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# Is academic selection in Northern Ireland a barrier to social cohesion?

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## ABSTRACT

Northern Ireland has a deeply divided education system with demarcation most notable along ethno/religious and social class lines. The former is largely attributable to the historical organisation of the schools estate based on religion, and the latter is associated with a system of academic selection that filters children into grammar and non-selective post-primary schools according to their performance in tests taken during the final year of primary school. Academic selection, and the grammar school system that underpins it, has come under some considerable scrutiny, with much of the research evidence pointing to a negative relationship between the selective system and equality of opportunity in education. The suitability of this system in a transitioning society that has become more ethnically diverse in post-conflict years has, however, received less attention. Drawing on social cohesion theory, we reflect on the grammar school system to argue that the cross-community class interests animating it not only perpetuate inequalities within respective communities but may also present a significant barrier to peacebuilding efforts in education, and ultimately impede progress towards a more socially cohesive society.

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## Education and division in Northern Ireland

Since the foundation of the state in 1921, education in Northern Ireland has been organised on parallel ethno/religious lines, with around 93% of the pupils attending schools that have either a predominantly Catholic or a predominantly Protestant pupil intake. Catholic schools, although fully state-funded, are managed by the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) and maintain a strong Catholic ethos, while majority Protestant schools are controlled by the Department of Education, with many retaining clergy from the main Protestant churches on their governing bodies (NI Direct 2022). The separation of schools by religion is reflective of wider patterns of segregation between the two main communities in Northern Ireland, particularly in housing, and has been the subject of considerable debate regarding both its contribution to conflict and its role in peacebuilding. Coterminous with religious segregation, the 'selection process' means that post-primary education across both sectors is offered on a bipartite, two-tier basis, with children from working-class backgrounds concentrated in non-selective

schools and pupils from more middle-class backgrounds more likely to attend grammar schools (Brown et al. 2021).

The last four decades have seen successive attempts to tackle ethno-religious and socio-economic divisions both in and through education in Northern Ireland. Regarding ethno-religious division, the period from the 1970s onwards saw developments aimed at improving community relations through schools, precipitated in part by concerns that separate education might be fuelling tensions (Gallagher 2016). Alongside a range of initiatives to encourage intergroup encounter between pupils in separate schools, and curriculum interventions to promote respect for difference and citizenship education, a major structural development was the establishment of the first designated integrated school in 1981. Integrated schools seek to educate Catholic, Protestant and other pupils together in an atmosphere of social inclusion, and offer an alternative to traditionally 'separate' schools. Integrated education has been shown as effective in reducing prejudice and promoting more positive intergroup relations between Catholic and Protestant pupils (McKeown 2017), but the growth of the sector has slowed in recent years, and its 67 schools currently account for only around 7% of educational provision. Reflecting the limited scope of integrated education, and with an intention to involve pupils across all sectors in regular cross-group contact, a shared education initiative launched in 2007. Operating within the largely parallel education system, shared education involves schools from different sectors collaborating to offer sustained curriculum-based opportunities for pupils from different religious and socio-economic backgrounds to learn together (Gallagher 2016). Currently involving around 60,000 young people across 600 schools in Northern Ireland, shared education aims to enhance learning opportunities, promote effective use of resources, and foster equality of opportunity and social cohesion (EANI 2021). As with integrated education, shared education has been shown to promote more positive intergroup relations amongst participants and there is some evidence that it may contribute to social cohesion at wider community level, by normalising cross-group interaction and challenging traditional physical and identity boundaries (Hughes and Loader 2021).

Regarding socio-economic division, the Eleven Plus system, which had been in operation since 1947, was officially abolished in 2008 (DENI 2022). This followed decades of concern about the impact of academic selection in fostering inequality in Northern Ireland, with the Burns Review of Post Primary Education castigating the Eleven Plus as 'socially divisive' and damaging to pupils (Burns report 2001, 7). While non-selective schools, including most integrated schools, were largely unaffected by the end of academic selection, many grammar schools were deeply opposed to it and in response began a process of establishing their own independent admission tests. Two consortia emerged, the Post-Primary Transfer Consortium (PPTC), representing mainly Catholic grammar schools, and the Association of Quality Education (AQE), representing grammar schools with a mainly Protestant enrolment. Each developed their own transfer procedure and unique set of tests, with the new unregulated system launched in November 2009, just one year after the ending of the official state-sponsored Eleven Plus. The tests remain popular, with an estimated 50% of final year primary school pupils taking either PPTC-or AQE-sponsored tests, and a smaller unknown proportion sitting both (Roulston and Milliken 2021).

