

# 4

## THE TESTS: DECIDING TO TAKE PART AND PREPARATION

Rollercoaster

Nervous

Excited

**NICCY**

TALKING TRANSFER



**NICCY**

## Decision to participate in the entrance tests

Pupils were asked who had made the decision regarding their participation in the entrance tests. In most cases, children made the decision themselves, however parents played a significant role, either deciding for them or making the decision with them. In a few cases, pupils said that their teacher had decided for them. The majority of pupils were content with their decision, although a few expressed regret that they had not sat the tests. In one school, two pupils indicated that they had not heard about the tests and asked if they could still take part.

Pupils, who sat the entrance tests, mentioned one or a combination of the following reasons to explain their decision:

### Provides a better choice of schools.

Sitting the tests was perceived by some pupils, as offering a better choice of schools and in some cases, life choices, such as entrance to university and better jobs; *'You have more choice and you might regret it if you don't'*. From the Kids' Life and Times survey, selecting from a list of five options, 83% of pupils who responded to a question asking why they had sat the tests said they did so *'in order to get into a good school'*, implying that 'good schools' were likely to be grammar schools.

### Desire to go to a grammar school. Pupils did the tests because they wanted to attend a grammar school, where some believed they could learn more and access better facilities.

**A family tradition.** A few pupils noted that their parents and siblings had attended a grammar school and they were keen to follow them.

**Parental decision.** In a few cases, pupils indicated that their parents had decided; *'I had to do the test - Mum made me'*. From the Kids' Life and Times survey, 22% of pupils who sat tests indicated that their parents wanted them to do the tests.

**Desire to 'give the test a go'.** A few pupils explained that they had decided to *'try it to see how I got on'*, in the hope they might gain a place in a grammar school.

**Friends taking tests.** A few pupils decided to sit entrance tests because their friends were sitting them.

Parents gave similar reasons when explaining why their child was sitting the entrance tests. Some commented that they had discussed the issue with their child and a few said they simply wanted their child to attend a grammar school; *'Grammar school gives them the best chance of success in life'*.

A few parents said that they wanted their child to go to a school near home, and since the school was using entrance tests as part of their admissions criteria, their child had been entered for the tests. A number of parents also acknowledged that although they did not like the present system, they felt they had to *'buy into it'* because an entrance test was part of the criteria for admission to their child's school of choice.

An analysis of the data from the Kids' Life and Times survey indicated that pupils from lower income families were less likely to have sat the entrance tests. Using the World Health Organisation Family Affluence Scale, the Survey revealed that 72% of pupils categorised as 'high affluence' sat the tests, 56% of pupils categorised as 'medium affluence' sat the tests and 39% of pupils categorised as 'low affluence' sat the tests.

Observations made by some teachers during the consultation, corroborate this finding.

## Decision not to sit the entrance tests

Reasons why pupils had opted not to sit entrance tests were numerous and wide-ranging.

- Tests were not necessary for admission to a pupil's preferred school.**  
Some pupils hoped to transfer to secondary schools where entrance tests were not required. Responding to a question in the Kids' Life and Times survey asking why they did not sit the tests, 41% of pupils, selecting from a list of options, said they did not need to do the tests to get into to the school they wanted to go to.
- Existing links with a secondary school.**  
Pupils indicated that they preferred a particular secondary school because their siblings or friends already attended.
- Pupils had revised their decision.**  
A few pupils had attempted the practice tests, concluded they were too difficult and decided not to sit the tests.

- Create unnecessary anxiety.** A few pupils felt that doing the tests would '*put [them] under too much pressure*'.
- Grammar schools not necessarily better.** A few pupils made this point, arguing, '*You can achieve your dream if you go to grammar school or secondary school*' and '*You can be smart whether you go to secondary school or grammar school*'.
- Introduction of new tests.** The abolition of the '11plus' and introduction of different tests and administration arrangements, coupled with an absence of information about the tests, dissuaded some pupils from sitting the tests.
- Financial costs.** The fees accompanying AQE tests prohibited a few pupils from taking part.

