policy in this school of never mentioning results before or after they come out."*

One of the problems mentioned in relation to not talking about results was that pupils who have done well are disappointed that they are not congratulated. Many examples were given of discussions with children, sometimes using 'circle time', about feelings, about disappointment, about transferring to another school and about maintaining friendships no matter what the results. The disappointment of not qualifying for grammar school was eased in one area by the fact that all the children had a very enjoyable visit to the local secondary school where they became involved in music, art and information technology. The Principal of the primary school concerned felt that as a result of their experience, children were happy to go there, even if initially disappointed by their Transfer Test result.

In addition to not mentioning Transfer Test results, some teachers also tried to keep practice test results as quiet as possible because of the demoralising effect it can have when children constantly get low marks, *“You can see the children wilt in a sense that they know they’re not achieving.”* However, others suggested that it was almost impossible to keep test results confidential as children compared results among themselves. One teacher described how her class, on their own initiative, made graphs of their progress which they then compared with each other. Another teacher stated,

*“They ask each other, “What did you get?” That’s when the problems start and the head goes down and then you’re having to spend time trying to talk to them in afternoons when you’re not doing ‘eleven plus’ type work. You’re trying other things to lift them a bit. It’s painful, but you don’t have a choice if you have to work this system.”*

One teacher played classical music and burned aroma-therapy oil to create a calm atmosphere in the weeks leading up to the Tests. Several teachers referred to working on reunifying the class afterwards as they felt the whole process was very divisive. Another teacher referred to,

*“engaging in something like reconciliation with the class. I have put them through enormous pressure on the grounds that I want to give them the best possible chance in life. They need an opportunity to say how angry they were with me for all the roaring and shouting and all the homework I gave them.”*

Overall a variety of practices were identified throughout the interviews that could be considered to have arisen in response to the Transfer Tests. These included:

- offering incentives to improve practice test scores;
- presenting ‘certificates of achievement’ to all pupils before the Tests;
- avoiding all written work in the weeks before the Tests;
- a deliberate policy of never mentioning results before or after the Transfer Tests;
- having a ‘fun day’ on the day before the first Transfer Test;
- placing extra emphasis on encouragement and developing self-esteem;
- using ‘circle time’ to build support within the class group;
- taking the pupils on a visit immediately after the Tests;
- concentrating on project work after the Tests.

## **7. Impact on Pupils**

A small number of the teachers interviewed considered the Transfer Tests to be a motivating factor for pupils, for example,

*“P6 is one of the best years for pupils because there is never a dull moment. They are never idle. They are so motivated. Once they get into the routine of work, work, work you can see what they can do. They are quite capable, even the children who are struggling they really do come on.”*

However, nearly all of the teacher comments about the impact of the Transfer Tests on pupils focused on negative aspects. A dominant theme in the interview transcripts were comments about the impact of the Transfer Tests on pupil self-esteem,

*“We aim to enable children to get used to success, believing that there is nothing better for helping a child to do well. But the whole Transfer Test system drives a coach-and-four through all that”.*

*“The worst damage of all is around children’s self-esteem. The fall-out from the results is simply horrendous. The vast majority of children who go to secondary schools do so carrying an affirmation that they are*

*stupid. It is tantamount to child abuse. I think we will look back from the next century and say 'How could we have done that to our children and justified it?' It is simply outrageous".*

Defining categories in most teachers' minds in terms of the impact of the Transfer Tests on pupils' self esteem and motivation were:

- the impact on pupils who are 'opted out' of the Transfer Tests;
- pupils who are preparing for the Test with little prospect of success;
- the effects on pupils once the results are announced.

Although some teachers referred to the fact that non-Transfer Test pupils do not have the same pressures in terms of preparation for the Tests, a majority of teachers felt that the experience for many of these pupils is significantly different,

*"Children who haven't done the test have said to me afterwards that they felt 'left out'."*

*"Those children who are not doing the test would be sitting in the room while the others are doing a practice test, doing quiet work for that hour. It's very tedious, and maybe not a lot of thinking, tasks that are just straight forward and don't require a lot of activity."*

A significant number of teachers also reported that there was less expectation of 'opted out' pupils,

*"They (non Transfer Test pupils) know that the pressure is not on them to achieve and that affects their attitude to the thing. So they're much more switched off, and really when it comes then to the 'eleven-plus' type work, I'm not going to pull them up as hard as I would the children who are doing the 'eleven-plus', because I know that the expectation is different."*  
*"So, do you find that you relate to them differently?"*  
*"Much to my shame, yes."*

A few responses indicated that there is a tendency to regard all pupils who had been 'opted out' as having less ability, even though there may be many reasons for parents not entering their child for the Tests,

*"They (the non-test pupils) begin to perceive themselves, I'm sorry to say, as the slow ones, the less bright and able. But certainly the Transfer Test procedure does reinforce that."*

However, some teachers also reported deliberate attempts to dispel any stigma attached to pupils not entered for the Transfer Tests,

*"We do not suffer from that at all, partly I think because we make a conscious decision to not make a difference between those sitting and those not. Even to the extent that when the results come out, we're not going in saying well done."*

For those entered for the Transfer Tests the main concern identified by teachers was for pupils having problems 'keeping up', especially those with little prospect of success,