The continued bifurcation of schools on ethno/religious and crosscutting class lines is arguably at odds with a society seeking to recover from a conflict frequently represented as fuelled by precisely these divisions. While efforts to foster relationship-building through schools can be seen as having made a positive contribution to a more cohesive society, the failure of official efforts to remove academic selection in 2008, and the subsequent establishment of an unregulated test system along denominational lines, is retrograde to social cohesion (Roulston and Milliken 2021). Academic selection, as a linchpin of the divided education system, serves to perpetuate class and group divisions within and between school sectors, and across wider society in Northern Ireland. Moreover, the current transfer procedure, more so than the one it replaced, may actually undermine Community Relations, Equality and Diversity (CRED) policy objectives to ensure that children and young people ‘understand and respect the rights, equality and diversity of all’, ‘value and respect difference and engage positively with it’ and are equipped ‘with the skills, attitudes and behaviours needed’ to do so (DENI 2011, 20). Guidance issued for the new policy in 2012 defines equality in terms of ‘life opportunities and achievements’ and places it at the forefront of delivery, noting that ‘without ensuring equality it is impossible to foster community relations and diversity’ (DENI 2012, 4). In this article, we draw from literature on the definition and measurement of social cohesion to consider the role of academic selection and grammar schooling in transitional Northern Ireland. Specifically, conceptualising social cohesion through three constituent elements – ideational, relational and distributive (Schiefer and van der Noll 2017) – we argue that the current transfer model hinders progress towards the stated aim of ‘a shared and cohesive community that can move forward and collectively face the challenges of an ever-changing world’ (OFMdfM 2013, 10).

## Analytical framework

From the mid-1990s, social cohesion attracted renewed interest from policymakers and academics who saw its conceptual value for understanding social and political change, particularly in the context of globalisation and economic reform (Beauvais and Jenson 2002; Hulse and Stone 2007). Early typologies identified a series of components of socially cohesive societies, which included *inter alia* belonging, inclusion, participation, recognition (of diversity), social solidarity, common values, social networks and social capital (Jenson 1998; Kearns and Forrest 2000). Subsequently, authors have sought to consolidate these in definitions comprising two or three components – for example, inequality and social capital (Berger-Schmitt 2002) or (in)equality, social relations and common values (Hulse and Stone 2007). Most recently, Schiefer and van der Noll’s (2017) review identified three dimensions and six components of social cohesion: the distributive dimension, comprising quality of life and equality of access to resources; the relational dimension, encompassing relationships and ties between individuals; and the ideational dimension, including common values, identification and orientation to the common good. Capturing the three features of social cohesion that recur within the literature – social relationships, shared values and distributive justice – Schiefer and van der Noll’s typology provides the framework for the current paper.

The *distributive* dimension has been particularly prominent in discussions of social cohesion in supranational institutions including the European Union, the Council of

Europe and the OECD, which have focused on reducing disparities of resources, services and opportunity across different regions and social categories (gender, ethnicity, disability) (Fonseca, Luokosch and Brazier, 2019). According to this perspective, cohesive societies are characterised by social solidarity and inclusion (Jenson 2010); consequently, distributive approaches to social cohesion place ‘exclusionary structures at centre stage’ (Novy, Swiatek, and Moulaert 2012, 1878). Threats to cohesion include unemployment, income inequality, and discrimination on the basis of ethnicity, gender, sexuality or disability (Jeannotte 2000; UN, 2018). Societies that manage these threats effectively, particularly through more equitable resource distribution, are expected to display greater cohesion as measured by labour market participation, educational and health outcomes, and income levels across regions and social groups (Berger-Schmitt 2002; Easterly, Ritzen, and Woolcock 2006; Jenson 2019). Some bodies, notably the Council of Europe, also emphasise participation in civic, social and political life as an indicator of cohesion within this dimension (Chan, To, and Chan 2006; Jenson 2019).

The relational dimension of social cohesion considers a cohesive society to entail dense social networks that engender high-quality relationships across the community (Beauvais and Jenson 2002). Chan, To, and Chan (2006), for example, describe social cohesion as ‘a state of affairs concerning how well people in a society “cohere” or “stick” to each other’ (Chan, To, and Chan 2006, 289), for which the key criteria are that members of society ‘can trust, help and cooperate’ with one another and can trust institutions. This dimension has been widely associated with social capital, defined by Putnam 1995, 67) as ‘features of social organisation such as networks, norms and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit’. However, while social capital is generally understood as an attribute of individuals, social cohesion trains its lens on communities or societies (Chan, To, and Chan 2006). Thus, measures of relational cohesion typically include the number and quality of social contacts and social interactions across a population, participation in local civic, voluntary, political and cultural organisations, and levels of trust towards fellow citizens and institutions (Beauvais and Jenson 2002; Schiefer and van der Noll 2017). While this ‘bottom-up’ approach allows for the organic development of cohesion at the familial, organisational and neighbourhood levels (Hulse and Stone 2007), a potential challenge is that it offers limited opportunity for political intervention when levels of cohesion are low, allowing governments to shift responsibility for cohesive societies to communities and local networks (Cheong et al. 2007; Jenson 2010).