Additional reasons submitted by very small numbers of pupils included a perception that they were '*not clever enough*', or that they were '*too young*'. Some parents stated that they did not feel their child would be successful. Pupils' knowledge of their peers' negative experiences dissuaded them, as had the perceived expense of attending grammar school. In a few cases, pupils' parents had decided for them, as according to pupils, they were better informed. From the Kids' Life and Times survey, 40% of respondents who did not sit entrance tests, said they '*didn't want to do the tests*' and 15% indicated that their school was '*not doing transfer tests*'.

Some parents simply did not want their children to do tests. A number remarked that they were glad the '11plus' had been removed and that they had made a conscious decision

# 4

## THE TESTS: DECIDING TO TAKE PART AND PREPARATION

not to enter their child for the new tests. A few stated that they did not want to be part of any system which they perceived to be unfair or which raised equality issues. Where parents were happy with a local secondary school, this also influenced their decision. One parent explained that she had younger children with special educational needs (SEN), who she felt would be better suited to a secondary school, and therefore she had to 'plan ahead with the eldest child in P7', by selecting a school where she could send all of her children.

### Preparation for the tests: Experiences of schools

Reflecting on pupils' experiences of preparation for entrance tests, it is worth noting that many of the primary schools visited during the consultation explained that they felt 'caught in the middle' of the changes introduced through the 2009/10 transfer arrangements. The directive from DE instructed teachers not to play any role in preparing pupils for tests. However for many, the reality was that pupils and parents were seeking their help and this evidently presented teachers with personal and professional dilemmas;

*'It was difficult – constant battle. We kept wondering if it was the right thing to do';*

*'We were held to account if we prepared but there were mixed messages – unregulated so it was very difficult for the teachers';*

*'As a teacher, it was the worst ever term of teaching...I felt it was unfair to the children if you weren't preparing them well enough';*

*'Made me feel very uncomfortable that I was going against DE advice and policies...'*

Commenting on the situation, parents described a range of approaches adopted by different schools:

- No support offered to pupils; *'Teacher and principal washed their hands of support and preparation. [We were] very disappointed and disaffected';*
- Offered only limited support; *'The principal made parents aware of the directive and limited input that teaching staff would have';* and
- Offered full support; *'They ignored the directive, carried on as normal or referred to practice tests as "weekly assessments"'*.

Teachers were asked what impact the introduction of the entrance tests had on their teaching of the NI Curriculum. In most cases, they concluded that 'there was not a vast difference... and it [had] been 'pretty much business as usual'. Several teachers did refer to a greater focus being placed on English and maths, 'cramming more maths in' or 'covering the same topic but changing... their approach' by for example, using multiple choice questions, in order to prepare pupils sitting GL tests.

### Practice papers

Responses to the Kids' Life and Times survey indicated that 96% of pupils sitting entrance tests had completed practice papers in school or at home. 44% of pupils estimated that they had completed over 40 papers and one pupil stated that he or she had done 'millions' of practice tests. Most pupils who sat entrance

tests completed practice papers. Some pupils commented that they were *'helpful'* or *'fun'*, while others found them *'stressful'* and *'difficult'*. A few pupils, in each case, noted that practice papers were costly, that only a limited number were produced in Irish or that they had only become aware of the availability of practice papers a month before the tests. Teachers noted that AQE had provided some materials for children in Irish Medium schools but that no practice tests had been set in Irish by GL assessment and therefore teachers had to translate tests for pupils.

Teachers were uncertain whether pupils were practising the *'right'* type of tests, and if they were preparing them appropriately. One teacher commented, *'Children didn't have a clue what they were getting in the tests... you were able to prepare them more in previous years'*. In the absence of multiple choice practice papers, parents and teachers sought to purchase similar test papers, although some parents reported that these were expensive and difficult to obtain and again there was confusion about the *'right'* type of papers. *'I was told to buy practice papers which bore no resemblance to the paper [...] children said they sat'*. Other parents disagreed, believing that the practice papers available, were appropriate and of good quality. Parents also reported inconsistencies in the approaches of different primary schools, with regard to the provision and purchase of practice papers and materials.