*"It's the child who is borderline who'll worry about the Transfer. It's very important to build up from an average to below average stream who are actually doing the 'eleven-plus'. They lose a lot of self-esteem throughout the process, because you're not any longer waiting and you don't have time to bring them along at their own rate."*

*"You're marking all the time and some children are suffering as a result of the marks, and their parents still want them to do the 'eleven-plus'. It becomes very demoralising for those children."*

Almost every teacher made some reference to pupils who had experienced 'emotional problems' attributed to the Transfer Tests,

*"Some enjoy, some revel in that type of thing, usually the ones who are going to do well, but overall it is beyond dispute that children's well-being is radically affected by the Test, sometimes very severely."*

*“Some of those able children are very conscientious. “What will I do if I don’t get an A?” They know they have to put in the work and they are losing sleep. You can see it telling on them, the stresses and strains; they’re not their usual chirpy selves.”*

Many more examples were given of the impact of the Transfer Procedure on individual children manifest in physical symptoms – tummy aches, absences from school and behaviour problems.

*“I was talking to a parent yesterday. The child is sick morning and night. They went to the doctor and the doctor says, ‘Is he under any stress or strain?’ Of course he’s crying over tests and things, but he’s getting 54, 55 out of 75 in the tests. But that’s the type of child it affects most.”*

*“The parents of another bright child withdrew her from the Transfer Test because she fell apart under the pressure of getting ready, to the point where she wasted away to a shadow, couldn’t sleep and was vomiting every morning before coming to school.”*

Many teachers also referred to the impact on pupils once the Transfer Tests are complete. Two main themes arose here. Firstly, issues related to maintaining motivation,

*“Even the best ones are burnt out. They have worked so hard and you see the work you get now; it’s atrocious”.*

*“The greatest problem is keeping them motivated for the Key Stage 2 Assessment which are carried out between February and May.”*

*“Part of the ‘P7 syndrome’ sets in after the Transfer Test. Pupils know they are leaving and try to push the boundaries.”*

A number of teachers also felt that some pupils did not perform as well in the Key Stage assessments as they had in the Transfer Tests and attributed this to ‘burn out’ or ‘loss of motivation’.

Secondly, the emotions involved for those who had not achieved the expected grade or a grade that would secure a grammar school place. P7 was referred to as a difficult year for pupils. A whole year spent 'wondering', waiting for results in February, followed by the long wait until school choices were finalised in June.

*"I hate the Monday morning after the 'eleven-plus' results come out. I'm pleased for the children who have got what they wanted. Then afterwards I talk to them (those who did not get the grade they wanted) and ask, 'How do you feel now?' Just to get them to talk. The worst sort of child I have is the child who doesn't want to talk."*

*"Occasionally a child is so traumatised that he or she refuses to go to school. It shouldn't be like that. A ten year-old shouldn't have that weight coming to school ever."*

*"They also haven't got the concept, 'I didn't do half the questions so I couldn't possibly get it'. Within the Catholic tradition you have all this thing about prayer. My granny's lighting a candle, St. Jude is good. Creating a lot of false expectation."*

A recurrent theme was how pupils, parents and teachers deal with perceived 'failure' once the results are announced,

*"If anyone says to me that children aren't affected by a failed outcome, first of all just talk to the adults who remember their results day so vividly and painfully to this day. But look at the children themselves; why do they cry if it doesn't affect them, if they don't understand what it means that they've failed. And when a boy puts on a macho act and says it doesn't matter that he failed, his body language betrays him."*

*"I can never forget that Saturday morning, it was like a death in the house when she opened the envelope."*

*"And then comes the crunch and failure on the day of the results and the child has failed not just the Test but has failed his parents. How do you think the child must feel about himself?"*

*“I was personally in favour of the procedure till I started teaching it and seeing the effect on those who failed. I have changed completely. As a Parent of a P3 I live in dread of the Test coming. I hope it’s gone by then”.*

The negative impact of ‘failure’ on pupil’s self esteem was considered to be particularly acute for those who perceived themselves as having ‘failed’ their parents or teachers; those whose self-perception vis-a-vis their peers and siblings was affected; pupils who had been expected to do well but who did not, for various reasons, perform well on the day of the Tests.

*“You’ve got some disappointments and you’ve got some happy children. We can’t take away from the ones that do well and get into the grammar schools; they had a great achievement but sometimes at the expense of the others. I suppose a third of children, maybe even a quarter of children in P7 would be achieving grades to get them into the schools they want to be in, so all that work is to the detriment of the three-quarters that don’t.”*

## **8. Views on the Selection Procedure**

In the individual interviews only one teacher expressed relative satisfaction with the current system of selection. Four teachers identified some positive aspects (preparation for competition in later life, providing a clear focus for achievement, offering ‘a way out’ of deprived communities) and suggested they were not totally opposed to the present system. However, these teachers also expressed criticisms and reservations about certain aspects such as the pressure on pupils and distortion of the curriculum.

A large majority of teachers expressed negative opinions about the current system of selection and the Transfer tests in particular. More than half were very strongly opposed to the Transfer Procedure. A significant number of teachers expressed views that considered the Transfer

Procedure undesirable, but felt that little could be done to change the system or that it was not clear to them what the alternative might be.