The most commonly discussed feature of the *ideational dimension* of social cohesion is a set of shared values that provide a framework for citizens’ behaviour to others (Beauvais and Jenson 2002; Kearns and Forrest 2000). This dimension also encompasses feelings of identification with and belonging to a social and/or geographical entity (e.g. a region, nation or territory) and a commitment to the common good (Kearns and Forrest; Jenson 2010; Schiefer and van der Noll 2017). The ideational dimension of social cohesion is arguably that most closely associated with formal schooling through the teaching of norms and values, which assumed increased political importance across many countries from the late 20th century (Biesta and Miedema 2002). However, political assertions of ‘shared values’ and ‘common identity’ have been controversial in diverse, cosmopolitan and – in the case of Northern Ireland – divided societies, where citizens may have multiple identities and attachments (Hulse and Stone 2007). Anxiety has also been

expressed that discourses of ‘common values’ may be appropriated by regressive and populist forces to assert majoritarian perspectives that are oppressive to minority social and cultural groups (Hulse and Stone 2007; Jenson 2019). In response, ‘common values’ have been defined as commitments to respect for diversity and liberal democratic principles (Jenson 2019; Schiefer and van der Noll 2017) – though, in England, concerns have continued to be raised about the racialised and assimilationist overtones of ‘community cohesion’ and ‘integration’ policy agendas (Cheong et al. 2007; Kalra and Kapoor 2009; Keddie 2014).

While some scholars have sought to enhance the analytical value of social cohesion by defining and limiting its ‘essential features’ (Chan, To, and Chan 2006; Koonce 2011; Schiefer and van der Noll 2017), others have argued that its conceptual value is as a broad framework for examining social values, social relationships and social inclusion (Hulse and Stone 2007). In this article, we tend towards the latter perspective, exploring social cohesion as a multidimensional, multi-level concept involving communities, institutions and governments in its development and sustainability. This is consistent with our argument elsewhere that studies of social cohesion should be cognisant of ‘intersectional and interdependent processes that help build cohesion and potentially disrupt it’ (Hughes and Loader 2021, 18). We also understand social cohesion as a process (see, for example, Jeannotte 2000; OECD 2011), and argue for the analytic value of viewing it as both a cause and consequence of social developments and policy decisions (Jenson 2019). We apply these perspectives in our discussion of the contribution of grammar schools to social cohesion in Northern Ireland in the remainder of this article.

## Distributive cohesion

A distributive perspective on social cohesion posits that reducing inequality of access to resources and opportunities is central to building social solidarity (Beauvais and Jenson 2002; Fonseca, Lukosch, and Brazier 2019). The original rationale for academic selection was not inconsistent with this: awarding grammar school places on the basis of intellect rather than wealth or social background, ought, in theory, to increase access to high-quality, academic education and its lifelong benefits among socio-economically disadvantaged families (Morris and Perry 2017). Research emerging from the 1960s suggested, however, that academically selective schooling did not fulfil these egalitarian ideals (Gallagher 2021), and was followed by the removal of grammar schools from the state system in Wales and the reduction of their number in England from 1,298 in the 1964 to 163 today (Danechi 2020; SESC 2018).<sup>1</sup> Northern Ireland remains the only region to retain academic selection across all education authority areas.<sup>2</sup>

While the persistence of selection in Northern Ireland is contentious, and attracts significant political opposition, it continues to be defended with appeals to equality of opportunity and access. As recently as January 2020, the then Minister of Education, Peter Weir, claimed that ‘every child, regardless of background, postcode, social group, religion or ethnicity has the opportunity to get into one of our grammar schools’ (O’Neill 2020). However, perusal of statistics on grammar school admissions reveals this opportunity to be unequally distributed. Department of Education data shows that, in 2020/21, only 13.7% of pupils at grammar schools were entitled to Free School Meals, compared with over a third (37.1%) at non-grammar schools (DENI 2021a). Even when controlling



for prior attainment, children from families in the highest income quartile were 33 percentage points more likely to attend a grammar school than their peers in the lowest quartile (Jerrim and Sims 2019). Inequalities of access also persist according to ethnicity and migration status and across geographical areas (DENI 2021b; Henderson 2018). A greater proportion of grammar school places are available in the *de facto* Protestant sector than the Catholic sector (Henderson 2018), although attendance across religious lines is more common in the grammar than in the non-grammar sector (DENI 2021b).