Pupils' responses suggested that they began completing practice tests at different times from February in P6 onwards and there was also considerable diversity in the number of papers completed by pupils;

*'Mum made me start in the middle of June last year';*

*'Not as many in P6 then in P7, [we did] one every Monday and Wednesday';*

*'Did 6 practice tests and that was enough...';*

*'Had to do 2 tests a day 'cos my Mum and Dad both went to a grammar school';*

*'Did them from February in P6, every Tuesday in class and then [took] stuff home to be in next Tuesday'.*

Most pupils preparing for the GL and AQE tests indicated that they had completed practice papers at home and before or after school with parents or tutors. Pupils undertaking AQE tests indicated that they had also completed some papers in school and also during the summer months after P6. Pupils sitting the GL tests concluded that the practice papers were more difficult than the actual tests;

*'They were much harder – I used to hide when Mum told me I had to do one';*

*'They made me feel stupid, put me under pressure and I didn't like it'.*

Past '11 plus' papers were completed by some pupils sitting AQE tests. Pupils in two primary schools explained that they did a *'practice run'* for the tests in the school assembly hall in order to acclimatise to test conditions.

There were additional complications for children who opted to do both AQE and GL tests. Principals and teachers commented on

# 4

## THE TESTS: DECIDING TO TAKE PART AND PREPARATION

the different types of preparation required for the two tests; highlighting in particular, the multiple choice format of the GL tests, the separate question and answer booklets, and optical marking system. For teachers, these changes *'added complication – different thing to practice and way of answering – made our lives difficult'*.

Parents referred to the lack of adequate and accurate information available during the preparation phase. They criticised the bodies administering the tests, although some acknowledged that AQE had provided more helpful information. Parents noted an inconsistency in the amount and quality of information provided by grammar schools. They indicated that they had obtained information from other parents, their children, (who frequently picked up information from other friends) and the media. The latter was regarded as helpful, however parents did note that, at times, it had caused confusion and created unhelpful tension due to the information disseminated or the particular perspective adopted.

### Additional classes

Pupils in just less than one third of schools reported having attended extra classes in preparation for the entrance tests. These were held before or after school or on Saturday mornings. In some cases, pupils found these helpful;

*'Made me a bit smarter...';*

*'Glad we did harder work, we thought harder and pushed ourselves more'.*

In others, they resented having to attend;

*'Nobody wanted to do extra classes...missed out on...doing other stuff'.*

Teachers in one primary school decided to offer additional classes because they were aware that parents of their pupils could not afford private tutors. A number of parents commented that their children had availed of additional classes, including a *'Saturday club'*. Some believed these classes were helpful, while others felt that they encroached on *'family time'* or affected other siblings and their child's hobbies and interests. A few pupils noted that their school *'wasn't allowed to teach [them]'* and they felt this had put them *'at a disadvantage'*.

### Tutoring

An analysis of pupils' responses indicated that between 40% and 46% of those sitting the entrance tests had tutors. Comparing pupils' responses across different school types, a higher proportion of pupils attending integrated, preparatory and larger controlled schools had tutors. However, the location of these schools in fairly affluent areas may be an important mitigating factor. The Kids' Life and Times survey, revealed that 45% of pupils had tutors.

More than half of those pupils who were tutored, confirmed that this was a positive experience. They described tutors as *'helpful'* and *'good at explaining things'*. They found their work easier or commented that he or she had helped to *'push'* them more. Pupils claimed that a tutor had helped build their confidence and that *'everyone should have one'*. Other pupils were less positive,

complaining that extra tuition was boring, that the tutor was *'just repeating what I'm doing in school'*, and that it generated additional work and created *'more pressure'*.

Most pupils without a tutor were happy with this situation. They suggested that this had relieved them of additional pressure or that it was a positive decision because their sense of failure would have been compounded had they had not secured a place in a grammar school; *'If I'd had a tutor and still not got a good grade, it would make me think I'm really not smart enough'*. Other pupils suggested that if they required a tutor at primary school then they might *'need to be tutored all the way at grammar school'*. One pupil simply commented *'I wouldn't want someone I didn't know teaching me'*. A few pupils felt they may have been disadvantaged by not having a tutor and a minority indicated that a family member, in some cases, a former teacher, had assumed the role.

Because of their uncertainty about the new arrangements, some parents felt an additional pressure to employ tutors. As one parent admitted;

*'I was always against it due to equity and financial implications, but when it came to this year, [my] child was tutored'*.

While highlighting what they regarded as important benefits of tutoring, such as increasing children's confidence, some parents went on to qualify their views;

*'[It's] probably okay if you can afford it';*

*'I feel tutors may be beneficial for the format [technique] of the transfer test';*

*'Undecided. In principle I think all children should have the same opportunities'*.

