



TALKING TRANSFER

PUPILS' PERSPECTIVES OF THE TRANSFER PROCESS IN 2010

A report by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People



FOREWORD

The Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) was contacted in 2009 by children, parents and a range of other stakeholders, concerned about the potentially negative impact on P7 pupils of the new arrangements for transferring pupils from primary to post-primary school in 2010. Given the withdrawal of the Department of Education transfer tests ('11 plus'), the introduction of unregulated entrance tests and the ongoing uncertainty surrounding the transfer process, NICCY responded by initiating a consultation to review the 2010 transfer process and specifically to explore the experiences and views of P7 pupils.

THE ROLE OF NICCY

NICCY was established in 2003 in accordance with the provisions of The Commissioner for Children and Young People (NI) Order 2003. The principal aim of the Commissioner, as defined by Article 6 of the Order, is to safeguard and promote the rights and best interests of children and young persons. In undertaking this consultation, NICCY is engaging relevant articles of its legislation, namely Articles 7 and 8.

Article 7: The Commissioner has a duty to keep under review the adequacy and effectiveness of law, practice and services relating to the rights and best interests of children and young people by relevant authorities, and a duty to advise the Executive and relevant authorities on matters concerning the rights or best interests of children on occasions where the Commissioner thinks appropriate. The Commissioner also has a duty to take reasonable steps to ensure that the views of children and young people and their parents are sought in the exercise of her functions.

Article 8: Grants the Commissioner, after consultation with bodies or persons whom she thinks appropriate, the power to issue guidance on best practice in relation to any matter concerning children's rights or best interests. Article 8 also grants the Commissioner the power to provide and publish advice on any matter concerning children's rights or best interests, and to make representations or recommendations to any body or person about any matter concerning children's rights or best interests.



MESSAGE FROM THE COMMISSIONER

I am delighted to present this report of our consultation with P7 pupils about the transfer process during 2009/10. I have been concerned about the changes to the post-primary transfer arrangements in Northern Ireland and the potentially adverse impact these could have on children. My office has been contacted by a number of children and parents who had concerns about different aspects of the process. Indeed, it was children themselves who prompted me to investigate this issue and to consult with those most directly affected. I am aware of the strength of feeling surrounding this issue and therefore I particularly appreciate the involvement of all those who participated in consultation.

I would like to thank everyone who took part in the consultation. In particular, I would like to express my appreciation to all the P7 pupils (and a small number of P6 pupils), for their willingness and enthusiasm to share their views and experiences with me and my staff. I would also like to acknowledge each of the following:

- The schools who accommodated our visits and especially the principals and teachers and parents who gave of their time to participate in the consultation either during a visit or as part of the Teacher Reference Group;
- The parents who were members of the Parent Reference Group for their

commitment to the consultation process and their willingness to articulate their experiences and opinions;

- The Parenting Forum NI, and particularly Alison Loughlin and Sandra Couser for facilitating the consultation meetings with parents;
- Katrina Lloyd, Lizanne Dowds and colleagues from ARK, (Queen's University Belfast and University of Ulster), for their help and advice in devising questions for inclusion in the Kids' Life and Times survey; and
- All of the stakeholders who met with me or my staff during the consultation planning and dissemination stages.



Patricia Lewsley

**Commissioner
for Children
and Young
People**



CONTEXT OF CONSULTATION

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CONTEXT OF CONSULTATION

The Northern Ireland education system and the transfer process

There are currently 866 primary schools in Northern Ireland¹ of which 46% are 'controlled' schools and 47% are 'catholic maintained' schools. Controlled schools are non-denominational schools, managed by Boards of Governors and the employing authorities are the five Education and Library Boards². The majority of pupils attending these schools are Protestant. 'Catholic maintained' primary schools are also managed by Boards of Governors and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) is the employing authority. The intake to these schools is almost exclusively Catholic. The remaining 7% of primary schools consist of integrated schools which attract children from all denominations and none, Irish medium schools, preparatory departments in grammar schools and a small number of independent schools³.