Factors found to contribute to socio-economic inequalities in grammar school admissions, even when accounting for prior attainment, include parents' school preferences and aspirations for their children's education, parents' and teachers' perceptions of a child's ability, and access to tutoring (Gallagher and Smith 2000; Jerrim and Sims 2019; Kelleher, Smith and McEldowney, 2016; Morris and Perry 2017). Jerrim and Sims found that, in Northern Ireland, 'parental preferences and private tutoring explain a small but not insignificant part of the grammar school attendance gap' (445). For newcomer pupils, lack of familiarity with the NI curriculum, on which the transfer test is based, and lack of fluency in the test languages of English or Irish, may also be influential. From a distributive perspective, these inequities are concerning as they undermine a major rationale for grammar schools: to increase access to high-quality, academic education among disadvantaged children and thus enhance social mobility. Indeed, if grammar school attendance is associated with favourable long-term outcomes, then such schools may sustain distributive inequality by perpetuating the advantage of their largely middle-class intake.

In the latter regard, the advantage of grammar schools for academic attainment at first appears clear. In 2018/19, 94.3% of pupils at grammar schools in Northern Ireland achieved A\*-C grades in five or more subjects, including English and Maths, compared with 54.8% of their peers at non-grammar schools – a gap that has narrowed significantly over the past decade but remains substantial (DENI 2019). Recent statistical modelling has confirmed this influence, finding that grammar school attendance is the strongest predictor of GCSE attainment in the region (Cherry 2021; Early 2020). To what extent this is due to a 'grammar school effect' is unclear, however. Research from England indicates that grammar schools may confer less advantage than often assumed: once socioeconomic status and prior attainment are accounted for, any 'added value' of grammar schools either is small (Coe et al. 2008), or disappears, with pupils of similar ability achieving equally well at comprehensive schools (Gorard and Siddiqui 2018). To appraise the effects of selection, however, we must also examine the outcomes of non-grammar schools, and it is here that distributive inequality becomes more pronounced.

A key finding across several studies, primarily from England, is that selective systems depress the outcomes for pupils at non-grammar schools within the same area when compared with peers in non-selective areas (Atkinson, Gregg, and McConnell 2006; Levacic and Marsh, 2007; Thomson 2019). Contributory factors may include a less experienced teacher workforce, higher teacher turnover, peer influence and the compound effects of greater pupil disadvantage (Brown et al. 2021; Byrne and Gallagher 2004; Gallagher and Smith 2000). While this finding is not universal (Coe et al. 2008, for example, found no negative impact on performance among non-grammars), the overall picture is of a small or negligible improvement in system-wide performance in selective systems compared with comprehensive systems, with no gain in – indeed, likely



detriment to – the performance of non-grammar school pupils. As disadvantaged pupils are most likely to attend these non-grammar schools, selection risks entrenching social inequality and thus weakening social cohesion in distributive terms. Research from England also suggests that the inequalities associated with selective systems persist in differential access to higher education and ‘more unequal wage distribution in later life’ compared with non-selective systems (Burgess, Dickson, and Macmillan 2020, 2; Burgess, Crawford, and Macmillan 2017). While such research is not possible in Northern Ireland given the absence of non-selective areas for comparison, the polarisation of examination results at 16 points to the existence of similar inequalities.

## Relational cohesion

### *Academic selection and social relations in NI*

Focusing on the relational dimension of social cohesion, key features are the nature and strength of network connections between individuals in homogeneous groups (bonding), across groups (bridging), and with those in positions of authority or influence (linking) (Scrivens and Smith 2013), and the willingness of group members in a locality or across localities to engage and co-operate to the benefit of all (Stanley 2003). While working-class and more marginalised communities in Northern Ireland often enjoy higher levels of bonding capital (Leonard 2010; Morrow 2006), the benefits of this for social equality or cohesion are limited. As Leonard notes, the very factors that underpin bonding capital, such as trust and ‘own group’ solidarity, may ultimately inhibit the development of the bridging ties that can increase economic and educational opportunities. Although bonding social capital is good for ‘getting by’, bridging social capital is essential for ‘getting ahead’ and for enhancing societal interdependence. A number of commentators draw attention to the role of political conflict in embedding bonding capital in Northern Ireland, arguing that a sustainable peace should entail the erosion of a deterrence model and a drive to build bridging capital. In this vein, Morrow (2006, 76) proposes that, ‘Even so-called single identity matters like education should have clear bridging structures. (In schools, this includes policy development, sharing of facilities, curriculum issues, admissions policies etc.)’. However, as reflected in the analysis of Holland and Rabrenovic (2017), the dynamics of inequality, which cuts across ethno-religiously polarised groups, can undermine the potential to develop more integrative structures in post-conflict societies. Below we speculate that this observation is highly relevant to understanding the ways in which the grammar school system may be inhibiting the impact of initiatives such as shared and integrated education, but also how it may act to increase the likelihood of intergroup tension and violence.