Other parents were not in favour of tutoring;

*'I don't believe private paid tutoring is right';*

*'I did not get an outside tutor as I didn't want him overworked'*.

Primary school principals and teachers noted an increase in the proportion of pupils being tutored in 2009/10. They cited examples of parents who *'financially couldn't afford it, but had to do it because others were'*. Others referred to pupils for whom tutoring would have been beneficial however their parents were *'the ones who [couldn't] afford to do it'*. Reference was made to unnecessary tutoring, where parents had secured a tutor for children whom teachers regarded as being very able; *'Amount [of tutors] went up, [parents] hadn't [got tutors] for other brothers and sisters [but got tutors this year]'*.

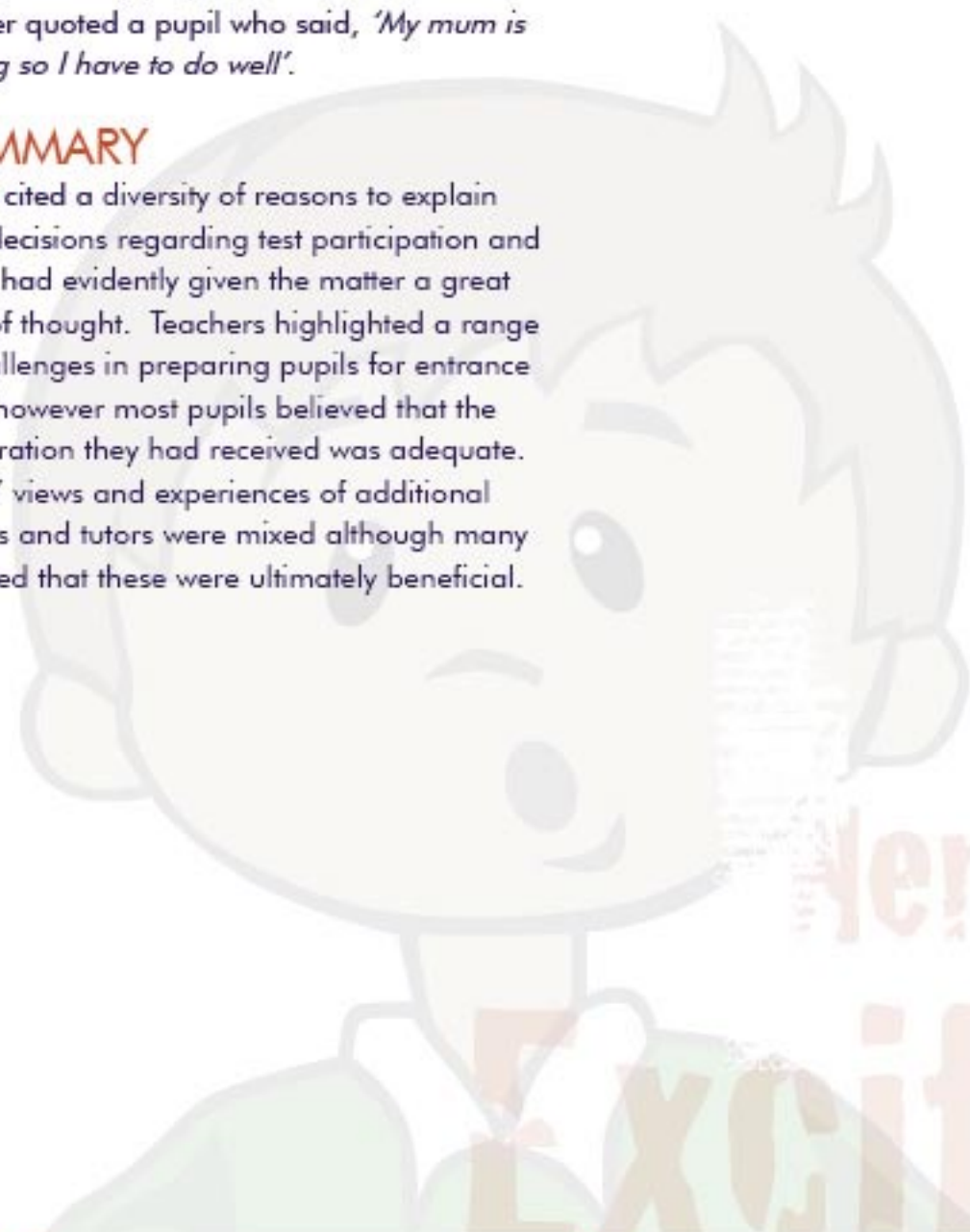
## Impact of preparation on pupils

Since some primary schools were not providing the same level of preparation for the tests compared with previous years, teachers felt that children who had chosen not to do tests might be less negatively affected. Teachers observed much less of a *'them and us'* culture than in previous years, when preparation was undertaken in class, and children were split into groups and separated on test days.

Parents reported children experiencing varying degrees of pressure while preparing for the entrance tests and how this had an impact on their free time and other activities. One parent whose child was putting himself under pressure to prepare as much as possible, quoted the child as saying *'Maybe [I] won't go to football tonight – need to get another paper done'*. In some cases, principals or teachers felt that stress from parents was indirectly passed on to pupils as they prepared for the tests. One teacher quoted a pupil who said, *'My mum is paying so I have to do well'*.

## SUMMARY

Pupils cited a diversity of reasons to explain their decisions regarding test participation and many had evidently given the matter a great deal of thought. Teachers highlighted a range of challenges in preparing pupils for entrance tests, however most pupils believed that the preparation they had received was adequate. Pupils' views and experiences of additional classes and tutors were mixed although many believed that these were ultimately beneficial.