The majority of teachers were critical of the system for three main reasons:

- they had observed the negative impact of the Transfer Procedure on pupils;
- they considered it to narrow and distort the primary school curriculum;
- they regarded it as favouring pupils from more advantaged socio-economic backgrounds, partly because their parents could afford to pay for coaching.

Throughout the individual interviews and focus group meetings a range of views emerged on possible change and alternatives to the present system. Suggestions ranged from those that implied change to the means by which pupils are selected for grammar school to those advocating structural change to the school system. Suggestions included:

- i. Replacing the Transfer Tests with a different form of assessment, for example, using the Key Stage assessment results perhaps accompanied by teacher assessment. However, many teachers also pointed out that this would merely shift issues about coaching and curriculum distortion on to Key Stage assessment and that there would be issues of comparability between schools. Few teachers, particularly Principals, were keen to go back to a system whereby teacher reports were the main basis for recommending a place in grammar school since this distorts the relationship between teacher and parent.

- ii. Placing the onus for selection on grammar rather than primary schools, although respondents were sometimes vague about what this might look like in practice. In general the suggestion was that grammar schools would be responsible for selecting pupils based on their Key Stage assessment results, an interview or entrance examination. However, a number of teachers also pointed out that these may simply mean that assessment becomes a surrogate Transfer Test and none of these are completely satisfactory in terms of ensuring equity. Some teachers pointed out that the introduction of entrance examinations would simply lead to more coaching for even more tests.
- iii. A significant number of teachers made reference to the age of selection and suggested that consideration should be given to delaying selection until pupils are a little older. There was some support for the idea of delaying selection until the age of 14 and a number of teachers expressed the view that boys in particular are too young for selection at age 11.
- iv. Other responses indicated the need to consider changes to the school system and not just the means of selection. Some teachers suggested a system of Junior High schools where pupils progress automatically from primary to Junior High school for three years during which they develop their strengths and interests. Further progress to grammar or secondary school would be determined by assessment and examination.
- v. Many teachers commented on the need for better differentiation within the system based on society's need for technical and vocational education as well as academic. Many teachers felt that too much emphasis is placed on academic education and considered

that the business community should express their views more strongly.

- vi. References to comprehensive education were tempered with concerns about the way this was introduced in England, "*We don't want to face the awful transition problems they went through towards going comprehensive*". Despite this, a significant number of teachers seemed confident that such a system could work. Many teachers felt that some element of selection of pupils is inevitable, but argued that this could be better achieved through banding or setting within common comprehensive schools, thereby reducing the social stigma of separation at institutional level.

Overall no clear consensus emerged in terms of preferred alternatives and it was evident from teacher responses that few teachers had had an opportunity to engage in a considered debate on the issue. A significant number of teachers expressed regret that the views of teachers have not been taken into account sufficiently,

*"We the practitioners never get a chance to air our views. Without a context of consultation what's the point in us looking for alternatives?"*

## **POST PRIMARY TEACHERS**

### **Methodology**

This strand of the research involved focus groups and semi-structured interviews with teachers from secondary and grammar schools. The sample included representation from controlled, maintained and integrated schools; urban and rural locations and various socio-economic backgrounds. The number of post-primary school teachers interviewed was as follows:

- fieldwork involved interviews with teachers from a total of 38 post-primary (11 grammar and 27 secondary) schools throughout Northern Ireland;
- formal interviews with 6-7 teachers in each school provided transcribed interview data from 266 post-primary school teachers.

The field research involved formal interviews with the following in each school:

- the Principal
- one or two members of the Senior Management team
- one or two Heads of Department for English, Maths or Science
- head of Year 8
- group interviews with 3 or 4 classroom teachers.

Included in the 38 schools were 8 'area study' schools. These schools were all located in relatively close proximity to one another and provided a more focused insight into teacher perceptions of the effects of the Transfer Procedure within a specific community.

The interviews with post-primary teachers were between 45 minutes and 1 hour in duration. Brief biographical details were provided by teachers along with personal views on the existing transfer system. Questions also addressed:

- changes within the school during the last 10 years;
- the impact of open enrolment;
- the pattern of demand for places;
- arrangements for streaming, banding, setting;
- arrangements for monitoring pupil performance;
- increased demands on teachers;
- the extent to which post-primary schools liaised with primary schools.

All interviews were transcribed and provided the basis for this section of the report. Teachers were guaranteed anonymity in terms of the views expressed and undertakings were given that no individual school would be named in the research. Findings are presented under a number of thematic headings illustrated with quotations from teachers in their own words. The general pattern of reporting is to present findings from secondary school teacher interviews followed by those from grammar school teachers under the same heading. Where appropriate differences between the two are contrasted.

The final section of the report then draws overall conclusions about the impact of primary, secondary and grammar school teachers' perceptions and expectations of pupils and motivation and performance.

## **1. Impact of Open Enrolment**

Most secondary school teachers reported that their school had been affected adversely by open enrolment and many teachers expressed

frustration and resentment at the impact. Grammar schools were perceived to be “*creaming off*” the more able pupils. Reported frequently was the view that grammar schools are now permitted to enrol up to their maximum capacity and are expanding. In many areas, depending on supply and demand, it was reported that grammar schools are filling their quotas by accepting pupils with lower Transfer Test grades than before. This was considered to have a significant impact on the range of ability within pupil intakes for secondary schools.

