

An Evaluation of the Craigavon Two-Tier System

Key Points

- Past research had indicated that the delayed selection system received a high degree of popular support in the Craigavon area. This research has found nothing to contradict that claim, but has concluded that a significant part of this popularity is based on the fact that in the Craigavon system there are a wide range of alternatives available to pupils and parents. Furthermore, there is evidence that a significant minority opt to take advantage of these alternatives.
- Comparing the attainment levels of pupils in the Craigavon system with pupils in the rest of Northern Ireland is difficult, precisely because there is so much pupil movement within and out of the two-tier schools. It would appear that a higher proportion of pupils in the Craigavon area obtain places in grammar schools, although popular estimates may be exaggerated. The three senior high/grammar schools in the area achieve creditable levels of performance which may, in fact, be even better if they do indeed include a larger proportion of the age cohort in their intake.
- There is some evidence, however, that pupils who are not selected at age 14 years are less well served by the Craigavon system, particularly in the controlled sector. The Southern Education and Library Board has taken steps in recent years to address this problem and there is already some evidence of improvement.
- The delayed selection system which operates in the Craigavon area might have provided an opportunity for schools to develop new and innovative approaches to the curriculum, inter-school cohesion and co-operation, and such areas as vocational education. While there is evidence that some of these possibilities are being realised, perhaps a little more might have been expected.
- While the delayed selection system which operates in the Craigavon area has been a success, the researchers have concluded that the evidence of this study does not suggest that it provides a better alternative to the 11+ system used throughout the rest of Northern Ireland. In particular, the evidence does not suggest that the two-tier system provides a better educational experience for less able pupils than the 11+ system.

1. Introduction

Most pupils in schools in Northern Ireland are affected by the 11+ system for transfer between primary and post-primary (grammar and secondary) schools. In the Craigavon area an alternative system, known as the 'Dickson Plan', operates. In this system pupils automatically transfer from primary to junior high school at age 11 years, and academic selection is delayed until the age of 14 years.

This summary report is based on research carried out for the Department of Education in Northern Ireland. The purpose of the research was to compare the experiences of pupils in the Dickson Plan system with pupils in the traditional 11+ system. The research focused on the academic performance of pupils and the relative pressures they faced in school, and tried to assess the extent to which schools in the two-tier system were able to take advantage of their position outside the particular pressures created by the 11+ system. In addition, the research tried to assess whether or not less able pupils appeared to gain any benefit in the two-tier system in comparison with the 11+ system.

This paper discusses findings in relation to primary schools, junior high schools, selection at 14 years and senior high schools. The general conclusions emerging from the study are then presented.

2. Primary Schools

Previous research had found that many primary teachers and principals were opposed to the 11+ system. This opposition was based on their perception of the impact of the 11+ system on the primary school rather than opposition to selection *per se*. In the Craigavon system primary schools are in a position where the procedure for academic selection does not directly affect them since it is delayed to a later age. Perhaps not surprisingly, therefore, the primary principals in the area interviewed for the research were in favour of the delayed selection system. They claimed that parents supported the system, as evidenced by the high proportion of parents who opted to remain within the Craigavon school system: this claim was supported by the analysis of Education and Library Board data on patterns of transfer from primary to post-primary schools.

The primary principals interviewed did highlight a number of concerns regarding the Craigavon system: they were concerned at the implications for pupils not selected at age 14 years, and the variety of methods used in different schools to stream or band pupils at the 11-14 years stage in the system.

The principals also pointed to a number of specific advantages they identified in the Craigavon system for primary schools. Although pupils did take tests in the primary schools, in order to accommodate streaming or banding in the junior high schools, these tests occurred at the end of the final year of primary schools and were organised by the receiving schools. In the opinion of the primary principals interviewed, this resulted in less pressure from parents on their schools, and allowed them to complete the Key Stage 2 curriculum without any distorting impact of selection tests earlier in the year. Some evidence was found to support this latter claim: an analysis of Key Stage 2 assessment data found that a higher proportion of pupils in the Craigavon schools achieved level 4 or above in comparison with pupils in Northern Ireland schools overall. This pattern was found for boys and girls, and for English and mathematics.