The majority of post-primary schools are under three different types of management; 'controlled', 'catholic maintained' or 'voluntary'; schools which are owned by school trustees and managed by a Board of Governors. The post-primary system is selective

and the majority of pupils transfer from primary school to a secondary or grammar school; the latter selecting pupils on the basis of academic ability. A small percentage of pupils transfer to integrated and Irish Medium schools. In 2009/10, approximately 58% of pupils attended non-grammar schools and 42% attended grammar schools⁴. An alternative transfer system in Northern Ireland is the 'Dickson Plan', operating in schools in parts of Co. Armagh. Pupils here have the option to transfer from primary to junior high schools before then transferring to senior high schools at 14 years to complete compulsory education. For pupils who opt out of transfer tests at 11 years, or do not achieve a grammar school place, they can transfer to a grammar school at 14, by taking internal exams set by individual schools.

Until 2009, the Department of Education in Northern Ireland (DE) managed the selection procedure. If pupils wished to be considered for a grammar school, they sat transfer tests (commonly known as the '11 plus'), and on the basis of their results, they went on to grammar or non-selective schools.

2010 saw a significant change in the transfer process. In 2009, DE stated that it would no longer host academic selection, instead issuing guidance which detailed how post-primary schools should conduct the selection process. This was based on a 'menu' of criteria recommending as the first criterion, that priority be given to applicants entitled to Free School Meals (FSME)¹. The St Andrews Act 2006, contains provision allowing grammar schools to use selection if they so wish, therefore they are not legally compelled to follow the Department's guidance. Any new legislation regulating transfer would require cross party support, however, no agreement has yet been reached. In this political vacuum, two private test bodies emerged, representing two consortiums of grammar schools, and they administered entrance tests to determine admissions to grammar schools in 2009/10. The test bodies are not regulated by Government. The Education Minister also issued a directive to primary schools stating that they should not prepare P7 pupils for the entrance tests.

The Association for Quality Education (AQE) caters for 34 controlled and voluntary grammar schools². The AQE Common Entrance Assessment (CEA) tests consist of three papers with the results from the best two papers taken to calculate a standardised age score. The tests included a series of 'assessments which took account of the English and mathematics components of the primary curriculum'³. For 2009/10, scores were split into five bands; greater than or equal to 113,

106-112, 98-105, 88-97 and less than or equal to 87, with 20% of scores falling within each of these bands. The bands do not relate to the traditional '11 plus' grades. The tests focus on English and maths assessments and in 2009, were administered in November and December.

The second test body, Granada Learning (GL) Assessment, devised tests which were employed by 34 schools, mainly voluntary (Catholic) grammars, and a small minority of non-denominational grammars and integrated colleges⁴. These schools came together under the Post-Primary Transfer Consortium. GL Assessment tests consist of two multiple choice tests in English and maths and the results consist of a grade; A, B1, B2, C1, C2 or D. This is assigned on the basis of a pupil's combined standardised age score⁵ for both papers. In 2009/10, most grammar schools opted to use the grade for admissions purposes, however some used the score. The entrance tests will be referred to as the 'AQE tests' and 'GL tests' throughout the report.

As in previous years, parents met with the principal of their child's primary school in February 2010 to complete the 'Transfer Form' which lists their preferences for post-primary schools in order of priority. DE recommended that parents included at least three schools on this form. Transfer forms were then forwarded to the appropriate Education and Library Board and sent on to schools for consideration. Pupils were informed about which school they had been





allocated in their 'Placement Letter' issued on 28th May 2010¹.

Both GL Assessment and AQE issued special circumstances forms. If parents believed there were grounds for their child to be considered under 'special circumstances' provisions, they were advised to complete this form and to provide medical or other appropriate evidence. Special circumstances were defined as medical or other problems which may have affected pupils' performance in the entrance tests². The form and accompanying evidence were submitted with the Transfer Form.

If parents believed there were 'compelling' or 'exceptional' reasons why their child should attend a particular school, they were given an opportunity to apply for their case to be considered as part of an exceptional circumstances process, managed by DE. This could only be initiated if their child had not been offered a place at the school through the normal admissions process. Parents were advised that further information regarding the process would accompany placement letters issued at the end of May 2010³.