*“This area has a grammar school that takes only ‘A’s and ‘B’s and we take whatever is left. So if there is a shortage, we end up with a full set of ‘D’s, whereas if you go to a secondary school in (X area) you could get ‘B’s or ‘C’s. There’s no competition, we just get what’s left.”*

*“It’s very difficult for us from year to year to predict numbers, never mind ability. It depends on the other two grammar schools in the area. They occasionally have taken it way down the scale, you know taking Cs and Ds to fill up places which means that we’re left with the very low grade kids.”*

*“Certainly when open-enrolment started a few years ago, the first year of it, I could see a huge ability difference in the first-year pupils we had coming in. It used to be when I first started here we had a few qualifiers, people who had actually passed the ‘eleven-plus’ and came here because family had come or whatever. Whereas now I don’t think we’ve had a qualifier for about 4 years.”*

There was a strong sense of grievance among many secondary school teachers about the effects of open enrolment. A number of respondents made comments that, in addition to losing the more academically able pupils, they also felt that other qualities were being lost to secondary schools through open enrolment. Examples included, “*pupils who have leadership quality and a broader range of outside interests*” with the suggestion that this leaves a narrower base of pupils with “*a more restricted set of social networks*”.

A significant number of respondents commented on the negative impact of open enrolment on teachers' morale in secondary schools, for example,

*“The quality of pupil coming in is falling I think and it will continue to fall. The grammar schools can take more and, apart from that, we have falling numbers. There is disillusionment amongst a lot of staff. Kids aren't as well behaved as they used to be. More is expected of us through results and league tables. And I think it is just a harder system to be in all round.”*

Many respondents in grammar schools reported that open enrolment had had little or no effect on the school in that the school was always over-subscribed and therefore were still taking all 'A' grades and some higher 'B' grades. However, a significant number of grammar teachers also reported changes that had come about since the introduction of open enrolment. These included:

- An increased intake of 'B2', 'C's and, in some cases, 'D' grades.
- In schools still only taking higher grades, it was reported that there were pupils who were not achieving the expected results at GCSE.
- There was a suggestion that a broader intake of Transfer Test grades was also accompanied by an increase in 'behaviour problems'.

## **2. The Status of Schools**

A dominant theme in the discourse of secondary school teachers involved their concerns about the low status afforded to secondary schools. This was perceived to be a systemic feature of the education system in Northern Ireland and many teachers expressed feelings of 'powerlessness' to influence the perception of secondary schools within society.

*“The perception of secondary schools as second class is so strong. If only people could know what is actually happening in secondary schools.”*

*These perceptions are substantiated by the 'eleven-plus'. That's where the public get the image."*

*"The grammar school lobby is completely and absolutely and totally dominant. They make all the decisions, all created to control second class teachers and second class schools. That is my understanding. Secondary schools are seen as 'failures for failures' and they're actually seen in class terms."*

The necessity to become pro-active in promoting secondary schools to try to counter-act their negative image was identified as a strain on scarce resources coupled with less capacity to fund-raise *"because of the lower socio-economic base."*

There was resentment in many secondary schools at being expected to take pupils expelled from the grammar sector for behavioural reasons. The comment was made by a number of teachers that *"they are the most difficult pupils."* It was considered to be further reinforcement of the image of secondary schools as *"a dumping ground"*. The view was expressed that if a pupil was expelled from a grammar school, that he or she should be accommodated in another school within that sector.

Further examples were reported that highlighted a sensitivity within secondary schools to *"subliminal messages contained in the media and in official DENI statements"* that reinforce the perception that secondary schools have a lower status. Examples included, invited speakers who talked about their success *"despite failing the 'eleven-plus'"* and references to *"some excellent teachers in secondary schools."* However well-intentioned, such statements were clearly resented and regarded as condescending and ultimately reinforcing negative perceptions of secondary schools. Official literature concerning the Transfer Procedure that *"conveys the impression that the whole system is geared towards selection for grammar school"* was also criticised. Further criticisms

were made of the system of reporting results, whereby secondary and grammar schools were being judged on academic criteria yet have different pupil intakes from the outset.

Many secondary school teachers identified examples to illustrate their view that separation of pupils between secondary and grammar schools is socially divisive and reinforces perceptions of class divisions,

*“Even the best youngsters that I have taught still felt inferior. Whenever it came to transferring to a grammar school for ‘A’ Levels they felt they weren’t going to be as good as the people who had gone through the grammar school system.”*

The impact of these perceptions on teacher morale and self-esteem was very evident in a many interviews,

*“Once you’ve taught in secondary schools, grammar schools don’t want to know you.”*

*“If a secondary teacher gets to go to a grammar it’s like a promotion or a move up the scale. You earn your money in a secondary school, you really do.”*

*“I think it’s maybe partly to do with experience. If you’ve had experience with secondary children maybe your expectations aren’t as high and I know very few secondary teachers who have left secondary for grammar.”*

