

THE BATTLE OF ACADEMIC SELECTION

*A study of the debate on the selective education system
in Northern Ireland
2000-2011*

Elisabeth Håland Berglund

His 350

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Department of archeology, history, cultural studies and religion



Preface

It feels like I have been on a manual roller coaster for two years.

Now I can finally step off.

To that, I owe a big thank you,

Sissel Rosland,

Your enthusiasm has been an inspiration and a motivation,

Your guidance has been priceless.

Thank you for opening the doors to the wonderful world of Northern Ireland.

Jan Heiret,

Thank you for your comments,

I have appreciated our discussions.

Family and Friends,

Thank you for all your support, I could not have made it without you.

Ine,

Today, we are minus one.

List of Content:

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS.....	IV
INTRODUCTION	1
PROBLEMS TO ADDRESS.....	2
PREVIOUS RESEARCH AND APPRAISAL.....	3
SOURCES	6
LABELS.....	8
THE POLITICAL PARTIES INVOLVED IN THE DEBATE	8
CHAPTER OUTLINE	12
1. EDUCATIONAL AND POLITICAL (DIS)AGREEMENT 1947-2000	14
INTRODUCTION OF THE SELECTIVE EDUCATION SYSTEM	14
DIFFERENCES OF OPINION.....	15
<i>“Grammar schools in every town”</i>	<i>16</i>
<i>Underachievement: a consequence of the selective education system?.....</i>	<i>21</i>
THE BELFAST AGREEMENT: INTRODUCING POLITICAL STABILITY?.....	23
<i>Decommissioning of paramilitary organisations.....</i>	<i>24</i>
<i>Implementation of the Agreement.....</i>	<i>26</i>
<i>A battle of the Department of Education?.....</i>	<i>27</i>
2. THE DEFINITION OF CHANGE 2000-2007	30
WAS CHANGE NEEDED?	31
<i>The Effects of the Selective System on Post-Primary Education.....</i>	<i>31</i>
<i>Views and visions on education: Equality of opportunity.....</i>	<i>35</i>
<i>Committee for Education’s main principles for education.....</i>	<i>40</i>
WHAT KIND OF CHANGE WAS NEEDED?	42
<i>Views on the 11-plus and Academic Selection</i>	<i>43</i>
<i>Review body on post-primary education.....</i>	<i>46</i>
<i>The End of the 11-plus?.....</i>	<i>55</i>
THE WILL OF THE PEOPLE?	58
<i>Administrative vandalism?.....</i>	<i>59</i>
<i>“You don’t fix something that ain’t broke”</i>	<i>61</i>
<i>What about grammar schools?.....</i>	<i>63</i>
3. THE SEARCH FOR CONSENSUS 2007-2011	66
THE ISSUE OF CLARIFICATION: CALLING FOR MINISTERIAL ACTION	67
<i>A lack of meat on the bone</i>	<i>68</i>
<i>The need for cross-community support</i>	<i>70</i>
THE PROPOSAL: COMPROMISING ENOUGH?	73
<i>The proposal: Crossing the Rubicon?.....</i>	<i>73</i>
<i>The Ruane transfer test?.....</i>	<i>75</i>
HEADING TOWARDS AN UNREGULATED EDUCATION SYSTEM?	78
<i>The Guidelines of Transfer 2010.....</i>	<i>78</i>
<i>Alliance Party and SDLP call for the proposed transfer test.....</i>	<i>82</i>
<i>Moving forward with no consensus.....</i>	<i>85</i>
WINNERS AND LOSERS?.....	87
<i>Chaos in the education system of Northern Ireland?.....</i>	<i>88</i>
<i>Future educational priorities and strategies</i>	<i>89</i>
CONCLUSION.....	94
BIBLIOGRAPHY	101

ABSTRACT 105

List of abbreviations

CCEA: Council for Curriculum, Examination and Assessment

DENI: Department of Education Northern Ireland

DUP: Democratic Unionist Party

ESA: Education and Skills Authority

IRA: Irish Republican Army

NIWC: Northern Ireland Women's Coalition

PUP: Progressive Unionist Party

SDLP: Social and Democratic Labour Party

UUP: Ulster Unionist Party

INTRODUCTION

The signing of the Belfast Agreement in 1998 marked a milestone in the peace process in Northern Ireland, and a central issue of discussion following the agreement, was the future. In these discussions, attention turned to the role of education and how it could contribute to create reconciliation in the Northern Irish society. It was particularly one aspect of the education sector that received the attention of the politicians, and that was the selective education system. Academic selection became one of the most debated issues on the political agenda in Northern Ireland in the first decade after the signing of the Belfast Agreement.

Since it was introduced in 1947, the education system in Northern Ireland had been based on academic selection. This meant that the transfer from primary to post-primary schools, was based on the pupils' performance in the 11-plus, which was an examination in numeracy and literacy. Those who performed well were selected to go to Grammar schools, and those who did not, went to Secondary schools. When this education system was introduced, the intention was to give all pupils the same opportunity to have an academically oriented education, despite their social background. However, in the 1980s a problem of underachievement became an issue of concern, and in 1998 the Department of Education commissioned research to find whether it was the effects of the selective education system that caused the situation of underachievement. Based on the results of this research published in September 2000, a debate on the selective education system in Northern Ireland was launched.

Whereas the starting point of the debate is easy to establish, the ending of the debate is more difficult to pinpoint. On the one hand, the debate has an ending because the new Departmental Policy introduced in 2010, did not include academic selection and the 11-plus. On the other hand however, the debate does not have an ending in the sense that the political parties did not reach consensus: Thus, the issue of academic selection still remains a matter of conflict between the political parties in Northern Ireland. Also as academic selection was legally secured as part of the negotiations in the St. Andrews Agreement in 2006,¹ and several

¹ The St. Andrews Agreement was the result of multi-party talks between the British and Irish governments and the political parties in Northern Ireland, from October 11th to October 13th in 2006, in relation to devolution of powers to Northern Ireland.

schools still use academic selection as entrance criteria for post-primary education. However, this ambiguity only makes the *process* of the debate more interesting to study.

Problems to address

The first main problem I will address throughout my master thesis will be:

What were the political parties' views on academic selection; which arguments did they use and which political strategies did they follow during the debate? Which political cleavages can be identified in the debate, and did the parties' visions, arguments or strategies change throughout the process?

This debate happened in a very politically unstable period. The Belfast Agreement in 1998 was a milestone in the peace process, and it was also seen as a historical compromise that would enable and encourage the community in Northern Ireland to work together.² However, the many years of conflict still strongly influenced the relationships between the political parties throughout the first decade after the agreement. Due to disagreements between the parties in Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Executive was suspended on several occasions, thus also moving the debate to Westminster. In turn, the political situation heavily influenced the development of the debate on the selective education system. Therefore, the second problems I will address throughout my master thesis will be:

How did the unstable political situation in Northern Ireland influence the debate on academic selection?

As academic selection became one of the most debated issues in the new Northern Irish Assembly, a study of this debate also gives us vital insights into the workings and dynamics of the new Northern Irish governmental framework in a formative period. I will thus also discuss how this study of the debate on academic selection can offer new knowledge regarding the wider issue of the development of Northern Irish politics after devolution.

² Coulter, E., Murray, M. (2008:15): "Northern Ireland after the Troubles". Manchester University Press. Manchester.

Previous research and appraisal

The debate on the selective education system in Northern Ireland has roots going back to the 1960s. However, the main period of study will be from 2000 to 2011. In order to fully understand the debate, it is necessary to place the debate in a historical context. Therefore, I have also included both the educational and political background leading up to the main period I am studying, beginning in 1947 when the selective education system was first introduced.

The Irish historian John Whyte has argued that compared to its size, Northern Ireland has to be one of the most studied areas in the world.³ One of the fields of research in Northern Ireland that has been given an increased attention in the last 40 years is the education system. The most prominent feature in the field of research has been what researchers frequently have characterised as a religiously divisive education system. What is interesting regarding this field of research is that it has attracted researchers from several disciplines, including historians, educationalists, history teachers, psychologists and sociologists, as well as researchers in the field of peace and conflict studies.

The education system in Northern Ireland involves three types of schools: Controlled schools which are mainly protestant schools governed by the state; Maintained schools which are mainly catholic schools governed by the Catholic church; and Integrated schools which were established in the 1980s, and which offer entrance to children from both catholic -and protestant backgrounds, as well as children from other religions and non-religious backgrounds. This divisive education system has been viewed as a cause to the conflict in Northern Ireland.⁴ It was particularly during the 1960s that researcher turned to this side of the education system, and questioned whether it had contributed to the division of the people found elsewhere in the Northern Irish society.⁵ Several researchers found that integrated

³ Whyte, J. (1990:vii): "Interpreting Northern Ireland". Clarendon Press. Oxford.

⁴ Knox, C. (2010:219): "Devolution and the governance of Northern Ireland". Manchester University Press. Manchester and New York.

⁵ Gallagher, T. (1998): "Religious Division in Schools in Northern Ireland", Article presented at *the British Educational Research Association Annual Conference*, Queen's University of Belfast, Northern Ireland, August 27th to August 30th, 1998.

education could be a step towards reconciliation and therefore, it was particularly integrated education that got the researchers attention.⁶

However, researchers have differed in their views on the potential of integrated education. Some argued that it was need for more research before one could decide whether integrated education offered the best way for reconciliation. When educational researcher Caitlin Donnelly studied an integrated school, she found that teachers tended to avoid possible inflamed topics, and had a view that simply educating the two traditions together was enough to create reconciliation.⁷ Also, educational researcher Alan McCully has argued that when teachers avoided these inflamed topics, pupils ended up with two versions of the past: One that made them pass their exams, and one that enabled them to survive on the streets.⁸ In other words, according to Donnelly and McCully, it was not enough to educate children from the different tradition together. Therefore, they held that more research was needed on how to work to create reconciliation in the education system. Other researchers, like educational researchers Clair McGlynn and Ulrike Niens, psychology researcher Ed Carins and social psychology researcher Miles Hewstone had the opposite view. According to these researchers, there had been more than enough research on integrated education that had found that contact between the two traditions had a positive influence on sectarian attitudes. Therefore, they argued that integrated schools clearly created reconciliation.⁹

In strong contrast to the broad research on the religious division in the school system and the role of integrated schools, no particular attention have been given by researchers to the aspect of academic selection. One explanation could be that the debate on academic selection happened quite recently. Also, as I have mentioned above, this is a debate that could be looked upon as not having an end as of yet, because academic selection still remains in several schools in Northern Ireland. There have been research studies that have briefly touched upon the issue of academic selection, where it has been mentioned as part of

⁶ Smith, A. (2001) "Religious Segregation and the Emergence of Integrated Schools in Northern Ireland". *Oxford Review of Education*, Vol. 27, No. 4, 2001.

⁷ Donnelly, C. (2004:3): "What price harmony? Teachers' methods of delivering an ethos of tolerance and respect for diversity in an integrated school in Northern Ireland". *Educational Research*, Vol. 46, No. 1.

⁸ McCully, A. (unknown year): "10. Teaching History in a Divided Community – the example of Northern Ireland".

⁹ McGlynn, C., Niens, U., Cairns, E., Hewstone, M. (2004), "Moving out of conflict: the contribution of integrated schools in Northern Ireland to identity, attitudes, forgiveness and reconciliation". *Journal of Peace Education*. Vol. 1, No. 2.

explaining the education system in Northern Ireland. Also, in recent research studies of the political situation in Northern Ireland, the debate on the selective education system has been mentioned. For example, in his research *Devolution and the governance of Northern Ireland* Colin Knox, Professor in Comparative Public Policy, studied the periods of devolution in Northern Ireland. Knox then mentions this debate, and describes it as being one of the ‘high political issues’ in Northern Ireland since the Belfast Agreement was signed. However, he does not give any further details on the process of this debate.¹⁰ Therefore, to my knowledge no previous research has actually studied the process of this debate the way I have done in the current study.

While the lack of previous research has provided a number of challenges, it has also brought with it some advantages in the process of working with this thesis. The political system that was introduced in Northern Ireland after the Belfast Agreement in 1998 was new to the local politicians. Also, compared to the traditional democratic system we have in Norway, the political system in Northern Ireland is very complex. The political system that was introduced with the Belfast agreement was one based on power sharing, and the Executive was to include both unionist and nationalist representatives. In addition, different mechanisms were introduced to prevent one of the sides to dominate the other. This will be explained more detailed in Chapter 1, as well as the reasons for why it took a while before it could be introduced fully after the signing of the Belfast Agreement. Consequently, there were no traditionally set procedures for how debates, like the one I have studied, were to take place. In turn, for me this involved an interesting, although time-consuming, process to create an overview of the different functions and institutions that were established, and how they worked in practice.

The lack of previous research on the process of this debate also meant that there was no existing overview of what had happened in the debate. The main challenge in relation to this was finding the sources needed to actually create such an overview. However, this has also proved to be an advantage. It gives me the opportunity to explore a field of research that never have been studied before. Also, the lack of previous research makes it a very fascinating field to study, because during the study I have not known what to expect next, and you never know what you will end up with. As we will see next, the main sources I have used in this thesis are

¹⁰ Knox, C. (2010): “Devolution and the governance of Northern Ireland”. Manchester University Press. Manchester and New York.

debates in the Northern Ireland Assembly and in the House of Commons in Westminster, as well as meetings of the Committee for Education in Northern Ireland.

Sources

One of the most important sources I have used in this thesis is the Assembly debates and Committee meetings at Stormont, as well as Parliamentary debates in Westminster.¹¹ All of the events concerning meetings of the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Committee for Education are recorded in Minutes of Evidence or Minutes of Proceedings, and are published on their websites respectively.¹² This is also the case for meetings in the House of Commons in Westminster.¹³ Minutes of Evidence are the exact wording of what has been said during the discussions. These meetings have been a valuable source for finding the views of the political parties, and also for studying the development of the process of the debate. The assembly and parliamentary debates provide a valuable insight into which of the political parties participating in this debate, how each of the parties argued, and how these arguments developed throughout the debate. These debates are also characterised by the fact that this is a public arena where the political parties have the opportunity to voice their opinion for a wider audience and the electorate. What happens in these meetings are not restricted to the political parties alone, but are also referred to in the media. Therefore, the tone of the debates are influenced by that the political parties are voicing the party's opinions for their potential supporters.

A central source has been policy reports commissioned during the debate. As outlined above, the education system based on academic selection has not been a prominent feature in the field of research in Northern Ireland. As far as I know, the only research that have been committed on this issue are the research that was commissioned by the Labour party in 1998, and the research produced as part of the policy documents of the current debate on academic selection. Therefore, the reasons why these reports and research studies exist, is that there was a political demand to find the effects produced by this particular education system, not to mention the different options the political parties had in hand. Therefore, the reports produced

¹¹ Stormont is the area of Belfast where the Northern Ireland Parliamentary Buildings are located. The name Stormont is therefore commonly used as the name for these buildings.