Despite facing ongoing pressure, the Minister announced, in June 2010 that there would be no reintroduction of the DE transfer procedure in 2010/11⁴. In July, new guidance was issued for admissions during the 2010/11 school year and the annual transfer processes for 2011/12 and beyond. Shortly before this, in April 2010, representatives of the two grammar school consortia, were unable to agree a single

entrance test for the intake to grammar schools in 2011. Consequently, the entrance tests are again being administered by GL Assessment and AQE and the arrangements for 2010/11 remain broadly similar to those in 2009/2010.



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CONSULTATION OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

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CONSULTATION OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

The key objective of the consultation was to explore the impact of the transfer process during 2009/10, on P7 pupils. This report therefore provides an insight into primary school pupils' views and experiences, with particular reference to key aspects of the process. It is important to note that the views expressed in the report are not those of NICCY but of the children, parents and teachers who participated in the consultation. NICCY has sought to report pupils' views and experiences, using their own words and accounts as far as possible. While the focus of the consultation was P7 pupils' experiences, NICCY believed it was also important to consider teachers' and parents' perceptions of how the process may have impacted on children and to collect contextual information in order to maximise our understanding of pupils' experiences.

The transfer process is a complex, multi-faceted issue therefore it is important to point out that not every aspect of the process is addressed in the report. As the primary aim was to record pupils' voices, the report documents their perspectives of the issues which interested or concerned them. In addition, the consultation was carried out between November 2009 and early May 2010, therefore stages in the process occurring outside of this period, may not have been

addressed, e.g. notice of school allocation and claims for exceptional circumstances.

Consultation participants

These included:

- Pupils from 29 primary schools across Northern Ireland. The vast majority of the 964 pupils were in P7, although a small minority of P6 pupils also took part;
- Primary school principals and teachers. Forty-two teachers from participating primary schools took part in the consultation;
- Parents of P7 children. Twenty-three parents enrolled in the Parent Reference Group and four meetings were convened throughout the year; and
- Pupils who completed the Kids' Life and Times survey. This survey is devised and administered by ARK, a joint initiative between Queen's University Belfast and University of Ulster. The 2010 survey contained questions on a range of issues relevant to P7 pupils, including the Transfer process and 5,192 pupils from 321 primary schools completed it.

School recruitment to the consultation

Initially, primary schools were recruited through self-nomination. In November 2009, NICCY sought expressions of interest from schools via email and a range of primary schools then contacted NICCY, indicating their desire to take part. Additional schools were identified in order to achieve a representative sample in terms of school management type, location and size. The sample included controlled, catholic maintained, integrated, Irish Medium, and preparatory schools, located in both urban and rural areas of Northern Ireland. It also included schools where every P7 pupil sat entrance tests (n=3) and schools where none of the pupils sat the tests (n=3).

Consultation with pupils


Consultation sessions with pupils took place between November 2009 and early May 2010 and were facilitated by NICCY staff. As indicated above, almost 1000 pupils participated, with the number of consultees in each school, ranging from five to 90. Sessions commenced with an introduction to NICCY and an explanation of the objectives of the consultation. Pupils were informed that the purpose of the session was to hear their views and to learn more about their experiences of the transfer process during 2009/10. Time was also allocated to addressing any questions or concerns that pupils may have had. A structured set of questions was designed in advance, most of which were relevant to all pupils and some which were relevant only to

those children who had taken the entrance tests.

These addressed:

- Their experiences of P7, particularly before and after the entrance tests and after receipt of test results;
- The decision to sit or not sit the entrance tests;
- Experiences of preparing for and taking the tests;
- Pupils' preferences regarding post-primary schools and feelings about changing schools;
- Pupils' proposed solutions to the transfer issue; and
- The messages which pupils wished to convey to Government.

Although a pre-determined set of questions was employed, this did not preclude discussion of other transfer-related issues if these were raised by pupils. The primary aim of the sessions was to facilitate a discussion where pupils felt able to share their views and experiences. With this in mind, care was taken to explain issues carefully and to employ language which was appropriate for the pupils involved. Following an evaluation of different recording methods, a decision was made to employ a scribe to record the consultations with pupils and teachers. This method caused minimal disruption and given the large numbers of consultees in some schools and the diversity of locations in which the consultations



took place, ensured that pupils' contributions were recorded as accurately and fully as possible.

