

Transfer Talks

A mixed methods exploration of the impact of the non-testing year of post-primary transfer on children, parents and educators in Northern Ireland



May 2024

Prof Noel Purdy, Dr Glenda Walsh, Dr Karen Orr,
Dr Anne Rowan, Dr Emilia Symington, Dr Franka Winter

Executive Summary

During the 2020-2021 academic year, the transfer tests used by grammar schools to select admissions to year 8 were first postponed and then cancelled as a result of ongoing public health concerns during the Covid-19 pandemic. Consequently, admission to grammar schools for September 2021 was instead determined by alternative criteria set by individual schools, all but three of which adopted non-academic criteria. The ‘non-testing’ cohort of children who began their post-primary education in September 2021 (and are currently in year 10) therefore represent a unique cohort of children within post-primary schools since they transferred using very different admissions criteria (on the part of the grammar schools) from previous or subsequent years.

This original research project, funded by the Office of the Mental Health Champion of Northern Ireland, aimed to explore pupils’, parents’/carers’ and teachers’ lived experiences of that non-testing year of post-primary transfer in Northern Ireland, including the perceived impact on children’s emotional health and wellbeing. The study adopted a mixed methodological approach involving two online surveys, the first completed by the 2020-2021 P7 cohort who are now in year 10 (n = 135) and the second by their parents/carers (n = 159); followed by a range of semi-structured interviews with a variety of adult and child participant groups including grammar and non-grammar school leaders (n=12), primary school leaders (n=6), parents/carers (n=23) and, most importantly, the young people themselves in both grammar and non-grammar settings (n=41). The research was conducted between May and November 2023.

The findings highlight that the prolonged uncertainty, the resulting “rollercoaster ride” of postponement, and the eventual cancellation of the AQE tests just four days before the first test was due to take place on 9 January 2021, were most keenly felt by those at the centre of the post-primary transfer process: the children themselves but also by their parents/carers and (to a lesser extent) their primary school teachers and principals. The study found high levels of stress among a majority of children (53%) and a negative impact on their appetite, levels of anxiety and sleep patterns, with one in eight children reporting that the experience has had a lasting negative impact on them. Parents/carers confirmed this negative impact: for instance, over half noticed that their child became more anxious (55%) and were concerned about their child’s mental health (53%) during that time. Almost a third (31%) of parents/carers felt that the experience has had a lasting negative impact on their child. The consequences were also felt by many of the parents/carers themselves who likewise reported their own high levels of stress (84%) and a negative impact on their own mental health (46%).

While there is evidence that for some children the negative impact of the non-testing year continues into the present day, it is encouraging that the overwhelming majority of pupils (91%) have now settled well into their post-primary schools, despite some initial reservations and concerns. The interviews with post-primary school leaders also revealed a clear professional commitment to identifying and addressing the academic, social and emotional needs of the entire cohort of children (now in year 10), who, it is acknowledged, have presented unique challenges as a result of admission by means of the alternative admissions criteria but also as a consequence of their lockdown home-schooling experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic.

This study has also confirmed that academic selection, whether by test or by alternative admissions criteria, continues to create “winners and losers” (Brown et al., 2021) in terms of the common (and unhelpful) perception that those who gain admission to the grammar school of their choice are the “winners” and those who fail to gain admission are the “losers”. This study into the lived experience of the non-testing year has once again shown that there were “winners and losers” but under new rules of engagement.

As a result, while previous studies have highlighted the pressures that children experience in a “normal” year of post-primary transfer tests (Gallagher & Smith, 2000; R2R, 2019; Pivotal, 2022), this was exacerbated during the non-testing year by the uncertainty of the tests taking place, their eventual cancellation and the subsequent use of non-academic admissions criteria by almost all grammar schools in Northern Ireland. As such, there were “new rules” during that year, and while there was a clear effort on the part of grammar schools to replicate the outcome of the process as much as possible to honour the preparation already undertaken by thousands of 10 and 11-year old children, this study has confirmed that the alternative criteria led to a new set of “winners and losers”. Under the new arrangements, it is clear that those *without* familial connections to the grammar school of their choice (e.g. through older siblings or other family links) were less likely to gain admission, despite their high practice test scores (judged to reflect high academic ability). Conversely, those *with* familial connections (e.g. through older siblings or other family links), despite their average or low practice test scores (judged to reflect average or low academic ability) were more likely to gain admission.

Under the new rules, the application of the alternative admissions criteria thus created a new and different set of “winners and losers” and a deep sense of injustice voiced by pupils (and their parents/carers) who would ordinarily have gained a grammar school place under the well-established system of academic selection by transfer test. The particular circumstances vary widely, but include for the most part high achieving pupils who failed to meet any of the alternative non-academic (e.g. familial) admissions criteria used by the vast majority of grammar schools, but also include pupils whose year 5 standardised literacy and numeracy test scores were low and who thus failed to gain admission to the three grammar schools who used those academic criteria to select pupils. For those wealthier families who were ordinarily able to support their children’s learning at home and to pay for private tutoring to prepare their children for the transfer tests to help guarantee a place at the grammar school of their choice, there was nothing that could be done and no way in which advantage could be given to their children in the absence of familial connection. There is no doubting their sense of injustice as the rules were changed so late in the day. These are however just the latest “losers” in a system of post-primary transfer where the traditional losers are those children from low income households (entitled to free school meals), newcomer children and children with special educational needs, all of whom have been underrepresented in grammar schools for many years (see Purdy et al., 2023), and whose voices are rarely heard.

This revelatory study has highlighted that the lived experience of many of those on board the “rollercoaster ride” of post-primary transfer in 2020-21 was fraught with uncertainty, stress and anxiety and resulted in a negative toll on many children and parents’ emotional health and wellbeing, which, for some, has had an enduring impact far beyond that profoundly challenging year.

While post-primary transfer remains a “politically contentious and polarising issue” (Independent Review of Education, 2023, vol.2, p.150), and as a set of new proposals have injected new energy into a previously stagnant policy context, it is clear that we must learn the lessons from the stressful experiences of the non-testing year. In addition, we must have the courage to bring fresh thinking to this polarised debate, and work to design a new, fairer post-primary transfer system which prioritises the emotional health and wellbeing of all of our children irrespective of their background or ability.

As one primary school teacher put it, the non-testing year provided an opportunity for a major re-think of the system of post-primary transfer and for a “bigger change”, so perhaps this is now the time, as they suggest, to “just rip that plaster and sort it out”.

Acknowledgements

The research team at the Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement (CREU), Stranmillis University College, would like to thank all those who so willingly participated in this research project: the young people; parents/carers; teachers and school leaders from primary, grammar and non-grammar post-primary schools across Northern Ireland. Finally, we are grateful to the Office of the Mental Health Champion for Northern Ireland for funding this significant and timely research study.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic represents a once-in-a-generation crisis which impacted on almost all aspects of our lives. A report by UNESCO, UNICEF and the World Bank (2021) noted, for instance, that the global disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic constitutes “the worst education crisis on record” (p.4). The report also argues notably that, as well as addressing the significant impact that the lockdowns had on children’s learning, it should be a clear priority to support re-opened schools across the world to provide comprehensive services promoting wellbeing and psychosocial support (p.7) and to address the “crisis within a crisis” (p.26) of child and youth mental health. In Northern Ireland, as in many other countries, the Covid-19 pandemic undoubtedly exacerbated pre-existing social and educational inequalities, with three comprehensive studies of home-schooling experiences highlighting the disproportionately negative impact on already disadvantaged families (Walsh et al., 2020; Purdy et al., 2021; Social Mobility Commission, 2021).

The Covid-19 pandemic also led to the postponement and eventual cancellation of the November 2020 transfer tests, due to be taken by around 16,000 year 7 pupils in Northern Ireland. However, the process that led to the eventual cancellation of the tests was lengthy and complex, creating uncertainty for thousands of pupils, their parents and teachers for at least eight months. For instance, on 11 May 2020, just six weeks after the start of the first lockdown, and following the voicing of parental concerns, it was announced by the two testing bodies, the Association of Quality Education (AQE) and the Post-Primary Transfer Consortium (PPTC) that the first transfer tests would be held two weeks later than usual on 21 November 2020 with subsequent tests scheduled for 28 November and 12 December 2020. It was reported at the time (BBC, 2020) that the AQE had originally wanted to postpone its tests until January 2021 but that this was deemed impossible by the Department of Education due to the demands of the timescale for the wider transfer process. Education Minister Peter Weir MLA noted that this announcement in May 2020 would provide pupils, parents and teachers with the “clarity” they had been seeking, and, he hoped, would “remove any stress that pupils and parents might be feeling and provide reassurance in terms of being able to plan and work towards the new dates that have been announced” (BBC, 2020). However, more changes and increased uncertainty were to follow.

By 21 August 2020, it was reported in the media that the transfer tests may be postponed to January 2021 after all, following an application for a High Court judicial review by two parents seeking to challenge the decision to delay the exams by just two weeks. In the judicial review the parents argued that this very short delay would discriminate against their children and other disadvantaged families, whose learning had been most disrupted by the lockdown of March to June 2020. When the judicial review was heard on 2 September 2020, it was agreed in the High Court that the tests would be scheduled for January 2021. This outcome was welcomed by the solicitor acting for one of the parents:

"The global pandemic has brought about unprecedented change to the way of living. Such unprecedented change must be mirrored by the Department of Education in ensuring children's interests are protected. Making children undertake life changing exams during such turbulent times would be most unfair. The right decision has been made this morning." (UTV, 2020)

One of the parents themselves expressed their frustration at the decision-making process:

"We hope that this will go some way to address the educational disadvantages experienced by some children during lockdown. We are both frustrated and disappointed that it took to the very last minute for this decision to be made and that we had to take legal action in the first place." (UTV, 2020)

The tests were duly scheduled for Saturday 9, 16 and 23 January 2021, but on Tuesday 5 January, "at the eleventh hour" (BBC, 2021) just four days before the first test was due to be sat, the tests were cancelled due to public health concerns amid a new Covid-19 surge. At the time parents and primary principals spoke of their anger and frustration at the cancellation of the tests, and recounted that their children had been working hard for the tests for many months including most recently over the Christmas holidays. On the day that the cancellation was announced, one primary school principal explained that there was now considerable uncertainty and accompanying concern as to what criteria would be used instead by the grammar schools to determine their admissions for September 2021 (BBC, 2021).

Due to the cancellation of the transfer tests on 5 January 2021 and in the absence of any alternative cohort data, post-primary admissions for the 2021/22 school year were instead determined by alternative criteria set by each individual grammar school in January 2021 within the bounds of departmental guidelines. For a full analysis of the alternative admissions criteria developed by the grammar schools and the impact on the social composition of the year 8 cohort who transferred to grammar and non-grammar schools in September 2021, see Purdy et al. (2023).

Following the anomalous non-testing year of post-primary transfer (2020-21), the same pattern of AQE and GL transfer tests resumed for the two following years (with tests held in November 2021 and November 2022) but this model was replaced in 2023 by a new test administered by a single testing body, the Schools' Entrance Assessment Group (SEAG). The new single entrance assessment comprised two tests taken on 11 and 25 November 2023 with standardised outcomes for pupils transferring to all post-primary schools in Northern Ireland which use academic criteria within their year 8 admissions criteria.

The 'non-testing' cohort of children who began their post-primary education in September 2021 (and are currently in year 10) therefore represent a unique cohort of children within grammar schools since they transferred using very different admissions criteria (on the part of the grammar schools) from previous or subsequent years.

While the Testing Times report (Purdy et al., 2023), funded by the Nuffield Foundation, provided a detailed analysis of the revised admissions criteria and a statistical analysis of the resulting social composition of the pupil cohort admitted into post-primary schools in September 2021 compared to previous years, it nonetheless failed to tell the complete story of how the year 7 children, their parents and teachers (both primary and post-primary) experienced the challenges of that year, and was also unable to consider how those children had settled into their post-primary schools.

Consequently, the current study sets out to complement the earlier quantitative study, with a mixed methods exploration of the lived experiences of those most closely impacted by the non-testing year. In particular, the current study sets out to answer the following central research questions:

- What were the P7 pupils' lived experiences of the non-testing year and its outcomes, including the impact they feel the experiences had on their emotional health and wellbeing, and the extent to which they have settled in their post-primary schools?
- What were parents/carers' lived experiences of the non-testing year and its outcomes, including the impact they feel the experiences had on their child's (and their own) emotional health and wellbeing?
- What were teachers' and school leaders' lived experiences of the non-testing year and its outcomes, with particular reference to their perceptions of the immediate and medium-term impact of the non-testing year on pupils' academic development and emotional health and wellbeing?

Chapter 2. Review of the Literature

The current state of mental ill health among children and young people in Northern Ireland is startling. Drawing on findings from the Young Life and Kids Life and Times Surveys, a recent report published by the Mental Health Champion (Bond & O'Neill, 2023) reveals that almost half of 16-year-olds (42.2%) in Northern Ireland have a probable mental illness and the wellbeing among 11-year-olds in 2022/23 is at its lowest level ever. In a similar vein, the first ever Northern Ireland Youth Wellbeing survey (Bunting et al., 2020) indicates that one in eight children and young people, aged 5 – 16 years, experience emotional difficulties, one in 10 have conduct problems, one in seven have problems with hyperactivity, and one in eight meet the criteria for common mood and anxiety disorders. Indeed, Northern Ireland is reported to have the highest prevalence of mental health problems in the United Kingdom, around 25% higher than those in England (NI Audit Office, 2023). Consequently, experts such as O'Neill and Rooney (2018, p. 965) describe the situation as 'urgent'. Yet, while the increase in mental ill health in Northern Ireland is alarming, it is not exclusive, since, according to the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2021) one in seven 10-19-year-olds globally experiences a mental disorder, accounting for 13% of the global burden of disease in this age group. Furthermore, the WHO reports that depression, anxiety and behavioural disorders are among the leading causes of illness and disability among adolescents, and that suicide is the fourth leading cause of death among 15-29 year-olds.

While many possible causes and potential solutions have been purported, there is a growing argument that high stakes testing, and the academic pressure associated with it, is a significant factor affecting the mental health of many children and young people in today's society. A study conducted by a team of researchers from University College, London supports such thinking. Drawing on a comprehensive systematic review of 52 studies in the field, Steare et al. (2023) found a positive association between academic pressure and adolescent mental health problems. This argument, of course, has particular relevance to the context of Northern Ireland where a system of academic selection for admission to grammar schools still exists for the majority of 10/11 year olds, a system which has been in place since the Northern Ireland Education Act in 1947 and remains a central feature of Northern Ireland's political landscape (Brown et al., 2021).

2.1 Academic selection and negative impact on children's mental health and wellbeing

2.1.1 Academic selection results in poor confidence and self-esteem

Although most other areas across the United Kingdom abandoned academic selection in favour of comprehensive education during the 60s and 70s, Northern Ireland has continued to retain a form of academic selection at the age of 10/11 where children's future education is determined by their performance across a series of academic tests (Gallagher & Smith, 2000; Brown et al., 2021; Pivotal, 2022). For many years, researchers have drawn attention to the failings of such a system, particularly with regard to the negative impact of academic selection on children's confidence and self-esteem, emanating from the seminal study in this field conducted by

Gallagher and Smith almost a quarter of a century ago (Gallagher & Smith, 2000). Drawing on a rigorous mixed-methods and multi-source research design, Gallagher and Smith's findings raised significant concerns about the undue pressure that children were being exposed to at an early age in Northern Ireland as a result of academic selection and the associated negative impact on children's well-being, motivation and aspirations. Similarly, several secondary school teachers reported the significant time spent on their part in re-building the self-confidence and self-esteem of those pupils who had been unsuccessful in achieving a grammar school place and in addressing the associated negative feelings of children being deemed as 'failures' at such a young age. Indeed, a recent review of literature in this field conducted by Pivotal (2022) confirms these findings, emphasising that the young age at which children complete the transfer test in Northern Ireland intensifies the stress and pressure experienced due to their developmental immaturity and their lack of experience completing "high stakes" formal examinations.

Similarly, a small scale study conducted by Right to Education (R2R) (2019) and facilitated by Participation and the Practice of Rights (PPR) engaged with pupils, parents and teachers from a diverse group of schools in urban and rural settings across Northern Ireland using a mixed methods methodology. More than 200 pupils and 50 teachers participated in the research. The sample of pupils included those who sat the transfer test and those who did not, and those who were successful or unsuccessful. The findings suggest that the majority of the pupils (60%) surveyed felt that completing the academic tests had not been a positive experience and approximately two thirds of them were of the opinion that the whole process had negatively impacted their confidence. Likewise, a large majority of the teachers (92%) indicated that the transfer test had a significant negative impact on children's mental health while 88% of the teachers stated that academic selection does not enable children to reach their full potential.

2.1.2 Academic selection breeds winners and losers

In addition, Brown et al. (2021) argue that the process of academic selection creates a system of "winners and losers", the losers being those who either "fail" the test (in that they do not achieve the required score to secure the grammar school of their choice) or do not sit the test and transfer directly to a non-selective secondary school (Hughes & Loader, 2022; Brown et al., 2021; Leitch et al., 2017; Gardner & Cowan, 2005). The injury inflicted on children's well-being as a result of "losing" out is described by Hughes and Loader (2022, p.11) as "particularly egregious" and something from which many children struggle to recover. Feelings of acute personal failure as a result of not gaining a place at a grammar school can seem insurmountable when aged 10 or 11 and are intensified, it seems, if siblings have been successful in gain a grammar school place (Brown et al., 2021; Gardner & Cowan, 2005). Indeed, Hoddle (2006) argues that such feelings of failure do not disappear easily and can stay with individuals throughout their lives.

Even for the "winners" i.e., those who are successful in gaining a place in a selective school, all is not positive. Research by Jerrim and Sims (2019a) on grammar schools in England found little evidence that gaining a grammar school place impacted positively on children's social and emotional outcomes. The study revealed that while many parents greatly value the grammar school place for their child's future well-being, aspirations and behaviour, by age 14,

three years after pupils have entered post-primary education, Jerrim and Sims found few, if any, positive effects on children's wellbeing from having attended a grammar school. Murphy and Weinhardt's study (2020) into "Big Fish, Little Pond effects" supports these findings, indicating that grammar school pupils often develop lower levels of academic self-concept and self-efficacy, as their main reference point will be high achieving peers. Drawing on evidence derived from three primary schools that use a selective entry examination to stream students into secondary schools based on ability, Skipper (2016) argues that the 11+ examination promotes a fixed view of intelligence that can damage both those who fail and those who pass the exam. Children are given the impression that performance in a primary school examination determines their future academic achievement without the need to work hard in school, to persist in the face of setbacks and to choose challenging goals, all of which are associated with a more malleable view of intelligence. Indeed, according to Carton (2023), academic selection feeds the myth that if a child hasn't achieved success in school by the age of 10 or 11, then they have somehow failed in their education and their future is now predetermined. What is even more concerning is that stress levels on the part of children sitting the test, according to research, are on the increase, resulting in severe anxiety and stress (Beattie, 2017) and as Carton (2023) argues, non-selective secondary schools spend most of their first year rebuilding confidence and self-belief as a result of the "11+ labelling system" (unpaginated).

2.1.3 Academic selection perpetuates social division

Many researchers also criticise the selective system for its divisive nature and argue that it breeds educational inequality, inequity and social injustice (Carlin, 2003; Jerrim & Sims, 2019b; McMurray, 2020; Harris et al., 2021; Purdy et al, 2021; Brown et al., 2021; Pivotal, 2022). Indeed, Hughes and Loader (2022) argue that academic selection acts as a barrier to social cohesion, perpetuating middle-class advantage and limiting the potential of a more integrative and inclusive education system. Drawing on three core dimensions of social cohesion theory, namely distributive, relational and ideational, they argue that a system of academic selection "serves to perpetuate class and group divisions within and between school sectors, and across wider society in Northern Ireland" and that this system "disadvantages the already most disadvantaged" (p.12).

A rapid review of evidence on educational underachievement, compiled by the Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement (Henderson et al., 2020), agrees with such thinking, confirming that academic selection has significant social, educational and economic consequences for pupils. Drawing on an international evidence base, the review indicates that forms of stratification in education systems i.e., sorting pupils into separate educational 'tracks', as is the case with the process of academic selection in Northern Ireland, magnifies inequality. Indeed, the area of greatest concern raised by Henderson et al. (2020) is the finding that the most important factor which influenced student achievement at GCSE was whether individuals had been placed in a grammar school or not, with the evidence suggesting that those pupils who have access to social capital (i.e., the more middle class children) are more likely to achieve high scores in the transfer test and gain a place in grammar schools (Carlin, 2003; Sheldrake, 2018).

Jerrim and Sims' (2019b) study provides further evidence to support this underlying relationship between household income and preference for schools with good exam results in

Northern Ireland. Using data from 1039 Northern Ireland pupils from the Millennium Cohort Study, they report that pupils from the top quartile of household income were 33% more likely to attend a selective grammar school than pupils from the bottom quartile. Furthermore, their findings suggest that per £100 increase in weekly family income, pupils were 7% more likely to receive private tutoring in Maths and English and that those pupils who received such tutoring were twice as likely to gain a place in a grammar school compared to those pupils who were not tutored (Jerrim & Sims, 2019).

Recent evidence from the Social Mobility Commission (2021) indicates that the socio-economic divide in Northern Ireland between pupils at selective and non-selective schools has widened in recent years. In 2020-21, only 14% of pupils in selective schools were eligible for Free School Meals (FSM), compared with 37% in non-selective schools. The Social Mobility Commission (2022) argues that transfer test results at age 10/11 are affected by high parental aspirations and rates of private tutoring in high-income households, which in reality means that grammar school places are disproportionately distributed to children from more socio-economically advantaged backgrounds. In this way, academics such as Hughes and Loader (2022, p.1) argue that the selective system in Northern Ireland impedes progress in terms of building a more “socially cohesive society”, where educational failure, underachievement and the absence of social mobility are most pronounced in the most disadvantaged and marginalised communities, while the most advantaged are protected by the selective system and thus remain the most privileged.

In a society where social mobility is stifled, the rich get richer and the poor become poorer, and according to a growing body of evidence, there is a strong link between socioeconomic disadvantage and mental ill health (Knifton & Inglis, 2020; EPI, 2018). The determinants of mental health and wellbeing are largely shaped by the society we live in, and according to Macintyre et al. (2018), a clear link exists between social and economic inequality and poor mental health with people of lower socioeconomic status having a higher likelihood of developing and experiencing mental health problems. While academic selection may have some benefits for those students gaining entry to selective grammar schools, Brown et al. (2021) question the cost to those students who are unsuccessful in the selection process.

2.2 Academic selection and positive impact on children’s lives

In sharp contrast to the evidence presented above, there is nonetheless a body of opinion, albeit quite sparse and in some cases somewhat anecdotal, that still supports a system of academic selection, proffering a number of key advantages of such a process, principally for those children who gain entry to selective grammar schools. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with primary and post-primary school leaders, benefits articulated, according to Brown et al. (2021), include boosting high academic performance as well as providing a culturally enriching experience for students. Building confidence is also alluded to where it is considered an achievement to gain admission to a grammar school, as well as providing an equal playing field, where all pupils, it is argued, irrespective of their social standing, have the opportunity to complete the test, including those from disadvantaged families.

McMurray (2020) agrees that proponents of academic selection draw significantly on the impact of grammar school attendance on academic achievement and the increased confidence associated with such success. Data from government departments such as the Department of Education in Northern Ireland confirm these findings, highlighting that selective grammar school pupils on average significantly outperform their non-selective secondary counterparts in terms of GCSE scores. Data from DENI (2020) indicate that a large majority of pupils at grammar schools (94%) achieved at least five GCSEs at grades A*-C including English and mathematics compared to 51% of students from non-selective schools, findings which are consistent with evidence on pupils attending selective schools in England (Andrews et al., 2016).