3. Junior High Schools

The evidence collected from interviews with principals, teachers, pupils and parents suggested that they are generally satisfied with the junior high schools. However, this may owe much to a steady increase in the number of children from junior high schools who have gained grammar school places as a consequence of both open enrolment and the opportunity for pupils to seek entry to grammar schools outside the Craigavon system. To the extent that this has occurred as a consequence of open enrolment it may only have enhanced the public perception of the 11-14 junior high schools. The same positive effect may not occur for the 11-16 junior high schools since they retain the pupils not selected at 14. For these schools open enrolment places the same pressure as it does for secondary schools across Northern Ireland, and the 11-16 junior highs, unlike the 11-14 schools, are publicly accountable through their position in the School Performance Tables.

This highlights a further issue to arise from the study. In the absence of public examinations, it was possible that the 11-14 junior high schools and their teachers could develop a degree of complacency. The evidence, which suggests a high degree of streaming or banding, and what appears to be a reasonably intense level of continuous pressure, might indicate that this possibility was not realised. It remains possible, however, that streaming or banding could produce a sense of fatalism among pupils who perceive, from a fairly early stage in their junior high school career, that they are very unlikely to achieve a place in a selective senior high school.

An additional possible impact is that teachers in these schools have limited career options given their lack of experience of teaching to GCSE or A Level. While most of the teachers interviewed indicated that they were content to remain within the system, the possibility remains that the relatively small system of junior high schools may be a little too insular if the level of staff turnover is, in fact, low in comparison to other schools.

Some of the people interviewed for the research took the view that banding or streaming children at 11 was simply another form of selection. While it might remove some of the pressure on pupils, since most will know where they stand in the ranking order, several principals and teachers suggested that a more transparent basis for standardisation and banding should be adopted.

4. Selection at 14

Data were examined from Education and Library Board records on the expressed preferences and outcomes for pupils involved in selection at 14 years. Two points in particular were highlighted in this analysis: first, the preference levels for the 'grammar' option at 14 were very high, certainly in comparison with the proportion of pupils who can reasonably aspire to a grammar school place in the rest of Northern Ireland; second, the success rate for entry to a 'grammar' option was also high.

These data echoed a point that was mentioned by a number of interviewees for the research. Their point was that the disparate nature of the school system in the Craigavon and neighbouring areas, allied with the right of parental choice and the guarantee to parents at the origins of the two-tier system that they had the right to opt-out, result in quite a high level of movement of pupils between schools. As already indicated, a proportion of pupils opt to go outside the system when they transfer from primary school at age 11 years. The data here suggest that there is a degree of movement out of the Craigavon system at age 14 years as well.

Throughout Northern Ireland there is movement of pupils between schools for a whole variety of reasons. The data obtained for this research might imply that the extent of pupil movement in and around the two-tier system may be somewhat higher than the province-wide norm. The net effect is that a high proportion of the pupils who remain within the two-tier system appear to be successful in gaining entry to a grammar school place and that those who do not gain a place in a selective senior high school have a range of alternatives to which they can seek entry: this includes voluntary grammar schools just outside the Craigavon area, and comprehensive and secondary schools within and outside the Craigavon area. This particular set of circumstances may go some way to explain the level of popular support that the Craigavon system appears to enjoy.

5. Senior High Schools

The Craigavon system now contains four senior high schools. Three of the schools, Portadown College, Lurgan College and St Michael's, are selective senior high schools and operate as 14-18 grammar schools. Craigavon Senior High School operates as a 14-16 secondary school, primarily for pupils in the controlled junior highs who do not achieve a place in either Portadown or Lurgan Colleges.