*“I sometimes feel that teachers in the secondary school have low self-esteem as well. That somehow the work they do is not as valuable or that they are not appreciated as much as teachers in a grammar school. And my own experience would have been at teacher gatherings, that somehow the elitism that I was talking about between pupils in grammar and secondary existed at the teaching level as well.”*

*“We wore gowns at our prize giving this year for the first time in twenty years and in part I think that was a response to the fact that people think we do not have the same qualifications as others. I think people still think, you know, we are not as good because we are not teaching in a*

*grammar school and people do not necessarily realise that it was a choice in some of our cases.”*

By contrast the discourse of grammar school teachers concerning the status of their school typically concentrated on its perceived academic standing within the community. This brought its own pressures such as parental expectations in terms of examination results accentuated by recent government policy to publish School Performance Tables of examination results. However, the interviews with grammar school teachers did not reveal anywhere near the same preoccupation with status and self-esteem issues.

### **3. Pastoral Care and Pupil Self Esteem**

A distinctive feature of the interviews with secondary school teachers was the emphasis placed on the provision of pastoral care programmes within secondary schools. Pastoral care provision was also referred to frequently by many grammar school teachers who considered emotional security to be a prerequisite of academic achievement,

*“In the first term our emphasis is on Pastoral Care and not academic at all. It is about getting children to feel safe and happy.” (Principal, grammar school)*

However, teachers from secondary schools attached particular significance to pastoral care provision and descriptions of the programme in Year 8 invariably emphasised some reference to “*restoring confidence*”, “*starting afresh*” or “*rebuilding self esteem*”. By implication there is an assumption that each new intake of secondary school pupils has already experienced “*a sense of failure*” and priority is attached to “*remedial action*”.

*“We have to actively engage in restoring confidence in the pupils when they come in here. With the good relationships in this school we think we are quite successful in tackling the problem of low self-esteem quite quickly. We have an excellent Year 8 transition programme.”*

*“There is an issue for us of the level of motivation. They have already classed themselves as failures. Often their self-confidence never comes back completely. Their level of self-esteem has been shot to blazes. I would argue that it is down to the Transfer system. Having failed once they don't see much of a problem about failing again. On the surface they can seem quite happy, but they just don't see their own worth. They see themselves as failures.”*

A number of teachers felt that the after effects of the Transfer Tests on many pupils in secondary schools has a lasting effect,

*“The ‘eleven-plus’ impacts on all that we do here. If we are entering them for GCSE the thought that it is something that they are going to fail is always with them. The system separates them at eleven and says to those who come here, “You are not good enough”. One of the reasons why they have low self-esteem is they feel school is not worth bothering about and they have a completely negative attitude towards it.”*

#### **4. After Effects of the Transfer Procedure on the Curriculum**

Many teachers from both secondary and grammar schools reported that they revisit areas of the curriculum in order to reinforce key concepts and skills. In many instances lack of understanding of concepts in English, Mathematics and Science was attributed to the type of learning that primary schools adopt for the Transfer Tests.

Heads of English commented frequently on pupils' lack of ability to produce pieces of sustained writing and felt that this was attributable to the nature of the English required for the Transfer Test in which pupils are required to give very short answers.

*“It’s possible for a pupil to come in here on a Level 5 in English and after three years [in postprimary school] only achieve a Level 4. I think they are highly inflated coming in from primary school and I give them no credence whatsoever.”*

Teachers of mathematics and science also identified a lack of confidence in pupils’ reported levels of attainment:

*“I know in my Year 8 pupils’ understanding of basics in Maths is very poor. A lot of stuff that they should have covered in Maths in primary school they don’t seem to remember it or haven’t covered it – I don’t know which. I’m very surprised because they are supposed to have covered it for the ‘eleven-plus’.”*

*“Basically our approach would be that we would almost start from scratch and almost do an introductory Science, just to find out where people are. In many instances the knowledge pupils have received is inaccurate and has to be ‘unlearned’ or they know some facts but do not understand the concepts.”*

Teachers from secondary schools also expressed concerns about the status attached to GNVQ qualifications in relation to GCSEs and a number of secondary school teachers made reference to the importance of entering pupils for examination boards that are *“suitable for our pupils because of their ability”*. Technology was identified as,

*“having been modified and hijacked by the system to render it more useful to the grammar sector. Technology used to be a practical, hands-on subject, but now Technology at GCSE does not suit an awful lot of our pupils. I would say it has become an academic subject.”*

## **5. Teaching Methods**

The main feature of the discourse from secondary school teachers was an emphasis on *“the continual challenge to motivate pupils”*, *“to maintain pupils’ attention”* and *“to maintain order in the classroom”*. These were

recognised as challenges common to secondary and grammar schools, but many teachers from both sectors felt that these challenges are greater in secondary schools. A typical comment from one teacher who had experience of teaching in both sectors,

*“It’s a different type of teaching in a grammar school. It was just simply supplying them with information and they just eat it up. Here you teach them every minute. You have to go through everything very slowly with them and, maybe they should do it in grammar school, but they’re inclined to just go through information and they learn it and regurgitate it in exams.”*

A common perception was that secondary school teachers require a greater range of teaching strategies to cope with the wide range of abilities in secondary schools. This view was not just held by secondary teachers, but was also voiced by a number of grammar school teachers,

*“I’ve always had great admiration for the teachers who go in to secondary schools and teach kids who don’t want to be there, don’t see any reason or benefit in what they’re getting. They’re the heroes to me.”*

Interviews from teachers in both sectors reveal stereotypical views of teaching in grammar schools being dominated by “talk and chalk” methods where “pupils sit quietly in rows and take notes”. Whereas secondary schools were characterised as places where “learning has to be more hands on and practical”. A minority of teachers made such observations with the benefit of having worked in both types of school, but the majority readily admitted that they had little real insight into day-to-day practice in schools from the other sector.