Another argument presented in favour of academic selection, is the increased number of grammar school pupils who attend university (Lu, 2021). Drawing on data from NISRA in 2019/2020, the statistics reveal that almost 76% of grammar school pupils in Northern Ireland went on to University after completing their A-levels, compared to only 26% of pupils from non-grammar schools (Bain, 2021). Research by Mansfield (2019), although sometimes criticised for its weak methodological design, suggests that children who attend a selective (rather than a non-selective) school in England, including those children from very disadvantaged backgrounds and those from BME backgrounds, have a better chance of attending highly selective universities such as Oxford and Cambridge. For example, a state school pupil with a BME background is reported to be more than five times as likely to progress to Oxbridge if they live in a selective area rather than a non-selective area (Mansfield, 2019). In this way, Mansfield's study argues that selective grammar schools increase social mobility opportunities, offering an "unrivalled ladder of opportunity" to those from disadvantaged backgrounds, enabling them to progress to highly selective universities which would not be available to them under a comprehensive system of education (Mansfield, 2019, p.50).

Many proponents of academic selection are also quite scathing of non-selective comprehensive schooling in England, not only in terms of scholastic attainment but also in terms of reducing inequalities of opportunity. A seminal piece of sociological research conducted by Heath et al. (2005) concludes that the introduction of comprehensive schooling has been ineffectual in reducing social inequalities in terms of outcomes. It is argued that the shift away from academic selection in favour of all-ability comprehensive education has thus had little if any impact on creating greater equality of educational opportunity. Similarly, Garner (2013) cites the then Chief Inspector of Schools in England, claiming that "many non-selective schools fail to imbue their most able students with the confidence and high ambition that characterise many students in the selective or independent sector" (unpaginated). Likewise, an article in the Guardian (2013) suggests that comprehensive schools have failed the working classes not only in terms of academic outcomes but also by denying them opportunities to climb the social ladder, something which the author claims that grammar schools did undeniably.

In a similar vein, Kitchen (2021) has blamed the current curriculum (rather than academic selection) for the levels of underachievement in Northern Ireland, opining that teacher-led, direct instruction models benefit disadvantaged pupils more fully than a skills-based curriculum founded on the progressive ideals of child-centredness, constructivism and autonomous learning. Kitchen therefore supports the continuation, not only of academic selection, but also of more traditional teaching methods, on the grounds that they will enhance children's academic skills, problem-solving skills, self-esteem and overall wellbeing.

2.3 The non-testing year of post-primary transfer in Northern Ireland

Despite the arguments presented in opposition to academic selection, particularly with regard to children's mental health and wellbeing, a form of academic selection prevails in Northern Ireland. Over the years, there have been few, if any, developments or suggested alternatives, resulting in a widespread sense of frustration among many parents at the 'policy paralysis' (Gallagher, 2021, p.19) and its resulting impact on children (Black & McHugh, 2021).

Yet in the academic year 2020-21, a unique opportunity to explore an alternative to academic selection, as we know it in Northern Ireland, emerged almost accidentally. Public health concerns as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic led uniquely to the postponement and eventual cancellation of the AQE and PPTC transfer tests that usually determine pupils' post-primary school placement. Due to these cancellations, admissions for the 2021/22 school year were determined principally by non-academic criteria set by individual grammar schools within the bounds of departmental guidelines, whilst the overall system of academic selection remained otherwise unchanged.

Drawing on this unprecedented context, a team from the Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement (Purdy et al., 2023) used this unique opportunity to explore the learning gleaned from the non-testing year of post-primary transfer. The findings of the 'Testing Times' study revealed that all but three grammar schools (i.e. 60 out of 63) employed entirely non-academic criteria, such as, older sibling/s currently attending school, AQE/GL registration, eldest/first/only child in family, and sibling who was previously enrolled/completed education at school. Analysis of the additional information provided to parents which accompanied the list of criteria revealed that many grammar schools also made frequent mention of their strong and enduring commitment to academic selection as the principal method of entry to their school, and of their intention to revert to academic selection in subsequent years. The majority of grammar schools also referred to fees payable.

Differences in the demographic composition of the 2021/22 year 8 cohort admitted in the absence of AQE and GL tests, according to Purdy et al. (2023), were negligible, when compared to previous year 8 cohorts. However, while there has been little or no change in the demographic composition of the year 8 cohorts transferring to grammar and non-grammar schools in the non-testing year when compared to previous years, the data reveal very stark differences (over the past four years, including the non-testing year) in the pupil cohorts entering year 8 in grammar schools when compared to non-grammar schools. In particular, the study confirmed that the grammar school sector in Northern Ireland, consistently, has very few children from the most socially deprived areas, very few children entitled to Free School Meals, very few children with Special Educational Needs and very few newcomer children. Therefore, this study provided evidence that even in the absence of transfer tests in 2020-21, the demographic profile of pupils entering grammar schools in September 2021 remained virtually unchanged.

Yet, while Purdy et al.'s (2023) quantitative study was highly significant, the current qualitative research aims to go further by exploring the perspectives and lived experiences of those most closely impacted by the non-testing year, especially the children themselves at the very heart of the process.

2.4 The Independent Review of Education

The question of academic selection has been considered most recently following the publication in December 2023 of the report of the Independent Review of Education (2023). In Volume 1 of the final report, *Investing in a Better Future*, the review panel recommended the development of a new test-based pupil profile, based on a model first proposed twenty years ago in the Costello Report (DE, 2004). In particular, the proposal states that:

“We recommend that the transfer process move away from being based on a one-off test at age 11 towards use of a pupil profile informed by statutory assessment and enabled by computer adaptive testing, as this technology develops. The information provided for progression purposes should go beyond numeracy and literacy and be consistent with the aims of the curriculum.” (Independent Review of Education, 2023, vol.1, p.51)

In Volume 2 of the panel’s report, we read further that in order to avoid “subjective judgements”, the main component of such pupil profiles would be test-based:

“In other words, pupil profiles used for selection would be largely based on the results of assessments undertaken throughout the learner’s time at primary school, largely via computer adaptive testing. The emphasis would obviously be on more recent assessments” (p.160).

In addition, the panel recommends that the use of pupil profiles (as outlined above and using statutory test data currently not available) could be “supplemented” by interviews undertaken by post-primary schools, which could “look for the qualities it believes to be demonstrated by those passing the current test” (p.160). There is also a recommendation of a cap of between 25-30% of any given year 8 cohort who can be admitted to post-primary by way of academic selection, thus creating a range of options whereby post-primary schools could operate a fully selective model, a bilateral module or a non-selective model. Finally, the panel recommends that selective schools must prioritise children entitled to Free School Meals to “ensure that the proportion of such children admitted is not less than the proportion of first-preference applications received” (p.164), and that the Department of Education should issue guidance to help increase the percentage of newcomer children in grammar schools.

At the time of writing, a public consultation is expected on all of the proposals of the Independent Review of Education, and there is no indication as to whether any or all of the panel’s recommendations will be endorsed by the newly appointed Minister of Education and/or the restored Executive.

Chapter 3. Methodology

This study adopted a mixed methodological approach involving: two large-scale online surveys, the first aimed at children and young people, the second at their parents/carers; followed by a range of face-to-face interviews and focus groups with a variety of different adult and child participant groups.

Through gathering data from a range of stakeholders, the project aimed to address the following central research questions:

- What were the pupils' lived experiences of the non-testing year and its outcomes, including the impact they feel the experiences had on their emotional health and wellbeing, and the extent to which they have settled in their post-primary schools?
- What were parents/carers' lived experiences of the non-testing year and its outcomes, including the impact they feel the experiences had on their child's (and their own) emotional health and wellbeing?
- What were teachers' and school leaders' lived experiences of the non-testing year and its outcomes, with particular reference to their perceptions of the immediate and medium-term impact of the non-testing year on academic development and emotional health and wellbeing?

3.1 Child and parent surveys

Two online surveys were distributed, one targeted at the parents/carers of those children in the 'non-testing' year, as well as a survey to be completed by the children themselves.

Child survey: The child survey explored, from the child's own perspective, their lived experiences of the 'non-testing' year. For example, the survey explored their experiences during the preparation period (as tests were first postponed and then cancelled), the impact that had on their emotional health and wellbeing, their feelings/levels of satisfaction about their eventual placement school, and how well they feel they had settled in (pupils are now in year 10).

Parent/carer survey: The parent/carer survey explored a range of issues related to the parents' experiences of the 'non-testing' year. For example, it addressed the parents'/carers' and children's lived experience of the transfer process during the non-testing year, including the perceived impact on their child's emotional health and wellbeing. It also addressed the impact on parents'/carers' emotional health and wellbeing, and any co-existing mental health difficulties (a key factor affecting children's mental health at this age).

Procedure: The surveys were hosted online using Smart Survey. Schools were invited to participate via direct contact links. The surveys were also advertised via social media platforms and remained open for a period of 4 weeks. In total, N=135 children and N=159 parents/carers responded to the surveys.

Analysis: Survey data were analysed using descriptive statistics (using Microsoft Excel, including the PivotTable feature, and SPSS). The data for each survey were initially cleaned and sorted to enable analysis of each question (or variable), including frequency counts and percentages, in respect to responses. This was followed by bi-variate analysis, comparing key

variables to identify any relationships in the data, for each of the surveys or age ranges. In addition, open-ended responses were separated from the quantitative data, and organised to enable thematic analysis.

3.2 Qualitative interviews and focus groups

Participants: A variety of different target populations were recruited to take part in interviews and focus groups. The research team held qualitative interviews and focus groups with a range of stakeholders, including school leaders, teachers, year heads, pupils, and parents/carers, providing further rich insights into the lived experiences of all relevant stakeholders during this time. The qualitative work aimed to gather insights into a range of topics, such as school decision-making during the ‘non-testing’ year, teachers’ and year 8/9 heads’ first hand experiences, as well as their perceptions of the impact on the children in terms of their academic progress and their emotional health and wellbeing; children’s lived experiences in terms of the impact on them during the ‘non-testing’ year and since (with a focus on emotional health and wellbeing, academic progress etc.); and parents’/carers’ own lived experiences as well as their views on the impact on their children. Three primary schools were also invited to participate in interviews and/or focus groups. In these settings, teachers (and principals if available) of the ‘non-testing’ year P7 children were invited to participate. These interviews explored, from the primary school perspective, the impact on the children at the time, as well as reflecting on their own experiences and perspectives as educators guiding the children (and their parents/carers) through a period of great uncertainty.

Table 1 - Details of qualitative interview participants

School Code	Interviewees	Date of interview	Format
Grammar School Pupils			
GS1	8 pupils (4 boys, 4 girls)	June 2023	face-to-face
GS2	8 pupils (4 boys, 4 girls)	November 2023	face-to-face
GS3	7 pupils (7 boys)	June 2023	face-to-face
Secondary School Pupils			
PP1	6 pupils (6 boys)	June 2023	face-to-face
PP2	2 pupils (2 girls)	June 2023	face-to-face
	2 pupils (2 boys)	June 2023	face-to-face
PP3	8 pupils (4 boys, 4 girls)	October 2023	face-to-face
Parents			
GS1	8 parents (7 female, 1 male)	June 2023	face-to-face
GS2	1 parent (female)	November 2023	face-to-face
	6 parents (4 female, 2 male)	November 2023	face-to-face
GS3	6 parents (4 female)	September 2023	remote
GS4	1 parent (female)	November 2023	remote
PP1	3 parents (female)	November 2023	remote
Grammar School Staff			
GS1	Principal and Year Head	June 2023	face-to-face

GS2	Principal	November 2023	online video
	Year Head	November 2023	face-to-face
GS3	Senior teacher	June 2023	face-to-face
Secondary School Staff			
NG1	Principal, two Vice-Principals and Year Head	June 2023	face-to-face
NG2	Principal	October 2023	face-to-face
NG3	Principal	June 2023	face-to-face
	Year Head	June 2023	face-to-face
Primary School Staff			
PS1	Vice Principal and P7 teacher	September 2023	face-to-face
PS2	Vice Principal and P7 teacher	October 2023	online video
PS3	Principal	June 2023	face-to-face
	P7 teacher	June 2023	face-to-face

Procedure: Semi-structured interview and focus group protocols were developed to suit the specific requirements and experiences of each of the different participant groups. Interviews and focus groups lasted between approximately 30 and 60 minutes, depending upon the participants and context. Interviews and focus groups were recorded using an audio recorder and were subsequently transcribed verbatim.

Analysis: Data were inductively thematically analysed (Braun et al., 2019) by experienced researchers. Following data familiarisation, transcripts were descriptively coded to develop an initial coding framework, refined through iterative discussion and coding rounds. Data were imported into ATLAS.ti Web to support data management and the coding framework applied to all transcripts. Supported by research notes and discussion, the team actively sought themes reflecting relevant key patterns within and across interviews and focus groups. These were continually checked and refined against transcripts, looking for patterns. Themes were defined, described, and labelled, and patterns were discussed.

3.3 Ethical considerations

Full ethical permission for the study was sought and granted by the Research and Ethics Committee of Stranmillis University College, Belfast, in line with the College's Code of Ethics in Research and the 4th edition of the *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research* (British Educational Research Association, 2018). Every effort was made throughout the research project to ensure that participants were informed about the nature and purpose of the study, their right to withdraw, confidentiality and anonymity, and data storage arrangements. All participants were required to read a full information sheet before consenting to participate in this research. Note also that signposting towards relevant support and information sources was provided to the participating children and young people and appropriate safeguarding procedures were implemented at all times.

Chapter 4. Quantitative results

4.1 Survey results: pupils

4.1.1 Demographics

In total, 135 usable responses were analyzed from the pupil survey. A relatively equal gender split was achieved with 41% of the sample identifying as male and 59% identifying as female (see Table 1). The majority of the sample identified as white (94%) and a majority considered themselves to be from a Protestant background (64%) compared to a Catholic background (26%, see Table 1). In total 16 respondents (12% of the sample) reported that they have a disability or special educational need. These tended to be cases of ADHD, dyslexia, and ASD (with single referrals of auditory processing disorder, epilepsy and diabetes). The majority of the sample (96%) are now attending a grammar school (see Table 2). For the majority (90%), the school they were attending at the time of survey completion was the same school they have been attending since leaving primary school.

Table 2: Demographic overview

Gender	Freq.	%	Valid %	Race/ethnicity	Freq.	%	Community background	Freq.	%	Valid %	Disability/SEN?	Freq.	%
Male	55	40.7	41.4	White	127	94.1	I am from a Protestant background	76	56.3	63.9	Yes	16	11.9
Female	78	57.8	58.6	Black, Caribbean or African	2	1.5	I am from a Catholic background	31	23.0	26.1	No	115	85.2
Missing	2	1.5		Mixed or multiple ethnic groups	6	4.4	Not sure	6	4.4	5.0	Prefer not to say	4	3.0
Total	135	98.5	100	Total	135	100.0	Prefer not to say	6	4.4	5.0	Total	135	100.0
							Missing	16	11.9				
							Total	135	100	100			

Table 3: School type and attendance since P7

School type	Freq.	%	Same school since primary school?	Freq.	%
Grammar School	130	96.3	Yes	122	90.4
Non-Grammar School	2	1.5	No	13	9.6
Don't know	3	2.2	Total	135	100.0
Total	135	100.0			

4.1.2 Response to tests being cancelled

When asked how they felt when they heard the tests had been cancelled, the three most frequently selected emotions were positive, i.e., happiness, relief and okay. Among the respondents, 49%, 42% and 32% respectively selected these emotions amongst a list of possible emotions (see Table 3 - note, the participants could select as many as appropriate). However, more negative emotions, such as frustration, shock, confusion and disappointment were also selected by a large proportion of the sample (31%, 28%, 27% and 25% respectively). Some respondents provided further detail on this topic (i.e., those that selected other and provided further insights). For example, two children referred to their disappointment at not being able to exercise the work and preparation they had put in. One child highlighted that they felt *'a bit miffed because we worked for ages'*, whilst another reported that they were *'really worried that all the preparation for the tests was now in vain and important opportunities had been taken from me that would certainly impact my future opportunities/ career'*. There were also several children who seemed less impacted (*'couldn't be bothered anyways'*/ *'didn't care'*) and those who were *'exstatic'*, *'greatful'*, *'happy happy happy'* and *'less anxious'*.

Table 4: Test cancelled - emotions

Emotion	Freq.	%
Happy	66	48.9
Relieved	57	42.2
Okay	43	31.9
Frustrated	42	31.1
Shocked	38	28.1
Confused	36	26.7
Disappointed	34	25.2
Angry	23	17
Sad	18	13.3
Worried	17	12.6
Scared	7	5.2
Other	13	9.6

4.1.3 Support and impact

In general, there was a strong sense of support amongst the children in terms of the support they felt from family ($m=4.51^1$; 95% agreed/ strongly agreed that during this time they were well supported by their family). Support from primary schools was, however, judged to be lower ($m=3.93$; 71% of the sample agreed/ strongly agreed that they felt supported by their primary school during this time, see Table 5).

¹ In the calculation of survey mean scores, numerical values have been assigned to the rating scales as follows: Strongly disagree (1), Disagree (2), Neither Agree nor Disagree (3), Agree (4), Strongly Agree (5).

Table 5: Perceived support (family and primary school)

	During this time, I felt well supported by my family		During this time, I felt well supported by my primary school	
Descriptive				
Min-Max	1-5		1-5	
Mean	4.51		3.93	
SD	.732		.994	
Frequencies	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Strongly Disagree	2	1.5	4	3.0
Disagree	1	.7	6	4.4
Neither Agree Nor Disagree	4	3.0	29	21.5
Agree	47	34.8	52	38.5
Strongly Agree	81	60	44	32.6
Total	135	135	135	100.0

Stress amongst the children during this time was verging on high ($m=3.44$; 53% of the sample agreed/ strongly agreed that they found the experience stressful). However, similar scores were evident for self-reported negative impacts ($m=3.5$; 56.3% agreed/ strongly agreed with the statement ‘I don’t think there has been any negative impact on me’). Notably, 18.6% of the respondents strongly/disagreed with this statement, demonstrating that almost one in five pupils felt this experience had some negative impact on their lives. Over one quarter (25.9%) of respondents felt that this experience had a negative impact on their lives during this time only, whilst 11.9% of children felt that this experience has left a lasting impact (see Table 6).

Unpicking these negative impacts further, anxiety was reportedly verging on high ($m=3.1$; almost half of the sample (48.2%) agreed/strongly agreed that they felt anxious during this time). Furthermore, 16% of the sample agreed/ strongly agreed that they found it hard to sleep during this time, while 10% felt the experience affected their appetite (i.e., agreed/ strongly agreed to this statement). A small proportion of the sample (2%, $n=3$), felt that because of this experience, they needed to visit their GP.

Table 6: Perceived negative impact of this experience

	I found the experience stressful		I don't think there has been any negative impact on me		I think this experience had a negative impact on me at the time (only)		I think this experience has had a lasting negative impact on me	
Descriptives								
Min-Max	1-5		1-5		1-5		1-5	
Mean	3.44		3.5		2.6		2.1	
SD	1.04		1.13		1.13		1.09	
Frequencies	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Strongly Disagree	5	3.7	9	6.7	24	17.8	52	38.5
Disagree	22	16.3	16	11.9	45	33.3	42	31.1
Neither Agree Nor Disagree	36	26.7	34	25.2	31	23.0	25	18.5
Agree	53	39.3	51	37.8	30	22.2	12	8.9
Strongly Agree	19	14.1	25	18.5	5	3.7	4	3.0
Total	135	100.0	135	100.0	135	100.0	135	100.0

Table 7: Impact on mental health

	I think this experience affected my appetite		During this time, I found it hard to sleep		During this time, I felt anxious		Because of this experience, I needed to see my GP	
Descriptives								
Min-Max	1-5		1-5		1-5		1-5	
Mean	1.99		2.14		3.10		1.4	
SD	1.05		1.19		1.24		.79	
Frequencies	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Strongly disagree	56	41.5	54	40	17	12.6	95	70.4
Disagree	40	29.6	35	25.9	31	23.0	27	20.0
Neither Agree Nor Disagree	26	19.3	24	17.8	22	16.3	10	7.4
Agree	10	7.4	17	12.6	51	37.8	1	.7
Strongly Agree	3	2.2	5	3.7	14	10.4	2	1.5
Total	135	100.0	135	100.0	135	100.0	135	100.0

4.1.4 Satisfied with current placement

For the majority (55.6%) of respondents, they feel they are in the same school they would have been in, had the tests taken place. Conversely, this means that almost one in five of the respondents (19%) agreed/strongly agreed with the statement ‘I think if I had sat the test I would be in a different school now’. A further one in four respondents (25.2%) were unsure.

Additionally, the large majority of respondents appear to be happy and settled in their current post-primary school (m=4.3 for satisfaction with school placement and settling well; 91% agreed/strongly agreed that they are satisfied with their current school and that they have settled well). Furthermore, there is a strong sense of being able to cope with the level of work in their current school (m=4.1; 81.5% agree/strongly agreed that they can cope well with the level of work, conversely only 7.4% agreed/strongly agreed that their current level of work is too easy).

On the whole, the population sampled feel they are in the right school with only two of the 135 pupil respondents (1.5%) reporting that they would like to change schools (see Table 8).

Table 8: Satisfaction with post primary school placement

	I was satisfied with the school I was placed in		I have settled well into my post-primary school		I feel that I can cope well with the level of work in my post-primary school		I think if I had sat the test, I would be in a different school now		I think the work at my current school is too easy		I would like to move to another post-primary school	
Descriptives												
Min-Max	1-5		1-5		1-5		1-5		1-5		1-5	
Mean	4.3		4.3		4.1		2.5		2.4		1.6	
SD	.8		.8		.88		1.21		.86		.79	
Frequencies	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Strongly Disagree	2	1.5	2	1.5	3	2.2	32	23.7	18	13.3	71	52.6
Disagree	3	2.2	2	1.5	4	3.0	43	31.9	63	46.7	48	35.6
Neither Agree Nor Disagree	7	5.2	8	5.9	18	13.3	34	25.2	44	32.6	14	10.4
Agree	60	44.4	65	48.1	67	49.6	14	10.4	7	5.2		
Strongly Agree	63	46.7	58	43.0	43	31.9	12	8.9	3	2.2	2	1.5
Total	135	100.0	135	100.0	135	100.0	135	100.0	135	100.0	135	100.0

4.1.5 Academic selection

Finally, in terms of perceptions on academic selection more broadly, almost half (49%) of the children surveyed agreed with academic selection, while just over a third were unsure (24%). Only 17% were opposed to academic selection.

Similarly, when provided with a few different options, 52% of the sample selected transfer tests as the fairest way of choosing which school children go to post-primary school. This was by far the most popular means of selection across the sample. The next most popular option, using scores from existing literacy and numeracy tests in primary schools, was selected by just 21% of respondents.

Table 9: Academic selection

I agree with academic selection (meaning that you like the current way in which children are split between grammar and non-grammar schools based on their performance in the AQE/ GL tests):			What do you think is the fairest way of choosing which school children go to after primary school?:			
	Freq.	%		Freq.	%	Valid %
Yes	66	48.9	Using transfer tests (e.g. AQE and/or GL)	68	50.4	51.9
No	23	17.0	Using the scores from other existing literacy and numeracy tests in primary school	27	20.0	20.6
Not sure	46	34.1	Assessing pupils' classwork in primary school	20	14.8	15.3
Total	135	100.0	Primary school teachers make recommendations	15	11.1	11.5
			Children go to the school closest school to their home	1	.7	.8
			Missing	4	3.0	
			Total	135	100.0	

4.2 Pupils' written perspectives

At the end of the pupil survey, the pupils were asked if there was anything further they would like to share about their experience of transferring to post-primary school without sitting the tests.

4.2.1 Positive perspectives

In some instances, there were positive accounts shared where pupils were happy that the tests were cancelled or in another case, one child appreciated the preparatory work they had put in in terms of best equipping them for secondary school:

“It was a lot less stressful without the transfer tests and I am very happy that I didn’t have to do the test”

“I was so very happy that I didn’t have to do the transfer test”

“It helped me with work in secondary school because I learnt it for the transfer test”

“Although the preparation for the test was quite stressful I think that the knowledge I picked up while practicing has really helped me in secondary school.”