As noted above, those from lower socio-economic backgrounds are the least likely to secure a place at a grammar school. Juxtaposed with this, non-selective schools in general are more highly segregated than selective schools (Borooah and Knox 2015). In this regard, the dynamic of a selective system, mapped also on Catholic and Protestant lines, works against children and young people from different socio-economic backgrounds learning together, within and between communities. Moreover, consistent with the association between attendance at non-selective schools and poorer academic outcomes (Early 2020), the highest levels of underachievement are concentrated in more

marginalised (and by definition, religiously segregated) communities where grammar school attendance is low. The relationship between relative deprivation, overlapping social inequalities between ethnic and religious groups, and the likelihood of intergroup violence is well documented (Gurr 2000; Stewart 2008). Holland and Rabrenovic (2017), identify the conditions that underscore ongoing political tensions and sectarian violence in Northern Ireland as: economic marginalisation of communities historically susceptible to violence, ongoing community influence of paramilitary factions, and disjuncture between the political priorities of upper and lower classes within each ethno-political community. They point to the greater likelihood that underachieving, working-class Catholic and Protestant boys will respond to ethnoreligious provocation:

The resolve among disadvantaged boys to protect their communities and, at times, enact revenge against the Other is hardened by their relative deprivation and immobility and the influence of paramilitary elements. Recent increases in racist attacks against a growing immigrant population—the new Other—are also symptomatic of such phenomena. (Holland and Rabrenovic 2017, 239)

While the selective education system is typically more conducive to ‘bonding capital’ along class lines (Putnam 2000), it has been argued that the system of unregulated transfer tests, introduced following the abolition of the state-sponsored Eleven Plus, has served to intensify socio-economic and religious division. Not only were ‘Catholic’ and ‘Protestant’ tests introduced by grammar schools in each sector but, unhindered by Department of Education pass grade prescriptions, grammars have been able to fill their places at the expense of non-grammar schools. The consequence of this is that, as grammar schools expand and the non-selective sector contracts, disadvantaged pupils are in effect concentrated in even more poorly performing schools than was the case before (Wilson 2016). The problem is self-perpetuating: grammar schools ‘cream off’ more highly-performing pupils and middle-class ‘flight’ from the low-performing non-selective sector increases (via strategies such as paying for tutoring in preparation for the transfer test), depriving non-grammar schools of positive (peer) role models (Leitch et al. 2017). The ILiAD study, chiming with Holland and Rabrenovic (2017), found that, among pupils who either fail the test or do not take it, poor self-esteem and low self-confidence can find expression in their association with organisations and activities that instil a sense of purpose and strong community identity (Leitch et al. 2017).

### *Academic selection and educational interventions to improve social relations*

Under the current parallel and religiously bifurcated education system, the impact of interventions aimed at promoting intergroup relations and social cohesion is necessarily limited. Considering first integrated education, the sector remains small: only 7% of educational provision in Northern Ireland is integrated, with limited growth in recent years occurring primarily through the transformation of a small number of controlled primary schools to integrated status (Gray et al. 2018). Guided by principles of inclusion and a vision to promote good relations through educating together children from diverse community backgrounds, integrated education is associated with reduced prejudice and more pro-social attitudes amongst pupils (Hughes et al. 2013; Stringer et al. 2000, 2009).

In line with this inclusive ethos, integrated schools are almost without exception non-selective. Consistent with this, integrated post-primary schools also have significantly higher proportions of pupils entitled to free school meals: 35.4% of pupils at Grant Maintained Integrated schools and 36.1% at Controlled Integrated schools were eligible for free school meals in 2020/21, compared with a post-primary average of 27% (DENI 2021a). Taking account of both the less pronounced differences in FSM entitlement across primary sectors, and the notably lower proportion of pupils entitled to free school meals in integrated primary schools (Grant Maintained Integrated 25.3% and Controlled Integrated 31.8%) relative to integrated post-primary schools, it seems plausible that perceived educational opportunity trumps any ideological commitment to inclusive and diverse education when it comes to secondary education choices made by parents in Northern Ireland. Young people from more middle-class backgrounds who attend an integrated primary school appear more likely to transfer to a religiously 'segregated' post-primary grammar school. Likely to be both cause and consequence of this are the performance outcomes for pupils attending integrated post-primary schools, which are on a par with other non-selective schools. In the year 2018/19 for example, 43.7% of pupils in controlled integrated schools and 58.5% in grant-maintained integrated schools achieved 5 or more GCSEs at grades A\*–C, while the average of across the non-grammar sector was 54.8% (DENI 2019).