Consultation with teachers

A majority of the 42 participating teachers and principals were consulted in their schools. A small sample also participated in a Teacher Reference Group which was convened in NICCY's offices. Teachers addressed some of the issues raised with pupils and they also shared their perceptions of the impact of the transfer process on pupils, their teaching and the relationships between schools. Many teachers were keen to contribute their views and this is reflected in the high participation rate across schools. A minority of teachers opted not to take part. In some cases this was attributed to the sensitive and controversial nature of the transfer issue.

Consultation with parents

NICCY commissioned the Parenting Forum NI to recruit a Parent Reference Group and to facilitate consultation sessions with the group on four occasions during 2009/10. The purpose of the Group was to contribute additional insights into pupils' experiences of the transfer process and P7 and to provide contextual information against which pupils' views and experiences could be considered. Parents commented on most of the issues explored with pupils, while also sharing their own experiences of the transfer process and in particular the impact they believed this had on their children who were in P7, and other family members.

The Kids' Life and Times survey

The Kids' Life and Times is an annual survey involving P7 pupils in Northern Ireland. The survey is carried out online in schools and includes questions about school and other issues that are of importance to children. NICCY devised a set of questions around the transfer process, in collaboration with the Kids' Life and Times researchers for inclusion in the 2010 survey. Pupils' responses to key questions concerning transfer are interspersed throughout the report. (Tables of results for the 2010 survey are available at www.ark.ac.uk/klt)

Ethical considerations

The sensitivity of the issues associated with the transfer process was an important consideration when planning the consultation with pupils. During early planning meetings, NICCY was advised by educational stakeholders, that the most appropriate approach to information gathering would be to conduct 'school visits', engaging with children in surroundings that were familiar to them and so that there would be minimal disruption to their routine. The sessions therefore took place in a variety of settings, including classrooms, school halls, libraries and 'circle time' spaces.

Consultation methods were discussed with primary principals or teachers in advance of visits to ensure they were appropriate and to ensure NICCY staff were informed if there were pupils who had particular needs or if there were any sensitive issues that had to be borne

2 CONSULTATION OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

in mind. Primary schools dealt with the issue of parental consent regarding pupils' participation. At the beginning of each visit, pupils were reassured that they did not have to discuss any issue if they did not wish to. Pupils were also given the option of speaking individually to a member of NICCY staff if they wished.

Finally, it is important to note that all NICCY staff involved in the consultation were vetted and appropriately trained in child protection issues. Robust child protection protocols operate in relation to all work carried out with children.

As highlighted previously, the consultation process involved almost 1000 pupils, with the number of consultees ranging between five and 90 in each participating school. The popularity of different views was recorded during discussions, however, given the large numbers of pupils in some schools and a desire not to dwell on sensitive topics, it was difficult, on occasions, to quantify pupils' responses precisely. Nevertheless, it has been possible to approximate the weight of pupil responses concerning many issues, and the report employs the following definitions:

- 'Majority' or 'Most' = 70% +
- 'Many' = 55% - 69%
- 'Around half' = 41% - 54%
- 'Some' = 21% - 40%
- 'A Few' = 20% or less.

The same definitions are employed when referencing teachers' views.



PUPILS' EXPERIENCES OF P7

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In each school, the consultation began by asking pupils what they thought was different about P7 in 2010. Around half of the sample made some reference to the transfer tests being 'different'. Pupils noted that the tests in 2009/10 did not include science, which for some pupils was not a positive change; *'It was annoying. Science normally gave you all the good marks'*. Pupils also noted that some tests were based on 'multiple choice questions', and that the Government had *'got rid of the 11 plus'*.

When asked to describe their experiences of P7²⁰¹⁰, pupils recalled a range of positive and negative experiences which often corresponded with key stages of the transfer process and their decision to take part in or opt out of the entrance tests.