4.2.2 Negative perspectives: opportunity, rightfulness and mental health

However, despite some positivity expressed, the children mostly used this opportunity to share some of their more negative perspectives and experiences. For example, some children highlighted how they felt this experience was ‘unfair’ and how it minimised their choice and opportunities:

“I felt like all the hard work I had done was for nothing and I think it was extremely unfair to cancel it after my peers and I had spent over a year preparing for an exam that wasn’t even going to happen”

“Bit rubbish didn’t have a choice where I wanted to go it was here or nowhere”

Additionally, whilst one child highlighted how they benefited from criteria focused on familial connections, another child highlighted how these criteria could detrimentally impact on other children:

“I feel like I probably wouldn’t be in my school at the moment if it weren’t for my dad going here like 20 years ago so that’s awesome”

“...the criteria was very bad for students like me who were doing brilliantly in primary school but didn’t have a brother at the school and other stuff like that.”

Interestingly, another child appeared conscious of a perceived lack of rightfulness or achievement in terms of their gaining entry to their preferred grammar school:

“I didn’t feel like I had rightfully achieved my way to {name of selective grammar school}, but I was glad I got there.”

Furthermore, some pupils also directly remarked on the detrimental impact this experience has had on their mental health, describing the sadness, loss of confidence and lasting negative impact that this experience has had on them:

“Due to the criteria put in place for secondary school placement, i had a very low chance of getting into my ideal school ...this made me very sad for the next month until, 1 month later after my parents pushing very hard, a spot had opened up in my 1st place school. This made me so happy...I am still at my ideal school now and I love it but that month of sadness was one of the lowest points of my life by that point.”

“I now attend a school fifteen miles away as it has a sixth form and my mum works there. My mental health was good before the tests were cancelled but after that, I needed support from the GP and still receive support. I knew no one in the school and found it really hard to make friends. It still is really difficult and has really impacted my confidence and even my teachers notice this and commented on my report that I don't contribute in class. I have lost all self esteem and have no confidence that anyone will ever help me and others like me who were let down to just get on with it and never consider the impact this has on our whole life and future. My parents have tried for years to get me into a grammar school to be with my sister. There is no room and even though I have results at the top of my year, it isn't enough. After GCSE, these schools will take their own pupils first, leaving no room once again in popular subject classes. It is so difficult to take that a computer made a decision to admit or reject me from the school I had worked so hard to attend based on my surname. I feel I have been discriminated against again and again and all I can do is watch my sister and my friends enjoy school, independence, challenging work and lots of opportunities in a fantastic environment. I attend a school that was built in 1950 and hasn't changed since. It is so hard to feel in any way motivated or gave hope in the future. Most of all, I feel angry that myself and peers have never had any interest or support from anyone. It is not fair that pupils my age will have the chance to enter grammar schools based on the Dickson Plan. Why am I not able to have this same opportunity since all opportunities were removed from me when two families brought a legal challenge and the results were imposed on everyone. Why did no one protect my right to an education that was suitable for my level of ability?”

4.2.3 Perceived misplacements

Finally, several of the children touched upon the issue of children being placed in schools that were not the right fit for them. For one child, they themselves felt they obtained a place in a school they would otherwise have not been admitted to:

“Personally I don't think I would have got into post primary school if the transfer had have continued. I feel getting into my current school has had multiple benefits to me but I do think having the transfer would have shown me my ability and doesn't leave me in the dark about my acceptance to this school.”

However, mostly these responses tended to be focused on the respondents' perception that some other children obtained places in schools that were academically too challenging for some pupils, and as such, they may fall behind:

“I am now at a grammar school and as a result of there being no transfer tests, I find that there are pupils in my class and year that fall behind with the work and exams.”

And finally, several respondents appeared concerned that the ‘misplacement’ of less capable children would have a detrimental impact on themselves and their learning. And whilst there were some instances whereby some children seemed to appreciate this diversity in ability in the classroom, there were some examples whereby children appeared to be less tolerant and at times expressed particularly unsympathetic attitudes:

“Some people aren’t as smart as others so we need to go over stuff that we already know so it kinda affects are learning but it’s alright I guess.”

“The only thing i would say is that, because there was no transfer test, there is quite a lot of people in my class and year that I think wouldn’t of got into this school if they had done the transfer. This has affected my learning because they are very loud and don’t do their work.”

“The amount of people in my year in a grammar school who would be failing at a non grammar school is outrageous as they have held more capable people back and are only here due to siblings and not skill but if practice tests were used it would be fair and they would not be here so unable to hold us back.”

“It was worrying because I might get some stupid people in my class that would've not been able to get I to it with the transfer test.”

“kick dumb people out”

4.3 Survey Results: Parents/Carers

4.3.1 Demographics

The majority of the respondents to the parent/carer survey were the mother of the child due to sit the transfer test (87%, 13% of respondents were the father). As such, the majority of the sample were female (87%; 13% male, see Table 9). Two thirds of the sample reported that they were from a Protestant community background (66%, see Table 10). On the whole, the population was made up of educated parents/carers (73% having obtained a minimum of an undergraduate degree), who were in paid employment (93%), with over half of the sample (54%) reporting a household income over £51,000 per year (see Table 11).

Table 10: Gender and community background

Gender	Freq.	%	Valid %	Community background	Freq.	%	Valid %
Male	21	13.2	13.2	I am from a Protestant background	99	62.3	66.0
Female	138	86.8	86.8	I am from a Catholic background	29	18.2	19.3
Total	159	100.0	100.0	I do not wish to disclose my community background	22	13.8	14.7
				Total	150	94.3	100.0
				Missing	9	5.7	
				Total	159	100.0	

Table 11: Parental education, employment and household income

What is your highest level of education?	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Prefer not to say	2	1.3	1.3
No qualifications	1	.6	.6
O-Levels/GCSEs or Level 2 vocational qualification	8	5.0	5.1
A-Level or Level 3 vocational qualification	16	10.1	10.2
Higher National Diploma Certificate/Diploma, Foundation Degree or Level 4/5 vocational equivalent	16	10.1	10.2
Undergraduate Degree (e.g. BA, BSc etc.)	49	30.8	31.2
Postgraduate Degree (e.g. Postgraduate Certificate/Diploma, Master's, Doctorate)	65	40.9	41.4
Total	157	98.7	100.0
System	2	1.3	
	159	100.0	

Are you currently in paid employment?			Please select your household income band, i.e., joint between you and your spouse/ partner (if applicable):			
	Freq.	Valid %		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Yes	147	92.5	Prefer not to say	24	15.1	15.3
No	8	5.0	Under £15,000	1	.6	.6
Prefer not to say	4	2.5	£16,000 to £30,000	15	9.4	9.6
Total	159	100.0	£31,000 to £50,000	34	21.4	21.7
			£51,000 to £80,000	46	28.9	29.3
			More than £81,000	37	23.3	23.6
			Total	157	98.7	100.0
			System	2	1.3	
			Other/ £100000	1	.6	.6
			Total	159	100.0	100.0

4.3.2 School type

The majority of the parents/carers surveyed (71%) had themselves attended a grammar school (see Table 12). Similarly, the large majority (94%) of children of the parent respondents are currently attending a grammar school. While all of the parents/carers (100%) reported that this is the same school the child has attended since leaving primary school, one parent did clarify that their ‘Child was not originally placed in a grammar which was devastating. Got place 30 June 2021’

Table 12: School type: Parent and child

	Parent		Child	
	Freq	Valid %	Freq.	Valid %
Grammar	113	71.1	150	94.3
Non-Grammar	44	27.7	9	5.7
Don't know	2	1.3		
Total	159	100.0	159	100.0

4.3.3 Test preparation

The majority of parents/carers reported that their child was sitting practice tests in preparation for the transfer test both at school (95%) and at home (98%). For the large majority (91%), parents/carers reported that their children had been doing practice tests at home for at least 6 months before the expected date of the AQE/GL tests. Over one third (39%) of parents/carers reported that their children had been sitting practice tests for a year or more prior to sitting the actual tests (see Table 13). Furthermore, almost half of the parents/carers (43%) reported that

their child had been receiving private tutoring in preparation for the transfer tests, mostly (i.e., for 94%) in the year/ six months running up to the expected test date (see Table 14). Most of the parents/carers (91%) were also helping their children themselves at home to prepare and for the majority (72%), the parents/carers felt fairly/ very confident in doing so (see Table 15).

Table 13: Test preparation: At home and school

	Was your child sitting practice tests (in preparation for the transfer test) in school?		Was your child sitting practice tests (in preparation for the transfer tests) at home?		Thinking about the practice tests your child was doing at home, how long before the AQE/GL exams was your child undertaking these practice tests (approximately)?	Freq.	Valid %
	Freq.	Valid %	Freq.	Valid %			
Yes	151	95.0	156	98.1	The few weeks leading up to the tests	3	1.9
No	8	5.0	3	1.9	Three months prior to when the tests were due to take place	8	5.0
Total	159	100.0	159	100.0	Six months prior to when the tests were due to take place	83	52.2
					A year prior to when the tests were due to take place	51	32.1
					More than a year prior to when the tests were due to take place	11	6.9
					I'm not sure	1	.6
					My child wasn't doing any practice papers at home	2	1.3
					Total	159	100.0

Table 14: Test preparation: Private tutoring

Was your child receiving additional private tutoring specifically to help prepare them for the transfer test?			For how many months was your child receiving private tutoring to prepare them for the transfer tests?		
	Freq.	%		Freq.	%
Yes	68	42.8	0-2 months	98	61.6
No	91	57.2	3-6 months	22	13.8
Total	159	100.0	7-12 months	30	18.9
			13-18 months	5	3.1
			19-24 months	2	1.3
			More than 24 months	2	1.3
			Total	159	100.0

Table 15: Test preparation: Parental support

Were you also helping your child with their practice tests?			How confident did you feel in your ability to help your child prepare for the transfer tests?		
	Freq.	Valid %		Freq.	Valid %
Yes	145	91.2	Not at all confident	7	4.4
No	14	8.8	A little confident	28	17.6
Total	159	100.0	Not sure	9	5.7
			Fairly confident	64	40.3
			Very confident	51	32.1
			Total	159	100.0

4.3.4 Response to tests being cancelled

For the parents/carers, the most frequently selected emotions when asked how they felt upon hearing the tests had been cancelled were negative, with feelings of frustration (selected by 57.2% of parents/carers), disappointment (55.3%), anger (37.1%) and worry (34.6%). Note, respondents could select as many emotions as they wished – see Table 15 below.

Table 16: Feelings post-test cancellation

Emotion	Freq.	Valid %
Frustrated	91	57.2
Disappointed	88	55.3
Angry	59	37.1
Worried	55	34.6
Relieved	34	21.4
Confused	26	16.4
Shocked	18	11.3
Okay	18	11.3
Happy	17	10.7
Sad	17	10.7
Scared	10	6.3
Other	10	6.3

Some respondents provided further detail regarding how they felt. Each of these additional responses further exemplified the negative emotions described already. Examples of some of the further descriptions provided are presented below:

“How could the views/ legal action brought from two families be permitted to influence every other family without appropriate challenge from the Department of Education?”

“It was horrendous. We had months of prep over which is not a pleasant time in any household only to be ready and then told it was being cancelled with a few days notice. Then the whole disaster with a date at end of feb to again a full cancellation. It really played a huge part in my declining mental health. We then went into the horrendous system of getting into a grammar school through ridiculous criteria.”

“Very disappointed that after all the effort the children had put in to continuing to study it was to no avail.”

“Two opposite emotions - relieved knowing he had a brother at Grammar School, sad that he put in a lot of effort and was very capable”

4.3.5 Support and impact

Almost two thirds of the parents/carers (64.2%) agreed or strongly agreed that their child’s primary school supported them well (m=3.6). However, notably, less positivity was expressed regarding communication from the testing bodies (m=2.3). For instance, while less than one in five respondents (19.5%) disagreed/strongly disagreed with the statement ‘I feel that my child’s primary school supported my child well’, almost two thirds (64.8%) disagreed/strongly disagreed that the communication from the testing bodies was effective. (See Table 17).

Table 17: Support and communication

	I feel that my child’s primary school supported my child well		I felt that communication by the testing bodies (AQE/GL) was effective	
Descriptives				
Min-Max	1-5		1-5	
Mean	3.56		2.27	
SD	1.21		1.01	
Frequencies	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Strongly Disagree	16	10.1	38	23.9
Disagree	15	9.4	65	40.9
Neither Agree Nor Disagree	26	16.4	33	20.8
Agree	68	42.8	21	13.2
Strongly Agree	34	21.4	2	1.3
Total	159	100.0	159	100.0

Furthermore, with regard to the parents’/carers’ perceived impact of this experience on themselves, in response to the statement ‘the experience had no significant impact on me’, in general scores were low ($m=1.97$), indicating general disagreement with this statement and inferring some level of impact on the parents/carers. For example, 78% responded that they strongly disagreed/ disagreed with the statement ‘the experience had no significant impact on me’. Similarly, mean scores were high in terms of perceived stress ($m=4.13$; 84% strongly agreed/agreed that they found the experience stressful) and verging on high for perceptions of negative impact on parents’/carers’ own mental health ($m= 3.19$; 46% strongly/agreed that their own mental health had been negatively impacted, see Table 18).

Table 18: Impact on parents/carers

	The experience had no significant impact on me		I found the experience stressful		I feel that my own mental health was negatively impacted by the experience	
Descriptives						
Min-Max	1-5		1-5		1-5	
Mean	1.97		4.13		3.19	
SD	.99		.95		1.13	
Frequencies	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Strongly Disagree	57	35.8	4	2.5	11	6.9
Disagree	67	42.1	8	5.0	38	23.9
Neither Agree Nor Disagree	21	13.2	14	8.8	37	23.3
Agree	10	6.3	70	44.0	55	34.6
Strongly Agree	4	2.5	63	39.6	18	11.3
Total	159	100.0	159	100.0	159	100.0

With regards to the parents'/carers' perceptions of the impact of this experience on their child, the majority (67.3%) recognised a significant impact (i.e., strongly disagreeing/ disagreeing with the statement 'the experience had no significant impact on my child'). Specifically, over half of the parents/carers (55.3%) recognised an impact on their child's anxiety, over a quarter (27%) noticed an impact on sleep patterns, and around one in six (16.4%) recognised an impact on their child's appetite. Over half of the parents/carers (54%) reported that they were concerned about their child's mental health during this time and furthermore, almost one third (30.8%) believe that this experience has had a lasting impact on their child (see Table 19).

4.3.6 Satisfaction with and appropriateness of child's school placement

In general, there was strong satisfaction with their child's current school placement (see Table 19). For example, there were high mean scores across: satisfaction with school placement (m=4.4; 93.1% of parents/carers strongly agreed/agreed that they were satisfied with the school that their child was placed in); their child feeling settled (m=4.3; 86.2% strongly agreed/agreed that their child has settled well); their child's happiness (4.3; 86.2% strongly agreed/agreed); and the perception that their child is coping well with their work (m=4.4; 88.6% strongly agreed/agreed). As such, very few parents/carers (6%) are keen (strongly agreed/agreed) to move their child to a different school. However, notably, almost one quarter (22.6%) of parents/carers felt that the outcome of the transfer process would have been different had their child sat the tests.

Table 19: Parental perceptions of impact of test cancellation on child

	The experience had no significant impact on my child.		I noticed my child became more anxious		I noticed my child's sleep patterns were affected		I noticed my child's appetite was affected		I was concerned about my child's mental health during this time		I think the experience has had a lasting negative impact on my child	
Descriptives												
Min-Max	1-5		1-5		1-5		1-5		1-5		1-5	
Mean	2.23		3.36		2.7		2.5		3.2		2.79	
SD	1.09		1.18		1.16		1.08		1.26		1.21	
Frequencies	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq..	%	Freq.	%
Strongly Disagree	46	28.9	12	7.5	25	15.7	28	17.6	18	11.3	24	15.1
Disagree	61	38.4	31	19.5	51	32.1	58	36.5	36	22.6	49	30.8
Neither Agree Nor Disagree	23	14.5	28	17.6	40	25.2	47	29.6	20	12.6	37	23.3
Agree	27	17.0	63	39.6	32	20.1	17	10.7	64	40.3	34	21.4
Strongly Agree	2	1.3	25	15.7	11	6.9	9	5.7	21	13.2	15	9.4
Total	159	100.0	159	100.0	159	100.0	159	100.0	159	100.0	159	100.0

Table 20: Satisfaction with and appropriateness of child's school placement

	I was satisfied with the post-primary school my child gained a place in		My child has settled well into their post-primary school		My child is happy in their post-primary school		My child is coping well with the level of academic work in their post-primary school		I would like to move my child to another post-primary school		I feel that the outcome of the transfer process would have been different if my child had sat the tests		I don't think my child's school is challenging them enough academically	
Descriptives														
Min-Max	1-5		1-5		1-5		1-5		1-5		1-5		1-5	
Mean	4.4		4.3		4.3		4.4		1.5		2.5		1.79	
SD	.78		.94		.91		.85		.89		1.33		1.05	
Frequencies	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Strongly Disagree	2	1.3	1	.6	2	1.3	2	1.3	106	66.7	49	30.8	78	49.1
Disagree	4	2.5	13	8.2	8	5.0	5	3.1	37	23.3	39	24.5	60	37.7
Neither Agree Nor Disagree	5	3.1	8	5.0	12	7.5	11	6.9	7	4.4	35	22.0	5	3.1
Agree	61	38.4	54	34.0	55	34.6	53	33.3	6	3.8	19	11.9	9	5.7
Strongly Agree	87	54.7	83	52.2	82	51.6	88	55.3	3	1.9	17	10.7	7	4.4
Total	159	100.0	159	100.0	159	100.0	159	100.0	159	100.0	159	100.0	159	100.0

4.3.7 Academic selection

A majority of parents/carers (59.7%) of the parents/carers surveyed were in favour of academic selection, while more than one in five (22%) were opposed to the current system (See Table 20). From the parents'/carers' perspective, the fairest method of post-primary school selection (i.e., the option most frequently selected) is using scores from other existing literacy and numeracy tests in primary schools (45.4%). The second most popular method was 'using transfer tests e.g. AQE and/or GL' (31.9%) - see Table 21 below.

Table 21: Academic selection

	Are you in favour of academic selection (i.e. keeping the grammar and non-grammar system in NI)?		What do you think is the fairest method of post-primary school selection			
	Freq.	Valid %		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Yes	95	59.7	Using transfer tests (e.g. AQE and/or GL)	45	28.3	31.9
No	35	22.0	Using the scores from other existing literacy and numeracy tests in primary school	64	40.3	45.4
Not sure	29	18.2	Assessing pupils' classwork in primary school	22	13.8	15.6
Total	159	100.0	Primary school teachers make recommendations	4	2.5	2.8
			Children attend the school closest to home	6	3.8	4.3
			Total	141	88.7	100.0
			System	18	11.3	
				159	100.0	

4.4 Parents'/Carers' written perspectives

4.4.1 Stressful experience

Firstly, and overwhelmingly, the level of stress that was encountered during this time must be acknowledged. The parents/carers referred to the already stressful experience of Covid, exacerbated by parents/carers continuing to work (some from home, some outside of the home as key workers) whilst home-schooling, and the added stress, pressure and uncertainty created by the transfer test:

“The whole process in the normal course of effects is stressful enough but with postponement and then the cancellation of the tests, it was a rollercoaster ride.”

“Home-schooling was extremely stressful and it was very frustrating as one minute it was on and the next it was off.”

“This was a very difficult time, as myself and my husband were key workers throughout, so therefore trying to work and do home-schooling, was extremely stressful on us as a family.”

“This was a very worrying time for us, my son was quite smart but had no criteria to get into a grammar school. Many sleepless nights and family arguments”

Whilst there were a few parents/carers who expressed positivity regarding the ultimate cancellation of the transfer tests, mostly, the parents/carers shared their disappointment, anger and frustration:

“I was happy my child didn’t have that stress”

“I was very glad when the tests were cancelled. However, I am not a supporter of the selection system. My child wasn’t tutored and I registered them for the test as they were likely to get on ‘ok’. Entering them for the AQE was a moral dilemma for me: whilst I don’t like segregated education and would much prefer comprehensive schooling, stepping out of the system is not simple either as the current system stands.”

4.4.2 Poorly managed

For a large majority of the responses, frustration and anger stemmed from the parents’/carers’ perception that the process was not managed effectively. Specifically, inadequate leadership, poor management and decision making, poor communication, a lack of support, and unfair alternative admissions criteria were the main sources of concern for the participating parents/carers:

“There was no leadership given by MLA’s. The examining bodies took too long to make a decision and communicate it to children and parents. All in all, the leadership demonstrated was inadequate.”

“The way the situation was handled by the examining bodies was reprehensible. As a teacher I saw that even JCQ body exam boards were able to make decisions in a time sensitive manner, however, AQE messed young children around in such a terrible way by cancelling then reinstating then cancelling the test again. That was by far the most stressful part of the whole situation and unforgivable. Beyond poor management by the exam body.”

The issue of poor decision making was shared by many parents/carers who expressed their anger at the lack of definitive decisions and the lateness of the ultimate cancellation decision:

“Frustrated by the lack of effective decision making. Angry at the lateness of the decision taken. Concerned for my child’s well-being and for their progression to post primary education.”

“AQE- test on, then off, then on and, 4 days before the first test off again was absolutely ridiculous. At least GL board made 1 decision and stuck with it!”

“The endpoint kept moving! When the final decision to cancel the tests was announced, my son had been working towards these tests for almost a year - much too long! At that point, we were both relieved that it was over and were almost beyond caring which school he went to! I feel that the whole affair dragged on far too long!”

“I was annoyed because my child had done all the preparation work and the exams were called off at such short notice. I feel they should have been cancelled long ahead of the postponement in November”

Other parents/carers highlighted that, in their opinion, it appeared that the decisions were made without full consideration of the impact on the children and their families:

“I will never forget or fully forget the way that the examining bodies handled the situation. They acted with grim determination to make the tests sit at almost any cost to the children and families. They chose to ignore the high likelihood that the tests would be unlikely ever to sit, to the cost and disappointment of many. Early cancellation was the only sensible option.”

“The on-off nature of the decision making, coupled with its lateness caused huge stress and many tears for my son and, in my opinion, was handled poorly without meaningful consideration of its impact on the children”

Additionally, parents/carers expressed their frustration at the lack of communication from the awarding bodies or statutory agencies more broadly, which appeared to only heighten stress and confusion:

“I felt the cancellations were communicated at very short notice.”

“The communication was very poor. The AQE was on and off like a yoyo. The uncertainty caused by this was extremely stressful”

“I wrote to AQE and asked what other mitigations they considered; had they contacted primary schools to ascertain what curriculum had been taught to inform adaptation of questions; what questions or areas had been adapted; had online tests or any alternative to usual test procedure been considered. I got a banal reply not addressing my key questions. When I followed up I was told AQE would not correspond with me further. The experience of dealing with them was a disgrace.”

Furthermore, as one parent highlighted, they were hearing information via the media, rather than a direct line of communication between the relevant authorities and parents/carers:

“I felt the way the AQE testing body handled the whole thing was very poor. One day the tests were going ahead and then we would hear via media that the tests were cancelled. It was a complete disaster...The inability of the Education Authority and other organisations to give ground on this issue was extremely annoying.”

“The situation created by the lack of communication from AQE was my biggest frustration. They (and the grammar schools) refused to communicate with families and

the primary schools about what was going to happen and the only way of finding anything out was via the BBC; as was the case the day they announced the tests wouldn't be going ahead. This was then compounded by the selection criteria employed by the grammar schools resulting in some very disappointed children and parents."

Other parents/carers commented on the apparent lack of planning and forethought from the relevant statutory agencies, as well as a lack of coordination and consistency between bodies:

"No proper planning was undertaken by either Education Authority... schools or AQE. All primary schools had an understanding of the child's abilities prior to the exam and this could have been effectively used."

"The 2 testing bodies did not work together and information was conflicting. Constant delays and didn't know what was happening so had to keep preparing for exams."

"The main frustration was that both GL and AQE decided to cancel at different times instead of just cancelling all at once"

Additionally, the unfair nature of the substitution admissions criteria was also highlighted:

"The final cancellation itself wasn't the worst thing - the various postponements (especially the one just a few days before the Jan test date), the uncertainty, the interminable preparation and the unfairness of the substitute system were all worse aspects"

"I felt the admission criteria was terrible, ill thought and very unfair for the children"

"It was absolutely ridiculous to remove academic testing without reviewing and standardising admission criteria across schools. Our grammar school of choice used ageist criteria taking eldest to youngest children- the completely opposite approach to AQE where test scores were standardised. Also ridiculous that primary schools were not required to give predictive grades based on 7 years of teaching. That was the case for GCSEs and A level. These children were let down massively by the EA and Dept. Of Education and boards of governors who put self-interest and risk aversion ahead of fairness. I felt completely powerless as a parent and let down by all bodies who had a responsibility to provide an alternative process. This was certainly not a fairer process compared to academic selection, as the children had no opportunity to strive and achieve. The criteria for schools was set up to be used after academic selection, not in its absence."