In respect of social cohesion, the relational potential of integrated schools is limited by this selective system. Not only are opportunities for bridging capital restricted by academic selection, but the opportunity to capitalise on the integration benefits of primary level integrated education may also be negatively impacted (Al Ramiah et al. 2013). Al Ramiah and colleagues' study of university students in Northern Ireland found that, while contact at primary school was an important predictor of current outgroup friendship and positive intergroup attitudes, its impact was mediated through continued intergroup contact at post-primary level. As they argue, cross-group friendship at primary level 'was not in itself directly associated with lower in-group bias [among university-aged participants]. Instead ... it seems that having more friends at primary school reduced in-group bias via having more friends at secondary school, a kind of "trickle-down" effect' (69). According to this finding, then, interruption of contact experienced at primary school, by 'single identity' post-primary experience is likely to diminish the benefits of early integrated education experience.

Unlike integrated education, which operates at school level, shared education promotes collaboration between schools across all sectors in Northern Ireland to offer sustained curriculum-based opportunities for children and young people from different community, social and economic backgrounds to learn together. As with integrated schools, the grammar/non-selective divide is a significant barrier to the egalitarian vision for shared education because it foments socio-economic divisions, therein contributing to the relative underachievement of those from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Connolly, Purvis, and O'Grady 2013). Coterminous with this, maintenance of the grammar system impedes area-based planning processes for post-primary schools, which aim to deliver the most effective rationalisation of the schools estate on an area basis. As noted by Connolly and colleagues, this is not only wasteful but, if larger non-selective schools experience falling enrolments and reduced funding over the long term, detrimental to school collaboration. Their report proposes that

removing academic selection at age 11 will, 'enable the development of a smaller number of larger schools that will each have the economies of scale to deliver the entitlement framework while also enabling strong and sustainable collaborative relationships to develop with other schools in their locality' (Connolly, Purvis, and O'Grady 2013, 110).

Setting aside the system-level impediments to shared education, academic vested interests are also reported as negatively affecting the development of shared education collaborations between individual schools at post-primary level. The issues relate to concerns on the part of parents and some grammar schools that cross-sectoral school collaboration may adversely affect their children's academic progress (Connolly, Purvis, and O'Grady 2013; Loader and Hughes 2019). Teachers also report that in selective/non-selective school partnerships, pupils' anticipation of each other's social background, academic ability and behaviour makes the task of relationship-building more challenging (Duffy and Gallagher 2012; Knox 2010). A quote from a Vice Principal reported in Knox's study illustrates these tensions and the negative implications for social cohesion:

School children can handle cross-community education. Okay, some will do a double take at statues in the corridor or Protestant paraphernalia, but the more difficult thing for me is to persuade lads to attend a grammar school because their perception, in some cases, is that this is a school which rejected them at age 11 and therefore appears elitist, despite the best efforts of teachers in that school. (Knox 2010)

In terms of bridging social capital, the analysis presented above suggests that the interests of the middle class in maintaining a system that perpetuates privilege limits integrative interventions in education. This is underscored by Catholic and Protestant grammar schools uniting in opposition to the abolition of the state transfer tests and their sponsorship of unregulated testing (Gardner 2016). More recently, agreement within the grammar sector to develop a common test, following criticism of the divisive nature of separate tests for 'Catholic' and 'Protestant' grammar schools, only serves to reinforce the point. As noted by Holland and Rabrenovic (2017, 239), the potential for class interests to cut across ethno-political lines, resulting in the 'de-centering of ethno-national identities in shaping social and institutional relations', is an under-researched dimension of intergroup relations in post-conflict societies. Their case study of Northern Ireland highlights the asymmetrical nature of the problem, with middle-class Catholic and Protestant communities disproportionately cooperating to protect material interests. Conversely, the authors note that a shared experience of inequality does not generally translate to cross-community political advocacy in more marginalised communities. Rather, amongst young men in particular, the psychosocial effects of underachievement and disadvantage, taken together with longstanding sectarian mentalities, is more likely to manifest in hypermasculine ethno-political and sectarian practices that can destabilise the peace process, especially when appropriated by 'ethno-political entrepreneurs' (see also Ashe and Harland 2014; Creary and Byrne 2014). Recent peace monitoring reports lend support to this analysis, with issues such as ongoing sectarian and race crime, and 'culture wars' over flags, parades and language issues, intensifying inter-group division and hostilities in recent years (Gray et al. 2018; Wilson 2016).