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An analysis of responses to the Kids' Life and Times survey indicated that of the 62% of respondents who completed entrance tests, 39% said they had completed AQE and 31% had completed GL. Significantly, 18% did not know which test they had taken. A review of the consultation responses indicated that 55% of pupils undertook transfer tests and of these, 46% did AQE tests and 44% did GL and 10% of pupils did both. The slightly lower percentage of entrance test participants recorded during the consultation may be due to the fact that in several schools, only a few or none of the P7 pupils opted to sit the tests.

### General observations

Reflecting on their experiences of the tests, pupils had mixed reactions. Some pupils sitting AQE tests thought it was unfair that they had to complete three tests while those taking GL tests sat only two. Some were also unhappy about the amount of preparation required, the additional workload and having to sit tests on Saturday mornings. Other comments focused on pupils' anxiety and stress and a perceived lack of clarity about the process;

*'I was scared because in some of the practice tests, I got low scores';*

*'My brother and sister both got 'A's and teased me, saying that if I didn't do well, I would stain the family name';*

*'Worried about answering questions properly, finishing on time, getting a good mark'*

*'It was a bit confusing...I didn't really know what was going on'.*

Referring to both tests, teachers were critical about the lack of information available;

*'We weren't getting any advice. You had to find out yourself and it changed everyday';*

*'The 'Telegraph' was my information source';*

*'Very difficult for us – really out of it and totally sympathetic to the children'.*

### GL tests

Pupils who sat the GL tests discussed at length, the advantages and disadvantages of multiple choice questions, the apparent confusion regarding the format of the test papers - separate question paper, answer booklet and rough paper, and the optical marking system. While some pupils argued multiple choice tests were harder; *'You have choices to twist your brain up'*, more pupils preferred this type of test;

*'You know the right answer's there...you might strike it lucky';*

*'...Easier – If I'd wrote they probably couldn't read my writing';*

*'You just circle answers...';*

*'Didn't have to write long answers'.*

In the Kids' Life and Times survey, pupils who completed GL tests gave very similar responses and overall, 42% of these pupils believed that GL tests were easy or easier than the AQE tests. 21% offered a more neutral response commenting that they were *'ok'*, *'fine'*, or *'in the middle – not too hard or easy'*.