Among the teachers and pupils talked to in the selective senior high schools there was a consensus in favour of the Craigavon system. Selection at 14 was described as both more accurate and fair, and it was seen as facilitating late academic developers. At the same time, for many, a significant attraction was that it retained a form of selection. For some the selection procedure meant that their school had a wider social mix than was generally the case in grammar schools. For others, the large proportion of pupils transferring into the senior highs provided for a wider ability mix than might be found in other grammar schools. Despite these distinctive features, however, the view was expressed that the schools achieved good academic results. Another advantage claimed by some was that pupils transferring at age

14 years were more mature and responsible, and, as a consequence, the schools did not have significant disciplinary problems. There was a recognition by some that the pupils were, perhaps, subject to a little more pressure because of the additional transfers involved in the system, but this was seen to operate to their advantage in terms of attainment.

One issue on which there was less consensus concerned the links between schools in the two-tier system. At its inception it was envisaged that the junior and senior high schools, and the technical colleges, would form a cohesive unit. While in one selective senior high school a situation and style of practice was described that appeared to match closely this aspiration, the situation for the other selective senior high schools was somewhat more mixed.

Comparing attainment patterns between schools can be problematic and is best based on a number of attainment indicators rather than simply one indicator. Given the degree of pupil movement in the Craigavon system it is also difficult to produce a definitive measure of the predictive efficiency of this system in comparison with the 11+ system: this would be possible with a longitudinal study of pupils, but this was not possible within the timeframe of this study.

This does not mean that no comment can be offered on the attainment patterns achieved by the selective senior high schools. However, the following caveats need to be kept in mind: the most reasonable estimate is that the proportion of pupils who achieve grammar places in the Craigavon and neighbouring areas is higher than the average for Northern Ireland as a whole and that the ability range of pupils entering the selective senior high schools in the Craigavon system is probably wider than is the case for an average grammar school in the rest of Northern Ireland. However, the popular perception in the Craigavon area of the extent to which this occurs is probably exaggerated.

With these caveats in mind, the broad conclusion from an analysis of school performance and school leavers' survey data would be that the selective senior high schools have achieved levels of academic performance at least equal to, and sometimes better than, comparable grammar schools in other parts of Northern Ireland, and that they have showed evidence of somewhat higher levels of improvement over time. This pattern becomes even more positive if one accepts the likelihood that the ability range of the pupils entering these schools is wider than is the case for grammar schools across Northern Ireland. Furthermore, the pattern of improvement in the senior high schools over time is enhanced even more when one considers the likelihood that they appear to have undergone a more rapid period of growth, as a consequence of open enrolment, in comparison with other grammar schools.

The situation for pupils who were not selected at 14 was less positive. Previous research had highlighted problems in the school departments of the further education colleges to which pupils had transferred before the establishment of Craigavon Senior High School. Some of the teachers interviewed for this study had worked in these departments and their memories were not favourable. Indeed, it was only among these interviews that a significant degree of dissatisfaction was expressed with the Craigavon system: some of these teachers felt that the system was geared to meet the needs of the junior high and selective senior high schools, that they had to spend time covering basics that should have been covered already and that they were expected to achieve performance levels comparable with other secondary schools while having the pupils for only two years. This, they felt, created added difficulties in building a sense of school identity among the pupils.

It is important to note that the development of Craigavon Senior High School was a conscious attempt to tackle some of these difficulties and there is already some evidence that improvement is occurring.