## Ideational cohesion

Orientation towards the common good and consensus on basic values such as equality and respect for diversity can be considered ‘minimal standard’ drivers of social cohesion, especially in post-conflict societies where shared ethno-national identity is an unrealistic proposition. Such values, demonstrated in policy and practice, have been associated with the quality of society. For the OECD, a cohesive society, ‘works toward the well-being of all its members, fights exclusion and marginalisation, creates a sense of belonging, promotes trust, and offers its members the opportunity of upward social mobility’ (OECD 2011). It goes almost without saying that academic selection and the grammar school system are antithetical to the achievement of a cohesive society by this definition.

In respect of the values associated with social cohesion, research highlights the contribution of mixed educational environments in fostering civic competences such as respect for diversity and promoting positive perceptions of local and societal cohesion (Burgess and Platt 2021; Demack et al. 2010; The Century Foundation 2019). While much research in this area has been undertaken in ethnically mixed schools, Demack et al. (2010) suggest that socio-economically and academically mixed schools may promote social cohesion: pupils from secondary modern and grammar schools in England were 1.7–2.4 times more likely to perceive low levels of cohesion than their peers at comprehensive schools. Despite evidence such as this, there has been conspicuously less commentary in Northern Ireland about the social and attitudinal impact of separation by academic ability and social class than about denominational segregation. Where criticism has arisen, appeals to the ‘common good’ have been deployed to defend grammar schools – that they offer schooling appropriate to ability and the potential for social mobility to anyone of ‘high ability’. However, as outlined earlier, the more convincing counter-argument is that their benefits to grammar school pupils ‘are offset by an adverse effect for those in nearby non-selective schools’ (Brown et al. 2021, 14), and thus they impede the greatest good for the greater number.

Compounding and likely contributing to the social cohesion costs of the grammar system are the high stakes transfer tests undertaken by pupils at the age of 10 and 11. Research finds that such tests focus on academic outcomes as the measure of ‘success’, thus reducing emphasis on other skills and outcomes, and narrowing curriculum delivery to ‘tested’ subjects (Carlin 2003; Gallagher and Smith 2000; Smith et al. 2000). To this end, Maths and English receive disproportionate attention by teachers in the latter years of primary education, at the expense of more civic-focused curriculum areas, such as history and geography, and aesthetic subjects such as art and music. The de-prioritisation of these subjects, and the associated devaluing of their worth, is especially pernicious in Northern Ireland given both the orientation of civic-related subjects to fostering peace-building and conflict recovery, and the association of the arts with health and well-being.

Commitment to the well-being of all citizens can also be considered an important dimension of ideational cohesion, and in this regard, injury inflicted by the process of academic selection on children’s well-being is particularly egregious. For many years, researchers in Northern Ireland have drawn attention to the negative impact on confidence and self-esteem of either failing the transfer test or not sitting it and transferring directly to a non-selective school (Brown et al. 2021; Carlin 2003; Gardner and Cowan 2005; Leitch, 2020). The impact of failing a test that pupils and their parents perceive as

determining whole life chances is something from which many struggle to recover. A primary school principal cited by Brown et al. (2021), commented:

Children view themselves as being a failure ... and it's the devastation to the children themselves who are waiving on a score, and that score defines them, and in one moment of opening an envelope they are defined as a success or failure at the age of 10 or 11. (493)

Carlin notes that this sense of failure is often intensified in children at non-selective schools by having a sibling who has 'made it' to the grammar school (Carlin 2003). Moreover, research suggests those successful in the test harbour negative assumptions about the behaviour and ability of their peers at non-selective schools (Knox 2010; Loader 2015), militating against notional claims of 'equality' among students.

In recent years, stress and anxiety associated with the transfer tests has risen, with increased numbers of children seeking counselling for 'crippling anxiety' (Beattie 2017). Byrne and Gallagher (2004) also report that non-selective schools are often left to 'pick up the pieces' in the aftermath of academic selection, with significant effort and resource directed to promoting confidence and rebuilding self-belief amongst pupils in the first year of secondary education. In such schools, higher numbers of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, taken together with the psychological and emotional costs of transfer test failure amongst many new entry pupils, serves to compromise the learning environment of pupils relative to their grammar school peers, and is certainly not conducive with values of social inclusion and well-being.