A significant number of teachers commented on their views of teaching in the other sector. In the main, the reservations of teachers from secondary schools concerned meeting the academic demands particularly for teaching ‘A’ level; whilst the reservations expressed by teachers from

grammar schools concerned issues of maintaining discipline and teaching 'less-able' pupils.

## **6. Perceptions and Expectations of Pupils**

As reported elsewhere, the perception that pupils come to secondary schools with "*a sense of failure*" featured prominently for most secondary school teachers.

*"They definitely come in here feeling like failures."*

*"Those who fail come in here feeling negative about everything"*

*"Our school has to cope with de-motivated children and particularly de-motivated boys."*

*"In Year 11 English the pupils were still describing themselves as failures because they did not get the 'eleven-plus'. Those kids really need lifted."*

A number of secondary school teachers also reported instances of pupils who have "*failed the 'eleven plus' and also been rejected by a number of secondary schools before coming here*".

*"The ones who come in here thinking they were defeated or they had very low esteem coming in here, it takes them 5 years before they feel that they are great achievers and some do very well when they come to do GCSEs. It's a long time to wait, isn't it?"*

Such perceptions inevitably influence the expectations of pupils that many teachers reported. Many examples from the interviews refer to the need "*to cover the curriculum at a slower pace*"; "*to simplify aspects of the curriculum*" or "*to make academic parts of the curriculum more relevant to pupils' ability*".

Comments from teachers in both sectors suggested that pupils in secondary and grammar schools are given 'different targets'. Setting

targets of 5 grade Cs at GCSE for secondary school pupils, whilst peers in grammar schools are being told to aim higher, was seen to undermine the message that every pupils can achieve high grades irrespective of the school they attend. Considerable resentment of School Performance Tables that set the benchmark for success as passes at grades A\* to C was also expressed by many secondary school teachers. Many teachers felt that this sort of reporting takes no account of the different ‘starting points’ for pupils in secondary and grammar schools.

The majority of grammar school teachers reported the view that most pupils come with a sense of achievement following the Transfer Tests. In general pupils *“settle in quickly, and are highly motivated, “keenly competitive and becoming more so.”* Some grammar school teachers identified a minority of pupils who are difficult to motivate, not through lack of ability, but because they relax with a sense of achievement after the Transfer Tests:

*“A sudden exhalation as it were. That long sigh of relief lasts all the way into first year here and can last all the way up to Christmas.”*

Many grammar school teachers also identified another group of pupils distinctive to grammar schools. These were variously described as pupils *who “had slipped through the net”* or had *“been coached for the ‘eleven-plus’ but then find they are not up to the academic demands of the grammar school”*

*“I do not think that the present ‘eleven-plus’ prepares them for the kind of work we do here. The nature of the exam doesn’t demand any continuous writing, doesn’t really test them.”*

In such situations it was reported that parents and pupils are reluctant to change schools because *“there is a culture in Northern Ireland that once your child gets into grammar school they have made it.”*

However, apart from the minority of pupils in the categories mentioned above, many grammar school teachers spoke in positive terms about their expectations of pupils,

*“Teaching in a Grammar school is relatively fulfilling. You are dealing with kids who have been selected and whose self-worth has been enhanced and by and large they are very easy to deal with.”*

A few teachers mentioned that high parental expectations can contribute to motivation where a pupil is not working in grammar school. It was suggested that this sanction is not always open to secondary schools if parents do not have the same educational aspirations. Reference was also made to the *“threat of a move to secondary school”* as a further sanction available to grammar schools in extreme cases.

Reference to pupils with special educational needs was much more common in the interviews with secondary school teachers, although there was some evidence to suggest that teachers in grammar schools are reporting *“increasing numbers of pupils requiring special support”* and attributing this to a broader intake of ability.

## **7. Views on the Selection Procedure**

A small number of secondary school teachers made positive comments about the selective system of education in Northern Ireland.

*“I can certainly see the minuses of the system, but for high-flyers the grammar school is more suited to their ability and their need should be catered for.”*

*“I favour the selection process. I didn’t get the ‘eleven-plus’ and I don’t think that you are a failure because you didn’t get it. When the results come out I think it is an issue for a few days but they get over it.”*

A significant minority indicated their personal dilemma of being opposed to a selective system of education, but finding themselves as parents making the decision to send their own child to grammar school.

Most secondary school teachers reported criticisms of the system. In broad terms criticisms of the Transfer Tests and selection referred to:

- a view that the system is socially divisive;
- a view that the system mainly benefits a minority who attend grammar schools;
- experience of its impact on pupils, particularly in terms of self esteem.