¹² www.niassembly.gov.uk/

¹³ www.publications.parliament.uk

in the period I am studying are valuable as a source because they are a part of the debate itself. These reports also explain, and give an insight into what type of education system this is: Why the education system was introduced in the first place, what kind of principles this structure are created upon, and also the effects that it produced.

Other sources I have used in this thesis have been the manifestos and education policies of the political parties, as well as media sources. To clarify and to fully understand the positions of the political parties in the debate on the selective education system, the material they produced themselves is relevant. Particularly in the last phase of the debate, this is a valuable source as it gives information as to the strategies and priorities regarding academic selection compared to other educational matters. Also, the manifestos and the educational policies are important in that they give an insight into each of the political parties own development, as to their opinion on the issues relevant in this debate. Media is also important in this context, and *the BBC News* and *the Belfast Telegraph* are the main media sources I have used. Both of these news media provided a general overview of the events of this debate, as well as additional understanding of what degree of interest this debate had in the rest of the society in Northern Ireland.

I have considered using interview as well, which might have provided a broader spectre of the process, however this was faced with several challenges. In order for the interviews to provide a balanced and legitimate addition to my thesis, I would have needed to include a broad selection across multiple stakeholders, who represented the different sides in this debate. Many of the central politicians, who were involved in this debate, are still very central in the political landscape in Northern Ireland today. Therefore, it would have been a major challenge to make contact with them, and to conduct these interviews would have been a time consuming process in its own. Ultimately, I found that the written sources I have chosen to use have given me an opportunity to create a study that gives a detailed insight into the process of this debate. These sources have been a product of the process on its own, they are a part of the process, and taking into account the extent to which these sources provide, I find them to be complementary on their own.

Labels

‘Protestants’ and ‘Catholics’ have traditionally been the labels used to describe the two communities in Northern Ireland. There are however, also other labels used to describe these “two communities”. I have chosen to use the terms of ‘unionists’ and ‘nationalists’, as those labels are the most used when differentiating between the two communities in Northern Ireland in a political context.

Unionists consider themselves as British, and wish to be a part of the United Kingdom. Unionists are also described as being loyal to the British Crown. Therefore, the term *loyalists* are often used interchangeably with the term unionist. However, the term loyalist is also in some contexts associated with groups who engage in violence, and most unionists do not describe themselves as loyalists.

The term *nationalists* on the other hand, consist of people who consider themselves as Irish, and aspire towards a united Ireland. The more militant part of nationalists is known as *republicans*, and sometimes the terms nationalist and republican are used interchangeably. However most nationalists do not refer to themselves as republicans.

As always, there will be exceptions where one will find Catholics who consider themselves as unionists, and vice versa. However, because the majority of the unionist community are Protestants, these two labels are at times used interchangeably. The same applies to the nationalist community where the majority are Catholics.

The political parties involved in the debate

The debate on the selective education system takes place in a political landscape that is very different from what one finds in most western European countries. I have chosen to briefly present the political parties involved in the debate here before I start my analysis. The alternative would be to present the political parties’ as they appeared in the debate. However, because this is a rather extraordinary and highly complex political landscape, presenting the political parties as they appeared in the analysis of the debate, could potentially take too much space and thus risk damaging the dynamics and logic of the overall analysis.

The political landscape of Northern Ireland is divided into unionists, nationalists and other. Central to the debate on academic selection were the five political parties: the Democratic Unionist Party and the Ulster Unionist Party on unionist side; Sinn Fein and the Social and Democratic Labour Party on nationalist side; and the Alliance Party (which is neither unionist or nationalist). However, the debate also involved the participation of the Progressive Unionist Party (unionist) and the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (which is neither unionist or nationalist). Because the debate shifts between the Northern Ireland Assembly, and the British Parliament, the British Labour party and the British Conservative party also participated in the debate.

The Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) consists of the remnants of the Unionist Party who previously governed Northern Ireland between 1921 and 1972. The party was also a branch of the British Conservative party, but the line broke once Direct Rule was introduced in Northern Ireland in 1972. Although the UUP first refused to participate in the peace negotiations when Sinn Fein entered, they remained a part of the multi-party talks. The signing of the Belfast Agreement in 1998, and the decision to vote yes in the following referendum was opposed by many of the party's members. Under David Trimble's leadership, the party won 21,25% of the electoral votes in the Assembly election in 1998, and became the largest party on unionist side. However, further internal dissension within the party was to follow, and the Assembly Elections in 2003 and 2007 gave disappointing results, with the party falling behind and several votes was lost to their main political rival the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP).

The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) was formed in 1971 by the party leader Ian Paisley (in 2006 Peter Robinson became the party leader) and Desmond Boal. One of the party's main objectives has been to defend Northern Ireland's constitutional position within the United Kingdom. The DUP campaigned for a 'no' vote in the Referendum in 1998 on the Belfast Agreement. Following the Assembly Election in 1998 where the party won 18% of the electoral votes, they actively used their position to express their opposition to the Belfast Agreement. This approach brought further electoral success for the party, which in the Assembly Election in 2003 and 2007 became the largest winning party overall with 25,7% of the electoral votes. This also made them the largest party on Unionist side.

The Progressive Unionist Party (PUP) was formed in 1979, and David Irvine was the party's leader until his death in January 2007. The party became more prominent in the 1990s when the party entered the multi-party negotiations in 1996. Despite many of the unionist community opposing the Belfast Agreement, the PUP campaigned for a 'yes' vote, and kept on supporting it. In the Assembly Elections in 1998 the party gained two seats, and in the following Assembly election in 2003 and 2007 it only gained one seat. In 2011 the party became unrepresented in the Assembly. The PUP is found on the left side of the political spectrum, and differs from the rest of the unionist parties, which are more conservative ideologically.

The Social Democratic and Unionist Party (SDLP) are together with Sinn Fein the main nationalist party in Northern Ireland. The party was formed in 1970 and the party receives support mainly from the nationalist middle-class. The SDLP believes in a reunited Ireland by political agreement. The SDLP participated in the multi-party negotiations that lead to the Belfast Agreement in 1998, and campaigned for a 'yes' vote in the subsequent referendum. In the Assembly Election in 1998, the party became the largest on the nationalist side, with 24 seats. However, the growing electoral challenge to the party by Sinn Fein lead to a decline in the electoral support, and in the following Assembly elections in 2003 and 2007, the party lost many of their votes to Sinn Fein which became the largest nationalist party. Today, the SDLP are the fourth largest party in Northern Ireland.

Sinn Fein is also dedicated to the achievement of a united Ireland. Lead by Gerry Adams, the party was formed as a result of a split of the Irish Republican Army (the IRA) in January 1970, when the official Sinn Fein was split into the Official Sinn Fein and the Provisional Sinn Fein. In 1993, Sinn Fein entered into talks with the Social and Democratic Labour Party (SDLP), which marked the beginning of a peace process. After the IRA announced the second ceasefire in 1994, Sinn Fein was allowed to participate in the multi-party negotiations that were to produce the Belfast Agreement in 1998. The party ended its abstention policy and decided to take the seats won in the Assembly elections. In the Assembly election in 1998, the party gained 18 seats, and were entitled to two positions in the Executive. In the following elections in 2003 and 2007, Sinn Fein became a major rival to the SDLP as a voice for mainly the nationalist working class, and became the largest nationalist party in Northern Ireland with 28 seats, and the second largest party overall. Since the Assembly Election in 2007, Sinn Fein

have shared power with the DUP, having one of its members, Martin McGuinness, as the Deputy First Minister.

The Alliance Party of Northern Ireland (APNI) was formed in 1970. Originally the Alliance party represented a moderate support of the union with the United Kingdom, however in the 1990s it moved towards having a neutral view, and has come to represent wider liberal and non-sectarian concerns. The party mainly receives their electoral support from the two main communities middle-classes, and are found at the centre of the political spectrum. The Alliance party participated in the multi-party talks that were to produce the Belfast Agreement in 1998, and campaigned for a 'yes' support in the following referendum. In the Assembly elections in 1998, the party gained six seats, but failed to get a seat in the Executive. In the following Assembly Elections in 2003, the party retained their six seats, and in 2007 the party gained 7 seats in the Assembly. Currently, the Alliance party are the fifth largest party in Northern Ireland.

The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC) was formed in 1996. It was a cross-community party who had the agenda of reconciliation based on dialogue, accommodation and inclusion and promoted women's participation in politics. The party was involved in the multi-party negotiations leading to the Belfast Agreement, and campaigned for a 'yes' vote in the following referendum. In the Assembly election in 1998, the NIWC gained two seats in the Assembly. However, in the following Assembly election in 2003, the party lost their seats and in May 2006 the NIWC was officially wound up.

The British Labour Party was especially involved in the debate on academic selection in the years between 2002 and 2007, when the Northern Ireland Assembly was suspended. The Labour party was then in government, and had the responsibility of the Department for Education in Northern Ireland. *The British Conservative party* is at the present time in government in coalition with the Liberal Democrats. The Conservative party played an important role as the opposition in Parliament in the debate on the selective education system in the years between 2002 and 2007. Also, as we will see, both the Labour party and the Conservative party was involved in the development of – and continuation of the selective education system in the years of 1972 to 1999.

Chapter Outline

The chapters have been organized chronologically. As to the content of each chapter, I have chosen to organise them both chronologically and thematically. When I analysed this debate, I found that there were certain themes that emerged, and which subsequently provided a way to divide this debate into two phases. Because of this, there is a chronological structure in that we follow the debate as it developed. Also, each of the different themes will be presented in its own right as it took place during this debate. I have chosen this structure because it provides a better way to follow the development of the debate. A purely thematic structure would not have been able to grasp the important dynamics between the debate itself and the unstable political framework.

Chapter one takes us back to the time when the selective education system first was introduced, and gives an introduction to the political situation in Northern Ireland. Therefore, the intention with this chapter is to provide the historical background of the selective education system during the period of 1947-2000. By giving a description of, and an explanation to certain aspects of the selective education system during this period, the reasoning in the debate will be more understandable. Central to this period was the political situation in Northern Ireland. Therefore, this chapter also describes and explains how the political situation contributed to the turn of events in the debate, and how it kept on influencing the debate throughout the main period I have studied.

Chapter two involves the first phase of the debate in the period from September 2000 to May 2007. Central to this period was the definition of change. Research indicated that educational and social problems in Northern Ireland's society could be related to the selective education system. This initiated the debate where the political parties were to discuss two matters: Firstly, whether there was a need for change in the education system, and; secondly, what kind of change that was needed. Central to these discussions was the political parties vision and views on education. Also, the first phase of the debate took place in the early days of the peace process. Therefore, this chapter also considers how the highly politically unstable period influenced the dynamics between the political parties, and thus the debate itself.

Chapter three concerns the period from May 2007 to May 2011, which constitutes the second phase of the debate. The return of devolution to Northern Ireland in May 2007, after the

Assembly and Executive had been suspended since October 2002, marked a significant change in the debate on the selective education system. The debate was no longer a discussion of whether change was needed in the education system, or what kind of change was needed: It was now about the search for consensus. Following constitutional changes in the St. Andrews Agreement, this chapter examines how this affected the continuation of the debate, and how the search for consensus was influenced by the political challenges that followed from the governing structures laid down in the Belfast Agreement as well as the changes introduced by the St. Andrews Agreement.

1. EDUCATIONAL AND POLITICAL (DIS)AGREEMENT 1947-2000

There are two essential aspects that need to be explained in order to fully understand the reasoning behind the debate on the selective education system in Northern Ireland. First and foremost, the reasons of *why* the selective system was introduced in the first place need to be explained. Secondly, *how* the historical context of the *political situation* in Northern Ireland had influenced the selective education system, and *why* certain aspects of it still was influencing the debate, also need to be accounted for. More importantly: What caused the issue of the selective system going from being politically unchallenged for nearly fifty years, into becoming one of *the* most debated issues of the Northern Ireland Assembly? Also, the political consequences of the Belfast Agreement, and how certain elements connected to it were to influence the debate on the selective education system, needs to be outlined.

Introduction of the selective education system

Up until the 1940s, secondary schools had been a privilege for the few. It was based on a fee-paying system, and provided an academically basis for those who intended to reach higher education. Most often, however, pupils left school after finishing primary education to start working in the industry. During the 1940s there was an increasingly realisation of the importance of secondary education, which led to further legislation and development of the secondary school sector.¹⁴

The Education Act 1947, introduced an intermediate secondary school system, which provided general education the first two years, and then pupils could decide to enter for either academically or technical oriented subjects.¹⁵ What had previously been Secondary Schools, changed its name into Grammar schools, and remained a fee-paying institution. However, the aim of the Education Act 1947 was to provide an education system that offered every child equal opportunity to receive grammar school education where they could develop their academic abilities, irrespective of their social backgrounds.

¹⁴ Northern Ireland Department of Education (2001:42): "Education for the 21st Century: Report by the Post-Primary Review Body". www.deni.gov.uk

¹⁵ Northern Ireland Department of Education (2001:42-44): "Education for the 21st Century: Report by the Post-Primary Review Body". www.deni.gov.uk

The education system that was introduced, and which lasted almost unchanged for nearly fifty years, was one based on academic selection: Pupils entered primary schools at the age of five, and once they turned eleven, they transferred to post-primary school. The qualifying test for transfer was the one later known as 11-plus, which was a written examination in numeracy and literacy. Based on the results of the 11-plus, the pupils who was academically gifted was selected to go to Grammar schools, and the rest went to Secondary schools which provided an option for practical oriented education.¹⁶ Although the rest of the United Kingdom decided to abandon the selective system in 1965 when the Labour government introduced the comprehensive system, Northern Ireland chose not to follow, and kept on using the education system based on academic selection.¹⁷

Differences of opinion

When large parts of Ireland became a Free State in 1922, Northern Ireland was established and got their own local parliament, but remained a part of the union with the United Kingdom. The result was that Northern Ireland was divided into a majority of Protestant and a minority of Catholics. The unionist community (mainly Protestants) wanted to remain a part of the union with the United Kingdom, and the nationalist community (mainly Catholics) believed in a reunited Ireland. These different views on the union with the United Kingdom divided the society of Northern Ireland both politically and religiously, and ultimately lead to the thirty years of violence and conflict, often labelled as “the troubles”. The conflict eventually made it impossible for the local authorities in Northern Ireland to govern their country, and therefore, from 1972 Northern Ireland was under Direct Rule, and was administered from Westminster. This meant that the so-called appointed ministers, whose party was in power in the United Kingdom at the time, decided on all educational matters that concerned Northern Ireland.

¹⁶ The intake to grammar schools were based on a formula, where 27% of the top performers was selected for grammar schools, and 73% were admitted to secondary schools.