One parent went as far as to say that this cohort have been subjected to inequality and discrimination:

"The Dickson plan affords children in the same cohort the opportunity to have their academic potential assessed. In contrast, children who were due to sit the transfer tests were unable to ever have the same opportunity even now. These children have been subjected to the highest form of inequality by the failure to recognise their academic potential and their academic futures being decided on their personal details only. These children have been discriminated against as there are and will be no places available in grammar schools until sixth form. They are left begging for a place which would offer them the challenge to meet their educational needs and a right to which

they are all entitled to have...My particular community from the south down area is particularly adversely affected by the lack of provision of non denomination grammar schools. The Education Authority did not release information about the Post Primary placements until after three month period when the window for a judicial review had passed. We believe strongly that our child is a victim of inequality having spent thousands of pounds on legal advice to no avail, whereas others have obtained legal aid to assert the rights of their children over the majority of others."

4.4.3 Impact on mental health

Whilst a few parents/carers referred to the lack of stress or the positive reduction of anxiety created by the ultimate test cancellation, these viewpoints were in the minority:

"As parents we made the decision not to share our worries and frustrations with him. Explained that the work he was doing would be very useful for year 8 regardless"

"As she had an older brother in the post primary school she wanted to attend, it was likely she would probably get a place. I think this helped her and she was not anxious or worried"

"My child was adversely affected during Covid. However, the cancellation of the test brought relief - it did not bring the anxiety. I think it lessened the anxiety."

For the large majority of parents/carers, however, the experience of the non-testing year was very stressful. These parents/carers spoke of the detrimental impact on themselves, their child and the wider family unit:

"I cannot emphasise enough how horrendous the whole experience was. The night it was cancelled I sat on the floor and cried. All that preparation to be then thrown into a tick box eldest child/ sibling criteria was ridiculous!! Months of stress!"

With regards to the impact on their child, some parents/carers referred to the detrimental impact on their child's wellbeing and overall mental health:

"To watch your child fall apart as a result of the chaos and their mental health impacted was unbelievably difficult and added major stress to the covid nightmare."

"Heartbreaking to live through to see your child retreat into a shell losing all hope and confidence. Experiencing such frustration and confusion at such horrendous inequality at such a young age. This has greatly impacted his self-esteem, social interaction and motivation that have restricted his academic potential. As a family, we have tried to raise awareness and request support for two years from politicians, media, Children's Commissioner, legal support and some school Principals. We have presented a case for our son for two years with the ECB to be told the pandemic was not exceptional neither was his mental health."

"Having studied diligently every weekend since Sept; taking 4 days off over Christmas before returning to study as my child knew the grammar they wanted to attend, in the end with no test score, 6 places for eldest children were left; 7 eldest children with

FSME applied. My child had no chance of admission to their preferred grammar. They were placed in a non-grammar and distraught - asking why did I study so long and so hard for the AQE. The injustice was devastating; still hurts my child two years later. The day we were advised of placement was the worst day of my child's life - their words!"

When discussing the negative impacts on their child's mental health, some parents/carers also referred to the clinical support required for their children as well as some of the lasting impacts as their child has progressed to post-primary school:

"My child ended up in counselling as a result of being an only child, socially isolated during covid lockdowns (effectively solitary confinement) and the impact of the AQE disaster"

"The whole experience with Covid, transfer pressure and my child's mental health due to all of this I think may have a lasting effect on him but really hope that this does not."

"My daughter currently suffers from severe anxiety and emetiphobia due to this period in her life. She also suffered imposter syndrome for the first year of grammar school as she felt like she didn't earn her place"

4.4.4 Misplacement

As is highlighted in the quote above, there was also a concern amongst parents/carers regarding their child's 'imposter syndrome' (as termed by the parent in the above quote). That is, several parents/carers referred to their children feeling as though they had not rightfully earned their place at their chosen grammar school:

"My child feels to this day that he did not earn, his words, the placement in post primary he has and feels he is only there because of his older siblings. It doesn't matter how much I try to persuade him otherwise. This is what he thinks and feels. He wanted to prove himself with testing and earning his place based on his own ability but this didn't happen"

"She was upset at first because we didn't know what would happen but realised as her brother went to the school already she would be ok. Then she was concerned that she wasn't 'good' enough to go to the grammar school. She has more than proved she deserves to be there now. But I do think it plays on her mind a little."

Furthermore, some parents/carers also discussed the notion of misplacement, whereby their children or other children will have taken places in schools which are not the right fit for them academically:

"However, there are some poor wee souls who should not be in a grammar school in the wrong place receiving an education that doesn't suit them and they are underachieving and self-esteem is at rock bottom"

Some parents/carers expressed concern regarding their child's education being impacted, due to the differing levels of academic ability in the classroom, whereby it was perceived that their child wouldn't be learning at an adequate pace or academic standard:

"I know there are children at my child's school who should not be there. They would not have achieved the grade required for admission and are now currently struggling to keep up with the standards required. I also believe the teachers are also finding it hard to teach the year as the ability of the children is so varied. I believe this means the pace may be slower and therefore my child isn't learning at the pace they would ordinarily"

"He has generally found that the class is working below the level that he is capable of, that he is being taught topics that are of no practical benefit for work life"

Social connections were also flagged as being a concern for some parents/carers, whereby some parents/carers felt that the school/ class was not the right fit for their child and that they hadn't made friends or settled as well as they had hoped:

"My child expresses that (unlike primary school) he "hates" school. There are days and occasions when he is clearly quite fulfilled/happy and others when he is deeply upset at having to go in... he has not formed any meaningful friendship connections in his own class and classmates do not follow the rules (he does have good friends from other class groups and via extra-curricular participation)."

4.4.5 Support

Finally, considering the multiple adverse effects and experiences highlighted via the parents'/carers' written survey responses, it is also important to address the support that is (or is not) available for the children affected by this process, as is addressed in the following comment from one parent/carer:

"I can also see that in the post primary environment there is a lack of appropriate support available for the children who transitioned to post primary during the 2020-2021 year. My daughter and others struggle with making social connections, friendship group issues, and they have needed a more supportive transition to post primary. An example of this is the lack of provision of quiet and calm spaces available at lunchtime, lack of lunch time clubs at a time when children needed access to nurturing support"

In conclusion and on the whole, the parents/carers sampled in this survey clearly feel very strongly about how the transfer test was managed for this particular unique year group. As one parent/carer stated, this was *"a dreadful episode altogether in the history of education in Northern Ireland."*

Chapter 5. Qualitative results

5.1: Focus groups with Grammar School pupils

A total of 3 semi-structured interviews were held with pupils in grammar schools, as detailed below: two co-educational voluntary grammar schools (GS1 and GS2) and one all-boys voluntary grammar school (GS3). The grammar schools were located across Northern Ireland and have wide catchment areas comprising both urban and rural areas. In GS1, a face-to-face interview was carried out in June 2023 with a group of eight year-9 pupils (4 boys and 4 girls). In GS2, a face-to-face interview was held in November 2023 with a group of eight year-10 pupils (4 boys and 4 girls). In GS3, a face-to-face interview was conducted with a group of seven year-9 boys in June 2023. All interviews were audio-recorded to facilitate transcription.

Table 22: Overview of interviews with Grammar School pupils

School Code	Number of interviewees	Date of interview	Format
GS1	8 pupils (4 boys, 4 girls)	June 2023	face-to-face
GS2	8 pupils (4 boys, 4 girls)	November 2023	face-to-face
GS3	7 pupils (7 boys)	June 2023	face-to-face

Each interview followed the same semi-structured interview schedule comprising three main sections: an initial discussion around the pupils' experiences of the 2020-21 non-testing year when the transfer tests were postponed and eventually cancelled; a discussion around the pupils' experiences of settling into their grammar schools since September 2021; and, finally, a concluding discussion around lessons learnt from this unprecedented set of circumstances.

Following audio transcription and thematic analysis of the qualitative data, five key themes emerged, providing insights into the experiences of these grammar school pupils.

5.1.1 Theme 1: Experiences of lockdown and the return to school

When pupils were initially asked about their experiences of the first lockdown (March to June 2020), it became clear across all three groups that there was considerable variety in terms of the amount of work set by the different primary schools; in the level of support provided to them by their parents/carers; and in their confidence in terms of transfer test preparation on returning to school in September 2020. Most pupils spoke negatively about their lockdown experience. For instance, one pupil explained that he had found it hard to “self-motivate” during the lockdown and “wasn’t getting much done in homeschooling” (GS3). Others reported feeling “nervous” (GS2) that they might be falling behind and found it “a bit stressful” (GS2) that they were not able to get immediate support or feedback from their teacher as they might have in class. Another claimed that he didn’t do much work and so felt “like a bit rusty” (GS1) on returning to school.

A minority of voices were more positive, including one pupil who reported that his mother was a teacher and so “prepped me” for the transfer tests (GS3) and another who found the lockdown learning experience “relaxing” because they did not have to get up so early and could “do whatever you wanted” (GS2). The extent of preparation for the tests varied enormously: one pupil claimed that they had been asked to complete one practice test per week during their P6

lockdown experience, while another noted that they had been required to complete just one test during the entire three-month lockdown period.

On returning to school in September 2020, several of the pupils spoke of an intense period of preparation for the transfer tests as P7 teachers made every effort to ensure that their pupils were as ready as possible. In GS3, one pupil spoke of how, in his primary school, P7 pupils preparing for the AQE or GL tests would miss assembly to sit practice papers, while another reported that “we had to stay behind after school” and a further boy recounted that his P7 teacher came in early one morning each week to offer an optional test preparation class. One pupil explained that, in his school, P7 pupils sat two practice tests each week, which “kinda burned me out a bit. I didn’t really like it” (GS3). While not asked directly if they had tutors, several of the pupils in GS2 mentioned that they had been receiving private tuition in preparation for the transfer tests (see below).

5.1.2 Theme 2: Responses to postponement and cancellation of the tests

The pupils were asked to comment on how they felt about the postponement of the transfer test to January 2021, following the initial two-week postponement from the original November dates. Many pupils spoke of the confusion and uncertainty that this caused:

“It was kind of, like, I think in the end, it was pushed back a bit. But then they decided they weren’t going to do it and then again, they decided actually it was going to happen. And again they decided that it wasn’t going to happen. So it was really confusing because it was back and forth” (GS3).

“I was just really annoyed about why we weren’t given a finalised date and it kept being turned on and off and pushed back” (GS3).

“It just kept on going on and on” (GS1).

“Didn’t know if it was going to be there or not, if we were going to do it or not” (GS1).

There was just one pupil for whom the postponement “was a bit of a relief” as this gave him more time to prepare for the test and “go over all the stuff that I didn’t know” (GS2).

Particularly striking were the pupil comments relating to how the postponement of the test meant that they were preparing for their transfer tests during their Christmas holidays, when normally they would have been finished and would have been able to enjoy the festive season. One pupil recounted that he had completed a practice paper on Christmas Eve, while another reported that he had had to implore his parents to have a test-free birthday:

“Like you couldn’t like enjoy Christmas pretty much cos you had that in the back of your mind” (GS1).

“You did get a bit like fed up. We had been working for so long. We had nearly been working for a year at this already” (GS1)

“Maybe the only time, the only week I didn’t do a test, I might be getting this wrong, but I think it was my birthday week. I begged to not do one” (GS3).

Pupils expressed mixed feelings about the eventual cancellation of the test (in January 2021). On the one hand, a minority of pupils expressed a clear sense of relief that the prolonged process of test preparation was finally over and that they would not have to sit the test:

“I was just relieved that we didn’t have to do it” (GS1).

“I was relieved, because I wasn’t sure if I was going to do well in the test and was relieved I didn’t have to do that” (GS2).

“I was quite happy at the time cos it felt like the pressure’s off me, and at the time I didn’t really care what happened. To be honest, I just didn’t want to do it” (GS3).

However, more commonly, there was a strong sense of disappointment, annoyance and frustration among a majority of the participants that after many months of hard work, they had not been given an opportunity to finish the process, sit the tests and thus prove their ability. For these pupils, it felt that their hard work had been in vain, that they had been “cheated” out of this opportunity at the eleventh hour, and, in one instance, that the money spent by their parents on their private tutor had been wasted:

“I was just really disappointed cos I was so ready to do it” (GS2)

“I just wanted to get it over and done with” (GS2)

“I’d worked really hard for it and it just was annoying that I wasn’t going to put it to any use” (GS2)

“I was a bit mixed because I was a bit mad because I did all that work for the AQE and like there’s nowhere to put all the hard work into” (GS3)

“I was just really annoyed that we didn’t get to do it because I wanted to see how well I’d done. I wanted to see how I compared to my peers, but then not doing it just, I felt a bit cheated not doing it” (GS3)

“Like I had a tutor during that time, like before, and my parents had like been paying money and then when it got cancelled, it felt like it was a complete waste of time” (GS1)

5.1.3 Theme 3: Concerns around school admissions

In the aftermath of the cancellation of the tests, there was some anxiety expressed by the pupils as to which school they would transfer to under the alternative admissions criteria. Pupils reported that although the pressure of the transfer tests had dissipated, they were worried about “getting into a school I didn’t want to go to and didn’t like at all” (GS3) or going to a school where they didn’t know anyone else and where they would be “really miserable” (GS3). Another pupil explained that he was “nervous in case I didn’t get it” (GS2), while a further pupil felt the pressure of letting the family down:

“I was relieved [to get a place] because everyone else and like my family has gone here. I was just nervous that I would be the only one that didn’t” (GS2)

The challenge was most acutely felt by the boys in GS3, most of whom recounted that they had not initially thought of applying to this school at all. However, in the absence of familial connections to other grammar schools, their parents/carers had felt that the use of year 5 standardised test scores would offer them a better chance of securing a grammar school place:

“I met no criteria for basically any other school because it was mostly familial connections to the school” (GS3).

“I didn’t even know much about [GS3]. I only put it down because they were taking practice papers and that was my best shot at getting into a school” (GS3).

5.1.4 Theme 4: Settling in to post-primary/grammar school

The fourth theme to emerge from the grammar school pupil focus groups was in relation to how well the pupils had settled in to their schools at the end of year 9 or in the first term of year 10. Some expressed nervousness about starting a new school which they had not visited on an Open Day/Night, and, particularly in the case of the boys in GS3, where they knew very few others beforehand. As one boy explained, “I was coming in completely blind, not knowing anything” (GS3).

Nonetheless, the overwhelming experience of transition across all three schools was positive, with the pupils telling of how they had made friends in class and through extra-curricular activities (e.g. sport) or common interests (e.g. music).

“None of my primary school friends come here but I think like, I’ve made lots of friends through like, playing rugby really helped as well cos all of my friends are rugby players and stuff like that. I think it wasn’t that hard to make friends” (GS1).

“On the social side I came with a couple of friends and now I’ve loads” (GS2).

“Going home we would meet people on the bus that went to our school and it was like they went as well and you know we would talk to them on the bus... and you know it has helped a lot” (GS3).

In terms of their academic transition and how they had been coping with the academic demands of their grammar school education, there were also very positive accounts. As one pupil explained, they had been as well prepared as any other cohort even though they hadn’t actually taken the tests (“so it’s not like we knew any less” GS1). One pupil noted that the amount of homework (including at weekends) “took a bit to get used to” (GS3) but another pupil explained that their experience had been much more positive than their P7 teachers had forecast:

“Well it was made out by our P7 teachers to be like really hard and stuff but when you are actually there, it’s not that bad” (GS3)

While this paints a very positive picture of social and academic integration into the grammar schools, it has to be acknowledged that pupils might be unwilling to admit to any social or academic challenges in a focus group setting in front of a number of their peers.

5.1.5 Theme 5: Lessons to be learnt/final thoughts

When asked what lessons can be learnt from the non-testing year, there was evidence of considerable maturity from many of the pupils. Some called for greater clarity from the testing bodies (e.g. AQE) which would have reduced the stress on them, for instance if the testing bodies had cancelled the tests much earlier. One pupil summed up the year quite succinctly as follows:

“It was a year of uncertainty. You didn’t really know what was going to happen, whether the AQE was on or off, what school you were going to get into” (GS3).

Another added that this uncertainty surrounding the transfer tests was particularly unhelpful during an already stressful period as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, and placed considerable pressure on them as young children:

“Probably a bit like emotionally draining because there’s all this stress and uncertainty at a time where there’s already going to be a lot of that, having Covid and lockdown and whether the test is on and off or not just sort of adds to it, especially since we were probably around 10 or 11 then, maybe a bit older but even then that’s quite a young age to be exposed to that level of, you know, stress and things. So I don’t think it was that great overall” (GS3).

Others spoke of how the non-testing year had taught them the “life lesson” that you have to be prepared for all eventualities, including tests not taking place even after working hard for them.

Finally, while the pupils interviewed in these three focus groups could be considered as “winners” in the exceptional non-testing year (having gained admission to grammar schools), there was nonetheless an awareness that the alternative criteria had often been unfair and that some of their peers had not secured places at their first choice grammar schools, despite their ability:

“I feel for some people after it can affect others cos my mate, he wanted to go to here but he didn’t get in. If he’d done his AQE, he would have got in and he’s like not very happy at the moment, so he’s a bit annoyed” (GS3).

There was no suggestion from any of the pupils that the selective system should be abandoned in light of their experiences, although one pupil in GS3 did feel that the AQE tests favoured those who memorized the format of the questions (and so recommended greater variety of question format).

Instead, the opinion was expressed by several pupils that selection by transfer test was a fairer method of selection than the alternative criteria by means of which they had gained their grammar school places. The following comments are illustrative of the general views:

“I think the test is a good reason, because like we’ve found out now that by doing it by other ways, like having an older sibling and stuff like that, that’s not fair” (GS2).

“Yeah I think that the test is a good idea as well, because there are some ones in my old primary school that were really smart, but because they didn’t have older brothers or sisters, they couldn’t get a chance” (GS2).

“People that are worthy of coming here and should be here maybe aren’t” (GS1)

5.2 Focus groups with Non-Selective Post-Primary School pupils

Three focus groups were held with pupils attending mainstream non-selective post-primary schools across Northern Ireland, as detailed below: the sample included two controlled (PP1 and PP2) schools, and one integrated school (PP3). PP2 and PP3 were co-educational, and PP1 was an all-boys school. Each focus group comprised pupils from a single year group, including 6 boys in PP1, 2 boys and 2 girls in PP2 and 4 boys and 4 girls in PP3. Separate focus groups were conducted for boys and girls in PP2. All focus groups were audio-recorded to facilitate transcription.

Table 23: Overview of interviews with Post-Primary School pupils

School Code	Number of interviewees	Date of interview	Format
PP1	6 pupils (6 boys)	June 2023	face-to-face
PP2	4 pupils (2 boys, 2 girls)	June 2023	face-to-face
PP3	8 pupils (4 boys, 4 girls)	October 2023	face-to-face

Each focus group followed the same semi-structured interview schedule comprising three main sections addressing pupils' experiences of the non-testing year 2020-2021, including reactions to postponement and cancellation of tests; pupils' experiences settling into their new school and feelings about the outcome of the exceptional selection process; and pupils' views on academic selection and lessons from the non-testing year.

Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) of the interview data produced six key themes in relation to the experiences and views of non-selective post-primary school pupils participating in the study.

5.2.1 Theme 1: Preparations for the transfer test

Pupils taking part in the secondary school focus groups reported preparing for the transfer test at school and at home. Based on pupils' accounts, different primary schools appeared to implement different approaches to test preparation, with some schools teaching test candidates separately, and other schools expecting all children to participate in test preparations, as exemplified by the following quotes:

“The people who did AQE stayed and like, marked AQE tests they did earlier” (PP1, male).

“I don't know about yours, but it was a thing you were forced to practise for it. It was the work you got given. Like, you didn't get like all your wee P7 booklets, you were given your practice for your transfer test. You had to do it, which I like, now I know like where it's brought me, like I can understand it” (PP2, female).

During lockdown, many schools provided practice papers to help pupils prepare for the transfer test at home. Several of the pupils interviewed spoke of the difficulties of studying at home and of their attempts at managing distractions:

“When I was sitting in like maybe in my kitchen, it would have been more harder, with more things to distract you, whereas in school, it would have been maybe just a blank

room, when you have all gadgets and all in your house, and that would distract you” (PP1, male 1).

“When I was doing the tests at home ... I had to be put in the sunroom with all my devices took away from me each time I did a test. So I would be better concentrated and not distracted” (PP1, male 2).

Even though the transfer test was ultimately cancelled, several of the pupils taking part in the secondary school focus groups felt that preparing for the test had been beneficial and had helped them succeed at secondary school. For example, one pupil stated that *“the practice papers have prepared us well for this school. Like, we’ve got in the top class and I think that is because we did practise for it”* (PP2, female).

5.2.2 Theme 2: Reactions when the test was postponed and cancelled

When asked about their reaction to the transfer test being postponed and then cancelled, the responses revealed a wide range of feelings, such as relief, frustration, and annoyance, particularly at the revised admission criteria that were being implemented.

Postponement of the test was positive for one pupil, who stated that it *“gave me longer”* (PP2, male) to prepare, whereas another pupil was annoyed because she *“just wanted to get it over and done with and do it”* (PP2, female). Another pupil also argued that the postponement caused additional stress and worry:

“I think it was just more like annoying because you wanted to do the test and, and then you were stressing about it over Christmas and like, especially when you’re that bit younger it’s not something you want to be stressed about and I don’t think anybody should be stressed at that age.” (PP2, female)

Pupils were asked about their reactions to the test being cancelled. Most pupils heard this news from their parent/carer or principal. However, one pupil recalled hearing about it on *“the news”* (PP1, male).

Some pupils felt *“relieved”* (PP1, male, PP1, male, PP3, male) with one boy stating it removed *“a lot of stress and pressure”* (PP1, male), and another boy explaining that he *“was still conflicted on whether I actually wanted to do it at all. So, they had to make the decision for me”* (PP3, male). One girl recalled feeling *“happy”* (PP2, female) that she did not have to do any more tests.

Other pupils expressed frustration and annoyance due to the *“stress and hard work”* (PP1, male) they had invested. As one boy stated, *“we just did a bunch of tests for nothing really”* (PP3, male). Another pupil, who had availed of private tutoring, also complained about *“having to pay for a tutor just for it not to happen”* (PP1, male).

Pupils also felt that the uncertainty created by the repeated changes to testing plans could have been avoided if more thought had gone into the process:

“Maybe if they thought about it more and didn't postpone it to be a bit longer and didn't postpone it as much”. (PP2, male)

“I think they really just should have sat down and like they didn't have to give us an answer straight away. They didn't have to like rush in the way they did to give us an answer. They should have just sat down and thought about it more”. (PP2, female)

One pupil stated that he just wanted them “to tell me what's going on” (PP3, male), highlighting the importance of clear and effective communication in the future.

5.2.3 Theme 3: Support given to pupils in school and at home when the test was cancelled

Pupils were asked about the support they received after learning of the test date postponement and cancellation. A minority of pupils reported receiving emotional and practical support from their primary school. Two pupils recalled receiving help with “appeals and school applications” (PP1, male) or guidance from their teacher (PP2, male), while another spoke of emotional support to help deal with stress:

“We had a wee thing we could go after lunch, during lunch actually. You went upstairs into a classroom and there was all games and all you could do and there was teachers to talk to, it was just like to relieve you of your stress” (PP1, male).

However, despite some good practice, other pupils were dissatisfied with the level of support given, and as a consequence, were reliant on family members.

“I was sort of like on my own, just the teachers and my mum. The teachers weren't that much help. They're just there to teach me” (PP1, male).

“Just mum and dad I suppose” (PP3, male).

“My brother was just like don't be worrying about it and all that” (PP2, female).