A significant minority of grammar school teachers made arguments in favour of selection although such arguments tended to support the need for grammar schools rather than Transfer Tests as the means of selection. In support of the system it was argued that streaming was necessary in any system and that *“selection between schools may not be as invidious as selection within a school”*. One Vice-Principal considered that post-primary schools here are in a better position than comprehensive schools because,

*“I think that pupils are more motivated when they are not undermined by somebody of greater ability or lots of people of greater ability listening to them or commenting on what they are doing. And I think with selection the secondary schools can offer a place of building confidence for those*

*pupils rather than them being made to feel less able by being exposed to the brightest and best academically.”*

Another teacher commented:

*“I do not know how you would cater for high achievers if you had a full spectrum of ability to deal with in your class. I think everybody would suffer.”*

The majority of grammar school teachers interviewed made critical comments of selection although many of these were directed at the Transfer Tests rather than the overall system, for example,

*“It’s the only exam where there is no evidence right through. Now they have coursework you have evidence of how a child is able to perform ongoing. You have the opportunity to have an exam remarked. It’s the only exam that cannot be remarked. It’s the only exam that really just focuses on how a child performs on two occasions during one hour and really the rest of their life depends on it.”*

Some teachers who supported the retention of grammar schools suggested that possible changes might be:

- to expand sixth form provision in all schools;
- to admit all pupils with a ‘B’ grade to grammar school by right;
- to ban coaching, as this was the ‘real’ source of inequality in the system;
- allow more movement between schools according to performance;
- provide more investment in secondary schools to raise standards.

A small number of grammar school teachers expressed concern at the prospect of any change to the current system of selective education.

*“What would be a nightmare scenario is if we ended up with an expanded ability range that teachers and schools are not prepared or able to cope*

*with. I don't think anybody in a selective system could cope with the open enrolment system without the kind of careful preparation that could make it work."*

*"Am I going to be retrained? Is there going to be enough resources to give teachers the confidence to cope with all levels of ability? You know, if a secondary school teacher applies for a job here, are they going to get sufficient training to be able to teach 'A' Level, because to me there are very different skills needed for the two."*

The interviews with secondary and grammar school teachers in favour of change within the system generated a list of options similar to those identified by primary school teachers in the previous section. There were some slight differences. There was less support for the notion of individual grammar schools being responsible for selecting pupils. There was sympathetic support for the concept of delayed selection to age 14 and similar expressions of concern that any proposals for a comprehensive system should avoid some of the weaknesses perceived in the way this operates in England.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

This section of the report draws conclusions from the interviews with primary, secondary and grammar school teachers in terms of their expectations and perceptions of pupils and in terms of teacher motivation and performance. It was clear from the data that the different working environments for primary, secondary and grammar teachers give rise to different perspectives and concerns. This is reflected in the way the conclusions from the research are now presented.

### **1. Primary school teacher perceptions and expectations of pupils**

Primary school teachers are involved with pupils in the years leading up to the Transfer Tests. It is therefore no surprise that the issues related to primary school teacher perceptions and expectations of pupils are mainly concerned with the ‘backwash’ effect that the Transfer Procedure has on the final two years of primary education. The evidence from this report indicates that the Transfer Tests have significant impact on how primary school teachers think about their pupils and the expectations they have of them. This ‘effect’ is particularly acute in relation to the following:

#### **1.1 Curriculum and teaching strategies**

Almost every teacher interviewed as part of the research was of the opinion that the existence of the Transfer Tests has some effect in narrowing or distorting the Northern Ireland Curriculum. In practice many teachers reported that the existence of the Transfer Tests leads to negative effects on specific areas of the curriculum and the adoption of a narrow repertoire of teaching strategies. Reported effects include:

- an emphasis on Transfer Test technique rather than the development of concepts;
- a narrow focus on reading, comprehension and grammar in English;
- neglect of creative writing in English;
- compression of two year's Mathematics before the Transfer Tests;
- teaching of Mathematics by rote and test technique;
- teaching of Science by lecture and note taking rather practical experiments;
- neglect of project work in History and Geography;
- displacement of Art, Music and PE with Transfer Test preparation;
- adoption of more didactic teaching methods.

The reported evidence suggests that teachers convey very different messages about the nature of the Northern Ireland Curriculum as the Transfer Tests approach. As a consequence pupils receive different messages about the type of learning that is expected.

## 1.2 Classroom management and pupil groupings

The most significant effect that the Transfer Tests have on classroom management in primary schools concerns the arrangements that are made for those pupils who have not been entered for the Transfer Tests. Various arrangements were reported. These included full integration within the same class; differentiated learning within the same class; employment of teaching assistants; separation during class time; and provision of special Transfer Test classes before or after school. The separation of Transfer and non-Transfer Test pupils from as early as P6 could be seen as the first steps towards separation of grammar and secondary school pupils.

There is reported evidence from teachers to support the view that, in some cases, pupils who are not entered for the Transfer Tests receive unequal or less attention than pupils who are preparing for the Tests. Many instances were reported, often with regret, that the work set for non-Transfer Test pupils is less challenging.