¹⁷ Northern Ireland Department of Education (2001:41-43): “Education for the 21st Century: Report by the Post-Primary Review Body”. www.deni.gov.uk

The first step towards a non-selective system in Northern Ireland came in the 1970s, when the validity of the principle of academic selection was questioned.¹⁸ The Labour Party Government took this forward, but was met by local opposition from the grammar school sector. Instead the Labour party introduced an interim measure, as an alternative to academic selection. However, it only lasted from 1978 to 1981. Once the Conservative Party regained the power in 1979, the 11-plus was reinstated in 1981, and Northern Ireland went back to the education system based on academic selection.¹⁹

One way to explain why the selective education system remained politically unchallenged from that point, and why this changed during the 1990s, was the political party who governed the United Kingdom. As we have seen so far, there existed different opinions on the selective education system between the Conservative party and the Labour party. Therefore, how the two parties viewed academic selection and the 11-plus needs to be outlined. First, we will start with the Conservative party which after gaining the political power in 1979, won every United Kingdom General Elections until the Labour party won in 1997. A key issue in this period was the issue of underachievement in the Northern Ireland school system.

“Grammar schools in every town”

Before the United Kingdom general election in 1997, the Conservative Minister Michael Ancram was the Minister responsible for education in Northern Ireland. When asked what the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and the Government’s policy on the academic selective system was, Mr Ancram responded that he “had no plans to change the present system, which serves Northern Ireland well”.²⁰ In other words, while the Conservative party was in power, they found no possible faults with the educational system based on academic selection. The Conservative party had an enthusiastic view of grammar schools and the academic selective system, which became very clear during their election campaign in 1997, where one of their educational policies was “grammar school in every town”.²¹ The Ministers’ main arguments for keeping academic selection, was based on the results from the previous

¹⁸ Northern Ireland Department of Education (2001:44): “Education for the 21st Century: Report by the Post-Primary Review Body”. www.deni.gov.uk

¹⁹ Northern Ireland Department of Education (2001:41-43): “Education for the 21st Century: Report by the Post-Primary Review Body”. www.deni.gov.uk

²⁰ Ancram, M. (30.01.97): Parliamentary Debate: Vol. 289 cc491-2. www.publications.parliament.uk

²¹ Oates, M. (15.11.11): ”Tory MP: More Grammar Schools please”. www.bbc.co.uk/news (read 19.10.12)

General Certificate Secondary Education's (GCSE),²² which showed that Northern Ireland was at the top end had 52% pupils which left with 5 or more GCSEs, compared with pupils in England which had 44%.²³ Ancram argued that it was an educational system Northern Ireland should be proud of, and a system the conservative government intended to introduce to the rest of the United Kingdom. Another argument for keeping academic selection was according to the Minister, that it produced choice. And part of that choice came from having a selective system based on the 11-plus.²⁴

However, when Conservative Party governed the United Kingdom, a problem of underachievement in the Northern Ireland school system became an issue of concern. These concerns became the main issue of examination in a report published by the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee²⁵ in 1997: *Underachievement in Northern Ireland Secondary Schools*. To ensure an economical stable future for Northern Ireland, the Committee argued that there was a need to explore why pupils left school with few, or no qualifications. According to the Committee, those pupils had a higher risk of becoming long-term unemployed. The result of this report was based on several inquiries, which involved both representatives from the Department of Education and educational researchers. One of the issues that the inquiry looked into was the selective education system. As we will see next, there were major differences in the views expressed by the Department on the impact of academic selection compared to the one by the educational researchers. Because the conservative government at the time ran the Department of Education, how the Department viewed the impact of academic selection, also serve as an example of how the conservative government addressed the issue.

According to Don Hill, the Department of Education had no intentions to make changes to the educational system, as long as there was a majority who supported the education system based on academic selection. Therefore, the Department found no need to address the selective education system in structural terms. When Hill was to explain the Department's

²² GCSE: an academic qualification awarded in a specific subject taken at post-primary level, generally taken in a number of subjects.

²³ Ancram, M. (30.01.97): Parliamentary Debate: Vol. 289 cc491-2. www.publications.parliament.uk

²⁴ Ancram, M. (30.01.97): Parliamentary Debate: Vol. 289 cc491-2. www.publications.parliament.uk

²⁵ The Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee's remit is to examine the expenditure, administration and policy of the Northern Ireland Office, which is a British Government Department responsible for Northern Ireland affairs, and are based at Stormont.

view on academic selection, he claimed that the Department was aware of that there existed several views. The Department knew that there existed views that would argue that academic selection was a major factor in the level of underachievement. But according to Hill, those who held this view would still believe that, even though the levels of underachievement had improved. The Department was also aware of those who found selection in itself to be fine, but the age of transfer was unfortunate. Hill also claimed that there were those who viewed the means of selection to be wrong, and hence referring to the 11-plus.

Therefore, given the wide range of views that existed on the matter, the Department acknowledged their existence, and Hill claimed that the Department had every intention of responding to those, as well as listening to any proposals. However, what seemed to be missing in this elaboration on the impact of academic selection was the view of the Department of Education.²⁶ The Conservative party argued that there were other methods that should be prioritized in order to address the problem of underachievement in schools: and the Department of Education for example introduced both early intervention methods in primary schools, and the project TNS; targeting social need, distributing resources measures like free school meals.²⁷

Whereas the Conservative party favoured the school system based on academic selection, and sought other measures to address the issue of underachievement, Professor Tony Gallagher from Queen's University in Belfast, who participated in the inquiry, was more worried about the future of the pupils in the selective education system. Contrary to the Department of Education, Gallagher had concerns about the impact of academic selection. Gallagher acknowledged that statistics showing the improvement in the educational achievement of pupils in Northern Ireland was important to recognize. However, he also claimed this improvement was found in the category of pupils who previously had left school, and which now stayed long enough to sit their exam and leaving with a grade. The matter of concern to Gallagher was the extraordinary variation found among pupils' achievement, and especially those found in secondary schools. Even though pupils stayed longer in school, they still

²⁶ Hill, D. (24.04.96). Located in: Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. (1997:24): "Second Report. Underachievement in Northern Ireland Post-Primary Education". The Stationery Office. London.

²⁷ Hill, D. (24.04.96). Located in: Northern Ireland Affairs Committee (1997:24): "Second Report. Underachievement in Northern Ireland Post-Primary Education". The Stationery Office. London.

underachieved. Therefore, Gallagher argued that there was a need to recognize this as part of the problem, in order to improve it.²⁸

Gallagher argued that the selective education system lacked flexibility: According to him, once the selection procedure for an academic or vocational route had been made at the age of 11, there was very few who changed it until they were 16. Further more, Gallagher argued that those who were less likely to benefit from compulsory education were very often pupils who came from families of high social disadvantage, living in social disadvantaged areas. Gallagher also claimed that the selective education system did not seem to respond to those pupils coming from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. Professor Tony Gallagher argued that there were two issues that needed to be addressed in the selective education system, and they needed to be addressed separately. Firstly, what needed to be addressed was the mechanism used to select at the age of eleven: the 11-plus. According to Gallagher, there existed a large body of evidence that suggested that there were many problems associated with the selective education system: The age of transfer; the principle of dividing pupils into grammar and secondary schools; and in terms of accuracy and fairness of the transfer procedure. Secondly, Gallagher argued that the structure of the post-primary education system was an issue that needed to be addressed separately. According to him, it was possible to have a differentiated post-primary education structure, without the means of the 11-plus.²⁹

The inquiry by the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee suggested that there were several views on the selective education system. The Department of Education was aware of this, but as long as a majority of people supported the selective education system, the Department did not have any intentions to address the issue. Their priority and strategies in order to address the underachievement in post-primary education, was through measures of free school meals and earlier intervention methods. On the other hand, Professor Tony Gallagher had concerns that the underachievement in post-primary schools could be related to the selective education system. According to Gallagher, there were strong evidence that suggested that there were several problems associated to the education system based on academic selection, and that it had serious consequences for pupils from socially disadvantaged backgrounds.

²⁸ Gallagher, T. (06.11.96). Located in: Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. (1997:44): "Second Report. Underachievement in Northern Ireland Secondary Schools". The Stationery Office. London.

²⁹ Gallagher, T. (06.11.96). Located in: Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. (1997:44-45): "Second Report. Underachievement in Northern Ireland Secondary Schools". The Stationery Office. London.

Based on these differences of opinion, how did the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee consider the role of the selective education system in relation to the problem of underachievement? Compared to the rest of the United Kingdom, the Committee described Northern Ireland as being different in several ways. More importantly, according to the Committee, these differences influenced the way people viewed education.³⁰ Northern Ireland had both a younger population, as well as a greater social deprivation compared to the rest of the United Kingdom. Therefore, the Committee argued that it was a challenge to motivate families who had lived in generations of unemployment, and persuade them that education could offer them a route to a better future.

The Committee also described the education system to be different than in the rest of the United Kingdom because it was split in two ways: based on religion and on the basis of academic selection at the age of eleven.³¹ The Committee acknowledged that there existed different views on the effects of the 11-plus. One of them being that it produced failures and successors at an early age, and that there was a tendency to assume that grammar school was best, and secondary schools was second best. The Committee also claimed that there was some who found academic selection to be the actual reason for the difference between high and low achievers in Northern Ireland. However, because of a survey in 1989 where there was 51,9 %, which favoured grammar/secondary education instead of introducing a comprehensive system, the Committee concluded that there was enough support to keep the selective education system.³² While admitting the existence of evidence that the selective system offered a narrow approach to school performance, the Committee praised the grammar schools for giving excellent education.³³

The Conservative party favoured the education system based on academic selection, and sought other measures to address the problem of underachievement in post-primary education. However, despite introducing those measures, the problem of underachievement did not disappear. When the Labour party won the United Kingdom general election in 1997,

³⁰ Northern Ireland Affairs Committee (1997: xiii): "Second Report. Underachievement in Northern Ireland Secondary Schools". The Stationery Office. London.

³¹ Northern Ireland Affairs Committee (1997: xiii): "Second Report. Underachievement in Northern Ireland Secondary Schools". The Stationery Office. London.

³² Northern Ireland Affairs Committee (1997: xiv): "Second Report. Underachievement in Northern Ireland Secondary Schools". The Stationery Office. London.

³³ Northern Ireland Affairs Committee (1997: xv): "Second Report. Underachievement in Northern Ireland Secondary Schools". The Stationery Office. London.

it did not take long until the issue of underachievement became a top priority for the new government. As mentioned above, the Labour party opinion on the selective education system differed from that of the Conservative party, and as we shall see next, the new Education Minister had another strategy when he addressed the problem of underachievement.

Underachievement: a consequence of the selective education system?

After the Labour party had won the general elections on May 1st 1997, Tony Worthington took over as the Minister responsible for education in Northern Ireland. One of the Labour party's main arguments during the election was based on the idea that raising school standards had to be the main priority, especially when it came to improving the chances of low achievers in school.³⁴ The Education Minister Tony Worthington described the educational system in Northern Ireland as being a highly effective one in getting pupils into higher education. However, he also presented it to be a system that continued to produce underachievers. If Northern Ireland was to compete successfully with the rest of Europe, education standards needed to be raised, and a particular priority for Worthington was the underachievers.³⁵ However in the beginning, no particular attention was given to the effects produced by the selective system. Worthington, and the Labour government's immediate concerns for the education in Northern Ireland was provision for pupils at pre-school and early primary school, and to secure a good foundation in numeracy and literacy. Also, the linkage between secondary schools, further education and training was to be strengthened.³⁶

In March 1998, the following year attention turned to the impact of academic selection. Although Worthington claimed he did not want to change the education system, the Department of Education commissioned two research studies.³⁷ One of these was to study the delayed selection system operated in the Craigavon area, which provided a systematic alternative to selection at the age of eleven. The second study was more wide ranging, and focused on the consequences and effects of selection on standards at all levels.³⁸ The primary reason why Worthington commissioned this research according to himself was: "(...) so that

³⁴ Worthington, T. (26.06.97): Parliamentary Debate: Vol. 296 cc1026. www.publications.parliament.uk

³⁵ Worthington, T. (29.10.97): Parliamentary Debate: Vol. 299 c832W. www.publications.parliament.uk

³⁶ Worthington, T. (11.06.97): Parliamentary Debate: Vol. 295 cc494-5W. www.publications.parliament.uk

³⁷ Worthington, T. (11.03.98): Parliamentary Debate: Vol. 308 c249W. www.publications.parliament.uk

³⁸ Gallagher, T., Smith, A. (2000:4): "The Effects Of The Selective System Of Secondary Education In Northern Ireland. Main Report." Queen's University Belfast and University of Ulster. www.deni.gov.uk

debate on all aspects of the system, and consideration of possible changes to it, can be based on better information and understanding of the present system”.³⁹ When giving the terms of reference for the research project, he emphasized that:

Particular attention needs to be given to the identification of any differences in opportunity and performance in respect of different socio-economic groups, and especially between the constituent parts of the Northern Ireland community, which may result from the present system and structures.⁴⁰

By commissioning this research, Worthington opened up for the possibility that the problem of underachievement could have occurred as a consequence of the selective education system. Worthington also stated that: “The main focus should be on the effects of the selective structure of the secondary sector, though attention should also be given to the effects of the Transfer Procedure”.⁴¹ Therefore, it was not only the selective education system that was to be a part of the research study, Worthington also wanted the 11-plus to be scrutinised. Following the publication of this research, a public debate on the selective education system was launched, and it became one of the most debated issues in the beginning of the 21st Century. At the same time, the political situation in Northern Ireland was marked by an important change.

On the 10th of April 1998, the Belfast Agreement was signed. For the people in Northern Ireland who for decades had lived in a society of conflict, this agreement marked an important milestone in the peace process. It meant that from now on, a devolved government constituted by locally elected politicians, was to decide on matters that concerned Northern Ireland. However, several elements remained to be solved until powers could be transferred. The past years of conflict continued to influence the society during the peace process. This was particularly the case for the relationships between the political parties in Northern Ireland, which meant that the debate on the selective education system also happened in a politically unstable time. Therefore, the political situation that followed the Belfast Agreement, and how this was to continue to influence the debate on the selective education system needs to be addressed.

³⁹ Worthington, T. (15.06.98): Parliamentary Debate: Vol. 314 cc4-5W. www.publications.parliament.uk

⁴⁰ Worthington, T. (16.07.98): Parliamentary Debate: Vol. 316 cc257W. www.publications.parliament.uk

⁴¹ Worthington, T. (16.07.98): Parliamentary Debate: Vol. 316 cc257W. www.publications.parliament.uk

As we will see next, it was especially the decommissioning of paramilitary groups and the establishment of an Executive that was to delay the implementation of the Belfast Agreement. This also led to the suspensions of the Assembly and the Executive several times throughout the first decade after the signing of the agreement.

The Belfast Agreement: introducing political stability?

The Belfast Agreement was endorsed through a referendum held on the 22nd of May 1998, and thereafter it was to be given legal force through the Northern Ireland Act of 1998. A series of interrelated bodies was established following the Belfast Agreement. The Northern Ireland Assembly, which included 108 democratically elected members, was one of these. The Assembly was given full legislative and executive authority for all matters that had been transferred from Westminster to Northern Ireland. Given Northern Ireland's past years of conflict, and as a way of securing the continuation of devolution, the Assembly was to operate on a cross-community basis. This meant that the Members of the Assembly had to identify themselves as nationalist, unionists or other.⁴² The intention of introducing the system based on a cross-community vote was to ensure that both nationalists and unionists could have their say, and that no side could dominate the other when it came to deciding on political matters. However, the system of cross-community support worked both ways. Reaching political agreement demanded the support from both sides. As we will see later, when studying the second phase of the debate on the selective education system, the arrangement of cross-community support did not necessarily make it easier to reach political agreement.