It is important to note that the transfer arrangements which were in place before the introduction of entrance tests, also required pupils to sit transfer tests if they wished to be considered for a grammar school. It should be borne in mind that some of the views expressed by pupils about the entrance tests, for example, in relation to additional work or their feelings of anxiety may have been equally applicable to their assessment of the transfer tests set in previous years.

Before the tests

For many pupils who had decided to sit GL or AQE tests, or both, the period preceding the tests was described as *'stressful'*. Parents spoke of children having *'sleepless nights'* and pupils themselves explained that they felt *'nervous'*

and *'anxious'* and in some cases, under *'intense pressure'*;

'It was stressful, so you really had to concentrate, so much to think about, doing the test and all the practice tests';

'There was too much pressure on you and you didn't really know what to do'.

Some pupils described how their workload had been increased and had become more challenging; *'It was harder work...a lot of work to put in and a lot expected of you'*.

Referring to the level of work, other pupils described the period before the tests as *'hectic', 'busy' or 'chaotic'*. For some children, the sense of pressure began the previous summer with practice papers, and tutoring sessions;

'Most of us didn't really talk about the test - I got scared over the summer when doing practice tests...talking about it built up the pressure'.

Some pupils reported that the period before the tests had been *'ok'*, describing the work as *'easy...going over the same stuff'* or *'interesting because I learnt different stuff'*. A few pupils thought that this period was *'exciting'*, while also acknowledging that they *'felt pressure but you were also happy'*.

Pupils commented on the uncertainty and lack of clarity around the transfer process, particularly in relation to the provision of

practice papers, the format of the new entrance tests, arrangements for their administration and scoring. They also talked about the confusion experienced by parents and teachers. The latter were almost unanimous in their criticism of the lack of information about the transfer process, referring to the ambiguity surrounding the situation while P7 pupils were still in P6, and lack of information about test arrangements *'even up to [pupils] going to the test'*. Principals reported that information concerning the new entrance tests was sent directly to parents, so they were kept *'out of the loop'*. Both teachers and parents described the transfer process in 2009/10 as *'the unknown'*, commenting that they felt *'very much at sea' and that the arrangements seemed to be 'up in the air'*. They also acknowledged the knock-on effect this had on children; *'The whole uncertainty of the thing – us as adults can cope, but not 10 and 11 year olds'*.

After the tests

Many pupils reported feeling a sense of relief and being happier after the tests;

'I'm glad they're over ...but brain dead. You forget the things you've learnt';

'I'm just really, really happy';

'I felt more relaxed and life is just... oohhhh...how did I live through this?'

During the consultation, pupils enthusiastically described the celebrations they enjoyed following the tests, listing various activities and events, including holidays, parties, shopping,

ice-skating, swimming and trips to restaurants and the cinema. Pupils also indicated that there were now more opportunities for them to study other subjects, to engage in different educational activities and go on school trips;

'We've got more space now to give our opinions and not just the answers';

'[We] get less homework than other classes and other opportunities other classes and schools don't do like playground pals, recreation club and film club'.

Some pupils were excited about being the eldest in their school or were looking forward to moving to a new school;

'I'm happy because I'm the oldest and looking forward to another school...the wee ones look up to you'.

Some parents felt that their children's *'stress levels dropped'* after the tests. However, around a third of pupils said they remained worried or anxious;

'After the test Christmas was coming up so the worries were put to the side but then I got worried again'.

Some pupils admitted they felt nervous about getting their results during the *'long wait'* after the tests and in the days immediately prior to receiving results. Parents, again, commented on children experiencing *'sleepless nights'*, showing unusually high signs of tiredness not

long after the exams were over, and feeling 'very low' in the run up to the results. A few parents believed that the stress had become a learned behaviour for their child, who began to act out the 'stress' when it came to other activities.

Getting results

Pupils talked about postal delays and parents having to arrange special collection of their results on the day these were issued. Describing how they felt after receiving the results, pupils continued to use terms such as 'nervous', 'stressed' and 'worried'. They attributed these feelings to concerns about their performance in the tests, not being admitted to their school of choice, 'letting the family down', and constantly being asked about their test scores. Others said they had been 'excited', were 'not really bothered' or simply, felt 'fine about it'. However some parents indicated that their child had been quite unperturbed;

'It was no big deal for my daughter on the day. She was mildly curious about her friends but waited until they phoned her.'