5.2.4 Theme 4: Views on the revised admission criteria

An important finding emerging from this theme was the anger and frustration felt by the young people in regard to the revised admission criteria for each school, after the test was cancelled. Pupils voiced their concerns over the use of Primary 5 scoring, which they felt was not an accurate measure of their skills at the time of school transfer. Others questioned rules that prioritised pupils with a sibling (or even a member of the wider family) who had previously attended the school:

“They were basing it on tests from like three years ago, the P5 tests, which made it harder because I was scoring really high in the AQE tests but because it was three years ago, I didn't have a really fair chance of getting in” (PP1, male).

“One of the schools I was going to go to, the criteria was my Primary 5 scores, and I just felt about stupid because from Primary 5 and up I improved” (PP3, male).

“My sister went to [PP1 sister school], that's the only reason I got in. Whereas if I had put another grammar school, I would have been left out of every school” (PP1, male).

“I didn't get any sort of chance with [voluntary grammar school] because I was scoring 70s and 80s in the test and I didn't have any family members that went to [voluntary grammar school], so my only option was [PP1]. The only way I got in here was my dad, my cousin and my uncle got in here” (PP1, male).

One pupil felt that the revised criteria had resulted in mismatched school choices. The quote below expresses this idea and is also representative of a perception, shared by several pupils in PP1, that social criteria which prioritise “people with special needs” (PP1, male) and people

who “had free school dinners” (PP1, male) were unjustly depriving “smarter” pupils of grammar school places.

“Yeah the way they did it wasn’t fair on us, like, people who are like smart now, but maybe weren’t a couple of years ago didn’t get into the grammar schools. But people who aren’t really smart now are dropping out from the grammar schools, which is like pointless because of the people who were really smart but weren’t a couple of years ago aren’t getting into these schools, but because of the people who, like, maybe, I don’t know, were on benefits at the time or something because of the criteria from the grammar schools they were getting in” (PP1, male).

One pupil suggested that criteria based on class work completed over a longer time would have been more acceptable:

“My parents were confused on how are they now going to match the kids up to their schools? We were just thinking, were they just going to look at the school work they did in school, which I think probably would have been a really good idea because it would have been able to gauge the level across a wider amount of things with no pressure on us to get stuff right” (PP2, male).

Despite pupils’ critical views of the revised admission criteria, it is worth noting that, for many of them, a non-selective post-primary school had been their first choice all along – irrespective of whether or not they had intended to take the transfer test. As a result, many of them were quite happy with the outcome of their application for a post-primary school place.

Interviewer: “So, this was your first choice school anyway, so it didn’t really impact on whether you did the test or didn’t do the test, you wanted to come here? Maybe if you’d got a brilliant score or whatever, do you think it would have changed your minds at all?”

Respondent 1: “I think I would have thought about it but I never would have went.”

Respondent 2: “It wouldn’t have changed my mind. I would always have come.” (PP2, female 1 and female 2)

However, others were disappointed at missing out on a Grammar School place.

“[PP1] was my last choice of school. So I wasn’t expecting to get in here. I was expecting, like, you know, [name of grammar school], [name of another grammar school], schools like that. But I didn’t get into any of them ... So I really didn’t like [PP1] at the start.” (PP1, male)

“[I am] a bit annoyed because I would have loved to have went to [name of grammar school], but here’s okay.” (PP2, male)

5.2.5 Theme 5: Experiences in the new school environment

Pupils were asked about their experiences in their new school environment since they moved from primary school.

The overwhelming majority of pupils indicated that they were happy and settled at their new school, and were satisfied with the outcome, despite the challenges encountered. One key area noted by several pupils was that they found it easy to form friendships as some of them

“already knew loads of people going” (PP1, male), or they *“had made quite a lot of friends”* (PP1, male) and met *“new people”* (PP2, male).

Some pupils also commented on the level of work, with most saying it was *“easy”* (PP1, male, PP3, male) and one boy, who had wanted to attend a grammar, stating that pupils at his non-selective post-primary school *“need to be pushed more”* (PP3, male).

One pupil noted that the lockdowns had affected her social skills, and that this presented challenges when she first started post-primary education – *“I kind of lost my social skills. I just kind of forced myself to start talking with people more”* (PP3, female). However, this was not a widespread experience among the pupils who participated in this study. In fact, one pupil felt that the experience had made them stronger and more resilient:

“We know that if [a lockdown] ever happens again that we’re capable and we know what to do. ... We know how to deal with it. ... It doesn’t matter what school you go to, because you’re always gonna find a way to cope and a way to do well” (PP1, male).

5.2.8 Theme 6: Views on academic selection

Views on academic selection were mixed among the non-selective school pupils taking part in the study. Two pupils felt that the transfer test was a useful measure of academic ability and could help ensure a good fit between the type of school and a pupil’s ability:

“I think it’s a good way to determine how smart academically someone is and, like, what would be a good school to go to, because some schools might not be able to handle certain things” (PP3, male).

“Yeah, I think the transfer test is a good test for telling you where to go – and a good school for you, yeah” (PP3, male).

In contrast, other pupils felt that, for a range of reasons, the transfer test was not an accurate measure of academic ability. Reasons given included the narrow focus on mathematics and English, and a view that the test measured a child’s ability to perform under pressure, rather than their true academic ability:

“For people who do struggle with the likes of exams, with the pressure, they might not be showing their full potential and might do better in the likes of a grammar school.” (PP1, male)

“I just don’t think we should keep like doing them. ... Because just, say, like you’re like smart and then like you get really nervous in the test and then just do bottom.” (PP1, male)

There were also concerns that a pupil who *“guesses a few questions ... right, they can go to the same school as some boy who knew all the questions”* (PP2, male). Another pupil agreed that *“if you didn’t know those questions and you got super lucky and you got most of them right and got a really good score and then ended up in a school that was too much for you, you would struggle quite a lot”* (PP2, male).

Related to the concerns about performing under pressure, several secondary school pupils raised the negative impact the transfer test could have on pupils’ mental health by causing stress at too young an age and affecting pupils’ confidence.

“I don’t really agree with it. ... Because it just makes the students more stressful going into a new school and all that stuff” (PP2, male).

“I don’t even agree with the transfer test now. I think you’re too young to be testing kids at that age. ... That’s 10 year olds, like you’re far too young to be tested and 10 year olds shouldn’t feel stressed like. At that age you’re playing with unicorns and Barbies, do you know what I mean?” (PP2, female)

“I don’t think there is any need for it. I think it just puts kids under too much stress when they have so much time ahead and they don’t need to be stressed about it that young” (PP2, female).

“And then you’re always like, of course, when you get your marks back, as you do with any test, you compare them with your friends and then if you got a lower mark, you’re like, I’m not smart enough. ... Of course you have to think about what high school like but you shouldn’t be, like, thinking am I good enough for that high school?” (PP2, female)

Another concern referred to the view that transfer tests created differences and division between children: *“I don’t think you have to do it because you’re just like making a difference between pupils and there’s no need to, like, at all” (PP2, female).*

In one school, several pupils reported that their primary schools had enforced strict spatial segregation between children who were studying for the transfer test and others who did not, extending even to the school playground:

“When I first went to P7, my school split our classes up, so it felt quite weird because I would have been put into the AQE class, then I would have been away with some of my mates because I was split up with them, so it did feel quite weird. ... It was kinda annoying because like they would split like our playground and all so we couldn’t even speak to our mates in our year, so it felt weird just being with people that were doing the AQE.” (PP1, male)

“None of the other classes were allowed to be near each other and then there was this one class for people who wanted to do the AQE and then you just went in and did all the past papers and all.” (PP1, male)

“My school was split up into three categories each class, so it was AQE, that was the top level, then there was some mid-level, if you were going to do the AQE then you would be moved up, then there was the lowest level, so it was each band of AQE.” (PP1, male)

The comment about top-, mid-, and lowest level shows how such arrangements can lead pupils to differentiate between their peers in terms that imply differences in worth based on the “category” they belong to. One pupil felt that the transfer test was useful because it helped high-achieving pupils succeed by shielding them from *“somebody who wasn’t [getting high marks] and ... could distract the person who’s trying to do good [if they attended the same school]” (PP1, male).* Such a mind-set, which links test performance to personal worth and character, was also noticeable in pupils’ discussions about the fairness of the revised admissions criteria, where several pupils repeatedly referred to children “who are smart” and children “who are not smart”, framing test results as a defining personal trait.

5.3 Interviews with Parents/Carers

A total of 7 parent/carer interviews and focus groups were held with 25 parents/carers who had a child attending various mainstream post-primary schools: two co-educational voluntary grammar schools (GS1 and GS2), two all-boys voluntary grammar schools (GS3 and GS4) and one all-boys non-selective school (PP1).

Each focus group followed the same semi-structured interview schedule addressing experiences of the non-testing year 2020-2021, experiences since then, and lessons learnt. Data was analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) model of thematic analysis. Following audio transcription and thematic analysis of the qualitative data, several key themes emerged from the data.

5.3.1 Theme 1: Experiences prior to the cancellation of the transfer test

Participants were first asked to explain their experiences prior to the cancellation of the transfer test, including the level of provision and support they were providing in order to prepare their child to sit the test. Parents/carers reported a range of preparation methods, including sample papers, using BBC Bitesize tests, and hiring personal tutors.

The majority of parents/carers agreed that the pandemic exacerbated the stress and anxieties associated with preparation for the transfer test, including its impact on pupils, with two parents/carers whose children are now at a non-selective school reporting concerns over *"running out of tests, maybe test papers"* (PP1, male) in addition to *"other major stressors going on in their lives"* (PP1, female) such as lockdowns, home schooling and fear of illness.

"We were doing the sample papers, and we were preparing, and it was a lot of tears and a lot of anger" (PP1, Female).

"An absolute fear that we were going to be unwell for the tests and a lot of parents remember we were all on the count down what Saturdays the tests were, if they got COVID or somebody else got COVID, because we were still doing the, if somebody in the home had it, then your child had to stay away so I just remember living for a couple of months like in a bubble not wanting to let them go out because you were so afraid" (PP1, female).

"She was doing practice papers in her bedroom of her own volition because she was so anxious that she had these tests coming up. You know, she wasn't well, we weren't well, she was stressed about her daddy being really not well, but she was doing papers, it was just awful" (PP1, female).

Several parents/carers of pupils now attending grammar schools also spoke of the challenges of preparing their children for the AQE at home during lockdown:

"I was working at the time so it was trying to balance working as well as trying to get my son at that time to work and to keep on at him because he wasn't just going to do it on his own. So at least when they were back at school, you felt that somebody else, they would be doing papers in school, it'll all be a bit more controlled." (GS2, female)

"And I did worry my daughter was being left behind ... because I worked full-time and my husband worked full-time. I carried a guilt that they weren't being home-schooled,

you know, there was nobody doing this home-schooling really with them. I would spend time at the weekend at the start printing off all the materials, and then the school eventually started providing them and then trying to mark something to put onto the Google classroom or whatever it was, but, I mean, they were not being taught. There's just no way they were being taught during that last sort of tranche of P6 from my perspective.” (GS2, female)

Parents/carers in both school types reported receiving limited support in preparing their children for the AQE, with one parent stating that *“beside the learning packs to do at home, there wasn't really sort of much information as to how to best implement those or, or anything else, it was kind of like you were given the work and sort of just sink or swim kind of almost”* (PP1, female). A grammar school parent explained that *“our primary schools don't prepare for the test. So that was me who was preparing my daughter for the test”* (GS1, female).

5.3.2 Theme 2: Responses to postponement and cancellation of the transfer test

A key theme in parent/carer interviews across both school types referred to the repeated changes to testing plans, which created uncertainty and stress for parents/carers and children:

“Nobody knew what they were doing. Even the children didn't know what they were doing, parents didn't know what they were doing. And I think nobody knew. ... Just waiting for the email every day, just looking and waiting. What's going on? And just watching the news and thinking, is it happening? Is it not happening? The main emails coming and you afraid to open it because you don't know what's the news?” (GS1, female).

“I don't think there was a huge amount of stress until they postponed it. ... I was so annoyed. She was ready to do it, then. I didn't want it after Christmas, I didn't want her studying all over Christmas. ... She was sickened with doing them by the time [crosstalk] so around about Christmas time, I was gonna pull out of it ... because I said I'm not having this – it's on, it's off. It's on, it's off. But I didn't in the end because I chickened out... And so when they finally made a decision, I was relieved and annoyed that they left it so late. ... I just felt like I was annoyed for about three months where I didn't need to be” (GS1, female).

“That was the worst thing, because obviously telling your child, right, look, it's cancelled and there was a bit of upset and this is unfair, I've worked so hard for this, I've put all this time in, then to be told there's a possibility of it going ahead and then getting excited about it again, and then for it to be like no, actually, it's not, and it isn't even going to go on academic ability, it's gonna go on a whole lot of other criteria” (PP1, female).

Parents/carers in both school types felt that the government response was characterized by poor planning, avoidance of responsibility, and poor communication, and several parents/carers identified this as a key learning from the experience:

“It was like a hot potato; I don't want it, [the Minister for Education] didn't want it, the Education Board didn't want it, the AQE and GL. We were customers of theirs. We were paying them a service. And they weren't even giving us any information on what their plan B was and C – nothing” (GS3, female).

“I think it was mismanaged. I don’t think anybody could have planned for COVID in fairness you know, it was it was new to everybody. But ideally, in scenarios or situations like that, there should be a contingency plan, there should be something put in place already” (PP1, female).

It is evident that although parents/carers felt that no one was prepared for the global pandemic, contingency plans should have been considered in the event of this situation. Parents/carers from both setting types agreed that the lack of clarity in the lead up to the cancellation of the tests could have been avoided with a clear decision being made earlier on in the process – *“Just make a decision”* (PP1, female)

Parents/carers from both school types expressed mixed reactions and feelings towards the cancellation of the transfer test, which ranged from a sense of relief to disappointment and anger. Those who expressed relief did so for a number of reasons such as not having to prepare for the test, and a reduction in pressure for their child, while those who were disappointed cited wasted effort or reported that their child’s self-esteem was affected by not having a “score”:

“I remember my son was really upset about it and that wasn’t really what he expected, because I sort of thought, maybe he’d be relieved that he wouldn’t have to do it and he was really upset and he was like, no, I want to earn my place and I’ve worked hard.” (GS2, female)

“When it was cancelled, it was I don’t know, it was mixed feelings. Because [sighs] it was good, because she didn’t need to do that, because I knew that it was a big stress. I was kind of relieved that she doesn’t need to do that. But it was kind of disappointing, because we were working a lot” (GS1, female).

“She was so disappointed because she wanted to beat her brother in her score as well. She was ready for it, she had done so much work and she was ready, and then to pull that out from her. Like till this day, she says they would talk about their scores. She says, ‘I never got a score. I wish I had a score’. So that will always stay with her” (GS1, female).

Interestingly, there was no clear relationship between school type and reaction to the test cancellation, with both grammar and non-grammar school parents/carers expressing positive and negative feelings. Rather, reactions were related to families’ positions in relation to the revised selection criteria for their school of choice and the anxiety or relief caused by this – irrespective of whether the school their child was ultimately admitted to was a grammar or non-grammar school. This finding points to the importance of choice and agency, which is discussed below.

5.3.3 Theme 3: Reactions to the revised admissions criteria

The revised school admissions criteria played a significant role in parental experiences of the non-testing year. Revised admission criteria varied substantially between schools, but in most cases did not take into account measures of academic achievement. Family-based criteria – such as having an older child at the school or being a first child – were particularly contentious. While parents/carers whose children met these criteria expressed relief, those who did not were dismayed by this requirement. It is noteworthy that even some parents/carers whose children

benefitted from family-based criteria expressed discomfort at their use, considering them unjust. Overall, family-based criteria were unpopular among parents/carers taking part in the study.

“I was quite happy because we met a lot of the criteria, because she was the oldest child. We were registered to the test. So we had a big hope that we are going to go to the school. But I imagine other children were not so lucky. ... And it’s when I hear some people didn’t go to any school, even they are very, very clever children. And they were hoping to go to grammar school, but they didn’t because they didn’t meet any criteria. So we were lucky” (GS1, female).

“My older daughter was at an all-girls school, so we didn’t have her as a sibling to fall back on. So my son was left in a situation where a lot of his friends in primary school had older siblings in [preferred grammar school], so they were all happy as Larry, they were all like, alright, this is easy, you know, I’m kind of in now, I don’t even have to do the transfer test. You know, this is great. Whereas we were like, they had published their admission criteria claiming that they appreciated and valued those with a connection to the school, yet they weren’t prepared to consider the one primary school closest to them” (GS3, female).

“[You had to have] a family member already at the school or somebody else that again got you in. For an eldest child, which was, in my case, really was my eldest boy, he was the last criteria. He was the last on that list of all those others above him. He was the last on that list. It did ask had you registered your child for AQE or GL, which was above the eldest boy. ... They went down to having either a child there or a father that attended the school or a mother [who had attended the sister school] or they had free school meals” (PP1, female).

In one school, Primary 5 data were used as a proxy for transfer test results. Parents/carers who commented on this criterion were generally critical of its value, arguing that these data were “out of date” (GS3, female) and that “people mature” (GS3, female). One parent, whose child had missed out on his school of choice based on this criterion but had been admitted to a different, high-performing grammar school, reported that her child was diagnosed with dyslexia in P6 and was disadvantaged by the use of the P5 data, which preceded his diagnosis.

Another concern voiced by parents/carers whose children now attended a Grammar School referred to mismatches between children’s personality or academic ability and the school they had been admitted to based on non-academic admission criteria, although few reported that their own children were struggling.

“I do think that they did get a really good quality cohort of pupils due to their academic selection that year. And that’s why I think [my son] settled, because everybody he ended up with ... had similar mind-sets. And I’ve heard stories of those that ended up at [grammar school that didn’t use academic criteria] and they’ve had a lot of difficulties getting that year’s cohort through each year, you know, with behavioural issues or academic issues, whatever it is” (GS3, female).

“Mixed feelings, personally mixed feelings because I knew deep down it probably wasn’t the right school for my son academically, but also relieved that I knew that there were lots of pupils who probably should have got places in grammar schools who didn’t

get places, so I suppose a bit of a mix you know, fearful of how he was going to cope but also a bit of relief that actually, although it wasn't his first choice, it was a good choice, you know, it was a good school. A lot of people didn't have that" (GS2, female).

Finally, an important finding from the parent interviews concerns the importance of choice and agency in allocating school places. Several grammar school parents/carers reported feeling upset about not being able to choose a school that was "right" for their child. This was particularly salient among parents/carers of all-boys schools, several of whom reported that they and their sons had had a strong preference for a co-educational school. While all these young people attended very good schools, this finding shows the lines between "winners" and "losers" of the revised admission process do not align neatly with whether a child gained admission to a grammar school. In fact, in one case, the pupil had hoped for a place at a non-selective school and was disappointed with the grammar school place he had been offered.

"It's not where he would have chosen. He didn't want the single-sex education, but, you know, you took what was there, and he got a place there. But obviously, a real lack of [choice], there was no choice, you know. And I suppose that was the only part of doing that test that would have been helpful. It would have facilitated some choice for him." (GS4, female)

"I'd never worried because [my son] had such a strong academic side in primary school and I thought he'll have his choice. He can go where he wants. But again, like your son, [my son] loves girls, and sort of the mixed primary school and I didn't really feel that an all-boys school was kind of the place for him. And I just felt like his choice was just ripped out from under him. And you know, he was a child who would have done well at the test ..., but it just took away his choice. 80% of his primary school, went to [co-educational secondary school], and that's where he wanted to go. And I had to be the one to say 'sorry, your brother made a decision three years ago and now yours is gone'" (GS3, female).

5.3.4 Theme 4: Experiences of new school environment

Despite the challenges faced during the non-testing year and the lack of support encountered, the language and comments reported by parents/carers from the grammar and non-grammar sector highlighted that their children are "happy" (PP5, female), "contented" (PP3, female) and "settled very well" (PP4, female). It was clear that pupils were being supported both academically and pastorally at their new school, and they had formed strong friendship groups.

"She is not now on the top end of things academically, but we knew that with even before she was coming in and sat and she's not going to be the top end of it, but she is so happy and so settled and so well supported in school" (GS1, female).

"I know it's strange to say but because at the time we thought, you know, this is really unfair on him. But actually, it's perhaps been a gift in disguise, because he has really settled into a good school that looks after him. He's made a really close group of friends. And he's genuinely happy" (GS3, female).

"When I let him open [the admission letter] he was like [sighs] 'how's this fair, Mum?' I says, 'Fair?!' and I was like 'Listen, son, it doesn't matter where you go, you'll excel, you know, it does not matter'. I says, 'So, you just have to get it out of your head now, you know, you're not going to those other schools. This is where you're going. And

unfortunately it was done unfairly, son, you know, but you'll make the most of it.' And do you know what? He is absolutely flying. Brilliant. I mean, flying and part of me thinks, if he had went to grammar school, would he be doing just as well? Maybe – I don't know. Because the teachers, I have to say they're all for pushing, pushing, pushing, and they will push him, because they know, he's capable. And they've openly said to me that they knew that wasn't a school that he was planning to go to. And from first year right through to this term here, they have pushed him, and he is flying" (PP1, female).

5.3.6 Theme 6: Parental views on the academic selection process

Parents/carers were also asked to comment on their views of the academic selection process, including any suggestions to improve or enhance the process in the future. There were mixed parental views on academic selection, and how this should be implemented in future. One grammar school parent felt that the academic selection process provided guidance for finding a suitable school that matches a child's ability:

"We like the idea that there is a score that we can base our decision on. We know in school he's doing well, but this test is totally independent and it's his efforts" (GS1, female).

However, two parents/carers of pupils from non-grammar schools, noted that although they agreed with the test, they would like to see alterations or changes made to the process such as testing all pupils:

"I think it should be done. I do see part of me agrees that there should be a test for all. It shouldn't just be a test for those who think they're capable of grammar school, but to me there should be a test" (PP1, female).

"Everybody that did the 11+ way back then you know that there's no pressure on the child, everybody's getting taught, I think that everybody in the class will get taught. So therefore, the underachiever in the class will get the help and support that they need. And the overachiever will get the help and support all on one level" (PP1, female).

Two parents/carers, whose children attend a grammar school, reported that they did not agree with academic selection in the form of a test, but that other possible options should be put in place such as streaming classes within schools, or ongoing assessment across the academic year,

"I think you could just open school up to whoever and, you know, I don't think you need selection, you know; I think some schools they would do it and said they would do it when you got there, and they streamed the class. I think you could do that" (GS2, female).

"I don't know, a process of ongoing assessment, would that be something that's fairer you know and allows for the peaks and troughs over a couple of years?" (GS2, female)

Lastly, it was clear from the findings that parents/carers noted the significant mental impact test preparation had had on their child's wellbeing, and the significant stress it can put on pupils, as expressed in the quotes below:

"I think that the test is quite stressful for the kids" (GS1, female).

“I definitely don’t think, having gone through it very recently again and with my daughter sitting two to three tests is the right way to judge a 10/11 year-old’s suitability for a school. I think it is harsh, unfair, unnecessarily stressful and doesn’t get the best out of all children, so, and I’ve seen children crumble who should have done really well and mine did okay, but it’s just luck of the draw and it shouldn’t be like that” (GS2, female).

“[My son] had two friends that had personal tutors. And they used to cry because they had to do the work in school, they were expected to go home, then going to the personal tutor. Too much pressure on them. For what?” (PPI, female)

5.3.7 Theme 7: Lessons learned from the non-testing year.

The last question posed to parents/carers was regarding key lessons from the non-testing years and how these could be taken forward into future practice.

Firstly, one parent of a grammar school pupil stated that “communication is critical” (GS3, female) in circumstances such as the non-testing year, to keep parents/carers informed of developments and updates on matters which affect their child’s education and wellbeing.

Secondly, “standardisation of the admission criteria” (GS1, female), was noted by parents/carers whose children attend a grammar school, to ensure that parents/carers were clear on how schools were selecting pupils and there was no unfair disadvantage. A further parent from the grammar school sector suggested looking to other countries and reviewing their education systems (GS2, female) to see how academic selection may be undertaken without the need for a test.

“It really felt like the wild west and like a really unregulated system, that to put kids that age through, that just now seems outrageous” (GS3, female).