The Executive was the main authority and constituted a First Minister and a Deputy First Minister, as well as eleven Ministers with Departments. Both the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister was to be elected into office by the Assembly voting on a cross-community basis. This was followed by appointment of Ministers. Based on the number of seats in the Assembly, the political parties with the highest number selected a Department and nominated one of the party's members as the Minister. For each of these Departments, an associated Committee was established. The Committee was to have a scrutiny, policy development and consultation role. The same procedure to nominate Ministers and selecting

⁴² The Belfast Agreement (1998:Strand One): "Democratic Institutions in Northern Ireland". www.cain.ulst.ac.uk (read 18.11.12)

Department, were applied when the political parties was to select a Committee, and nominate one of their party's Members to Chairman and Deputy Chairman.⁴³ Other interrelated bodies' that was established was the North/South Ministerial Council, the British-Irish Council, the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference, and the consultative Civic Forum.⁴⁴

The New Northern Ireland Assembly was elected on 25th of June 1998, and had its first meeting on the 1st of July 1998, where David Trimble MP (Ulster Unionist Party) was elected as First Minister and Seamus Mallon MP (Social and Democratic Labour Party) as Deputy First Minister.⁴⁵ During the continuing months the New Northern Ireland Assembly met several times, however they had no legal power. The reason for the delayed transfer of power was that there still remained several issues to be dealt with before the agreement could be implemented in full.

Decommissioning of paramilitary organisations

There were mainly two issues that caused difficulties in implementing the Belfast Agreement: that paramilitary groups were to decommission their illegal weapons, and the establishment of an Executive Body.⁴⁶ Despite several initiatives made by the British and Irish governments, Executive seemed to be difficult to establish. One of the reasons for this was that the two Northern Ireland political benches, nationalists and unionists, had different views on what was to happen first. According to Tony Blair's chief of staff at the time, Jonathan Powel, the unionist parties would not agree on an Executive until the paramilitary organisations had begun to decommission their illegal weapons. On the other hand, according to the party leader of Sinn Fein, Gerry Adams, the Irish Republican Army (the IRA) would not start decommissioning until the Executive had been established.⁴⁷ Who was to back down?

⁴³ The Belfast Agreement (1998:Strand One): "Democratic Institutions in Northern Ireland". www.cain.ulst.ac.uk (read 18.11.12)

⁴⁴ Northern Ireland Assembly: "History of the Assembly". www.niassembly.gov.uk (read 16.10.12)

⁴⁵ During the Shadow period the Northern Ireland Act of 1998 stated that it was to be called the New Northern Ireland Assembly to distinguish it from the Northern Ireland Assembly for which legislative provision remained at that time under the Northern Ireland Constitution Act 1973. At the date of devolution it could be called the "Northern Ireland Assembly".

⁴⁶ Mowlam, M. (28.10.1998): Parliamentary Debate: Vol. 318 cc320-2. www.publications.parliament.uk

⁴⁷ Powel, J. (2008:142): "Great Hatred. Little Room. Making Peace in Northern Ireland". Vintage Books. London.

Given the success of finally having signed the Agreement, according to Jonathan Powel the delay was not looked upon as a set back. As far as the British government were concerned, it was not a collapse of the process but an impasse that no one at the time could find a way to pass by.⁴⁸ In the House of Commons there still seemed to exist an atmosphere of belief in the power of the Agreement and the process itself. Marjorie Mowlam, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland at the time, stated that what was important was “that the parties, their leaders, the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister (...) are trying to take the process forward”.⁴⁹ According to Mowlam it was not the first time a deadline had been missed, and that they had missed them before finally signing the Belfast Agreement. She argued that deadlines were important because it reminded the parties of their mission, and it gave them focus and space to work within. As long as progress was made, the British government would not interfere with the process more than they had to.⁵⁰

However, not everyone shared the British Government and Mowlam’s faith in the power of the Agreement. In February 1999 decommissioning was still the critical issue in Northern Ireland politics. It was featured in several debates, both in the new Northern Ireland Assembly and in the House of Commons. The deadline set for 31st of October 1998 had been missed. The importance of decommissioning and why nothing had happened so far, was according to the conservatives questions that needed to be answered. The close relationship between the political party of Sinn Fein and IRA had become a source of frustration. Unionists were frustrated because they felt that they had already done their part of the Agreement, and to them it was a principle of moral. If the Agreement was to be implemented anytime soon, credible decommissioning needed to take place before the establishment of an Executive Body.

Because decommissioning was such an important part of the Belfast Agreement, there could be no full implementation of it before this issue was resolved. According to the British Conservative MP Malcolm Moss, the Agreement clearly stated that the political parties who held office were only to use democratic, non-violent means. Those parties, who could not,

⁴⁸ Powel, J. (2008:142): “Great Hatred. Little Room. Making Peace in Northern Ireland”. Vintage Books. London.

⁴⁹ Mowlam, M. (28.10.1998): Parliamentary Debate: Vol. 318 cc320-2. www.publications.parliament.uk

⁵⁰ Mowlam, M. (28.10.1998): Parliamentary Debate: Vol. 318 cc320-2. www.publications.parliament.uk

should be excluded and removed from office.⁵¹ Therefore, because of Sinn Fein's association to IRA, Moss claimed that members of Sinn Fein should be prevented of holding any posts in the Executive. MP Moss argued that as long as IRA did not decommission their weapons, it was as if Sinn Fein had their own private army. There was a need to begin a credible decommission to achieve a political settlement in Northern Ireland. However, according to Marjorie Mowlam, the British government had no intention to go ahead and set up a devolved Executive without Sinn Fein being involved.⁵²

Implementation of the Agreement

In June 1999, the British and Irish Government had come up with a proposal for a way to implement the Agreement. Included in this proposal, was a clear failsafe for both parts. When the day of nominating the Ministers came however, the Ulster Unionist party, the Democratic Unionist party and the Alliance party chose not to nominate any members to ministerial offices. This made it impossible to set up a cross-community Executive. Despite Marjorie Mowlam admitting that this was a set back, she said to the House of Commons that it would be "foolish to conclude that the Good Friday Agreement cannot continue".⁵³ In her opinion, the Agreement had led to agreement in several areas, which in the past had been dividing the people in Northern Ireland. Because of this, the only way was forward and there was no other alternative.

In the following months, further negotiations between the parties took place. The American Senator George Mitchell had facilitated a review of the implantation of the Belfast Agreement, starting on the 6th of September 1999. This review resulted in the announcement 11 weeks later, by the new Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Peter Mandelson that he would meet the Assembly for nominating ministers on the 29th of November. Following the nomination of ministers, Parliament would then approve devolution under the Northern Ireland Act of 1998 on the 30th of November. Consequently, this was to result in transfer of powers on the 2nd of December. Decommission had not been started, but Mandelson, the British and the Irish government believed that once devolution had taken place, it would come

⁵¹ Moss, M. (22.02.1999): Parliamentary Debate: Vol. 326 cc131-52. www.publications.parliament.uk

⁵² Mowlam, M. (15.07.99): Parliamentary Debate: Vol. 330 cc325-8. www.publications.parliament.uk

⁵³ Mowlam, M. (15.07.99): Parliamentary Debate: Vol.335 cc565-77. www.publications.parliament.uk

as a natural development of the peace process. And according to Peter Mandelson: “We are, therefore, planning for success, not failure”.⁵⁴

For the first time, conditions had been created by which the Agreement could be implemented in full. There had not been any new issues dealt with during the autumn negotiations, but for the first time these negotiations had led to the IRA giving a statement on decommissioning of their illegal weapons. Although most of the members of the House of Commons welcomed the results of the negotiations, some of them had concerns that decommissioning had not started.⁵⁵ Peter Mandelson stated that if decommissioning did not go as planned, the British and the Irish Government would take action:

We are taking some risks, but they are all carefully calculated and controlled and will remain under the control of the parties and the Government and, above all, of the Assembly itself. The right hon. Gentleman talked about my excluding Sinn Fein from the Executive in the event of the IRA failing to decommission to the satisfaction of the de Chastelain commission, but it is up to the Assembly, not me, to take that action. In the event of those circumstances arising, I would certainly move to suspend the operation of the Executive but it would then be for the Assembly and all the Members and parties in it to take what action they think is appropriate.⁵⁶

This meant that if there should arise a situation where some of the parties involved did not live up to the Agreement, it was up to the Assembly to take action. If the Assembly could not handle that responsibility, the British and Irish Government would take action.

Devolution returned to Northern Ireland, and on the 29th of November 1999 the members of the Northern Ireland Assembly met for the first time to select Departmental portfolios and to nominate one of their members for ministerial posts.

A battle of the Department of Education?

The four largest parties after the Assembly elections in June 1998 was the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), who won the most seats in the Assembly with 28 seats, Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) coming second with 24 seats, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) came in third with 20 seats, and Sinn Fein coming fourth with 18 seats. When the Assembly met on the 29th of November 1999, elections for the Executive ministerial posts took place,

⁵⁴ Mandelson, P. (22.11.99): Parliamentary Debate: Vol. 339 cc345-59. www.publications.parliament.uk

⁵⁵ Taylor, J., D. (22.11.99): Parliamentary Debate: Vol. 339 cc345-59. www.publications.parliament.uk

⁵⁶ Mandelson, P. (22.11.99): Parliamentary Debate: Vol. 339 cc345-59. www.publications.parliament.uk

and the leader of each party appointed Ministers to the Executive. This election was based on the strengths of each party at the previous Assembly Election.

The first party who chose Department was the UUP, and they selected the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. The SDLP came in second and selected the Department of Finance and Personnel, followed by the DUP that selected the Department of Regional Development. However, the fact that Sinn Fein then chose the Department of Education, and nominated Martin McGuinness as the minister, was not well received by many Members of the Assembly. In fact, it caused quite a furore in the Assembly.

The Department of Education was the fourth department to be chosen, and if others parties had really wanted it; they had three opportunities to take it before Sinn Fein could select it. Therefore, the strong reactions could not simply have been about the battle of the ministry. The reactions were probably more due to the party that selected the Department, and the fact that Martin McGuinness was nominated to manage it. As mentioned above, there had traditionally existed strong connections between Sinn Fein and the IRA, and McGuinness had admitted to having been a member of the IRA in the early 1970s. Although the relationship between the IRA and Sinn Fein had changed during the peace process, because of this connection, the unionist parties, and especially the Democratic Unionist party (DUP) did not recognise Sinn Fein as a part of the devolved government. In fact, on the 4th of July 2000, the DUP moved a motion where they tried to exclude Sinn Fein from the Executive. The DUP argued that

(...) in consequence of the failure of the Provisional IRA to offer up its illegal weaponry for destruction, its continuing threat, and pursuit, of terrorist outrages to secure its aims, its maintenance of an active terrorist organisation, its continuing engagement in murder and other acts of violence, and the fact that it is inextricably linked to Sinn Féin, this Assembly resolves that Sinn Féin does not enjoy its confidence because it is not committed to non-violence and exclusively peaceful means, and further, in accordance with section 30 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, determines that members of Sinn Féin shall be excluded from holding office as Ministers for a period of 12 months from the date of this resolution.⁵⁷

However, the motion fell because of lack of cross-community support in the Assembly. Sinn Fein kept the Department of Education, and in addition the party also selected the Department

⁵⁷ Paisley, I. (04.07.00): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

of Health, which left Sinn Fein with the responsibility for almost three-quarters of the budget.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Powel, J. (2009:165): "Great Hatred. Little Room. Making Peace in Northern Ireland". Vintage Books. London.

2. THE DEFINITION OF CHANGE 2000-2007

As we have seen above, the debate concerning the selective education system was not new to the people of Northern Ireland. However, because of the Belfast Agreement Northern Ireland now had locally elected representatives in the Assembly, and a cross-community Education Committee to be a part of the process. Therefore, the debate was now happening in a new format. It meant that the future of the selective school system had become a responsibility of the Executive of Northern Ireland.

The struggle for the definition of change characterized the *first phase* of the debate on the selective education system, and stretches from September 2000 to May 2007. The research by Professors Tony Gallagher and Alan Smith had found that several educational and social issues could be related to the effects of the selective education system. Based on these findings, the Minister of Education, Martin McGuinness, launched a debate on the selective education system. A review body on post-primary education was established, to come up with proposals and recommendations on post-primary arrangements. This was followed by a consultation period where not only the political parties, but also the entire community was given a chance to express their opinion on the future of the selective education system.

There were two main questions related to this period: *Whether* there was a need for a change, and in that case what was to be changed. I have chosen to initially present each of the political parties separately, because this provides a clearer insight into the aspects that are central in this debate: Similarities and differences between the parties are one of the most important question as well as to what degree each party participated in the debate, and how the character of the party's opinions, arguments and strategies developed throughout the debate.

The first phase of the debate also covers the period when Northern Ireland again came under Direct Rule. Due to the lack of decommissioning of paramilitary organisation, the Assembly and the Executive was suspended from the 14th of October 2002 to May 8th in 2007. The scene of the debate thus shifted, and the process became the responsibility of the so-called appointed Ministers selected by the UK government. This did not put the process on hold, however, the debate continued and a new working group was established in order to find a new arrangement replacing the selective education system.

Was change needed?

The Effects of the Selective System on Post-Primary Education

The research led by Professors Tony Gallagher, Queens University Belfast, and Alan Smith, University of Ulster, culminated in the report: *The Effects Of The Selective System Of Secondary Education In Northern Ireland*. The report was published on the 28th of September 2000. As the former Minister with the responsibility of Education in Northern Ireland, Tony Worthington had outlined, the purpose of this research was to provide an informed basis for discussion on the future of the selective system. Therefore, the report was not to make any recommendations on the future arrangements of the selective system. Professors Gallagher and Smith's main focus had been on the differentiation that occurred as a consequence of the selective education system. What were the main findings of this research?

Overall, Professors Tony Gallagher and Alan Smith argued that the selective education system had significant strengths. It gave great results in terms of high academic achievements. Grammar schools provided an environment of academic and intellectual excellence for their pupils. Secondary schools seemed to provide an environment of support for the pupils who did not attain a place at grammar schools. Also, secondary schools did not require their pupils to take as many General Certificate Secondary Education⁵⁹ (GCSE) examinations as grammar schools did. In addition, secondary schools seemed to have enrolment from local areas, which had a positive effect on the local community and their schools.⁶⁰ However, there were a number of significant weaknesses in the selective education system. The mission and purpose of grammar schools were defined by academic terms. By contrast, even though secondary schools were required to meet a range of objectives simultaneously, they still experienced being judged by the society based on academic criteria. Ultimately, this had a more positive effect for grammar schools.⁶¹

⁵⁹ GCSE: an academic qualification awarded in a specific subject taken at post-primary level, generally taken in a number of subjects.