### 1.3 Preparation for the tests and coaching

Evidence from the interviews suggests that the existence of the Transfer Tests have a strong influence on the way that teachers perceive and talk about the pupils in their class. The following categories can be readily discerned from teacher comments in interview transcripts. Pupils who are:

- ‘entered and expected to do well’
- ‘entered and borderline’
- ‘entered but little chance of success’
- ‘not entered for the Transfer Tests’

Teachers reported differences in the challenges of working with each of these groups. There is substantial evidence to suggest that teachers perceive these categories of pupils differently and have different expectations of them, often from an early stage in P6. Different expectations become more acute during the early part of P7 when preparation for the Transfer Tests is more intense. This is often reflected in the different amount of time afforded to different groups and the frequency or difficulty of work set.

The majority of teachers are critical of coaching for the following reasons:

- coaching is primarily focused on the development of ‘technique’ for the Transfer Tests rather than broader educational goals and ‘conceptual development’;
- coaching ‘hothouses’ borderline pupils who may later not be able to keep pace with academic demands in grammar school;
- coaching is a commercial activity, so children from less affluent backgrounds are less able to afford it and are therefore disadvantaged;
- parents may feel they are depriving their children if they do not receive coaching;
- coaching creates additional and unnecessary pressures on pupils.

## **2. Secondary school teacher perceptions and expectations of pupils**

Evidence from the interviews indicates that secondary school teachers’ perceptions and expectations of pupils are influenced by:

- 2.1 Perceptions that most secondary school pupils arrive with a ‘sense of failure’ due to the Transfer Tests. This generates pre-occupation with ‘rebuilding confidence and self esteem’ in the early years of secondary school.
- 2.2 There is evidence from the interviews that many secondary school teachers consider that the curriculum often needs to be mediated at a different pace and pitched at a different level in terms of difficulty and relevance.
- 2.3 The interviews suggest that many teachers consider secondary school pupils to require a broader range of teaching methods to maintain motivation and discipline.

- 2.4 Secondary school teachers reported awareness amongst their pupils that different levels of expectation are communicated in terms of examination performance.

### **3. Grammar school teacher perceptions and expectations of pupils**

- 3.1 Most grammar school teachers regarded their pupils as arriving with a sense of achievement and readiness to learn. Two other categories of pupils were identified in the way that grammar school pupils perceive their pupils. First are pupils who relax through a sense of achievement after the Transfer Tests and can be difficult to motivate. Second are pupils who are perceived to have difficulty meeting the demands of academic work, sometimes attributed to the effects of coaching for the transfer Tests. Both categories of pupils were considered to be in the minority but readily identifiable.
- 3.2 Stereotypical views of teaching exist within both secondary and grammar school sectors. Teaching in grammar schools was characterised by many teachers as relying more on didactic teaching methods.
- 3.3 There was some evidence of grammar school teachers reporting increased demands to provide learning support for children with special needs. This was attributed to a broader intake of ability in grammar schools since the introduction of open enrolment.

### **4. Primary school teacher motivation and performance**

- 4.1 A dominant theme in the interviews with primary teachers concerned their frustration with competing demands. On the one hand is the expectation that they prepare pupils for the Transfer

Tests, fuelled by parental demand. On the other hand is the need to provide a broad and balanced curriculum, a statutory requirement of the Northern Ireland Curriculum.

4.2 The majority of primary school teachers reported dissatisfaction with the amount of time they felt compelled to spend on preparation for the Transfer Tests. This included curriculum time spend in administering and marking practice papers. There is some evidence to suggest that certain teachers ‘specialise’ in Transfer Test preparation in some schools.

4.3 Primary school teachers reported a number of demands arising from parents that can affect motivation. These included moral dilemmas arising from parents seeking advice about whether to enter their child for the Transfer Tests and advice about whether their child required coaching.

4.4 Many teachers also referred to ‘emotional demands’ associated with the Transfer Tests. This included the demoralising effect of working with pupils who are entered for the Transfer Tests but have little prospect of success. Primary school teachers also identified the period after the announcement of results as particularly difficult, especially in dealing with the majority of pupils and parents who have been disappointed in not securing a grammar school place.

## **5. Secondary school teacher motivation and performance**

5.1 The dominant theme in interviews with secondary school teachers concerned the extent to which teacher motivation and morale is adversely affected by:

- a perception that the majority of pupils arrive with a ‘sense of failure’;
- the perceived low status of secondary schools within society;
- conflicting demands leading to less certainty of purpose.

5.2 Many secondary school teachers also reported the perception that their job requires a broad range of teaching skills to ‘maintain control’ and ‘engage pupils’, but that this was undervalued.

## **6. Grammar school teacher motivation and performance**

6.1 Many grammar school teachers reported pressures related to academic demands and the need to secure examination results.

6.2 A significant number of grammar school teachers had concerns about changes to the system of selection related to the challenges that they would face if required to deal with a broader range of ability within the same class.

## **7. Teachers’ views on change to the system**

7.1 The majority of teachers, particularly in the primary sector, are critical of the use of Transfer Tests as the means of selection for grammar school in Northern Ireland.

7.2 Many teachers commented on the lack of ‘informed debate’ on the basis of which possible alternatives might be considered. A significant number of teachers looked to government for leadership on this issue and expressed a desire for involvement in a consultation process.