Outstanding lessons drawn from the themes discussed throughout this chapter include the need for better crisis management and greater efforts to avoid repeating the uncertainty that characterised the period up to the cancellation of the transfer test. Furthermore, results from the parent/carer interviews show that – within the current education system – careful thought needs to be given to admission criteria. While academic selection received criticism for a range of flaws, including the pressure it puts on children, the alternative, non-academic criteria applied during the non-testing year were widely seen as unfair, resulted in poorly matched school choices for some children, and deprived families of choice. Any future changes to the academic selection system therefore need to be carefully considered. Overall, it is clear that lessons can be learnt by schools and the relevant authorities, and contingency plans put in place to ensure a more transparent system is implemented in the event of a future public crisis.

5.4 Focus groups with Grammar School staff (principals and senior staff)

A total of 4 interviews were held in grammar schools as detailed below: two co-educational voluntary grammar schools (GS1 and GS2) and one single-sex grammar school (GS3). The grammar schools were located across Northern Ireland and have wide catchment areas comprising both urban and rural areas. In GS1 an interview was carried out in June 2023 with the school principal and the (then) Head of Year 9 (the cohort who had transferred without sitting transfer tests in the autumn of 2020). In GS2, two individual interviews were held in October 2023 with the school principal and (separately) with the (then) Head of Year 10 (responsible for the same cohort who had transferred using the non-academic admissions criteria). In GS3, an individual interview was conducted with a senior teacher. This interview was held in June 2023. All but one of the interviews were conducted face-to-face in the school settings and audio-recorded to facilitate transcription, with one interview recorded on Microsoft Teams.

Table 24: Overview of focus groups with Grammar School staff

School Code	Roles of interviewees	Number of interviewees	Date of interview	Format
GS1	Interview with principal and year head (together)	n=2	June 2023	face-to-face
GS2	Interview with principal	n=1	November 2023	online video
	Interview with year head	n=1	November 2023	face-to-face
GS3	Interview with senior teacher	n=1	June 2023	face-to-face

Each interview followed the same semi-structured interview schedule comprising three main sections: an initial discussion around the experiences of the 2020-21 non-testing year when grammar schools were required to develop alternative admissions criteria following the cancellation of the AQE and GL transfer tests; a subsequent discussion around the particular needs of and challenges presented by the cohort of pupils who transferred to grammar school in September 2021, having followed the alternative admissions criteria; and, finally, a concluding discussion around lessons learnt from this unprecedented set of circumstances.

Following audio transcription and thematic analysis of the qualitative data, several key themes emerged, providing insights into the challenges faced by grammar school principals and senior staff:

5.4.1 Theme 1: Unique circumstances

There was strong consensus across all the interviews that the schools were faced with a very unique set of circumstances in 2020-21, the result of the Covid-19 pandemic in general but also the consequence of a High Court hearing on 2 September 2020 that had led to the postponement of the tests scheduled for November 2020 (initially with a two-week delay) to January 2021, by which stage schools had once again closed due to the second wave of the pandemic virus.

Grammar school leaders referred to the “*very particular*” context and “*a very particular set of circumstances*” (GS1) that created “*a kind of logistical quandary*” (GS2) since it quickly

became apparent that schools would be closed for a period of months rather than days or weeks, meaning that there simply wouldn't be time to run the tests later in the school year. There was a strong sense that it would have been simpler had the tests (or even one of the tests) been allowed to go ahead as normal in November, but, as one principal remarked *"the court case knocked that on its head"* (GS2).

5.4.2 Theme 2: Honouring and replicating the process

Although the grammar schools had little or no opportunity to engage directly with the children, there was nonetheless a high level of understanding and sympathy towards "these poor kids" (GS3) who were unwittingly impacted by the change to the normal transfer process.

In every case there was a clear willingness to "honour" (GS1) the process which had already begun and towards which many children had been working for many months (or years). It was therefore not a case of designing a new process at the outset instead of selection by transfer test, but rather a case of designing a transfer procedure that would "replicate" as far as possible what would be the normal outcomes for this cohort:

"So as far as we were concerned, we were very keen to make sure that we replicated as far as possible the intake that we would have had if the tests had taken place. And that was not so much for our benefit but for the benefit of the pupils because they had gone through P7 with the expectation that they were going to do a test. There had been a long, drawn out process, and then they suddenly had the rug pulled from under their feet. So we wanted to honour that as far as possible." (GS1)

Another grammar school principal (GS2) similarly outlined the challenge he faced in terms of honouring the transfer process that was already well underway, doing so *"in such a way that was true to the school and its ethos"*, reducing the "stress" as much as possible for the children, and trying to come up with a system *"with a means of ending up with more or less the same children who, who might have got here anyhow"* (GS2).

For the third grammar school, which adopted a different admissions approach to most others (see below), there was also a sense of honouring the historic academic ethos of the school which, it was felt, needed to be preserved, even amid the challenges of the pandemic:

"...you know the point of [GS3] and this sort of comes back to the ethos of the school. The school was set up on the foundation that any boy of ability should be able to go and get an education and they've tried to stick to that sort of idea as much as humanly possible, so then, whenever it came to this as well... anyone with a level of ability who wants to come here, we want to make sure that we have an avenue for them to be able to do so" (GS3).

5.4.3 Theme 3: Rationale, process and outcome

Despite the similarity across all three grammar schools of seeking to replicate the normal transfer outcomes as closely as possible, the process adopted by each of the schools differed significantly. GS3 was one of just three grammar schools in Northern Ireland which chose to maintain a form of academic selection, in this case, by using data from year 5 standardised tests of numeracy and literacy (PTM and PTE). As the senior teacher explained, the aim was clearly *"to keep a degree of academic selection"* in line with the historic ethos of the school (see section above).

The reliability of this option for selection in a “normal” year was however questioned by the principal of GS1 who pointed to the fact that these in-class numeracy and literacy tests were “*sat in different conditions in different schools*” and also that the tests had been taken “*too far from the current situation*” (in terms of chronology) to allow them to be used to make robust selection decisions. For GS3, the use of year 5 in-class standardised test scores was however accepted as reliable, not least since, as the senior teacher explained, there could have been no temptation for teachers to unfairly help pupils since they could not have known or predicted at the time that they might have played a role in post-primary transfer two years later.

The reliability of the year 5 test scores was further supported by claims that the cohort who transferred to GS3 on that basis are, if anything, “*academically stronger*” than other year groups. Although admittedly anecdotal, a possible explanation for this outcome was mooted, based on the premise that parents/carers of academically strong pupils without older siblings at another grammar school may have opted for GS3 as it offered much greater certainty of admission. It was suggested that more parents/carers of high ability children “*then decided they would go for an academically selective school that was still doing it [selection by ability], to try and sort of make sure that they got in*” even if a closer grammar school (which had chosen to use non-academic admissions criteria) may have been their initial first preference.

All three grammar schools sought legal advice around their revised admissions criteria, but none reported that they had been challenged in the courts. Nonetheless, there was an acknowledgement by the principals of GS1 and GS2 that the resulting non-academic admissions system adopted that year was “*probably as good a solution as we could have come up with in the circumstances*” but that it was still “*far from perfect*” (GS1). Echoing this viewpoint, the principal of GS2 noted that “*this was an imperfect process. Our good intentions played out for most people well, most of the time, but it could never be perfect*” (GS2).

5.4.4 Theme 4: Parental concerns

Consequently, it was acknowledged by GS1 and GS2 that there were definitely some children who almost inevitably lost out in the sense that, under the non-academic admissions criteria, they failed to transfer to a grammar school, even though under ‘normal circumstances’ their AQE or GL test scores would have guaranteed them a place. One principal reported that “*a lot of people were very distraught because they hadn’t been placed in what they felt was a suitable school for their child*” (GS1).

A clear sense of “*Angst*” (GS1) or a “*fear factor*” (GS2) were noted by both principals who also referred to more parents/carers contacting them than would normally do so, and most commonly saying “*Please make sure the test goes ahead...my child has spent two years preparing for this. It’s not fair if they don’t have the opportunity to do what they need to do to get a place at your school*”. This was the result of some parents/carers seeing that they couldn’t “*tick certain boxes*” on the admissions form and so they keenly felt “*a lack of agency*” (GS2).

5.4.5 Theme 5: Support from DE, EA and AQE

When asked if they had received adequate support from the Department of Education (DE), Education Authority and test providers (AQE and/or GL), the principals of GS1 and GS2 were accepting of the fact that this was a matter for the grammar schools themselves to deal with, since the transfer tests were “*unregulated*” (GS1). Both principals reported that the grammar schools and AQE had been discussing the challenges and thinking of solutions, but “*there wasn’t any good alternative, and that was the problem*” (GS1). The principal of GS2 added

that as a grammar school that always set their own admissions criteria (“*and the governing body is sovereign in that sense*”), they were neither supported nor disadvantaged through this unique circumstance. As a result, schools were essentially left to their own devices to “*come up with what best they could*” (GS2).

Both principals resisted the temptation to cast the blame on DE or AQE and both reiterated their contention that the resulting non-academic admissions criteria that they had come up with, having consulted with other grammar schools and their local primary schools, was as good a solution as they could have come up with, given the challenges of the unique and fast-changing circumstances.

5.4.6 Theme 6: Experiences of supporting the September 2021 cohort

All participants were asked to outline the differences in the social and academic demographic of the year 8 cohort who had been admitted to their school in September 2021. On this question more than any of the others, the responses differed across the three contrasting grammar schools.

Firstly, as outlined above, the senior teacher in GS3 (where year 5 test scores had been used to select entrants) explained that the resulting cohort of pupils was “*academically stronger*” than other year groups. In terms of their emotional health and wellbeing, he continued that, while the school in general was working hard to support pupils from all year groups who had found the experience of lockdowns and home-schooling very challenging, he had not noticed particular challenges in that particular year group.

By contrast, the year head in GS1 spoke of a number of significant differences including a greater range of academic ability, a time of adjustment and lack of focus in class following two extended periods of lockdown, and an initial higher level of parental anxiety (especially in relation to pupils who were struggling to meet the academic expectations of a grammar school). The school had used MidYIS tests to identify particular pupils who were struggling the most academically and had implemented a number of forms of support including additional pupil mentoring for this cohort, additional homework club sessions, and a change to the curriculum for a small number of pupils who were given additional support with literacy and numeracy. The principal explained that the benefits of this were both academic (working in small groups with experienced staff) and pastoral (allowing closer monitoring and support), although there was a risk of continued disengagement by a small number of pupils. It was clear from the discussion that the school was thinking ahead to years 11 and 12, and were considering alternative GCSE options and a reduced number of subjects for those struggling most.

In GS2 the situation was different again. The principal firstly described how that cohort included more newcomer or non-indigenous families than in previous cohorts, although he noted that this may not have necessarily been as a result of the revised admissions criteria. Secondly, he noted that there was also an “*academic gap*” that was more obvious than in other year groups. This gap was “*deeper and wider*” than normal and this had necessitated a higher level of support that was ongoing even two years later. Thirdly, he remarked on a lower level of maturity of behaviour in the cohort, including having to stop assemblies to insist on the pupils paying attention. He attributed this to a broken experience of education at home without “*adult authority figures*” and as a result there was more time spent by the school on teaching basic behavioural expectations and self-regulation through pastoral care. By contrast, the year head explained that she had hardly noticed a difference at all. She explained this by virtue of

the fact that this was a less selective grammar school and that the intake had become increasingly diverse academically over the past few years, irrespective of the pandemic. She also claimed that, as a middle manager rather than a senior manager, she had personally been so focused on her teaching and year head responsibilities (as well as her family commitments during the two extended periods of home-schooling) that she had not been aware that there had been no academic selection for that particular cohort. Consequently, she had not realised that the pupils had transferred differently from any other cohort. This was the result, she claimed, of the intake to her school becoming “*diluted and diluted and diluted*” over recent years, and meant that the current year 10 cohort were “*not that much different*” to other year groups, but were noticeably weaker than the year groups in many other more selective grammar schools, as a recent substitute teacher had confirmed to her.

5.4.7 Theme 7: Final reflections and commitment to selection by test

To conclude each interview, school leaders were asked to reflect on the whole experience of the non-testing year and to suggest what (if any) lessons could be learnt for the future. Here the points made across the three schools were often divergent, but a clear message seemed to emerge from all three that they would not wish for a repeat of the 2020-21 year for everyone’s sake, but especially for the P7 children who were the victims of a very unique and unforeseen set of circumstances. For one senior teacher, the main lesson learnt was never to “*do that to those kids again*”, by which he was referring to the “*dragging out*” of the transfer procedure through the Christmas holidays only to see the tests cancelled in January: “*...to me, that is far too much for kids of that age. To be strung out like that was ridiculous*” (GS3). For the two principals, the anomalous year reinforced their understanding that their schools were irrevocably embedded and interlinked with the surrounding community of primary schools, parents/carers and children, and that decisions taken in their schools in relation to admissions criteria had significant knock-on effects across the local community, the effects of which they were still dealing with more than two years later. As one principal remarked, “*So I think it just demonstrates that every school is part of the system*” (GS1). There was an admission that there had been winners and losers under the revised criteria in their schools, but there was a strong commitment evident to support those who appeared to be struggling in a range of different ways: academically, pastorally and socially, including through an encouragement to get involved in extra-curricular activities.

In all cases there was an enduring commitment to academic selection and to the selective ethos of their grammar schools, and this emerged perhaps stronger than ever, since it was accepted that transfer tests were a fairer way to select pupils than the alternative 2020-21 admissions criteria. As one grammar school principal explained, the non-testing year demonstrated that the test was still “*the simplest means of accessing*” the grammar school education which the children’s parents/carers saw as best suited to their child:

“And what we have found over the years is that academic selection is the best way of giving everyone, no matter their background, no matter their geographical proximity to the schools, or religious background or whatever, the chance to access the school... And that's why we want to have, as we see it, the best means of allowing those children in.” (GS2)

5.5 Focus groups with Non-Grammar School staff (principals and senior staff)

A total of 4 interviews were also held in three non-grammar schools as detailed below: one single-sex non-grammar school (NG1) and two co-educational non-grammar schools in a range of geographical locations across Northern Ireland, again comprising urban and rural catchment areas. In NG1 a joint interview was conducted face-to-face in June 2023 with the school principal, two vice-principals and the (then) Head of Year 9. In NG2, a single interview was conducted with the principal in October 2023. In NG2, two individual interviews also carried out face-to-face in June 2023 with the school principal and the (then) Head of Year 9. All interviews were conducted face-to-face in the school settings and audio-recorded to facilitate transcription.

Table 25: Overview of interviews with non-Grammar School staff

School Code	Roles of interviewees	Number of interviewees	Date of interview	Format
NG1	Interview with principal, two vice-principals and year head (together)	n=4	June 2023	face-to-face
NG2	Interview with principal	n=1	October 2023	face-to-face
NG3	Interview with principal	n=1	June 2023	face-to-face
	Interview with year head	n=1	June 2023	face-to-face

As with the grammar school interviews, each interview followed the same semi-structured interview schedule comprising three main sections: an initial discussion around the experiences of the 2020-21 non-testing year; a subsequent discussion around the particular needs of and challenges presented by the cohort of pupils who transferred to their school in September 2021, having followed the alternative admissions criteria; and, finally, a concluding discussion around lessons learnt from this unprecedented set of circumstances.

Following audio transcription and thematic analysis of the qualitative data, several key themes emerged, providing insights into the challenges faced by non-grammar schools:

5.5.1 Theme 1: Profile of the pupil cohort

All school leaders were asked first to describe any significant differences in terms of the demographic and academic profile of the pupil cohort who began year 8 in September 2021. The differences appeared to be minimal, although interestingly the year group in NG3 was much smaller than in previous years (though no reason for this was suggested). The principal of NG2 referred to the much higher level of interest in a ski trip that had been offered to the year group, and suggested that this may be due to a more affluent parent body than in other years. This, he admitted, was however unproven.

Academically, the three schools reported differing patterns, although in each case there was clearly a difference from other year groups. In NG1, the academic profile appeared weaker across the year group when the standardised NGRT (New Group Reading Test) scores were analysed. As the vice-principal explained, “Normally, we would have it evenly spread, but that year group in particular had more concentration at the lower levels, which means it is then difficult for them to access the curriculum, as you know” (NG1). By contrast in NG2, and once

again based on scores in standardised tests, the principal reported a “*startling picture*” whereby there were more pupils attaining both high and low scores, “*the top end being very top and the bottom being very bottom*”. In NG3, both the year head and the principal reported that there were more academically able pupils in this year group than in other year groups (although there were always some pupils who would have coped well in a grammar school context). The year head outlined how there had been “*a lot of disappointment*” and “*maybe disgruntlement*” that September as some pupils felt that “*they were in the wrong school*”. It was reported however that these pupils had since settled well into the school and were well integrated.

In terms of the interventions introduced by the schools to cater for the academic challenges of this unique cohort, the most significant example was provided by NG1 where an additional (third) support class had been established to provide nurture support to the pupils who were struggling most acutely to regulate their emotions. In this smaller class setting there was more focus on basic literacy and numeracy within a nurturing environment which was aimed to allow them to return to their normal classes after the intervention had finished. It was acknowledged however that this intervention had come at considerable financial cost to the school in an already challenging funding context. In NG2 where there were more academically able pupils than in previous years, the principal explained that he was considering widening the range of GCSE options that would be made available for this cohort in year 11.

5.5.2 Theme 2: Emotional health and wellbeing

The second major theme to emerge from the interviews with non-grammar school leaders was the very significant impact of the experience of the Covid-19 lockdowns (rather than the removal of the transfer tests *per se*) on this cohort of pupils. While this was found across all three schools, it seemed to be most keenly felt in NG1 where all four senior leaders spoke of the many challenges they were dealing with on a daily basis as an unusually high number of boys were becoming frustrated with their inability to cope with their school work, but were then unable to regulate their emotions, becoming either aggressive and confrontational or simply walking out of class and sometimes out of school to escape the problem. This higher incidence of “*crisis points*” was attributed to low levels of concentration, lower than normal levels of attainment, a lack of resilience and an inability to regulate their emotions, all of which could be linked back to extended periods of lockdown during the pandemic. The situation was further exacerbated by the lack of face-to-face induction prior to transfer. School leaders in NG2 and NG3 referred to the unusual immaturity of this year group, which made their behaviours more “*child-like*” (NG3, year head). She described in some detail how this year group lacked the social skills to make friends and have a conversation with others, and that this was not “*fixed*” by the Engage programme:

“But we have children, and I look out in our playground, we have children who sort of obviously all of them were involved in the lockdown, the COVID, who stand on their own, because they don't know how to make friendships, that step, who've missed that transition.” (NG3, year head)

She also outlined how she had noticed “*a lot of talk around pornography*” and an increase in the number of girls sharing explicit images of themselves with boys. She also described how the school was dealing with more images of suicide and had dealt with many pupils who were telling others to kill themselves. She attributed this behaviour, firstly, to “*too much time online at home*” and, secondly, to a lack of parental supervision and a loss of parental control, a theme

also raised by the principal of NG1 who spoke of the parents/carers of her pupils having lost “*influence and control*” during Covid and not being able to regain that:

“I think there's two elements and we've touched on both, but the first is the lack of structure, in that sense in the formal education setting. But there's the lack of boundaries and routine, food, sleep, all of that deprivation that went on during lockdown, because unfortunately, our parents will choose whatever is the path of least resistance and for a P6/P7 pupil who is beginning to find their own feet and to find their own voice, they were able to exert enough influence and control in the house to be able to have time in their bedroom uninterrupted for months on end and now parents cannot get that back. They can't.” (NG1, principal)

The year head of NG1 also spoke of the impact of the lack of identification and assessment of special educational needs (SEN) and in particular Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) during the lockdowns. As she explained, incidence of ADHD is typically high among boys in socially disadvantaged areas (such as the location of her school) and the impact of delayed diagnosis was very detrimental to the boys’ ability to focus, learn and regulate.

5.5.3 Theme 3: Lessons learnt from the non-testing year

There were three main subthemes that were discernible across the three schools, when the school leaders were asked to consider the lessons to be learnt from the non-testing year.

The first relates to the importance of addressing children’s emotional health and wellbeing as a means to supporting their learning, irrespective of ability or social background. While the desire to support the year group emerged across all three schools, it was expressed most clearly by the principal and year head of NG3. For the year head, there “*needs to be a big investment into mental health*”, with additional funding for mental health specialists from external agencies and the Education Authority to support pupils’ emotional health and wellbeing and to focus on “*positive, healthy relationships*” rather than returning to assessments and examinations. This theme was developed further by the school principal, who felt strongly that there needed to be less focus on “*negative mental health*” or accessing support from others, and more focus instead on “*emotional resilience...where you have to do something for yourself*” (NG3, principal). Across all three schools there was a clear commitment to making whatever curricular and/or pastoral changes were required to support this year group to regulate, learn and thrive. As the principal of NG2 concluded:

“The other lesson I think that we can learn, we still need to learn is around how, how we can what, what, what is adaptive teaching, you can adjust and modify and adapt your curriculum and your lesson, to make sure that all students regardless of their background, or their academic ability can make progress.” (NG2, principal)

The second subtheme related specifically to the role of parents/carers and to the need to provide additional support to them in their parenting role. School leaders spoke of the loss of “*control*” and the resulting inability of parents/carers to impose “*boundaries*” and regain a degree of authority over their children. For the year head in NG1, there was a commitment to harnessing the support of the parents/carers of the cohort of pupils “*to bring them along*”, and “*equipping them*” to help their children to mature and to cope with the challenges of life. For the year head in NG3, the desire to empower parents/carers was even more explicit:

“And I would find that the bulk of the problems come from the parents who don't have the skills to parent, you know, and I find myself in here a lot in this room, with parents, saying, you know ‘You're the parent. A 12-year-old does not dictate whether they come to school or not. There needs to be boundaries. You need to take the mobile phone off them. You need to make sure, you know.’ I find a lot that the power and the control is out of the hands of the parent and it's about giving them the power back. And we can control as much as we can in school but essentially, they're spending more time at home than they do with us...So I don't know how we'd do it, but work with the parents before they come in would be one of the big emphases.” (NG3, year head).

The third theme relates to the fundamental shortcomings of the system of academic selection by transfer tests in year 7. For the principal of NG1, there was a realisation that the alternative admissions criteria in the non-testing year were *“set up to maintain the status quo”*. The principal of NG2 went further and spoke of the need to consider other ways to assess children's *“aptitude and performance”* other than through sitting examinations, and also spoke of the inadequacy of an education system which measured the success of schools simply through their GCSE scores (at A* to C) rather than engaging in *“a more sophisticated conversation around what the place of the school is to add value in terms of the progress that a child makes during their time here, rather than just quite a reductionist approach of looking at outcomes”* (NG2, principal). This was echoed by the principal of NG3 who noted that *“value added in high schools is never published”* and that there had to be something better than testing children at age 10 or 11. While she spoke more favourably of the system of selection at the end of year 10 which has been in operation in the Portadown / Lurgan area for many years (known as the Dickson Plan), she claimed there was no point in pupils in her area sitting transfer tests, when, due to falling pupil numbers, the local grammar school was accepting pupils with ever lower scores.

5.6 Interviews with primary school teachers and leaders

Four interviews were held across three different primary schools (PS1, PS2, and PS3). One primary school is located just outside Belfast, whilst the other two are more rural. Interviews were conducted in the Summer/Autumn of 2023. Across all schools, the Primary 7 (P7) teacher (who would have been teaching the P7s of the year in question) were interviewed alongside either the principal or the vice-principal. In two schools, the teacher and principals/ vice principals were interviewed together. In the other school, they were interviewed separately. One school took part in a virtual focus group, whilst the other two schools were interviewed face-to-face (see Table 26 below). All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Table 26: Overview of interviews with primary school staff

School Code	Roles of interviewees	Number of interviewees	Date of interview	Format
PS1	Interview with vice principal and P7 teacher (together)	n=2	September 2023	Face-to-face
PS2	Interview with vice principal and P7 teacher (together, online)	n=2	October 2023	Online video
PS3	Interview with principal and P7 teacher (separately)	n=2	June 2023	Face-to-face

Each interview followed the same semi-structured interview schedule which addressed the teachers' perceptions and experiences of the non-testing year, focusing on issues such as the impact of this experience on the pupils, support received, and their general perceptions of academic selection. Following audio transcription and thematic analysis of the qualitative data, several key themes emerged and are presented below.