⁶⁰ Gallagher, T., Smith, A. (2000:10.3.1-3): "The Effects Of The Selective System Of Secondary Education In Northern Ireland. Main Report". Queen's University Belfast and University of Ulster. www.deni.gov.uk (11.11.12)

⁶¹ Gallagher, T., Smith, A. (2000:10.3.14): "The Effects Of The Selective System Of Secondary Education In Northern Ireland. Main Report". Queen's University Belfast and University of Ulster. www.deni.gov.uk (11.11.12)

Despite several initiatives to rise standards in low-achieving schools, there still existed a differentiated pattern with a consequent over-representation of low achieving schools. Professors Gallagher and Smith argued that in any education system, there was likelihood to find some low-achieving schools. However, the research implied that the selective system in Northern Ireland produced more of these schools.⁶² One of the issues the project examined was the patterns of achievement of pupils GCSE's, and how this was influenced by selection. The findings suggested that there was a clear difference in the levels of GCSE achievement of grammar and secondary schools. In the school year of 1997/98, 95% of grammar school pupils on average achieved five or more GCSE grades at A-C, while the number of secondary pupils was 5%.⁶³ Professors Gallagher and Smith explained this to be partially explained by social disadvantage. The findings of the research also revealed the so-called "Grammar School Effect": If two pupils who had the same transfer grade, and who were similar in every other aspect were compared, one at grammar school and one at secondary school, the one at grammar school would achieve a significantly higher GCSE score.⁶⁴ According to Professors Gallagher and Smith this effect could to be explained by the combinations of grammar schools creation of a learning environment with a clear academic mission, and high expectations for academic success.

In general, it was a marked difference in the way teachers at grammar schools and secondary schools talked about educational priorities. One of the main tasks of the teachers at secondary schools were to rebuild pupils' self-confidence, after having failed the 11-plus.⁶⁵ Teachers at grammar schools main task, was to provide educational excellence. The selective education system did not only affect post-primary schools. It was also found to have severe influences on primary schools. Primary school teachers felt that they were being judged by the public on the basis of pupils performance on the 11-plus. And according to Professors Gallagher and Smith, there was a great concern that the teaching on the upper stages of primary schools

⁶² Gallagher, T., Smith, A. (2000:4.2.6): "The Effects Of The Selective System Of Secondary Education In Northern Ireland. Main Report". Queen's University Belfast and University of Ulster. www.deni.gov.uk (11.11.12)

⁶³ Gallagher, T., Smith, A. (2000:2.2.3): "The Effects Of The Selective System Of Secondary Education In Northern Ireland. Main Report". Queen's University Belfast and University of Ulster. www.deni.gov.uk (11.11.12)

⁶⁴ Gallagher, T., Smith, A. (2000:2.3.2): "The Effects Of The Selective System Of Secondary Education In Northern Ireland. Main Report". Queen's University Belfast and University of Ulster. www.deni.gov.uk (11.11.12)

⁶⁵ Gallagher, T., Smith, A. (2000:3.2.8): "The Effects Of The Selective System Of Secondary Education In Northern Ireland. Main Report". Queen's University Belfast and University of Ulster. www.deni.gov.uk (11.11.12)

seemed to revolve around preparing for the 11-plus. The consequence was that pupils did not receive the teaching of the curriculum they were supposed to get.⁶⁶

The research also looked into key social groups view on the education system.⁶⁷ In general, most groups valued the good academic results achieved by grammar schools, and wished that any new arrangement should maintain those achievements. However, there was a concern for the 11-plus. They found it unfair to divide children at this early age, and unfair that pupils' future was based on a two-hour test. When discussing the 11-plus, there also seemed to be a notion of *winner*s and *loser*s: those who passed the test and obtained a place at grammar schools were looked upon as winners, and those who failed the test, were seen as losers.⁶⁸ According to Professors Gallagher and Smith, this view provided a confirmation of the general view of the different status of grammar schools and secondary schools. The research also revealed that parents felt obliged to pay for extra tuition for their children. However, parents from socially disadvantaged areas did not have the opportunity to pay for these extra costs, with the results of the socially disadvantaged children becoming even more disadvantaged.⁶⁹ According to Professors Gallagher and Smith, the original purpose of the 11-plus was to “identify the pupils who were able to cope with the academic curriculum provided by grammar schools”.⁷⁰ However, there were no 11-plus grade that automatically entitled pupils a place at grammar school. The 11-plus was used to rank order those with the higher grades over those with lower grades, for which grammar school then could base their selection on.

The findings of the research did not come as a surprise to most politicians. But for the first time, it existed a solid base to move the debate forward from. The findings from the research showed that the education system based on academic selection had important strengths: it

⁶⁶ Gallagher, T., Smith, A. (2000:7.2.1): “The Effects Of The Selective System Of Secondary Education In Northern Ireland. Main Report.” Queen’s University Belfast and University of Ulster. www.deni.gov.uk (read 11.11.12)

⁶⁷ Key social groups: parents, employers, and training and third-level education providers.

⁶⁸ Gallagher, T., Smith, A. (2000:10.3): “The Effects Of The Selective System Of Secondary Education In Northern Ireland. Main Report”. Queen’s University Belfast and University of Ulster. www.deni.gov.uk (11.11.12)

⁶⁹ Gallagher, T., Smith, A. (2000:10.3.6): “The Effects Of The Selective System Of Secondary Education In Northern Ireland. Main Report”. Queen’s University Belfast and University of Ulster. www.deni.gov.uk (11.11.12)

⁷⁰ Gallagher, T., Smith, A. (2000:10.3.12): “The Effects Of The Selective System Of Secondary Education In Northern Ireland. Main Report”. Queen’s University Belfast and University of Ulster. www.deni.gov.uk (read 11.11.12)

produced high academic results in grammar schools, and the secondary schools seemed to provide a supporting environment for the local community. However, the findings also showed significant weaknesses: selection influenced the teaching of the primary school curriculum; there were huge differences in the achieved GCSE results between grammar and secondary schools; it seemed to produce more of the low-achieving schools, and it led to those who were social disadvantaged becoming even more disadvantaged. The 11-plus were viewed as unfair, and even though pupils achieved great results, there was no guarantee that it would secure a place at grammar schools.

Professors Gallagher and Smith argued that in the continuing debate, the first priority should be about the broader purpose of education. There was a need to decide what kind of educational experience the politicians wanted for the pupils in terms of social, educational and economical objectives. Then the politicians could move on to determine the structure that would be the best way to provide those experiences.⁷¹

At the same day of the publication of this research report, the Minister of Education, Martin McGuinness launched a public debate, and a review on Post-Primary education:

After 50 years of the current selective education arrangement, during which time the world has changed significantly, and as we start a new century with a locally elected Assembly and Executive, the time is right for the issues raised by this report to be examined and for everyone to have a say in the type of education system we want for our children. In launching this report today, I am therefore also launching a public debate on the future arrangements for education here.⁷²

When the political parties were to decide whether change in the education system was needed or not, each party voiced their views on education, and visions for the future education system. And as we will see next, it was when the parties were to express how they wanted to address these visions, and how they viewed education, that differences between them occurred.

⁷¹ Gallagher, T., Smith, A. (2000:10.4.1): "The Effects Of The Selective System Of Secondary Education In Northern Ireland. Main Report." Queen's University Belfast and University of Ulster. www.deni.gov.uk (read 11.11.12)

⁷² Quote located at: Northern Ireland Education Committee. (28.09.00): "The Effects of the Selective System of Secondary Education in Northern Ireland". Report 01/01 R. www.niassembly.gov.uk (read 11.11.12)

Views and visions on education: Equality of opportunity

When the political parties were to discuss their visions for the future education system in Northern Ireland, an issue that aroused was that the future education system should provide equality of opportunity for all. It was not a coincidence that this vision became so central to many of the political parties. *Equality* had for many years been ignored in Northern Ireland. However, the Belfast Agreement in 1998 marked a significant change. Equality became the mainstream in political discussions, and alongside human rights, it was identified as central elements in the new constitutional settlements.⁷³ In what way was equality of opportunity important for the political parties regarding education, and how did they address the issue?

Sinn Fein viewed education as the very foundation of their society, and stated that it was an integral part of their society and how that society developed.⁷⁴ Therefore, according to Sinn Fein, there was a need to provide choice to the pupils and their parents, and that this choice should be based on equality of opportunity.⁷⁵ The Minister of Education, Martin McGuinness, argued that *equality* was the key word, and that the focus needed to be on the future: Now was the time to start questioning whether the education system in fact did help all pupils in achieving their full potential.⁷⁶ Not only did the Minister argue that it was an important educational issue, according to the McGuinness, it was also a matter of a social issue.⁷⁷ Therefore, the Minister wanted to work on some of the key findings from the research provided by Professors Tony Gallagher and Alan Smith. Firstly, the Minister argued that there had been found a polarisation of the schools achievements: Northern Ireland had many high achieving schools and there were also many low achieving ones. Secondly, there was a considerably under-representation of socially disadvantaged children attending grammar schools. Thirdly there was a severe impact which the preparations for the 11-plus had in primary schools. And fourthly, what concerned the Minister and his party the most, was the sense of failure felt by those who did not obtain a place in a grammar school.⁷⁸

⁷³ McCrudden, C. (1999:96): "Equality and the Good Friday Agreement" in "After the Good Friday Agreement". Located in: Ruane, J., Todd, J. (1996): "After the Good Friday Agreement". University College Dublin Press. Dublin.

⁷⁴ Kelly, J. (17.10.00): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

⁷⁵ McHugh, G. (17.10.00): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

⁷⁶ McGuinness, M. (12.03.01): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

⁷⁷ McGuinness, M. (17.10.00): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

⁷⁸ McGuinness, M. (17.10.00): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

Based on these findings, the Minister and his party Sinn Fein argued that because education was a human right, the time had come to create a high-quality education system, which was freely available and accessible to all. If the politicians managed to do that, Northern Ireland invested in the future, with the result of a skilled and an enlightened workforce.⁷⁹ The Minister and his party argued that only those arrangements that would improve the education system by producing choice, equality and accessibility for the pupils could be implemented.⁸⁰

Previously, the Minister had stated that his personal view, and the one of his party, was that the selective system should be abolished. However, because he was the Minister of Education in a power-sharing Executive, he had to take into account that there existed other views on the issue. Therefore, McGuinness could not make any decisions until those views had been expressed, and he had the chance to consider them.⁸¹ This could serve as an explanation as to why Sinn Fein and the Minister chose to enter the earlier stages of the debate more open-minded. As we will see in the following, the Social and Democratic Labour Party (SDLP) shared many of the concerns of the Minister and his party, however the SDLP had a more direct way of addressing the issue.

The SDLP viewed education as the cornerstone of the society, and argued that it was a human right to get an education. However, equality of opportunity could not be created if Northern Ireland had a system not able to be inclusive, flexible to cater the needs to all of the pupils, and which was responsive to the society.⁸² According to the SDLP, the research provided by Professors Gallagher and Smith *had* found that the education system was unable to deliver equal opportunity for all.⁸³ SDLP argued that if there were equality of opportunity in the education system, it would be able to tackle the issues of underachievement, rural schools, nursery education and special needs. The party claimed that one of the reasons of the high levels of underachievement, was because Northern Ireland had become a league table-driven society geared too much towards academia. It had resulted in an education system that in the interest of the minority of children, who performed well, did not offer the same opportunities for the majority.⁸⁴ The selective system, according to the SDLP was a “supply-side-

⁷⁹ McHugh, G. (17.10.00): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

⁸⁰ McGuinness, M. (12.03.01): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

⁸¹ McGuinness, M. (31.01.00): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

⁸² Lewsley, M. (15.10.01): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

⁸³ Gallagher, T. (17.10.00): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

⁸⁴ Lewsley, P. (17.10.00): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

determined system”.⁸⁵ The party argued that the education system was neither fair, nor balanced, because the number of pupils that succeeded, were determined by the total number of grammar school places available. The SDLP opposed the 11-plus, and did so because it was unfair, divisive, ineffective and damaging. In other words, to deliver equality of opportunity for all, and to deal with the issue of underachievement, SDLP argued that there needed to be a complete overview of the education system, and agreed to find an alternative that did not include the 11-plus test.⁸⁶

Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition (NIWC) argued that the research report by Professors Gallagher and Smith raised two important issues: The question of what the purpose of education was, and the need for making decisions about the structure of the education system. The party argued that education played an important part in healing the divisions found in Northern Ireland’s community. The only way to promote a peaceful community according to NIWC was if the society let the children “experience the other side as human beings, capable of friendship and understanding”.⁸⁷ What the current education system did, however, was punishing pupils by reinforcing social divisions. The education system divided the pupils in one group of elites, and another one of losers. An education system based on equality of opportunity according to NIWC would be: “(...) comprehensive in ethos, population and curriculum, and more integrated, in terms of gender, class, culture, ethnicity and, most important of all, religion and ability”.⁸⁸

As the SDLP, Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) also chose a direct way of promoting the party’s opinion. However, the DUP had quite another view on how to provide equality of opportunity. The party argued that in any circumstances, selection was inevitable and should be carried out on the basis that it provided the best education route for the children to take. According to DUP there was a need to accept that differentiation was necessary, no children were alike. There had to be distinctive routes that matched pupils’ individual abilities, either academically or practically. In order to provide equality of opportunity, the DUP claimed that these two distinctive routes needed to have equal status, and it was up to the politicians to ensure that no people felt that one of the routes was better than the other.

⁸⁵ Byrne, J. (17.10.00): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

⁸⁶ Lewsley, P. (17.10.00): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

⁸⁷ Morrice, J. (15.10.01): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

⁸⁸ McWilliams, M. (17.10.00): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

On the other hand, a particular concern for the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP), was the results provided by the research on the effects of the selective system: Compared to the areas of catholic working-class, protestants showed a considerably lower pass rate on the 11-plus. PUP argued that this clearly showed that the education system did not provide equality of opportunity for all, and unless the debate was about finding a system that delivered equality in all terms, the debate was meaningless. According to PUP there was no problem to prove that the education system was flawed; the real problem was to find the alternative.⁸⁹

As we will see next, Alliance party and the UUP placed themselves more in the middle in how the parties addressed equality of opportunity for all, and what changes that could involve in order to achieve it. Alliance party described the education system as one of “divisiveness of a bipartite education system”.⁹⁰ The party argued that education was one of the most important issues and responsibilities the Assembly dealt with, and that the politicians now had the opportunity to make changes. Change in post-primary education would according to the Alliance party provide more opportunities to develop integrated education in Northern Ireland. The party claimed that if Northern Ireland had equality of opportunity, pupils would not be deprived of the opportunity to attend integrated education.⁹¹ While acknowledging that there was a need to make changes to the education system in order for it to provide equality of opportunity for all, according to the Alliance party, there was also the possibility that selection still had to be a part of these changes.

The Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) welcomed the debate, and claimed that the party would enter it wholeheartedly, with the principles of: “equality of access, provision and opportunity to maximise the skills and talents of individuals, not as members of any class or tribe, but for the benefit of individuals and society at large”.⁹² The UUP emphasized the need to get this right, and that it was important that every view was listened to. Although the selective education system had not changed in nearly fifty years, other educational factors had. Therefore, the UUP argued that it was time to study this issue in depth. According to the party

⁸⁹ Hutchinson, B. (17.10.00): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

⁹⁰ Neeson, S. (15.10.01): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

⁹¹ Neeson, S. (15.10.01): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

⁹² Robinson, K. (15.10.01): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

there was a need to identify why the flaws existed in the system, and try to cure them.⁹³ The UUP had some concerns as to all the stress and work done, which the party argued was one of the fundamental problems with the 11-plus. However, the UUP also claimed that these emotive effects of the selective system were hyped up by events that happened outside the schools.

Equality of opportunity remained one of the most important visions all parties agreed on. The differences between the parties however, appeared in *how* the parties wanted to address the issue, and how each party claimed equality was to be in practice. The Minister of Education and his party Sinn Fein seemed to take a more open-minded approach to the issue. Still, the research on the education system had raised particular concerns for Sinn Fein, especially related to social issues, and the party questioned whether selection was the best way to accommodate all pupils. The SDLP took a more direct approach to the issue, and argued that Northern Ireland had an unfair education system, where the number of available grammar school places determined the number of successes. The NIWC went even further, and argued that several elements of religious and social integration were needed, to ensure that equality of opportunity was offered to all of the pupils. The Alliance party also drew the line between equality of opportunity and integrated education.

Although there was some differences as to what extent they found necessary to address the issue, similarities could be found in the arguments of Sinn Fein, SDLP, NIWC and PUP. To a certain degree, and based on the findings of Gallagher's research, all parties questioned if the selective education system was necessary to provide educational excellence. More importantly, all of the parties arguments for achieving equality of opportunity, moved away from an education system based on selection. By contrast, DUP argued that because children had different abilities, an education system based on academic selection proved to be the best way to offer the educational route that suited pupils' individual abilities. Equality of opportunity according to the DUP was to make sure that there was no one who found one or the other, academically or practically, to be the better way. Other political parties like the Alliance party and the UUP took a more open approach to the issue. Although the parties agreed in that flaws existed in the selective education system, both of them were open to the fact that there were different ways to address the situation, and did not rule any option out.

⁹³ Robinson, K. (17.10.00): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

Given these different opinion on the matter, how then did it go when the Committee for Education was to produce its own report the: *Review of Post-Primary Education in Northern Ireland*? The Assembly Committee had representatives from DUP, UUP, PUP, Sinn Fein, SDLP, Alliance Party and the NIWC: did the members manage to include all of these different views into one joint statement? What was the result of the report?

Committee for Education's main principles for education

According to the Chairman of the Education Committee and UUP member Danny Kennedy, the purpose of the Committee's report was to "(...) crystallise the views of the Committee and to enable us to carry out an informed assessment of the recommendations of the review body (...)".⁹⁴ The report was based on evidence on a number of key witnesses, among others: the education and library boards; teacher and head teacher organisations; higher and further education organisations; employer organisations; and academics who had carried out relevant research on the issue. Overall, the research of the Committee recognised that in the past, only a small minority of pupils were expected to achieve examination. However, the demand of the system had changed, whereas now, a majority of pupils was expected to achieve examination qualifications. Therefore, the Committee had reached the conclusion that substantial reforms in their education system were required.⁹⁵

Based on the results of the research, Danny Kennedy argued on behalf of the Committee that there were especially three key issues that needed to be addressed: Firstly, the school curriculum and the opportunities and experiences available to the pupils. Secondly, considerations if the current arrangements for organising schools were appropriate for future demands, or whether structural changes were required. And thirdly, if changes to the transfer procedure were needed, for which the pupils was transferred through to post-primary schools.⁹⁶ This report did not make any recommendations for any structural changes to the post-primary education system. However, the Committee did propose what it found to be necessary guiding principles to ensure the outcome wanted for a future post-primary education system:

⁹⁴ Kennedy, D. (15.10.01): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

⁹⁵ Kennedy, D. (15.10.01): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

⁹⁶ Kennedy, D. (15.10.01): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

The social, economic and education objectives of any future system must enable pupils to develop their potential; enable them to exercise ownership and choice; provide appropriate and varied opportunities to ensure the development of a well educated, skilled and employable workforce for the Northern Ireland economy; place greater emphasis on innovation, creativity and entrepreneurial skills; enable every individual to identify his or her aptitudes, interests and vocation in life; and improve the process for identifying and addressing elements of deprivation that may impact on a pupil's performance.⁹⁷

The Committee for Education argued that at the time, those objectives was not met in a good enough way, and found that change to the post-primary education system was needed. The members of the Committee also argued that they did not find the transfer test appropriate anymore, nor serving its purpose. Therefore, the Committee recommended that the 11-plus was to cease to be administered in the near future.⁹⁸ Until there had been found a feasible alternative for the transfer, the Committee wanted an interim measure to replace the 11-plus. However, while it recommended that the 11-plus was to cease to be administered, the Committee was not opposed to testing using alternative methods.⁹⁹ The Committee also suggested that part of any new transfer procedure should include a pupil's transfer profile. This transfer profile was to provide a fuller and better image of the pupils achievements during primary school years, and therefore the Committee recommended that the transfer profile should include the four elements: current pupil performance; other aspects of pupil development; parental wishes, and; teachers guidance.¹⁰⁰

The Committee for Education's report was an important contribution to the debate in that it recognised the need for change. However, it did not make any suggestions to what kind of changes that should be made. Although the members of the Committee recommended that the 11-plus should cease as soon as possible, this did not mean that they opposed transfer based on selection. The reasons for why the Committee did not recommend any structural changes according to the Chairman Danny Kennedy was because "(...) it was not the Committee's intention or wish to either pre-empt the report of the Burns review or to do its job".¹⁰¹ However, as we have seen above, it did exist very different political views on the matter, and it seems likely that this might explain why the members of the Committee did not reach any agreement in a joint statement on structural changes.

⁹⁷ Kennedy, D. (15.10.01): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

⁹⁸ Kennedy, D. (15.10.01): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

⁹⁹ Kennedy, D. (15.10.01): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

¹⁰⁰ Kennedy, D. (15.10.01): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

¹⁰¹ Kennedy, D. (15.10.01): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

As we have seen so far, two strands of opinions had started to emerge in the debate on the selective education system. Ultimately, it had become a matter of whether or not the political parties believed in a system based on academic selection. Some of the political parties positioned themselves on either of these strands and some of the political parties had chosen to take a more open approach to the issue, and had positioned themselves in the middle. Given that the Committee for Education did not come with any proposals to what kinds of changes was needed, the report by the Committee could serve as an example of that the political parties had started to position themselves between these two strands of opinions, and were unable to reach a joint statement on the issue. So, how did it go when the political parties were to discuss what needed to change?

What kind of change was needed?

Following the publication of the research findings by Professors Gallagher and Smith, the Minister of Education Martin McGuinness had launched a public debate on the education system. The time had come to discuss what kind of changes was needed. Therefore, together with the Education Committee, the Minister for Education also established an independent Post-Primary Review Body.¹⁰² The Review Body was to consider research and other relevant information to what kind of impact the education system based on academic selection had on pupils, parents, teachers, the economy and the society.¹⁰³ Thereafter, the Review Body were to perform their own consultation period, which was conducted to consider whether the arrangements for post-primary education met the need of pupils and parents, as well as the modern society. What was different with the Review Body's work, compared to the research study by Professors Gallagher and Smith, was that the Review Body were to come up with more detailed proposals and recommendations for future post-primary education arrangements. Before the Review Body published its results in October 2001, the political parties in the Assembly discussed what was needed to change. As we will see next, when it was time to discuss what kind of changes that was needed, some of the parties became more involved than they had to begin with and some of the parties got more detailed in their

¹⁰² McGuinness, M. (15.05.01): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

¹⁰³ McGuinness, M. (25.06.01): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

opinions, others had made their opinion clear the first time, and did not participate in this round of discussions.

Views on the 11-plus and Academic Selection

Central to the discussion on the education system was the issue of underachievement and pupils' class and economical status. Differences between the two strands of opinions on the 11-plus and academic selection occurred because the political parties had different views on underachievement: Whether it appeared as a cause of the 11-plus and academic selection, or if something else caused it. Also, the political parties had different views on whether or not the selection process was based on pupils' class and economical status.

As mentioned above, the view of the Minister of Education Martin McGuinness and his party Sinn Fein was that the selective education system should be abolished. Now however, the party's opinion got more detailed as to why the party had that view. According to Sinn Fein, the issue was not about the 11-plus, it was about academic selection. The party argued that the 11-plus and academic selection was inextricably linked. The only reason Northern Ireland had the 11-plus, was because the education system was based on academic selection. Academic selection meant rejection for the socially disadvantaged, and the time had come to look beyond the symptom, which according to Sinn Fein was the 11-plus. The core of the problem, however, was academic selection.¹⁰⁴ The party claimed that the 11-plus had created a two-tier education system, and failed in preparing the children to become citizens of the society.¹⁰⁵ Given the change in labour demand, and that the fact that the workforce now needed a better overall education, Sinn Fein argued that the selective system was based on assumptions that no longer applied. Sinn Fein also shared the SDLP's view on the introduction of an 11-18 all-ability education system, on the grounds that it would offer a better recognition of the full diversity of children's needs and talents.¹⁰⁶

The Social and Democratic Labour Party (SDLP) argued that it had been calling for the end of the 11-plus since its inception in 1969, and that this test should not be substituted with another form of selecting. As one SDLP member of the Assembly put it: "Members should read my

¹⁰⁴ McGuinness, M. (23.04.02): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

¹⁰⁵ Kelly, J. (15.10.01): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

¹⁰⁶ McHugh, J. (15.10.01): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

lips: the 11-plus must go. That is, has been and will remain SDLP's policy (...)"¹⁰⁷ According to SDLP, a non-selective system should be just that, and feared for the replication of the initial problem if the Assembly was to substitute the 11-plus with another form of selecting. What is interesting with the way both Sinn Fein and the SDLP put their case is how the parties viewed the relationship between the 11-plus and academic selection. Both parties argued for the introduction of a non-selective system, which ultimately for them, also meant the end of the 11-plus. By simply removing the 11-plus and replacing it with another means of testing, initial problem would only be replicated.¹⁰⁸ Therefore, according to Sinn Fein and the SDLP a natural consequence of removing the 11-plus, was removing academic selection as well.

While still advocating for the possibilities that existed within the system of integrated education, the Alliance party's view on selection got more detailed. As mentioned above, Alliance party claimed that in any case, selection could be inevitable. However, that view seemed to have changed, because now the Alliance party viewed the 11-plus as being an inequitable system, that divided children into winners and losers, and caused too much trauma and tension for pupils at an unnecessarily early age. The party argued that a qualifying entrance test, such as the 11-plus, should not be the method of transfer. Alliance party also argued that any new system should be flexible enough to allow all children at a responsible age to make their own decisions regarding their educational future. Closer attention should according to the Alliance party be paid to the integrated sector, for which the party found to be offering a possible alternative to a future education system.¹⁰⁹

The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC) still believed that a fully comprehensive and integrated education system would provide the best way forward, however, now the party also argued that underachievement was caused by the selective education system. Therefore, according to the NIWC, the only way to tackle underachievement was through an overhaul of the education system, and its structure.¹¹⁰ The NIWC argued that there was a need to introduce a fully inclusive, comprehensive and integrated education system. Also, the party claimed that the 11-plus did not acknowledge that children had multiple intelligences, and

¹⁰⁷ Fee, J. (15.10.01): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

¹⁰⁸ O'Neill, E. (15.10.01): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

¹⁰⁹ Bell, E. (19.11.01): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

¹¹⁰ McWilliams, M. (15.10.01): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

that it was more based on memory than knowledge. Ultimately, the NIWC wanted to see the end of both academic selection and the 11-plus.¹¹¹

As for the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), there seemed to have occurred differences of opinions within the party on the issue of the selective system and the 11-plus. The UUP Member of the Assembly, Roy Beggs, welcomed the abolishment of the 11-plus, which he accused of being an artificial test, and which he wanted gone as soon as possible. The findings from Professors Gallagher and Smith research had implied that the high number of low-achieving schools could be caused as by the selective system. However, according to Beggs there was no evidence that it was the structure of the education system, and the fact that it was based on selection that caused the problems with underachievement.¹¹² According to him, the UUP did not support the introduction of a comprehensive system. Before any changes to the education system had been introduced, Beggs argued that there was a need to address the core problem of what actually caused underachievement.¹¹³ Ken Robinson, another UUP Member, found that the suggestion of pupils having a transfer profile, which incorporated pupils' performances over a period of time, together with parental wishes and a professional teachers guidance, would offer a more acceptable way forward.¹¹⁴ Robinson also argued that if the Assembly chose to introduce a more flexible education system, it could be a better measure to address the problem of underachievement.¹¹⁵ By opposite, Tom Hamilton, a UUP Member of the Assembly, argued that it was important to have some form of standardised testing. According to him, there should be *more* methods of testing. Hamilton argued that in addition to the standardised tests, there should be continuous assessment introduced. Hamilton claimed that because the one would back up the other, the result would be a more reliable way of testing the children's academic abilities.¹¹⁶

Previously, the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP) argued that the selective education system was flawed, and now the party got more detailed in how it wanted to address the issue. However, the PUP still treated underachievement as a factor to be addressed on its own, and did not include it in the party's arguments on academic selection and the 11-plus. The PUP

¹¹¹ McWilliams, M. (15.10.01): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

¹¹² Beggs, R. (15.10.01): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

¹¹³ Beggs, R. (15.10.01): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

¹¹⁴ Robinson, K. (15.10.01): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

¹¹⁵ Robinson, K. (15.10.01): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

¹¹⁶ Hamilton, T. (15.10.01): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

argued that it was not necessarily the selective education system that caused the problem of underachievement just because it revealed itself during post-primary years. According to PUP, the cause of underachievement could be found much earlier in the process. It was too late when pupils had reached post-primary education, therefore the necessary means to tackle the issue of underachievement had to be addressed before pupils entered primary school.¹¹⁷ Still, the PUP did not support academic selection, because it was an elitist form of education based on pupils' social and economical status. According to PUP, one of the key issues that needed to be addressed was how to produce choice for the pupils. That choice could come from the establishment of centres of excellence, which enabled pupils to move around campus because it was good for different subjects of their interests, PUP argued.¹¹⁸

While some of the political parties like Sinn Fein, Alliance party, NIWC and PUP had become more detailed in their opinions, other parties like SDLP continued in the same direction as the party did at the start of the debate. Others, like the UUP had become more involved, but showed that there existed differences of opinions within the party itself. As for the DUP, the party did not participate in this round of discussion in the Assembly. Earlier, the DUP had made the party's opinion clear: There had to be some sort of selection in the education system if it was to offer equality of opportunity. How then, did the DUP and the rest of the political parties in the Assembly respond to the proposal and recommendations of the Review Body? As we will see next, after the proposals have been presented, the DUP became more involved than what the party had been previously.