Pupils did however refer to some *'confusing'* elements of the test;

*'You had 3 pieces of paper in front of you... and you had to read the information, search the questions and go to a third sheet to pencil in the answer...could have put it on the wrong sheet';*

*'It was laid out a lot differently...had to take care filling it in...easy to get muddled and miss one'.*

They were also concerned about the optical marking system;

*'It was marked by a machine and if you didn't put your answer in the particular way they said, it might not pick it up';*

*'The lines had to be straight or you got marked wrong';*

*'Didn't like machines marking them, could have right answers in the wrong boxes'.*

From the Kids' Life and Times survey, 18% thought these tests were *'hard'*, *'challenging'* or *'stressful'*. Reflecting on other aspects of these tests, a few pupils highlighted the dearth of appropriate practice papers, a lack of appropriate support for pupils with special needs, the exclusion of science from the tests and a concern that teachers had been unable to prepare pupils adequately. Teachers reiterated pupils' concerns about the GL tests, including the confusion regarding the booklet format, pupils' lack of familiarity with a multiple choice question format and the care required in completing the answer booklet.

## AQE tests

Pupils who had taken the AQE tests did not raise as many concerns about the tests or discuss *'test techniques'* in as much detail. A few pupils commented that it was *'just like the old transfer'* and one pupil observed *'it's easier to write down your thoughts than tick a box'*. Conversely, other pupils said it was *'stressful'* and *'I didn't really like it'*. A small number of pupils in some schools debated which AQE test was most difficult and discussed the advantages of just taking the marks from two tests over selecting marks from the best two tests out of three.

In the Kids' Life and Times survey, pupils who sat AQE tests reported mixed experiences. 27% of pupils described the tests as *'confusing'* or *'stressful'*, while 26% made more neutral comments, remarking that the test was *'grand'*, *'alright'* or *'somewhere in between'*. 11% of pupils remarked that AQE tests were *'hard'*, *'harder than I thought'* or *'harder than GL'* while 10% thought the tests were *'easy'*.

## Sitting entrance tests in grammar schools

The entrance tests were administered by grammar schools across selected Saturday mornings. Pupils who sat the tests described the arrangements and their experiences in some detail. Undertaking the tests in unfamiliar surroundings was evidently an unsettling experience for some pupils, who commented on the size of the school, strange buildings and a fear of the unknown;

## SITTING THE TESTS

*'It was bad having to go in on your own... school was intimidating, so many people, it was massive, and the room was really long';*

*'It was weird because you're not familiar with where you are'*

*'It was strange you didn't know anything about the school and senior pupils took you to the toilet'.*

Many children were unhappy that the tests were conducted on Saturdays as this interfered with their regular pursuits. Pupils complained they were forced to miss sports, music and other activities and that the tests should have been conducted on a weekday as they liked 'having a lie-in' at the weekend. Some pupils found it strange taking tests with pupils from other schools, indicating that they would have preferred being in their own primary school or with their friends;

*'I'd feel more comfortable in my own school...not with a bunch of strangers';*

*'I didn't feel comfortable doing tests with other people – you want your friends there'.*

In some cases, parents' comments reiterated pupils' criticisms, referring to their child's discomfort being in an unfamiliar environment or by themselves without any of their friends;

*'My daughter was stressed and she was the only one from her school at the test centre'.*

A few parents were unhappy about the supervision provided at some test centres, and one parent expressed concern that sixth form pupils from the school were responsible

for escorting and supervising pupils. Teachers also commented on the administration arrangements in some grammar schools, arguing that in terms of pastoral care, these were 'inappropriate', 'hideous' and 'unfair'. They recalled pupils sitting transfer tests in previous years and parents being able to come into the school and teachers being there to support and reassure them; *'The Mummies were able to leave them right in and we kept it low key...all very comfortable'.*

On the positive side, some pupils commented that they had enjoyed having the opportunity to visit the school they were hoping to attend; *'I'd wanted to know what it would be like'.* They described the visit as 'exciting' because it was 'new', 'somewhere different' and 'it made you want to go there'. A few pupils thought it was useful as it 'helped you to get used' to the school and 'gave you a feel for what the school was like'. Other positive aspects of the test arrangements were the opportunities to meet other prospective pupils and not having to attend school on the same day or to complete any other work.

## SUMMARY

Pupils sitting entrance tests drew attention to the positive and negative aspects of the experience. The multiple choice format of the GL tests presented challenges for some pupils and the care required to complete the answer sheet correctly was a concern for some. Despite this, there was a perception that the GL tests were easier than the AQE tests. Some pupils enjoyed the experience of sitting the tests in grammar schools, although more pupils found it disconcerting and difficult.