## Conclusion

In this paper, we sought to explore the social costs of academic transfer tests and the grammar school system in Northern Ireland. Employing three core dimensions of social cohesion (distributive, relational and ideational), and drawing on research and empirical evidence, we highlight how equality and equity are not the only casualties of a system that had already been deemed deeply flawed. In summary, we argue that academic selection perpetuates middle-class advantage and limits potential for the development of a more integrative and inclusive education system. In a society emerging from conflict, those in more marginalised communities experience the consequences of this most acutely, and in communities that are historically segregated and susceptible to paramilitary control, educational failure and the absence of social mobility are more likely to manifest in violence and intergroup hostility.

We propose three explanations for the retention of academic selection and the grammar school system, even in the face of accumulated evidence that this system disadvantages the already most disadvantaged. First, cross-cutting middle-class interests have served to mobilise a grammar school lobby, comprising both Catholics and Protestants, that has acted decisively to protect its privilege. As noted, an inverse response appears to manifest in more marginalised communities, where educational disadvantage and underachievement is associated with the perpetuation of ethno-religious hostilities. There is little empirical evidence to explain the processes involved, but Leitch and Cairns (2020), drawing on a large-scale study exploring educational achievement and disadvantage, point to a number of variables that may contribute. These include, a siege mentality in some communities that impose spatial



mobility restrictions on young people, undermines the value of education, and stigmatises those who deviate from community norms; the associated power of paramilitaries; local level drug and alcohol cultures, and the spatial detachment of grammar schools from the more disadvantaged community areas.

Second, we observe that discourses justifying selection appear to weaken a collective response to reform the current system. For example, research from the last large-scale study of academic selection in Northern Ireland found that teachers in non-grammar schools – who might be in a position to advocate on behalf of their school communities – were less united in their opposition to a bipartite system than grammar school staff were in support of it (Byrne 2000; Smith et al. 2000). Prominent in teachers' responses were assumptions about the existence of 'academic' and 'non-academic' children who require different types of education in separate peer groups (Smith et al. 2000) – arguments redolent of post-war educationalists. Similar discourses are also apparent in responses from pupils and parents concerning academic selection (D'Arcy 2000; Sutherland 2000), and in politicians' claims for the need for different schools to 'match' children's aptitudes (Hansard NI Assembly Deb, 26 April 2021). Whether such arguments are deployed strategically or are sincerely held, they indicate how selection continues to influence understandings of education in the region, to the detriment of efforts towards systemic reform.

Third, in defaulting to the neo-liberal principle of parental choice, government in Northern Ireland has resisted intervening in education in a way that can comprehensively address manifest inequalities. Indeed, parental choice and, to a lesser extent, schools' self-governance have been presented as *sine qua non*s that elected representatives, including the Education Minister, are powerless to challenge. This response has been particularly prevalent in the DUP, until March 2022 the largest party in the Executive and in charge of the Education Ministry, which has resisted calls from nationalist and non-aligned parties for the reform of the current system. Its representatives' comments vaunting 'strong parental demand for selection' and schools' autonomy over admissions criteria (Hansard NI Assembly Deb, 26 April 2021) present intervention as both undesirable and impracticable. The effects of this are seen most clearly in the tolerance for unregulated testing that followed the abolition of the state-sponsored transfer test in 2006, and more recently in the Education Department's support for academic transfer based on test scores (DENI 2020). Somewhat ironically, as noted above, significant investment in education interventions and initiatives aimed at promoting positive intergroup relations, including shared and integrated education, is undermined by the system of academic selection that valorises educational achievement over inclusion and peacebuilding.

Unfortunately, as noted in our analysis, while those in more advantaged middle-class Catholic and Protestant communities can pool their resources to act in common interest, inequality and disadvantage tend not to translate in mobilisation and political lobbying within more marginalised communities, rather in recourse to destabilising ethno-sectarian practices. In terms of social cohesion and the imperative it places on tackling inequality and disadvantage and generating opportunity for social mobility across all of society, it seems particularly egregious that the young and most vulnerable in the most disadvantaged Catholic and Protestant communities are the victims of an education system that manifestly fails to serve their interests.



## Notes

1. Unlike the rest of the UK, Scotland did not implement reforms after the second world war to establish grammar schools, although a form of selection had been introduced during the interwar years (SESC 2017). By the late 1970s, 98% of Scotland's post-primary pupils attended comprehensive schools.
2. Within Northern Ireland, attempts to introduce comprehensive schooling have been limited to local towns (Carlin 2003). However, as pupils from these areas often travel to nearby towns to attend grammar schools, this has limited impact on selection as a whole. In addition, in the 1960s parts of County Armagh elected to delay selection from 11 to 14, maintaining a bipartite system from 14 to 18.

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