Other parents reported that their child's experience had been more unsettling;

'A horrendous day – my child was crying and wouldn't answer the phone';

'My son was very stressed when he got the grade, making himself ill, especially when he heard other people's results.'

Some parents also believed that their children's confidence waned as they awaited a decision regarding school allocation; *'My child keeps asking me, "How confident are you Mum that I'll get in?"'*

Pupils who did not sit the entrance tests


Pupils who decided not to sit the entrance tests recounted a range of different experiences. Some described feeling 'excluded' or 'separated' from their peers whilst they were preparing for entrance tests;

'I felt left out because they were all talking about tests.'

A few pupils said they felt 'judged' for not doing the tests and parents also referred to children experiencing low self-esteem and stress. One parent felt that the media attention on the new tests gave the 'unhelpful' impression that children were missing out by not doing them. Several teachers agreed that in some cases, children's self-confidence was affected by not doing the tests. One commented;

'They never actually said it, but you could see it – "the best of the best are going to do it so we must be crap".'

On the whole, however, parents of children not sitting the entrance tests and the children themselves, reported that this had been a positive experience. Pupils commented that



they were *'happy to avoid extra work and pressure'*, preferring to do *'class work'* rather than test preparation. Others pointed out that it was not necessary for them to do tests to secure a place in their preferred school;

'It was an easy decision – I didn't want to go to a grammar school';

'Don't need them...the school I'm going to is just as good as a grammar school'.

Many of the parents of children not sitting tests agreed with these more positive perceptions;

'Unfair system is gone. My child won't be deemed a failure at such a tender age of development. He's enjoying school without the unjust grading'.

P7: the whole experience

Reflecting on P7 in general, some pupils described it as being *'nerve-wracking'*, *'awful'* or *'stressful'*;

'It was a rollercoaster...you worried about the results and you get the results and then [you're] stressed about what school you're going to...a lot of pressure'.

Parents of P7 pupils who sat entrance tests echoed this assessment, reporting an increase in their children's stress levels in the run up to the tests, a decrease after the tests, and another rise as they awaited results. A few parents felt that although the experience might have a negative impact, their child knew

that they had to go through it as they were *'focused'* on getting into a specific school;

'He wasn't sleeping, though it was his decision because he knew what the outcome would be if he didn't do the entrance exams'.

Some parents also commented on the impact of the transfer process on family life;

'Less quality time, less relaxation, less money, more stress';

'Overall it has been ok as we've made a conscious effort to do lots of fun things'.

In many cases, primary school teachers admitted that they had found the transfer arrangements during 2009/10 very difficult. They felt uninformed about the entrance tests and unable to give parents the same advice and support they had provided in previous years. Some teachers sought to reconcile their desire to support pupils in advance of the tests, with DE guidance which directed them not to prepare pupils. Teachers also believed that pupils talked more about the transfer process, that it had a greater impact on them and that more pupils appeared to be *'stressed'* about the process, than in previous years.

The impact on relationships between primary schools was also highlighted by principals. Many described how their school had clustered with other primary schools in their area and agreed to adopt a joint strategy; either providing preparation through additional

classes or in school or by deciding to adhere to DE guidance. This strategy generated support between schools and also avoided the possibility of parents removing pupils from a school which was not preparing pupils for the tests and placing them in a school where preparation was being given. However, principals did indicate that having agreed a strategy; usually not to undertake preparation, some individual schools then reneged, due to parental pressure or concerns about the potentially detrimental impact this might have on their intake the following year.

SUMMARY

As anticipated, pupils' experiences of P7 during the transfer process varied quite considerably. Some pupils coped well with the additional work required in preparation for entrance tests and navigated their way through the year with relative ease. For many more pupils however, the transfer process was difficult, unsettling and nerve-racking. Many parents' and teachers' accounts of the year corroborated those of pupils as they referred to the uncertainty and confusion of the transfer arrangements and the anxiety and stress experienced by children.