# TRANSFER TO POST-PRIMARY SCHOOLS

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## Selecting a school

Children talked enthusiastically about their preferred post-primary school and expectations of moving there. Pupils' reasons for selecting a particular school varied considerably and were at least partially informed by their preference for a grammar or non-grammar school. They mentioned the following considerations.

- **Favourable entrance criteria.** Some pupils were quite familiar with schools' entrance criteria and they recommended selecting a school where at least some of these were favourable to the applicant, such as having a sibling at the school. As one pupil advised, *'It's better to see if you've any relations there...'*
- **Family connections with the school.** A few pupils intimated that everyone in their family had attended *'My family went...I will be embarrassed if I'm not as smart and don't get in'*.
- **Size of school.** Smaller schools were particularly attractive to a few pupils while a larger school was a draw for others.
- **School facilities.** A few pupils indicated a preference for schools which either had new buildings or good sports facilities.
- **Being happy.** A few pupils commented that they had chosen a school because they thought they would be happy there.

Additional factors mentioned by very few pupils included friends going to the same school and the proximity of a school to their home. A small minority of pupils referred to the FSME criterion. One pupil was concerned that because she did not meet this criterion,

she would not be accepted to her school of choice. Pupils in many schools developed their discussions to debate the merits of grammar and secondary schools, in some cases expressing extremely interesting and thoughtful views. It is difficult to quantify pupils' opinions precisely, however, the majority of views were divided between a belief that grammar schools were better and a belief that all schools were the same.

## Preference for grammar schools

Some pupils argued that grammar schools were better than other schools;

- *'Smarter people go there'*. A few pupils suggested that more intelligent pupils went to grammar schools or that these schools were more likely to challenge pupils academically.
- *'Grammar schools have more money'*. There was a perception that grammar schools attracted more funding than other schools and subsequently they had better buildings and facilities and a broader range of subject choices.
- *'Secondaries have bad reputations'*. A few pupils believed that bullying was less likely to happen in grammar schools or that they would be happier at a grammar school; *'I just wouldn't fit in, in a secondary...they'd think I'm a nerd'*.

## Preference for secondary schools

Conversely, other pupils believed that a secondary school was a better option;

■ *'Grammar schools are too pushy'... 'they work you too hard'*. A few pupils felt that secondary schools had more realistic expectations of pupils and that the challenges would be more appropriate to their capabilities.

■ *'Don't think a grammar school would suit me'*. A few pupils believed that they would be more successful in a secondary school; *'I'd be top of the class – in a grammar, I'd be at the bottom'*.

■ *'Secondary schools help you more'*. There was a perception amongst a few pupils that they were more likely to receive support with their learning at a secondary school.

## 'Grammar and secondary schools are the same'

Some pupils argued that secondary and grammar schools were, on the whole, very similar;

■ *'School's just school...you're still learning every day'*. Some pupils pointed out that they would receive the same education whichever school they transferred to. One pupil added, *'I don't think I could bear to put children under that pressure when grammar schools and secondary schools are the same'*.

■ *'No difference – they all do the same subjects'*. A few pupils noted that the work at post-primary schools would be similar because every school offered the same subjects and exams; *'You do the same exams at the end anyway – GCSEs'*.

■ *'Pupils can succeed wherever they go'*.

Some pupils felt that it was possible to be successful irrespective of which post-primary school they attended. As one pupil said, *'If you're going to do well, you're going to do well'*.

A few pupils suggested that other variables were more likely to influence their potential to be successful at a post-primary school;

■ *'It's...attendance that matters'*. A few pupils advised that regular attendance at school was key to ensuring a pupil's success.

■ *'It's not the name – it's the school'*. Pupils argued it was important to examine a school in detail, in terms of its teaching, facilities and ethos, rather than draw conclusions simply because it was a grammar or secondary school.

■ *'There are smart people at every school'*. A few pupils said that there were successful people at every type of school. One pupil commented further, *'My Mum went to secondary and she did better than her friend at a grammar'*.