The attainment patterns for non-selected pupils in the Craigavon system varied across the three schools where these pupils were based. The results for pupils in Craigavon Senior High School were lower when compared with secondary schools, although the results for pupils in the past, when they were based in further education colleges, were, if anything, even lower. The new school is still in the very early stages of development and there is some evidence that measures introduced by the senior management are already having a positive affect, but

there is still a considerable distance to go. One positive feature is that despite the relatively low levels of performance of pupils in this school, the proportion who stay in education, particularly in further education, is relatively high. This might indicate a particular advantage of the two-tier system with intrinsic links into the FE sector. The performance pattern among the two maintained junior high schools varied. One achieved a relatively high level of performance across a range of criteria, whereas the levels achieved in the other school were markedly lower. It was unclear why this was happening. However, one possibility was that a higher than average proportion of leavers from the latter school were reported as entering employment. If this is accurate it might explain low attainment levels if a significant number of the pupils feel that their employment prospects are so good that academic achievement is unimportant. This explanation must, however, remain speculative.

6. Conclusion

The delayed selection system in the Craigavon area has achieved a high level of popular support and most people associated with the system would support its retention. Part of the reason for this popular support is that the system appears to have solved some of the more negative aspects of selection at 11+. However, the evidence of this research suggests that another aspect of the popular support is linked to the small size of the system, the right of parents to go outside it, and the fact that this removes one of the most significant problems with the 11+ system, that is, the once-and-for-all nature of the selective decision: the Craigavon system allows for a number of other chances.

The researchers conclude that the evidence available for this study does not lead to the conclusion that the Craigavon system currently provides the basis for a systemic alternative to selection at 11. This is not to say that the Craigavon system is somehow inferior to the 11+ system of grammar and secondary schools. The evidence examined highlights some potential strengths in the system: there is some indication of benefits in the primary schools; a pattern of good performance in the selective senior high schools, especially considering the higher than average proportion of pupils who go to these schools; and evidence of good links with further education in some parts of the system. However, the popularity which the system appears to enjoy may be closely linked to the extent to which movement in and out of the system is available. In other words, the system as it exists may be either too porous, too small, or both, to allow for a complete test of its comparative position vis-à-vis the 11+ selective system.

A number of issues arising from the study might be worthy of future attention. It might have been expected that schools in the Craigavon area, particularly primary and junior high schools, would have been able to develop creative new directions, freed as they were from the constraints of the 11+ system. In fact, the schools do face selective pressures for their pupils aged 11 years as well as their pupils aged 14 years. Nevertheless, this is one area that might be developed.

It was perhaps a little surprising that a greater degree of cohesion and co-ordination was not found between the schools in the two-tier system. There were some very good examples of strong links between some of the schools and colleges, but this was not so in every case. One of the potential strengths of the Craigavon system lies in the benefits of this cohesion, in particular due to the possibilities it allows for the development of stronger vocational education routes.

The Craigavon system does not appear to provide a panacea for the needs of less able pupils. Indeed, one of the weaknesses identified in this research was in the experience faced by these pupils, particularly in the controlled sector. However, the Southern Education and Library Board has taken steps in recent years to address this issue and the early evidence from school performance tables suggests that an important corner has been turned and improvement is being achieved. Clearly, however, this is an issue which the Board will want to monitor closely in the future.

7. Methodology

Three main sources of evidence were used: first, data on attainment patterns of schools in the Craigavon area were available from the DENI School Performance Tables, and this was supplemented from school leaver surveys and other DENI databases. Second, the Southern Education and Library Board provided data on patterns of transfer between primary and post-primary schools, and information on transfer patterns of pupils at age 14 years. The third main area of evidence was based on interviews with a wide range of people associated with the schools in the Craigavon area and beyond: this included interviews with school governors, principals, teachers, parents and pupils. In addition, a number of individuals who had played, and some who continue to play, a significant role in the Craigavon schools system were interviewed.

8. The Project

The project was undertaken for DENI by the Graduate School of Education at Queen's University, Belfast. The cost was £25,000.

9. Full Report

The full report entitled 'An Evaluation of the Craigavon Two-Tier System' DENI Research Report Series No. 12, by J Alexander, P Daly, A Gallagher, C Gray and A Sutherland is available from DENI, cost £5.*

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This paper is a summary of the research report and as such any views it contains are not necessarily those of DENI.

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