5.6.1 Theme 1: Transfer test preparation: Covid and the impact on pedagogy and practice

Firstly, the participants reflected on the challenges they encountered whilst trying to prepare their pupils for the transfer tests and the difficulty of doing so during the Covid 19 pandemic:

“And so we knew that there was a postponement, but we were still trying to fire ahead, we needed copies of the papers for the kids, we had to do the emergency packs that they kept at home. And then if there was an isolation case, then the kids could access the papers...it increased stress, it definitely increased stress for the parents, and those poor kids, you know” (VP, PS1).

The teachers and school leaders discussed the impact that the Covid restrictions had in terms of their pedagogy and classroom practice in the lead up to the transfer tests. The challenges of online and remote learning were noted. For example, one vice-principal referred to the challenges in preparing for the tests remotely, in terms of trying to facilitate collaboration, idea generation and classroom support:

“I think the big thing for me was the fact that whenever we would be going, you know, if the children sit a practice paper for talk sake, and then after that, we would spend an hour or so going through the paper and they'd be bouncing ideas off each other, whether it be saying different ways of solving a problem. They didn't have any of that, there was no collaboration whatsoever...So we would have spent the time maybe

putting those recordings together, going through every single question, one by one, every element of every question. And they were just left to do it on their own” (VP, PS1).

Additionally, the variations in the home learning environment were also acknowledged. For example, in terms of parental capacity and access to digital devices:

“Parents who didn't have a clue about it. Families who didn't have devices” (VP, PS1).

“A lot of it came down to whether the parents were, you know, educated, and whether they were interested in the kids’ education, or you know, because you get some who are very on board, and they’re going to practise with them. And they’re going to go through mistakes and be the teacher and there were others who just didn’t do anything and the kids were left to their own devices” (Teacher, PS1).

Also, one of the teachers referred to the impact that transfer test preparation during Covid had on those children who had decided not to sit the test, as she felt unable to provide them with sufficient attention:

“So, it had a massive impact on the kids who had already been working on this test since March, but it also had a significant impact on those children who weren’t doing the test because they weren't necessarily getting my attention” (Teacher, PS2).

“Because that Covid year where the children not doing the tests have had a folder, and they just have to sit on their own with this little differentiated folder, there was no challenge because I couldn't push it too far, because they couldn't get the support. So, they weren't really being challenged. So, I felt more sorry, necessarily for the children who were not doing the test than the children who were at times, because they needed my support. Some didn’t, because obviously parents have been sensible and knew they didn't need to test” (Teacher, PS2).

The postponement of the tests was an added frustration. Specifically, the uncertainty and changes, as well as the timing (spanning the Christmas holidays) were highlighted as key frustrations:

“Well, we've described it as the roller coaster, the ups and the downs, it's on, it's off, we're not sure and we just experienced heightened anxiety with the teachers, should we continue to prepare? Are we setting them up for disappointment? And even with parents, there was that level of frustration” (Principal, PS3).

“And so, I just remembered just working them so hard. And I hand on heart would have said by November, they were ready to sit the test. Then obviously, when they were postponed...to the January, it was really frustrating, because then we had to then continue the prep work the whole way through to the Christmas holidays, setting packs for the Christmas holidays” (Teacher, PS2).

Furthermore, the vice-principal in PS1 also talked about the additional need for connectivity between the school and home. She talked about relationship building and being available for the parents, when needed and feasible:

“It was that relationship building ...lifting the phone. And you know, how many parents had your mobile number at that stage? Because you ... were maybe working from home and you had to be phoning out of hours and whatever” (VP, PS1).

Additionally, this vice-principal also discussed the complexity of the transfer process system with the added complexities of Covid-19, where relationships and connectivity were even more important, particular in the cases of more vulnerable children:

“And then you had, you know, even at that, like, even things like all the Child Protection stuff, and all that went on safeguarding, it was just it was massive, and parents needed to know that they could contact you and that you were there for them but I'd really remember that one. That's a big stand out you know, a particularly vulnerable child and who wouldn't maybe have got a spot, simply because of a lack of understanding of an already very complex system” (VP, PS1).

“...We're starting to think and fill in forms and she (parent) said to me, “he has a statement, so I don't have to fill that form in”. And we were nearly at the end of the time for getting the forms completed. And I said “no, that's actually not right” (VP, PS1).

Finally, it is also important to note that, despite such uncertainty and stress, there was still evidence of commitment and dedication from the pupils, who were determined to prepare for and sit the transfer tests. However, there was also a sense of futility at not achieving the full sense of achievement that they deserved:

“Yeah, the pupils were great. They were amazing. And they literally did anything that I asked them to do. They put the work in, they were aware... So, I think the pupils, I couldn't fault them. They literally worked their socks off. And they were happy to take work back home for the Christmas holidays. They couldn't wait to see me in January, they said no, we're ready to sit this test. We'll go and just give it our all. And I think they just, it was frustrating because talking to my friends' kids now, who didn't actually get to sit the test...They're frustrated because they still don't know what score they would have got, that they didn't get a closure on all the work that they had put in and it was kind of pointless...they didn't get to see how their work had paid off” (Teacher, PS2).

5.6.2 Theme 2: Process management

All of the participants interviewed reported that they felt the management of the postponement and ultimate cancellation of the transfer tests was poor. Several key issues were highlighted as being cause for frustration and stress regarding the management of this process, namely, poor and untimely decision making, the lack of communication, and a lack of support.

Firstly, in terms of the decision-making processes involved in the postponement and eventual cancellation of the tests, there was a sense that no relevant body wanted to take ownership of the difficult decisions that needed to be made, which resulted in delayed decisions and further frustrations and stress, particularly over the Christmas period:

“It was all very disappointing. You would lift the phone and you would ask AQE, GL, whoever, it's down to the politicians, it's down to whoever, always passing the buck, always kicking the can a wee bit further down the road. Nobody was taking ownership.

Nobody was prepared to make the difficult decision and it was a difficult decision” (Principal, PS3).

“Make the decision, make it well in advance, don't leave it until a couple of weeks before the test. So, I think it was poorly handled and a decision should have been made much earlier than it was...As I'd said, a decision like that should have been made back in September and to drag it on as you said, over Christmas especially, to be honest, the children probably had switched off at that stage. They wanted family, sorry not wanted, they needed family time. They needed that time to open their presents, or whatever way they celebrate Christmas and yet in the back of their head, they still had the preparation to do because we still had to provide them with work and there was the expectation that this was to be completed. So, I feel it was unfair on the part of the department to allow it to drag out as long as it did” (Principal, PS3).

Secondly, the participants felt that information was not disseminated to them effectively. When asked about the communication received from relevant bodies, such as DE, GL, AQE, the teachers agreed:

“There was none...absolutely nothing” (Teacher, PS1).

“There wasn't anything. The kids, or the parent got their notification to say it wasn't happening and like that was it. It was down to us to sort of build them back up again and say look, it doesn't matter it's not going to define you and whatever. But no, there was nothing” (Teacher, PS3).

Furthermore, the teachers and school leaders felt that often they were learning key information alongside the general public via mass media communications, leaving one vice-principal feeling as though it portrayed the school in an unprofessional manner:

“I remember being really annoyed at the time that parents wouldn't when, you know, when we're bringing children out to the parents. The parents were saying, “so I believe this is happening?” And we were saying “we don't know, when was that announced?” and they were like “Oh, it was on the news”? Yeah. So, there's stuff coming through from the education department that was going through the media before...we weren't hearing it” (Teacher, PS1).

“Whenever they had postponed it, you know, everything was just drip fed just through through different sources. It never comes directly to the school in a timely fashion. Sure, it was exactly the same whenever we got to the end of that second lockdown. And they had said children can return to school. It was already out there....it actually makes us feel a little bit unprofessional” (VP, PS1).

And finally, with reference to the participants' sense of support, whilst one teacher commended AQE, on the most part, the teachers and vice-principals interviewed reported that they felt unsupported by the relevant statutory bodies and test providers:

“Eh there was absolutely no support. As far as I can remember, now AQE were great...The the AQE exam board themselves are very helpful if I had an email or a query or question, but then obviously they weren't obliged to answer because they didn't know the answers” (Teachers, PS2).

“But yeah, it kind of felt a wee bit alone, because you were preparing them for this test. And then you were worrying thinking ... will it happen? Will it not happen? Yeah, so you kind of didn't really get the support” (Teachers, PS2).

Rather, it appears that the P7 teachers involved relied on their own experience to guide them through this process, as well as availing of the support of their colleagues, rather than receiving any formal support:

“There was absolutely nothing...because I'm an experienced teacher, I knew the expectations of the AQE test. So, I was obviously still doing what I would normally have done every year. And but it was just the case of the not knowing that the uncertainty of everything. And I think the most frustrating thing for me is that there were no answers...just the frustration of it, there was no support, no help, no guidance” (Teacher, PS2).

“I think we as a staff, everyone was trying to support me, because obviously I was the only year seven teacher in the school at the time. And so yeah, it was quite frustrating again” (Teacher, PS2).

“... They weren't getting support from the statutory body so they went to their colleagues ... which is really not, it's not good enough in my opinion” (VP, PS 2).

5.6.3 Theme 3: Response to the eventual cancellation of the tests

Once the test cancellation was confirmed it appears there were mixed responses amongst the pupils of those schools represented in these interviews. Even within schools there was evidence of some children being ‘delighted’ whilst others were more disappointed at not being able to fulfil their planned pathway:

“Now they they (the children) were delighted, because this is such a massive pressure. But they don't really understand what the consequences are” (VP, PS1).

“I did have a couple of particularly able children who knew they would have, they would have cracked it and not in a cocky way...but they also had a vision of what their pathway was going to be. And the fact that maybe this rug had been pulled from under their feet. And then for maybe the first time in their lives, really, that they have felt completely at sea. And they were worried about the consequence of not fulfilling the pathway...because maybe their siblings had already taken this route to a specific school or...you know, their dad had gone to a certain boys' grammar school as had their grandads” (VP, PS1).

The principal in PS3 talked of the pupils being devastated and commented on the measures put in place to try and reassure the pupils:

“And the kids just were, they didn't know if they were coming or going. And then when it was cancelled, to be fair they were devastated because they had worked extremely hard and they would have been a year group that would have scored really, really well. That was just one of those years. But yeah, what was the point of all the work” (Teacher, PS3).

“In fact, what we did we had a bit of a fun day for the children early on in the year. We, I suppose, the test was finished, or it was cancelled. What happens next? We didn't

know. We didn't know how the schools were going to decide, and who gets in and who doesn't get in. And so it was to try and offer that reassurance that we will walk with you on that journey, because everybody was kind of in the dark... and we'll try and answer any questions that you have so that's what we did" (P, PS3).

Additionally, one school also spoke of the response from some of the parents who were keen for their child to go to a grammar school:

"But I do remember, though, that at that stage, there were a particular group of parents who really panicked, and they would have been the parents who would have always been hoping for grammar school places for their children. So, they were really concerned and, you know, I think at that stage, they wanted the likes of the PTE and PTM data...they wanted, they wanted this in writing, they wanted this support from us" (VP, PS1).

5.6.4 Theme 4: Criteria and suitability of school placement

From the teachers' perspectives, one of the big concerns regarding cancelling the transfer tests was school allocation and the pupils' subsequent satisfaction with where they were placed. With regards to the criteria set for school place allocation, one teacher expressed their frustration in navigating the varying criteria across schools in order to provide the pupils with the best possible opportunities:

"So, for example, we had children that were hitting 80, 85, 90 per cent on their AQE and I would have been confident that they would have got maybe 100, 110 plus, so if they'd have sat the AQE they would have got into (grammar school) quite easily. But then what (grammar school) did was they actually then asked us for the data from year five, now in year five children aren't necessarily making that commitment to sort of working towards transfer. So, so a certain child that I'm talking about literally had a really horrendous year five year" (Teacher, PS2).

Additionally, one vice-principal highlighted that the work involved during this time all fell to the primary school sector, with little or no support:

"That's the other aspect of it too there. That's all (Teacher) and the primary schools doing? There is no, there is no support from either admission, or post-primary admissions, or...from the post-primary schools themselves" (VP, PS2).

With regards to eventual school placement and pupil satisfaction, there were some mixed reports. For example, the vice principal of PS1 described some variation with regards to pupils in her school, some who were satisfied with their placement in a non-selective school (despite being capable of a grammar) and others who chose to appeal:

"And so, I had a couple who had got a place in a local, excellent secondary school. But had they have done the test, they would have walked into the local grammar school, and the grammar school that they desired. And when they got their place, the parents had asked me, should I appeal this? ...Now my advice for the parents was, if you feel that you want to appeal this and fight on behalf of your child then absolutely and I will give you whatever I can to support that process...And actually two of them did win that appeal and did did move...I also had a couple...and they didn't get selected for grammar based on where their surname came in the randomised alphabet... in saying

that I have spoken to those parents quite a few times since and you know, the children are very, very happy and doing extremely well where they are.” (VP, PS1).

However, the principal and teacher from PS3 pointed to their concern that whilst some children may be happy with their placement, if in a grammar school particularly, such a school may not be the best fit:

“But my concern was that every child did get their first preference in this school and my concern was that some of those children, I would be concerned, have they the capacity to cope with that style of learning and if not, do the teachers within that setting adapt accordingly to meet the change in profile of the children and I would have a few concerns there” (P, PS3).

“They may have got where they wanted to go but did they end up in the right place?” (Teachers, PS3).

5.6.5 Theme 5: Emotional health and wellbeing

All school teachers/ leaders reflected on the emotional health and wellbeing of the pupils, their parents, and the wider family unit during this time. One teacher referred to the negative toll experienced by parents who were trying to juggle family life, home-schooling and work etc. during lockdown:

“Some of the parents sort of broke down... Yeah, they just couldn’t cope with having the children at home, they couldn’t cope with having to teach them and having to keep them busy all day” (Teacher, PS1).

In terms of the emotional toll on the pupils, one school principal reflected on pupils becoming visibly upset during this time and the need for the teachers to ‘build them up’, whilst another referred to the potential anxiety induced during this time:

“Children were going home upset. We did have tears” (P, PS3).

“Yeah, you had to build up the children, you had to tell them, it's not, it's not the end of the world” (Teacher, PS3).

“But yeah, definitely I would be shocked if children didn't feel anxiety with with what they went through...I think definitely children were massively impacted with it massively.” (Teacher, PS2).

Another teacher commented on the exacerbating impact of this time on existing mental health challenges:

“For the group I had that year there was a couple who would have had mental health issues prior to this...And it was definitely heightened, definitely heightened” (Teacher, PS1).

However, despite this exacerbating effect, this teacher felt that on the whole, there was no major mental health impact on his pupils:

“So many people were talking about mental health and the mental health of the children and the well-being and mental health of everybody. And I think I’m not saying that there weren’t mental health problems and issues at the time but for for the children that I had they a lot of it was almost pushed on them” (Teacher, PS1).

It is perhaps the case that for some pupils, school represented a sense of normality and almost a sanctuary for them during this stressful time:

“Because so much stress at home....and they were coming into school and just relaxing and enjoying being together and.... I didn’t see that they had, there was any mental health issues coming through, you know, even though the parents would have warned me that, you know, they’re really, really struggling you know, when you came into school, it was instant” (Teacher, PS1).

Additionally, the schools referred to their own safeguarding practices and the range of programmes that were put in place to support their entire student population throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, recognising that emotional health and wellbeing (rather than ‘catching up’, as one VP put it) was the priority:

“I suppose as a school, we put those safeguards in place, you know, even before how happy healthy minds...wanted to put the infrastructure in there regardless, so that the children have the support as and when they needed it” (VP, PS2).

“Because wellbeing did come first. And that, you know, that was what it was, we did have links to loads of brilliant programmes to remember ... the yoga? Yeah, so there were loads of really good things that were put in place” (VP, PS1).

“We didn’t ever talk about gaps or catch up to be honest. England seemed to talk a lot about catch up but we, we did have a really good programme in terms of literacy and numeracy support again, for those children and particularly down the school we used to use Engage ...but sure, now it’s gone too” (VP, PS1).

However, the sustainability of such programmes to address the lasting impact of Covid 19 was also recognised:

“So there had been funding and a little bit, you know, like maybe 3000 pounds funding, I can’t remember what it was called at the time, but it was for schools to specifically buy in a wellbeing programme or to use it for the children’s emotional wellbeing...But again, it was, it was tokenism in my opinion from the department, you know? Here’s a little bit of money for a well-being programme and now it’s just “Okay, everybody back in you go, you’re well” (VP, PS1).

The vice-principal from PS1 also referred to their efforts as a school community to alleviate pressure and to support families where possible:

“...there is an emotional weight that comes with it because, you know, our practice would be very much that yes, we are here to teach children, but we are, we are like a community...we’re here to support families and here to support parents...And just trying to be as supportive as we possibly could and saying we understand what the struggles are trying to remove as much burden as we could...With the kids just to lighten just to try and lighten what was already a heavy load plus all of the pressures that the kids and families were feeling because if the parents are feeling it the kids are feeling it double” (VP, PS1).

Additionally, the teacher from PS2 referred to the openness of the children and the benefits of having a school counsellor during this time (for the children particularly, but additionally, this

same teacher referred to the support she herself received from the school counsellor), highlighting the ongoing need for such a role:

“Now, we also have a school counsellor who works with the children and she was quite heavily, she would’ve always, she’s amazing. She comes in even when she’s not paid to come in and always speaks to the year seven pupils who are doing the test, the children who are not doing the test, how it impacts them. So, she was heavily used during that time... I think every primary school should have a (counsellor) once or twice a week, because as things are progressing, children need more and more emotional support” (Teacher, PS2).

“When (counsellor) came into the classroom, she always asked me if I was okay. And ...the vice principal allowed us, the staff, if we needed to go and meet with (counsellor) ourselves...you can literally pick up the phone and just say, “so you know I need a chat” (Teacher, PS2).

5.6.6 Theme 6: Perspectives on academic selection

Finally, key issues and perspectives emerged regarding the participants’ perspectives on academic selection more broadly, and on the new SEAG transfer test more specifically. When asked directly if they were in favour of academic selection by tests, there were mixed responses, with some appetite for alternative measures:

When asked if in favour of academic selection by tests? *“No, no” (Teacher, PS 1).*

“No, but yeah, I would say yes until there is a sustainable and equitable system in place” (VP, PS1).

“I, my, my I would be in favour of the Dickson plan” (VP, PS2).

“I’m not against selection at all. And I think every school should be suitable for certain children” (Teachers, PS2).

“And there surely has to be enough data for us as practitioners to give grammar schools, even all the PTE and PTM scores from P4 every year” (Teacher, PS2).

Additional insights demonstrated the stigma attached to non-selective post-primary schools and the transgenerational weight put on the transfer test and attending a grammar school, highlighting the role of parents in addressing the issue of academic selection, in terms of adapting their mindset:

“So, I think we’re trying to change perceptions of parents that this test is not the be all and end all. It depends on the child’s school choice whether they sit the test or not...so I think it’s trying to change parents’ perceptions” (Teacher, PS2).

“But how do we change the mindset of parents? How do we change what you say is systemic, it is generational. And it is about, you know, your granda, and your uncle and your daddy, and everybody went to this school? And you’re going to keep that tradition up and just removing that burden from the children” (VP, PS1).

“I think there is still for so many, they see that there’s a stigma with secondary” (Teacher, PS 1).

Additionally, the teacher in PS2 touched on the pressure that this transgenerational weight applies to children as she recounted the emotional turmoil, she witnessed from children who were very eager to please their parents with the evidence of their academic ability:

“I've got three children that are in tears and they're scared to go home because of their score in case mummy or daddy's upset...I'd a kid today, joyful, I can't wait to go home because I've gone up 10% and my mum, my daddy is gonna be really brilliant with me today. You know, so there's all that emotional turmoil through it as well” (Teacher, PS2).

“It is heart-breaking...We should be pulling the kids up not bringing them down” (VP, PS2).

Additional issues around curricular content, language and financial equity (with regards to schools buying in support programmes etc.) were raised:

“Put science back into it” (Teacher, PS1).

“But I think another thing is that if we stop calling them secondaries, and grammars, and call them selective and non-selective, and we are very careful with our use of language, that that might also help, because there are grammar schools that are also non-selective. And you know? I know. And we're, yeah, so if they're selective, you know, they're buying in to the test. And we are feeding into that by saying, grammar or secondary. So, I think that if we could change...Yeah, the language it might help” (VP, PS1).

“I think as well, the whole finance aspect of it is...Joe Bloggs' school down the road has this wonderful programme that costs 500 pounds...I think that's also a monopoly for money as in a money-making scheme ... but also some added financial cost on some schools that can't afford that. And also, some parents that can't afford that, too... And that that, to me is an equality issue...that is an issue I foresee coming out of this in the future more so” (VP, PS2).

Additionally, the participants were asked to share their views on the new transfer test (SEAG). In general, the teachers welcomed the less burdensome nature of consolidating the tests, both in terms of fewer days required to sit the tests (if a child was sitting both AQE and GL) as well as less stress regarding test preparation for two different styles of tests:

“I'm glad that it will take away five Saturdays of the children's lives in November” (VP, Teacher PS1).

“Well, I'm glad the fact now that there's one test, which is good. That has just taken the pressure off the children in our school, because within our area, there are many children still haven't decided whether they want to do the (name of school using GL) or (name of school using AQE). So, they keep their options open. And, again, there was just that heightened level of anxiety with the child because previously, there were two very different tests and had to be completed very differently and therefore, the child was having to learn different strategies and skills to complete the test and then they were almost becoming a wee bit confused as well. And then we had to be careful to make sure in terms of preparation that they were having an equal balance of one style versus another” (Principal, PS3).

“I know for me as I'm preparing them for it, it's much easier than having to do, we were doing both. We had quite a lot last year doing GL so we had to split them so we had some in the morning doing AQE and some doing GL because they do need that, it was completely different. And some of them were doing both as well. So, for the children doing 5 tests was ridiculous, now they've only 2 so that's much better” (Teacher, PS3).

In terms of specific frustration with the new tests, the teachers commented on disliking the format of the new tests, the lack of availability of practice papers and some lack of clarity and support:

“But they're really struggling with a multiple-choice question...and then not only that they have to solve it but they have to put it onto a separate piece of paper so there's like a wee mark sheet as well. So, the children have to solve it on a booklet and then transfer the data onto this wee skinny page. So, it's really frustrating...” (Teacher, PS2).

“...I think if we get 70% that might be an A and if they get, you know, so there is there is chats out there which you kind of feel right. Okay, we're all in the same boat. But it's just frustrating because we're getting no support. And the pupils have to sit a test based on the unknown” (Teachers, PS2).

“I suppose the one thing you always had was your previous papers. We don't have that now but we have bought in an external one, but again, I think that's one of the big things not actually having an actual test, but like going back to the GL, you never had an actual test of a GL so you never knew exactly what was on it. So again, this is all new this year, we don't know” (Teacher, PS3).

Additionally, there was also some frustration expressed regarding the lack of consultation with the primary sector in the decision-making processes, whilst another felt the blend was not in the best interests of those key stakeholders involved:

“Yeah. Whoever they were trying to keep happy with their blend. It certainly wasn't children, or families, or teachers” (VP, PS1).

“And to pick up on that this new test yes, it's been set by the secondary schools, but at no point were Primary School practitioners consulted upon... I could be wrong in saying that my understanding is, particularly it's multiple choice, and that is a skill in itself. That you have to be taught and, and gone through, I think that, that in itself, I think is diabolical...So it just to me, that hasn't been thought through as well, in terms of our primary school aged children, the Primary school practitioners, if there's, if they're insisting on this test, there has to be some input in terms of how it's been, what the content is, and how it's been administered” (VP, PS2).

There was also an appetite from one teacher to liaise more with post-primary schools regarding pupils' transfer to alleviate some of the stress:

“I would like to liaise more with the post-primary schools, you know, they phone me when they finally get the results, they phone me to ask me ... how the children are ... So, I think we would, I would love to liaise more with post-primary” (Teachers, PS2).

And finally, regarding the cancellation of the tests due to Covid 19 and the subsequent changes made (replacing GL and AQE with SEAG), there was a sense amongst two of the participants

that the circumstances brought about by Covid-19 was an opportunity for change that was missed and that the changes that were ultimately made were not significant enough:

“At least they cut that out you know, everybody's the same. It's just you do the same test, but it annoys me that they didn't, when they were doing a change, that they didn't do a bigger change, you know, just rip that plaster and sort it out” (Teacher, PS1).