## Parents' and teachers' perspectives

Parents identified a number of factors which had influenced their choice or their child's choice of post-primary school. Proximity to a school was regarded by some parents as important; *'Simply that he could ride his bike to the school in minutes and have more free time'*. Other parents noted that they had taken the provision of transport assistance into account. Parents with an academic background or whose family had attended grammar school were eager that their child would also attend a grammar school; *'Our whole family ethos is*

## 6 TRANSFER TO POST-PRIMARY SCHOOLS

*grammar*'. Some parents acknowledged that their child had chosen a school while others indicated that some parental guidance was necessary;

*'They need to be on board, guided by you with their best interests in mind'.*

Parents gave accounts of their meetings with primary school principals in February 2010, when they completed the Transfer Forms, which listed their or their child's preferred post-primary school choices. The tone and length of these meetings varied quite considerably, depending on the child's ability, parents' certainty about their school choices and the approach adopted by the principal to the transfer process. Parents described them as follows;

*'Short and sweet';*

*'Very lengthy discussion';*

*'I was terrified, very intimidated, couldn't wait to get out';*

*'I had to return 3 times with more information, even after reading the DE leaflet...totally baffling';*

*'We were told that the teachers' union informed members not to get involved in the meetings with parents. The principal informed me he would take full responsibility for his actions'.*

Principals' perspectives were similarly diverse;

*'Terrible – it took a full two weeks and 11 parents came back twice...all wanted to talk politics';*

*'Parents totally bewildered...';*

*'This year you really didn't have any answers...didn't know what to advise'; and*

*'Very positive – happy the children got through it...dialogue was the same as any other year'.*


As indicated above, some meetings were relatively straightforward. In one primary school where none of the pupils sat entrance tests, the principal reported that the meetings with parents were *'completely hassle-free'*.

### Moving to a new school

During the consultation, pupils were asked to describe how they felt about moving to a new school. As expected, they expressed a diverse range of emotions and views. Some pupils were excited and overwhelmingly positive in their responses, while some were more apprehensive about the prospect and others had mixed views.

Many pupils were *'excited'* or *'happy'* about moving to a post-primary school, or as one pupil described it, *'moving to a whole new world'*. Many pupils, were looking forward to learning new subjects; in particular, home economics, science and sports; having new teachers, meeting new friends and in some cases, wearing a new uniform. A few pupils in almost every school highlighted aspects of transfer about which they were particularly excited. These included learning more subjects, *'not sitting in the same room all day'*, going to a bigger school, having *'a guardian angel to show you around and help'* (i.e. being part of a 'buddy' system), seeing relations at school and taking on more responsibilities – *'not being treated like smaller kids'*. Additional





benefits identified by a few pupils were having a better variety of lunches, enjoying a later bedtime, *'getting to start your life again'* and being *'one step closer to leaving [school altogether]'*.

On the other hand, there were pupils who felt *'nervous'* or *'scared'* about moving to a new school. As one pupil commented *'You're anxious because you don't know what the school will be like'*. Many pupils admitted they would miss aspects of primary school, mostly their friends, in a few cases, teachers and in one instance, *'the bell'*. Pupils expressed concerns about specific issues including the possibility of being bullied; *'The bad thing is the first year battering and you're not allowed to squeal to the teachers'*. They were also concerned about being the only one going from their primary school; *'I'm the only one going... so it might be strange not having a friend for a while'*, finding their way around a much bigger school, having more challenging work; *'You're going to be leaving all the fun work behind'*, making new friends and settling in. Some pupils commented that it was going to be *'a bit weird going from [being] the oldest to the youngest'* and becoming *'a small fish in a big pond'*.

A majority of pupils had attended an open night in the school to which they were hoping to move, and with a few exceptions, most had found this helpful and reassuring. As one pupil reflected, *'It's a really good idea – you get to know the school and the activities'*. Pupils enthusiastically related stories of the activities they had tried, including science experiments, cooking and computer games. Other benefits identified by pupils, included

the opportunity to meet teachers and other prospective pupils and to find out more about the school. In a very few cases, pupils reported less positive experiences, suggesting that the school had not effectively demonstrated the learning opportunities available to pupils, that the building was too big or that it had simply made them more nervous about changing schools.

## SUMMARY

Pupils gave a variety of explanations to explain their school preferences and some were quite informed about schools' admissions criteria and how these were applied. Pupils in many schools engaged in interesting and intense debates regarding the merits of grammar and secondary schools. For many pupils, moving to a new school was an exciting prospect and one which they were looking forward to. At the same time, others were more apprehensive about leaving the familiar surroundings of their primary school and concerned about being the youngest in a new school.