Review body on post-primary education

The independent Review Body which the Minister of Education together with the Committee for Education established, published its results in the *Report of the Review Body on Post-Primary Education* otherwise known as; *Burns Report* or *Burns Proposals* on the 24th of October 2001. Gerry Burns chaired the Review Body and the members came from a wide range of educational, professional and business backgrounds. Also, a panel of educational advisers were appointed to assist the Review Body, among others Professor Tony Gallagher

¹¹⁷ Hutchinson, B. (15.10.01): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

¹¹⁸ Hutchinson, B. (15.10.01): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

was involved in this panel.¹¹⁹ The Review Body's terms of references were similar to the ones of Professors Tony Gallagher and Alan Smith. However, the Review Body was also required to address specific issues related to the structure of post-primary education, and the transfer arrangements from primary to post-primary schools; the 11-plus.¹²⁰

Burns Proposals

One of the major issues that came up during the Review Body's consultation period, was the 11-plus. Although a minority found the 11-plus to be an appropriate means of testing pupils' academic abilities, the majority opposed the 11-plus being used and how it influenced the pupils future education opportunities. Therefore, the Review Body found that:

We have been left in no doubt that the Tests are socially divisive, damage self-esteem, place unreasonable pressures on pupils, primary teachers and parents, disrupt teaching and learning at an important stage in the primary curriculum and reinforce inequality of opportunity. There is evidence also that the Tests are not an appropriate or accurate method of assessing the individual abilities and aptitudes of young people, or of their potential to benefit from an academic education.¹²¹

Accordingly, the Review Body recommended that the 11-plus should end as soon as possible. The Review Body argued that the end of 11-plus would remove the need of extra coaching for the test, which had been proved to be a disadvantage for some of the pupils. Also, it would end the distortion of the curriculum in the upper stages of primary school.¹²² Although the Review Body had found that the appropriate age of transfer from primary to post-primary school was to happen at the age of eleven, no test should be used as a method of selecting in the transfer arrangements:

(...) we are convinced that there is no place in this process for a special test or assessment process which would be designed primarily to segregate children at such an early age on the basis of a narrow and perhaps premature assessment of their attainment needs and potential.¹²³

¹¹⁹ Northern Ireland Department of Education (24.10.01: Appendix A): "Education for the 21st Century: Report by the Post-Primary Review Body". www.deni.gov.uk (read 18.11.12)

¹²⁰ Northern Ireland Department of Education (24.10.01:46): "Education for the 21st Century: Report by the Post-Primary Review Body". www.deni.gov.uk (read 18.11.12)

¹²¹ Northern Ireland Department of Education (24.10.01:122): "Education for the 21st Century: Report by the Post-Primary Review Body". www.deni.gov.uk (read 18.11.12)

¹²² Northern Ireland Department of Education (24.10.01:125): "Education for the 21st Century: Report by the Post-Primary Review Body". www.deni.gov.uk (read 18.11.12)

¹²³ Northern Ireland Department of Education (24.10.01:124): "Education for the 21st Century: Report by the Post-Primary Review Body". www.deni.gov.uk (read 18.11.12)

Instead of having a test as a means of transfer procedure, the Review Body recommended that there should be an annual report on each pupil, *a pupil's profile*, which should be based on meetings between parents and teachers, where this report were to consider the pupil's progress, needs and specific actions needed to raise standards.¹²⁴ However, this pupils profile should not be available for post-primary schools until transfer arrangements had taken place. Before transfer had taken place, it was to help parents to make an informed decision on the child's abilities and potential. Once the pupil had been accepted to a post-primary school, the receiving school would get the pupil's profile, and use it as part of their teaching preparations.¹²⁵

What did the Burns Report propose for the transfer arrangements, in the absence of the 11-plus? According to the Review Body, they wanted to establish a collegiate structure in post-primary education. This meant a non-selective system based on open enrolment, where post-primary schools would become specialist centres, and each school would have one area of expertise. To achieve a high quality education for the pupils, this also entailed a co-operate partnership between post-primary schools. Through the use of the Pupil Profile, the children, parents and teachers would have the information to choose a collegiate would offer the best pathway according to the child's ability. Therefore, the Review Body argued that *parental and pupil preferences* should be a statutory priority for admission. Other admission criteria involved: if pupils had a *sibling* at the school or if the pupil was the *eldest child* in the family; if the pupil was a *child of the staff* in the particular school; in cases of *individual circumstances* that required special considerations; and *the nearest suitable school* of the pupil.¹²⁶ The Review Body's report also suggested that at the earliest, the 11-plus could end in 2002. However, depending of the outcome on the consultation period that was to follow the publication of the Review Body's report, if the proposals reached political agreement, the Review Body estimated an 8-year timeframe for all of their proposals to be implemented.¹²⁷

¹²⁴ Northern Ireland Department of Education (24.10.01:125-126): "Education for the 21st Century: Report by the Post-Primary Review Body". www.deni.gov.uk (read 18.11.12)

¹²⁵ Northern Ireland Department of Education (24.10.01:126): "Education for the 21st Century: Report by the Post-Primary Review Body". www.deni.gov.uk (read 18.11.12)

¹²⁶ Northern Ireland Department of Education (24.10.01:130): "Education for the 21st Century: Report by the Post-Primary Review Body". www.deni.gov.uk (read 18.11.12)

¹²⁷ Northern Ireland Department of Education (24.10.01: Appendix 1): "Education for the 21st Century: Report by the Post-Primary Review Body". www.deni.gov.uk (read 18.11.12)

Starting in October 2001, the consultation period that followed the publication of the Review Body's proposals was the largest ever undertaking on an educational issue.¹²⁸ Not only did it involve the political parties, but also, the entire community was a part of the process. The consultation lasted until the 28th of June 2002. Ultimately, the Review Body's proposals included the end of the 11-plus and academic selection. However, the proposals only offered one way forward, and were not set in stone, which meant that other alternatives were up for discussion. Change was necessary, and according to the Minister of Education, Martin McGuinness the research study by Professors Tony Gallagher and Alan Smith, as well as the report by the Committee for Education, had agreed to this. McGuinness urged that the debate should not be about *whether or not change was necessary*, but about *what kind of change* that was needed.¹²⁹ As we will see next, how the political parties positioned themselves according to their views on academic selection and the 11-plus, remained an important factor in how the parties responded to the proposals.

Consultation: Responses to Burns proposals

Sinn Fein welcomed the Review Body's proposals, and supported it in ending the education system based on academic selection. According to the party, to simply remove the 11-plus could not happen unless another process of selection was put in its place, or academic selection was abolished.¹³⁰ Sinn Fein argued that the Review Body's proposals had made it clear that replacing the 11-plus with another test would not remove the weaknesses of their education system. By arguing that educational underachievement had strong links to poverty, unemployment and health issues, which costs had not yet been calculated, Sinn Fein drew the line between education and social issues. Sinn Fein questioned what would cost more: rebuilding their education system, or future expenses on remedial programmes?¹³¹

Sinn Fein and the Minister of Education referred to what they argued to be the three great myths about the education system in Northern Ireland.¹³² The first myth was that Northern

¹²⁸ McGuinness, M. (19.11.01): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

¹²⁹ McGuinness, M. (19.11.01): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

¹³⁰ McGuinness, M. (19.11.01): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

¹³¹ Nelis, M. (19.11.01): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

¹³² Nelis, M. (19.11.01): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

Ireland had a world-class education system, and the best in Great Britain.¹³³ However, although pupils achieved great results, Northern Ireland still had the highest number of pupils with low qualifications. Sinn Fein claimed that top performers were also found in other countries of the world that did not have a selective system. Therefore, it was time to take on a broader view, and not only compare themselves with the countries within Great Britain. The second myth the Minister and his party referred to, was that academic selection allegedly provided a ladder to success for socially disadvantaged pupils.¹³⁴ According to the Minister, given that only 8% of low-income children attended grammar school, it had to be a *slippery ladder*. Also, those of better social classes were three times more likely to achieve a grade A, than those from lower social classes. The figures did not support the argument of the selective system provided a ladder to success, Sinn Fein argued. The third and final myth according to Sinn Fein and the Minister was that grammar school education was necessary to enter higher and further education.¹³⁵ At the time 35% of pupils attended grammar schools, Sinn Fein argued yet 44% participated in higher education. Therefore, according to Sinn Fein and the Minister of Education, this indicated that it was possible to enter higher education without the help of grammar schools.

The SDLP welcomed the proposals, because it put the child at the centre of its thinking. In general, the party found the report by the Review Body to be based on principles and objectives that reflected its intention to provide a high-quality education system. According to the SDLP, the proposals offered a positive step forward by validating that the selective system had been inflexible, fragmented, and that it lacked equality of opportunity. Also, the SDLP argued that the report acknowledged the untold damage the 11-plus had caused in previous years.¹³⁶ SDLP claimed that the 11-plus had assessed intelligence in a narrow and academic way, which ultimately led to a limited way of viewing the children's actual abilities. Because, as the report had stated, the idea of intelligence was now looked upon as having several facets, the idea of it being measured the way it was by the 11-plus, was no longer valid.¹³⁷ Therefore, the SDLP questioned if the introduction of a pupil profile would be able to measure those multiple intelligences, and accordingly there had to be more research on that before SDLP could support those profiles. The SDLP had a particular concern to retain the

¹³³ McGuinness, M. (19.11.01): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

¹³⁴ McGuinness, M. (19.11.01): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

¹³⁵ McGuinness, M. (19.11.01): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

¹³⁶ Lewsley, P. (19.11.01): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

¹³⁷ Gallagher, T. (19.11.01): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

division of children at the age of eleven. Also, the party was concerned for that the proposals for admission criteria would still be based on social and economical backgrounds, rather than the pupil's individual preference and potential. Therefore, the SDLP suggested that an introduction of an education system where 11-18 year olds were taught together, and which according to the party, would still maintain the good standards.¹³⁸ As to the collegiate system, the SDLP found some aspects of it to be positive, and supported a greater co-operation between schools.¹³⁹

The Alliance party welcomed the Review Body's proposals as a basis for studying alternative options, but the party had some concerns of implementing it in its entirety.¹⁴⁰ As mentioned above, Alliance party did not support the concept of the 11-plus, and therefore found the proposal of ending it, to be a positive step forward. The party also supported the proposal of retaining the *transition* age from primary to post-primary school at the age of eleven. However, the Alliance party still believed that the best time for pupils to make *decisions* regarding their education route should be at the age of fourteen, and not eleven. Hence, the introduction of a Pupil Profile was according to the Alliance party an extension of good practice, in that it provided a continuing assessment of pupils' skills and abilities. At the same time the Alliance party emphasized that it was a tool to be used by pupils, parents and teachers when *they* were to select the most suitable post-primary school, and not as part of entrance criteria for post-primary schools. Therefore, the Alliance party supported the view of the Review Body that the Pupil Profile should be available to the post-primary school, only after the transfer arrangements was in place.¹⁴¹

The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC) recognised the values of excellence, equality, inclusion and diversity on which the party argued Burns Proposals were based upon. Selection in itself at eleven was inappropriate according to NIWC. The party believed that the education system had to change, and welcomed the proposal of guided parent and pupils choice at a more appropriate age. The NIWC also argued that it was time for the schools to respond to the proposal of co-operation, however, the party had some problems with the

¹³⁸ Lewsley, P. (19.11.01): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

¹³⁹ Gallagher, T. (19.11.01): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

¹⁴⁰ Bell, E. (19.11.01): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

¹⁴¹ Bell, E. (20.06.02): "Vision for Education". www.allianceparty.org (read 21.04.13)

establishment of a collegiate structure. Therefore, more details on how that would work in practice were needed, before the NIWC could make a decision.¹⁴²

Although SDLP and the Alliance party had some concerns as to the full implementation of the Review Body's proposals, both parties as well as Sinn Fein and NIWC supported the end of 11-plus and academic selection. Compared to the previous ambiguities found in the party's view on the issue, the UUP seemed to have gathered the party's opinion on academic selection and the 11-plus. The UUP had great concerns regarding the proposal, and could not support it.

An interesting aspect that emerged as part of the way UUP argued, was the party's perception of the relationship between the 11-plus and academic selection, compared to the view of Sinn Fein and the SDLP. Although the UUP admitted that the 11-plus was flawed, the party could not accept the proposal to end academic selection.¹⁴³ According to UUP, ending academic selection meant the introduction of a comprehensive system, and the party did not believe that this type of education structure had enough support. Neither did the UUP believe, or find any evidence of that kind of structure improving standards overall. As Dr Esmond Birnie, a UUP Member of the Assembly argued: "Excellence is best promoted by having a variety of specialist schools rather than – dare I say it? – bog – standard comprehensives".¹⁴⁴ The UUP supported the introduction of a pupil profile as an alternative to the 11-plus. However, the party only supported it if it was made available to the receiving post-primary school, before transfer had taken place. The UUP claimed that there would be no help in creating a pupil profile if it could not be a part of the selection process to find the best suitable school for the pupil. Also, the UUP supported the view that there should be better co-operations between the schools. However, the problem was the proposal of the collegiate. According to UUP, the collegiate structure would not work in practice, because it would be too bureaucratic.¹⁴⁵

The PUP went the opposite way compared to the rest of the unionist parties, and criticised the Burns Proposals for not taking a stand: "(...) it is messing about with the idea of collegiates, while trying to keep those in grammar schools happy".¹⁴⁶ According to PUP, the proposals did not go far enough, where the party advocated the full introduction of a comprehensive

¹⁴² McWilliams, M. (23.04.02): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

¹⁴³ Kennedy, D. (23.04.02): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

¹⁴⁴ Dr Birnie, E. (23.04.02): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

¹⁴⁵ Kennedy, D. (23.04.02): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

¹⁴⁶ Hutchinson, B. (23.04.02): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

system. The PUP welcomed the abolishment of the 11-plus, and argued that when it was first introduced, no empirical evidence suggested that a child should be tested at the age of eleven. The party claimed that the education system based on academic selection promoted social injustice, and a particular concern for the PUP was, as mentioned above, the protestant areas:

(...) are people telling me that there is something genetically wrong with Protestants because they cannot achieve? (...) Given the opportunity, those people could achieve as much as everyone else. However, they are not given that opportunity, and we must address that issue.¹⁴⁷

The PUP encouraged all the unionist parties to take a look at the Burns Proposals from a Unionist point of view, and argued that it was about time to start addressing the problems of getting pupils in the unionist constituency to start achieving.¹⁴⁸ However, that encouragement was not accepted by the DUP, and as we will see in the following, compared to how the party had engaged in the debate previously, the DUP reacted quite strongly compared to the other political parties.