“It was an opportunity to explore the whole system, and it was an opportunity missed, because the following year, the test was reintroduced. So, nobody decided to take the bull by the horns to decide, well, here's an opportunity, we haven't done the test, let's and I know we are following this cohort of children to see how they perform in the grammar settings. But I feel that a proper discussion should have been had, which wasn't had...Regardless of whether I'm in favour of the test or against the whole transfer process, I would have enjoyed the discussion” (Principal, PS3).

Chapter 6: Discussion

A number of common themes emerge from the analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data presented in Chapters 4 and 5. These will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

6.1 Perceptions of the impact on emotional health and wellbeing

There is clear evidence from across the various strands of research data that the lived experience of the non-testing year of post-primary transfer (2020-21) was uniquely challenging and had a significant impact on the emotional health and wellbeing of many of the P7 children and their parents/carers, and that for some this impact has endured through to the present day. As outlined in Chapter Two (above), this has to be set within the context of several recent reports which have highlighted Northern Ireland's high incidence of mental ill-health among children and young people (see O'Neill & Rooney, 2018; Bunting et al., 2020; Bond & O'Neill, 2023; NI Audit Office, 2023).

A majority of the pupils (53%) reported in the survey that they found the experience of their post-primary transfer during the non-testing year stressful, with almost half (48%) reporting that they felt anxious during this time. One in six (16%) found it hard to sleep, while the experience affected the appetite of one in ten (10%). A quarter of the pupils (26%) noted that the experience had a negative impact on them at the time, while one in eight (12%) felt that the experience had a lasting negative impact on them. These statistics are reflected in the qualitative data (from open-ended survey comments and focus group interviews) where the pupils themselves often referred to the uncertainty of that year and the resulting stress and anxiety. This evidence would thus confirm the findings of Steare et al. (2023) whose systematic review found a positive association between adolescent mental health problems and academic pressure (which in this case was extended by two months and exacerbated by the lengthy period of uncertainty leading to the postponement and cancellation of the transfer tests in 2020-2021).

This negative experience as recounted by the pupils themselves was echoed by their parents/carers who also reported that their children became more anxious (55%), had disturbed sleep patterns (27%) and disrupted appetite (16.4%) throughout this period. Almost one in three parents/carers (31%) felt that the experience had a lasting negative impact on their child. Once again, the qualitative comments from parents/carers support the quantitative results, with frequent references to the anxiety, worry, frustration and confusion of the whole experience that year, on occasion leading to referral for counselling and/or medical intervention. One pupil recounted that almost three years later, she was still receiving support from their GP, while a parent explained that the day their child had been told of their post-primary placement was the worst day of their child's life (*"their words"*).

The overall negative impact was also confirmed by the primary school teachers, some of whom referred to some pupils (who had *"worked their socks off"*) becoming visibly upset as a result of the uncertainty, despite their best efforts to provide stability and reassurance within the safety of the primary school environment. There is also evidence to suggest that the emotional health and wellbeing of that cohort of children, impacted doubly by Covid-19 and then by the

cancellation of the transfer tests, remains particularly challenging even three years later. While it is not possible to attribute the behaviours to any one cause, it is noteworthy that almost all school leaders in both grammar and non-grammar schools highlighted that this particular year group have presented more significant challenges than other year groups in terms of dysregulation, inattention and undiagnosed special educational needs, in addition to the learning support needs created by the atypical academic profile reported by most of the post-primary school leaders.

While this study has highlighted the particular impact on the children at the centre of the disruption, the findings have also provided clear evidence that parents/carers too felt under real pressure in terms of their own emotional health and wellbeing. A large majority (84%) of parents/carers found the experience stressful, and almost half (46%) reported that their own mental health was negatively impacted by the experience. Only one in ten (9%) felt that the experience had no significant impact on them. Such stark statistics are corroborated by the qualitative data. Several parents/carers referred to their efforts to shield the worst of the anxiety from their children, but for many there were very strong emotions expressed, particularly in respect of the management of the process and the lack of communication as well as in respect of the actual outcomes of the process. As one parent explained, *“I cannot emphasise enough how horrendous the whole experience was. The night it [the AQE test] was cancelled, I sat on the floor and cried.”*

It can be concluded that, while there were reports of positive support offered by parents/ carers and by (primary) schools, and while it is reassuring that the vast majority of the pupils report no lasting impact arising from the year, nonetheless, this study paints a picture of a year of great uncertainty for all, but also stress and anxiety for more than half of the pupil participants. One parent referred to the experience of postponement and cancellation as a *“rollercoaster ride”*, while another talked about the AQE test being *“on and off like a yoyo”*, the uncertainty of which undoubtedly exacerbated the emotional impact of transfer on the children and their families far beyond what previous studies (e.g. Gallagher & Smith, 2000; R2R, 2019; Pivotal, 2022) have already shown to be a stressful experience in “normal” years.

6.2 Perceptions of the postponement and cancellation of the transfer tests

Both pupils and parents/carers were asked in the survey and in the focus group interviews to describe how they felt when it was announced that the transfer tests would not take place in 2020-21. The results are illuminating and reveal often conflicting feelings on the part of the children and their parents/carers.

The anonymous pupil survey results (completed in large part by pupils now at grammar school) reveal mixed emotions overall. The most commonly emotions reported by pupils were positive: happy (49%), relieved (42%) and okay (32%), but these positive responses were closely followed by feelings of frustration (31%), shock (28%), confusion (27%), disappointment (25%) and anger (17%). The qualitative engagement with the pupils provided opportunities for them to expand on their feelings. In the focus group interviews, some did refer to being fed up with a process that *“just kept going on and on”* and which meant that they had spent their Christmas holidays sitting practice tests in anticipation of the first AQE test

scheduled for Saturday 9 January 2021, when ordinarily the tests should have been completed by the end of November. There were frequent references by pupils, parents and teachers of the unfortunate negative impact on children of having to spend their Christmas holidays preparing for tests only to hear in early January that the tests had been completely cancelled or, as one principal put it, when the *“rug [was] pulled from under their feet”*. It is clear from the engagement with the pupils that they had sacrificed much in order to sit the tests. For instance, another pupil recounted begging not to have to sit a test during his birthday week. One of the primary school teachers interviewed also spoke of how they have pupils in tears and scared to go home following a low practice test score *“in case mummy or daddy’s upset”*, suggesting that excessive parental pressure to succeed can also be damaging and deeply felt by some children at this age.

While some of the pupils spoke of their profound sense of relief that they would not have to sit the tests in January, many of the grammar school pupils and some of the non-grammar school pupils spoke of their frustration that after so much preparation they had not been given the opportunity to show what they were capable of. For some this meant that they felt like they had not *“rightfully achieved”* their place at their grammar school (having perhaps secured their place through satisfying familial criteria); for others, it simply meant that they were deprived of the opportunity to see how well they could do after so many months of hard work. However, this sense of loss was also expressed by some of the non-grammar pupils, who were also frustrated that *“we just did a bunch of tests for nothing really”* and who concluded that their *“stress and hard work”* had been in vain.

Interestingly, several of the grammar and non-grammar pupils, as well as one of the parents referred to private tutoring. While it is acknowledged that the sample of parents/carers who completed the online survey was predominantly well-educated and middle class in terms of household income, it is interesting to note that more than two fifths (42%) reported that their child was receiving additional private tutoring over the previous few months, the positive impact of which has been highlighted in previous studies (e.g. Jerrim & Sims, 2019b). In the focus group interviews, the cancellation of the transfer tests provoked similar comments from two pupils, with the pupil now attending a grammar school remarking that *“...when it got cancelled, it felt like it [the tutoring] was a complete waste of time”* and the pupil now attending a non-selective school complaining of *“having to pay for a tutor just for it [the test] not to happen”*. While there is a lack of research into the nature, extent, cost and impact of private tutoring in Northern Ireland, this study does provide some evidence of its widespread use and of the significant investment in private tutoring by some families as a means to increasing the likelihood of their child securing admission to a grammar school. It seems reasonable to conclude that, as the pupils remark, the removal of the transfer tests and their replacement by non-academic admissions criteria in all but three schools caused frustration and annoyance at the apparent waste of money thus incurred.

The parents/carers did not explicitly refer to private tutoring, but their overall response to the cancellation of the transfer tests was very stark and differed significantly from the responses of their children. While the most common survey responses by pupils were positive (see above), parents/carers were overwhelmingly frustrated (57%), disappointed (55%), angry (37%), worried (35%), confused (16%) and shocked (11%) with much lower numbers reporting that they were relieved (21%) or happy (11%). The qualitative comments by parents (in the open-ended survey questions and in the focus group interviews) were often highly critical, with

parents/carers of children now attending grammar and non-grammar schools expressing similar emotions, describing the cancellation as “*horrendous*” or a “*disaster*” and referring to “*a dreadful episode altogether in the history of education in Northern Ireland*”.

While there were negative comments expressed about the level of support and guidance provided by the Education Authority and the Department of Education, the most trenchant criticism from the parents/carers was levelled at the testing bodies, and in particular AQE. Parents frequently referred to perceived “*mismanagement*”, poor communication, unnecessary uncertainty and a lack of contingency planning, with one parent describing their handling of the situation as “*unforgiveable*” and another lamenting AQE’s “*grim determination*” to hold the tests, despite public health warnings, and irrespective of the cost to children and families. The grammar school principals interviewed were more understanding of the challenges faced by the testing bodies, with one principal noting that AQE had been discussing the challenges and thinking of solutions but, as he noted, “*there wasn’t any good alternative and that was the problem*”.

6.3 Perceptions of the fairness of the alternative admissions criteria

Following the postponement and eventual cancellation of the transfer tests, grammar and selective schools developed alternative admissions criteria. While previous research has highlighted the minimal impact these alternative criteria had on the *social/demographic* composition of the year 8 cohort who gained admission to grammar and non-grammar schools in September 2021 (with consistent underrepresentation by children entitled to free school meals, children with special educational needs, and newcomer children - see Purdy et al., 2023), this study has for the first time provided evidence to suggest that the application of non-academic admissions criteria by almost all grammar schools in Northern Ireland has also had an impact on the *academic* profile and associated learning support needs of this unique cohort.

The interviews with the grammar school principals were highly revelatory, as they confirm that their priority, as one explained, was to “*replicate as far as possible the intake that we would have had if the tests had taken place*”. Principals admitted that while the alternative system was “*far from perfect*”, nonetheless it represented “*probably as good a solution as we would have come up with in the circumstances*”, given the unique public health context and the desire to “*honour*” a process which had already begun for thousands of children and which had been halted at the eleventh hour. While there appears to be no significant reported difference in the academic profile of the year 8 cohort (September 2021) in the grammar school which used year 5 standardised test scores, the senior leaders at the two other grammar schools in this study reported that their alternative non-academic criteria have led to a widening of the ability range across the year group, when compared to previous or subsequent cohorts. This has in turn led to unprecedented forms of differentiated support and curricular adjustment in one case as the grammar school has sought to provide additional necessary literacy and numeracy teaching, while the other grammar school principal added that the ability gap was “*wider and deeper*” than in other year groups. In both grammar schools, senior leaders spoke of their desire to engage and motivate these learners, despite their different academic profile and associated behavioural challenges.

Differences were also noted by the non-selective school principals in terms of the greater range of ability in the non-testing year group, and also (as outlined above) the particular challenges of supporting the learning needs of a cohort which had experienced two extended periods of lockdown and socially mediated experiences of home-schooling and parental engagement in their learning (see Walsh et al., 2020; Purdy et al., 2021; Social Mobility Commission, 2021). The school leaders referred to the impact of high exposure to social media and the loss of parental authority during the lockdown periods, which have continued to have a negative impact on pupil behaviour within school.

Participants were invited to comment on the outcomes of the alternative admissions criteria and on their perceived fairness. Here, as might be expected, there was a wide range of divergent opinions, with an overriding sense that there had been both “winners” and “losers”, echoing the terminology employed by Brown et al. (2021). One of the most significant survey questions asked pupils whether they thought that, if they had sat the transfer tests, they would be in a different school now. Almost one in five (19%) of the pupil respondents (almost all of whom had gained admission to grammar schools) felt that they would be in a different school now, had the tests taken place, though hardly any (1.5%) wanted to change schools. When parents/carers were asked the same question, a similar percentage (23%) agreed that the outcome of the test process would have been different if their child had sat the tests. Again, however, only a small percentage (6%) would choose to move their child to another post-primary school.

These quantitative statistics are reflected in the qualitative data, where a minority of pupils and their parents expressed their frustration and, at times, anger at the perceived unfairness of the alternative admissions criteria. A small number of grammar school pupils felt that they had been denied the opportunity to “*rightfully*” earn their place by sitting the transfer tests in 2020-2021, while one grammar school pupil was prepared to admit that he would not have secured admission if he had sat the test. Several other grammar school pupils also reported that the perceived “*misplacement*” of lower ability pupils in grammar schools was holding more capable pupils and leading to disruption to classroom learning. Reflecting an unfortunate academic snobbery, one grammar school pupil even remarked uncharitably that he would “*kick dumb people out*”, while a grammar school parent expressed a similar sentiment though in more sympathetic terms, remarking that “*there are some poor wee souls who should not be in a grammar school: in the wrong place receiving an education that doesn’t suit them*”.

Understandably, a sense of injustice was more commonly expressed by pupils now at non-selective schools, several of whom felt that the alternative admissions criteria had deprived them of their desired grammar school place. In a lengthy open-ended survey comment, one such pupil wrote of how they had been “*discriminated against again and again*” and argued strongly that the legal challenge of the judicial review (which led to the first postponement of the scheduled tests – see Chapter One) had led to an injustice as it meant that “*all opportunities were removed from me*”. In the pupil interviews in the non-selective schools, emotions were still raw, even three years after the experience, with one pupil stating that “*I didn’t get any sort of chance*” because of lack of familial connections to his desired grammar school, despite his high practice test scores. Another commented that he had improved significantly since P5 but that the grammar school of his choice would only accept test scores from two years earlier, while his classmate reported (anecdotally) that “*people who aren’t really smart are now dropping out from the grammar schools*”.

The views expressed by parents/carers were necessarily mediated by whether their children had gained a place in their desired grammar school or not, however many of the grammar school parents did concede that, while their children were “winners” in the system, the process had nonetheless been inherently unfair. One grammar school parent summarised the views of many when she said that *“this was certainly not a fairer process compared to academic selection, as the children had no opportunity to strive and achieve”*. Another non-grammar school parent spoke movingly of how, on receiving his admissions letter, their son had asked *“How’s this fair, mum?”* She replied that even though *“it was done unfairly”*, he should *“make the most of it”* and she was able to report that *“he is absolutely flying”* now and was very happy in his non-selective post-primary school.

6.4 Perceptions of post-primary transfer in the future

The current study has (perhaps unsurprisingly) revealed differing perspectives on academic selection held by grammar and non-grammar school leaders. On the one hand, the grammar school leaders expressed strong support for the retention of academic selection and a preference for the use of transfer tests as *“the simplest means of accessing”* a grammar school, and in the words of another grammar school principal, *“the best way of giving everyone, no matter their background, no matter their geographical proximity to the schools, or religious background or whatever, the chance to access the school”*. Such a comment highlights the common perception that tests offer equal opportunities to all (Brown et al., 2021), but ignores the evidence of the advantages of parental support and private tutoring which result in an inequitable distribution of grammar school places (see Jerrim & Sims, 2019b; Social Mobility Commission, 2021; Hughes & Loader, 2022).

On the other hand, the non-selective school leaders complained that the alternative criteria in the non-testing year were *“set up to maintain the status quo”* and that other alternatives must be sought to assess children’s performance rather than having them sit tests at age 10 or 11 and judging their ability by single test scores or (five years later) by a set of GCSE grades. They argued that schools should also be judged by metrics which consider the ‘value added’ rather than raw GCSE averages which fail to take into account the differences in pupil profile.

Furthermore, in both surveys (completed by pupils and parents/carers), participants were asked whether they were in favour of academic selection by transfer tests. While acknowledging that the vast majority of pupil respondents to the online survey attended a grammar school (96%) and that a sizeable majority (71%) of the sample of parents/carers had also attended a grammar school as pupils, it is perhaps surprising that so many respondents to both surveys expressed their disapproval of the current system. Only half of the pupils (49%) and three-fifths (60%) of parents/carers were in favour of retaining the current system. However, when asked what the fairest method of selection might be going forward, opinions varied: among pupils, there was a preference for retaining transfer tests (52%), followed by using existing scores for literacy and numeracy tests (21%) and the assessment of pupil work by classroom teachers (15%). Among parents/carers, the rankings were quite different, with a strong preference for the option of using scores from existing literacy and numeracy tests (45%) followed by retaining transfer tests (32%). Relatively few of the parents/carers expressed a preference for

selection by assessing pupils' classwork (16%), proximity to their home (4%) and through primary school teacher recommendations (3%).

This is of course particularly relevant following the publication in December 2023 of the report of the Independent Review of Education entitled *Investing in a Better Future*. As outlined in detail in Chapter Two (above), the review panel has recommended the development of a pupil profile, developing the idea first proposed twenty years ago in the Costello Report (DE, 2004). The suggestion is dependent on the development of statutory assessment tests and computer adaptive technology, both of which have proved challenging in the past. The proposal thus aims to remove the element of subjective assessment of pupils' effort, attitudes or other qualities by primary school teachers, which as the panel note, would almost certainly lead to "extensive parental complaint, challenge and potential litigation" (Independent Review of Education, vol. 2., p.160). Surprisingly however, the panel also propose that the objective tests could be supplemented by admissions interviews held in selective post-primary schools.

While this re-opening of the debate around academic selection is to be welcomed after many years "policy paralysis" (Gallagher, 2021, p.19), it is far from clear, in advance of a public consultation, whether any or all of the recommendations of the Independent Review will gain popular and/or ministerial support, and whether they will lead to any changes in the current system of post-primary transfer. It will also be crucially important in any future considerations of reform for post-primary transfer in Northern Ireland that the emotional health and wellbeing as well as the academic attainment of all children and young people remains paramount, thus realising the Department of Education's own vision, as encapsulated in its 2023-2028 Corporate Plan, of an education system where "Every child and young person is happy, learning and ready to succeed." (DE, 2023, p.3).

Chapter 7: Conclusion

This timely project aimed to address the following central research questions:

- What were the pupils' lived experiences of the non-testing year and its outcomes, including the impact they feel the experiences had on their emotional health and wellbeing, and the extent to which they have settled in their post-primary schools?
- What were parents/carers' lived experiences of the non-testing year and its outcomes, including the impact they feel the experiences had on their child's (and their own) emotional health and wellbeing?
- What were teachers' and school leaders' lived experiences of the non-testing year and its outcomes, with particular reference to their perceptions of the immediate and medium-term impact of the non-testing year on academic development and emotional health and wellbeing?

The study therefore set out to explore the lived experiences of the non-testing year of post-primary transfer in Northern Ireland by children, their parents and teachers, and to consider the immediate and medium-term impact of that unique year. The findings (as set out in Chapters Four and Five and as discussed in Chapter Six) highlight that the non-testing year (2020-2021) presented a set of unprecedented challenges to the testing bodies (AQE and PPTC) as they sought to chart a path through public health concerns and the outcome of a judicial review which postponed the scheduled test dates and effectively closed the window of opportunity to hold the tests safely during that year.

The consequences of the initial uncertainty, the resulting *“rollercoaster ride”* of postponement, and the eventual cancellation of the AQE tests just four days before the first test was due to take place on 9 January 2021, were however most keenly felt by those at the centre of the post-primary transfer process, primarily the children themselves but also by their parents/carers and (to a lesser extent) their primary school teachers and principals. This study has highlighted high levels of stress among a majority of children (53%) and accompanying impacts on their appetite, levels of anxiety and sleep patterns, with one in eight children reporting that the experience has had a lasting negative impact on them. Parents/carers confirmed this negative impact: for instance, over half noticed that their child became more anxious (55%) and were concerned about their child's mental health (53%) during that time. Almost a third (31%) of parents/carers felt that the experience has had a lasting negative impact on their child. The consequences were also felt by many of the parents/carers themselves who likewise reported their own high levels of stress (84%) and a negative impact on their own mental health (46%).

While there is evidence that for some children the negative impact of the non-testing year continues into the present day, it is encouraging that the overwhelming majority of pupils (91%) have now settled well into their post-primary schools, despite some initial reservations and concerns. The interviews with post-primary school leaders also revealed a clear professional commitment to identifying and addressing the academic, social and emotional needs of the entire cohort of children (now in year 10), who, it is acknowledged, have presented unique challenges as a result of admission by means of the alternative admissions criteria but

also as a consequence of their lockdown home-schooling experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic.

This study has also confirmed that academic selection, whether by test or by alternative admissions criteria, continues to create “winners and losers” (Brown et al., 2021) in terms of the common (and unhelpful) perception that those who gain admission to the grammar school of their choice are the “winners” and those who fail to gain admission are the “losers”. This study into the lived experience of the non-testing year has once again shown that there were “winners and losers” but under new rules of engagement.

As a result, while previous studies have highlighted the pressures that children experience in a “normal” year of post-primary transfer tests (Gallagher & Smith, 2000; R2R, 2019; Pivotal, 2022), this was exacerbated during the non-testing year by the uncertainty of the tests taking place, their eventual cancellation and the subsequent use of non-academic admissions criteria by almost all grammar schools in Northern Ireland. As such, there were “new rules” during that year, and while there was a clear effort on the part of grammar schools to replicate the outcome of the process as much as possible to honour the preparation already undertaken by thousands of 10 and 11-year old children, this study has confirmed that the alternative criteria led to a new set of “winners and losers”. Under the new arrangements, it is clear that those *without* familial connections to the grammar school of their choice (e.g. through older siblings or other family links) were less likely to gain admission, despite their high practice test scores (judged to reflect high academic ability). Conversely, those *with* familial connections (e.g. through older siblings or other family links), despite their average or low practice test scores (judged to reflect average or low academic ability) were more likely to gain admission.

Under the new rules, the application of the alternative admissions criteria thus created a new and different set of “winners and losers” and a deep sense of injustice voiced by pupils (and their parents/carers) who would ordinarily have gained a grammar school place under the well-established system of academic selection by transfer test. The particular circumstances vary widely, but include for the most part high achieving pupils who failed to meet any of the alternative non-academic (e.g. familial) admissions criteria used by the vast majority of grammar schools, but also include pupils whose year 5 standardised literacy and numeracy test scores were low and who thus failed to gain admission to the three grammar schools who used those academic criteria to select pupils. For those wealthier families who were ordinarily able to support their children’s learning at home and to pay for private tutoring to prepare their children for the transfer tests to help guarantee a place at the grammar school of their choice, there was nothing that could be done and no way in which advantage could be given to their children in the absence of familial connection. There is no doubting their sense of injustice as the rules were changed so late in the day. These are however just the latest “losers” in a system of post-primary transfer where the traditional and largely forgotten losers are those children from low income households (entitled to free school meals), newcomer children and children with special educational needs, all of whom have been underrepresented in grammar schools for many years (see Purdy et al., 2023), and whose voices are rarely heard.

This revelatory study has highlighted that the lived experience of many of those on board the “rollercoaster ride” of post-primary transfer in 2020-21 was fraught with uncertainty, stress and anxiety and resulted in a negative toll on many children and parents’ emotional health and

wellbeing, which, for some, has had an enduring impact far beyond that profoundly challenging year.

While post-primary transfer remains a “politically contentious and polarising issue” (Independent Review of Education, 2023, vol.2, p.150), and as a set of new proposals have injected new energy into a previously stagnant policy context, it is clear that we must learn the lessons from the stressful experiences of the non-testing year. In addition, we must have the courage to bring fresh thinking to this polarised debate, and work to design a new, fairer post-primary transfer system which prioritises the emotional health and wellbeing of all of our children irrespective of their background or ability.

As one primary school teacher put it, the non-testing year provided an opportunity for a major re-think of the system of post-primary transfer and for a “bigger change”, so perhaps this is now the time, as they suggest, to “just rip that plaster and sort it out”.

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