According to DUP, Burns Proposal was a recipe for disaster, and “(...) in the hands of the Minister of Education it is a dangerous weapon”.¹⁴⁹ Apparently, the DUP had problems not only with the proposals from the Review Body, but also with the Minister. The DUP accused the Minister, and argued that what Martin McGuinness was doing was to create an education system that would produce equality of *outcome* rather than equality of *opportunity*.¹⁵⁰ Sammy Wilson, a DUP member of the Assembly argued that the Minister intended to:

(...) destroy the existing system as systematically and as totally as he and his compatriots destroyed the centre of Londonderry when he was the commander of the IRA there. The Burns Report has provided him with educational Semtex with which he intends to destroy the system.¹⁵¹

On the matter of the proposals, the DUP argued that it lacked ideological courage. What the proposal really wanted according the DUP, was to introduce a comprehensive system. But instead of arguing for it, the Review Body tried to introduce it through the back door. The educational pathway chosen by the pupils at post-primary level should not be based on social and economical factors according to the DUP. It should be based on ability. Yet, the

¹⁴⁷ Hutchinson, B. (23.04.02): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

¹⁴⁸ Hutchinson, B. (23.04.02): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

¹⁴⁹ Wilson, S. (23.04.02): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

¹⁵⁰ Weir, P. (23.04.02): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

¹⁵¹ Wilson, S. (23.04.02): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

education system the Review Body wanted to introduce did not move away from selection. According to DUP, it moved away from selection based on *ability*, and to selection based on pupils' *social standings*. Ultimately, the Review Body proposed a system of selection based on the ability to pay.¹⁵²

According to the DUP, because children had different abilities they needed to have different routes open to them. Therefore, the party found it ironic that the Review body argued that children had different abilities, and still wanted to fit them all into one school that was to cater for all of those abilities. The DUP also had difficulties with the introduction of pupil profile; because there was no evidence that the people it was supposed to advantage would have the advantage. The socially advantaged would according to DUP most likely get more advantage of this type of system. Also, the party argued that objective testing left the teachers less open to favouritism, which a Pupil Profile would. The DUP claimed that the recommendations from the Review Body meant “less suitable opportunity, reduced access to the schools most suited to children’s needs and reduced opportunity for all sorts of excellence for most, if not all, children”.¹⁵³ The party agreed in that there was a need for a vision however; the one proposed by the Review Body was a poor alternative. Therefore, given that the education system did not provide adequately for the non-academic pupils, that was were the DUP argued the change was needed. The political parties needed to direct their energy in the direction of those pupils whose talents did not revolve around academic studies, but vocational and technical studies.¹⁵⁴

To sum up; while none of the political parties supported the Review Body’s proposals in its entirety, there were varying degrees of support for some of the recommendations. Sinn Fein, SDLP, Alliance and NIWC all supported the proposal of ending the 11-plus, and proposed a comprehensive system instead of academic selection as an educational structure. PUP supported that view, and therefore distinguished themselves from the rest of the unionist parties. The UUP argued that the 11-plus was flawed, but held that there had to be some means of selection, and suggested that if the pupil profile was made available to the post-primary schools ahead of transfer, it could serve as a replacement to the 11-plus. Thus, in opposite to the view of Sinn Fein, that looked at the 11-plus as the symptom of the problem,

¹⁵² Weir, P. (23.04.02): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

¹⁵³ Morrow, M. (23.04.02): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

¹⁵⁴ Robinson, M. (23.04.02): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

the UUP found selection to be necessary. The UUP argued that it was possible to replace the 11-plus with a fairer way of testing, which would offer the best way forward. The DUP seemed to have a problem not only with the Review Body's proposals, but with the Minister as well. Still, as children had different abilities the DUP argued that it was sensible to have different routes open to them. The party believed that academic selection provided the best measure, because it was not based on the pupil's social background. The problem, according to the DUP was in the non-academic sector, and that was recommended to direct the energy, and improve standards.

On the 8th of October 2002, the Minister of Education, Martin McGuinness published the report of the consultation and announced his decision on the future of the education system. Based on the results of the report, McGuinness had found an overall consensus on the proposal of ending the 11-plus. What was the main reason for the Minister's decision?

The End of the 11-plus?

The consultation process ended on the 28th of June 2002, and after that the Minister of Education, Martin McGuinness, and his department analysed the submissions, and summarised the responses in consultation report published on the 8th of October 2002: *Review of Post-Primary Education. Report on Responses to Consultation*.¹⁵⁵ The Minister described the debate as having been "lively, sometimes passionate, but generally mature, well informed and constructive".¹⁵⁶ The Minister also described the consultation process to be the largest consultation ever happening in the education sector, and stated that there had been an overwhelming level of response from schools, the public, organisations and political parties. On the day of publishing the report, the Minister also announced his decision on the next stage of the review on post-primary education, which was to abolish the 11-plus:

Although the transfer test must be held next year for practical reasons, I make it clear to the Assembly and to the people that it has no place in the future of education here. I am firmly resolved that it shall be abolished.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁵ Northern Ireland Department of Education (08.10.02): "Review of Post-Primary Education. Responses to Consultation". www.deni.gov.uk (read 12.12.12)

¹⁵⁶ McGuinness, M. (08.10.02): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

¹⁵⁷ McGuinness, M. (08.10.02): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

According to the Minister almost all of the responses to the consultation period had supported the abolition of the 11-plus, and those who wished to see the continuation of academic selection had also accepted that the 11-plus was flawed and needed to change. The Minister claimed that as long as certain conditions were met, the predominant view from the responses was that academic selection should end.¹⁵⁸ The Minister argued that most of those who worked closely in the education sector, like primary and secondary schools, as well as the churches, favoured the end of academic selection.¹⁵⁹ McGuinness also found that the consensus demonstrated by the report provided a stable platform from which the politicians could move the review of post-primary education forward.

There were those who opposed the proposal, and would see the continuation of academic selection, particularly those found in the grammar school sector, but also the majority of the household response forms.¹⁶⁰ However, the Minister explained that although 64% of the household response forms favoured academic selection, analysis showed that the response forms included a disproportionate numbers of those with children currently or previously at grammar schools. Therefore, although these opinions remained just as important as anyone else, the Minister argued that the household response forms could not be construed as representing the view of the public.¹⁶¹

The next step forward, the Minister argued, was to consider the results from the consultation period closely, in order to develop proposals for the new post-primary arrangements. The Minister called for all parties to engage with him in this process, including the Committee for Education. Martin McGuinness stated that he would announce his proposals for the next stages of the review in December the same year. Until any new arrangements was in place, the current arrangements, which included the 11-plus, would remain in place. To avoid causing a chaotic situation, the Minister claimed that when change came, it would be implemented in a planned and considered manner.¹⁶² However, although some of the political

¹⁵⁸ McGuinness, M. (08.10.02): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

¹⁵⁹ Those in favour: the five education and library boards, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education, the Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment, the five main teachers unions, the Catholic Heads Association, the SDLP, Sinn Fein, the Alliance Party, the PUP, the NIWC and the Worker's Party etc.

¹⁶⁰ Opposition came from: the Governing Bodies Association, the Secondary Heads Association, 1/3 of schools, 2/3 of the household response form, rural interest groups, the UUP, the DUP, four district councils, the Institute of Directors, and the majority of 16 training organisations.

¹⁶¹ McGuinness, M. (08.10.02): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

¹⁶² McGuinness, M. (08.10.02): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

parties supported the Minister, not all of the political parties agreed in the way the Minister had concluded. As we will see next, while some political parties supported the Minister, those who opposed the decision to end the 11-plus did so because they disagreed in how the Minister had analysed the results of the consultation process.

The SDLP welcomed the results of the consultation period. According to the SDLP, the consultation report recognised many of the party's long held views on educational matters. It particularly pleased the SDLP that the Minister announced the end of the 11-plus. The party also celebrated the strong support for the introduction of the pupil profiles, and that the report rejected the proposal of collegiate, and instead wanted to replace it with the development of co-operation among all secondary schools.¹⁶³ The Alliance party agreed with the SDLP, and described the results of the consultation process as a *milestone* on the way to creating a better education system. The Alliance party welcomed the announcement of ending the 11-plus, and would engage in the further debate on creating new arrangements.¹⁶⁴ The NIWC argued that the results of the report, and the announcement made by the Minister, served as examples from the Assembly that consensus on the matter was starting to emerge.¹⁶⁵ The PUP also welcomed the announcement of the Minister, and argued that it was one of the most important decisions being made by the Assembly. The party believed that it would have a major impact on the future for working-class children.¹⁶⁶ However, not all supported that view.

The DUP argued that the Minister had not taken into the account that there was a solid majority who did favour the continuation of academic selection. According to them, the fact that the majority of households and the teachers opposed the ending of academic selection sent a clear message that there was no consensus on the issue of ending it. Also, the DUP argued that more people favoured academic selection, than the ones who opposed the 11-plus. Therefore, the party questioned the Minister's action in ending the 11-plus, and not wanting to keep academic selection, when there were less support for abolishing the 11-plus, than it was for keeping academic selection.¹⁶⁷ The UUP agreed with the DUP in that the Minister had ignored the voice of the people, and stated that: "(...) I have had unfortunate experience

¹⁶³ Gallagher, T. (08.10.02): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

¹⁶⁴ Bell, E. (08.10.02): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

¹⁶⁵ McWilliams, M. (08.10.02): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

¹⁶⁶ Hutchinson, B. (08.10.02): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

¹⁶⁷ Wilson, S. (08.10.02): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

of welcoming reports, only to find that the devil was in the detail”.¹⁶⁸ Given the party’s previous ambiguity on the matter of the 11-plus and academic selection, this could serve as an example of the party finally having decided to favour the 11-plus being a part of the education system.

On the 14th of October 2002, six days after the Minister of Education announced the end of the 11-plus, the Assembly and the Executive was suspended due to the lack of decommissioning of the paramilitary organisations. Therefore, in the following period, the Minister’s education planned consultation period on what was to replace the 11-plus, and what the new arrangement of post-primary education was to be, could not be discussed among politicians in Northern Ireland. The future of the 11-plus and the review of post-primary education laid in the hands of the so-called Appointed Ministers, as Northern Ireland came under Direct Rule from Westminster. Although the scene of the debate on Northern Ireland’s education system shifted, the debate continued. As we will see, based on the emerging consensus in the report on the consultation period, the new Minister of Education Jane Kennedy chose to follow the actions set out by Martin McGuinness, and announced that the 11-plus would be abolished as soon as practicable possible. The next step according to Kennedy was to find alternative arrangements.

The will of the people?

Given the controversy of the selective education system, it was expressed by members of the House of Commons that this should have been a decision made by the people of Northern Ireland, and not by politicians in Westminster. However, the Ministers with the responsibility for Education argued that this debate, and the call for ending the 11-plus originated from the people of Northern Ireland: Westminster only carried it forward.¹⁶⁹ Central to the debate in the period of Direct Rule, stretching from October 2002 to May 2007 was the continuous disagreement of whether or not the actions set out by the previous Education Minister was in fact “the will of the people”. Other issues that emerged following the decision of the new Education Minister, and member of the Labour party, Jane Kennedy, were how ending the 11-plus would affect the selective system, and ultimately what kind of influence this would have

¹⁶⁸ Robinson, K. (08.10.02): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

¹⁶⁹ Gardiner, B. (30.06.04): Parliamentary debate. Vol. 423 cc265-7. www.publications.parliament.uk

on grammar schools. When Kennedy established a Post-Primary working group to find new post-primary arrangements, there were concerns of how the members of this working group viewed academic selection. As mentioned in chapter one, the debate on the selective education system was new to neither the Labour party nor the Conservative party. After the announcement of the new arrangements, the different views between the two parties started to rise once again. As we shall see next, the new Education Minister's decision to continue in the direction set out by her predecessor Martin McGuinness, was met by opposition from the UUP, the DUP, and the Conservative party.

Administrative vandalism?

The new Education Minister, Jane Kennedy stated that her aim was to develop a modern and fair education system which not only addressed the weaknesses of the selective education system, but that also enabled all children to fulfil their full potential.¹⁷⁰ However, the reasoning she had based her opinion on was not well received by the opposition: Martin McGuinness announcement to abolish the 11-plus, was described as a *shameful and destructive policy* by the Conservative party, and the party also criticised Kennedy for not reversing this decision.¹⁷¹ According to the Conservatives, no structural consequences would have come from reversing the decision, and the party argued that the Education Minister should not have allowed for an outgoing Minister to take decisions in his last hours in office without any alternative put in place.¹⁷²

The UUP agreed with the conservatives, and at Opposition Day on the 14th of January 2003, the party took the debate on the selective education system to the House of Commons.¹⁷³ The UUP was utterly amazed that one of the first acts of Jane Kennedy as the new Education Minister was to support the abolishment of the 11-plus. The UUP argued that by supporting the decision made by her predecessor, the Education Minister was overruling the democratic wishes of the people in Northern Ireland. According to UUP the results of the consultation process had shown that only 30% wanted to do away with academic selection, while 64%

¹⁷⁰ Kennedy, J. (20.11.02): Parliamentary debate. Vol. 394 c203W. www.publications.parliament.uk

¹⁷¹ Taylor, T. (27.11.02): Parliamentary Debate. Vol. 392 c697W. www.publications.parliament.uk

¹⁷² Davies, Q. (14.01.03): Parliamentary Debate. Column 574. www.publications.parliament.uk

¹⁷³ Opposition day is a day when the opposition to the government are allowed to choose the subject for debate in the House of Commons. It is a way of giving the smaller parties a chance to set the parliamentary agenda. On most days, the party in government sets the parliamentary agenda.

wanted it to continue. Therefore, the party questioned if abolishing the 11-plus without any alternative in place was actually the will of the people. It was essential to understand that without the prospect of the suspension, Martin McGuinness would never have made this decision, the UUP argued. According to the party, it was an act of administrative vandalism, because McGuinness knew that the Burns proposals would never have made it further than to the Assembly and the Executive, therefore it was the suspension that led to the decision.¹⁷⁴

The DUP agreed with the UUP in that the decision to end the 11-plus did not have a backing of the Northern Ireland Assembly. The situation the politicians now found themselves in exemplified the flaws of the devolved government according to the DUP: It had led to decisions being made by one Minister, and not by the Administration. According to the party, the action by the former Education Minister was a breach of his commitment to Assembly Members, and if there had been no suspension, no such decision would have been taken before it had been considered and decided by the Assembly.

Education Minister, Jane Kennedy on the other hand argued that if she had reversed the decision made by her predecessor, she would have created even more chaos.¹⁷⁵ Instead of jumping to any conclusion, she had considered the results of the consultation process in a careful manner where she found a clear demand for change. Although the Review Body's proposals were not supported in its entirety, there was wide support for abolishing the 11-plus, which was the reason she had supported the decision made by Martin McGuinness.¹⁷⁶ The Labour party argued that those who argued for the continuation of the 11-plus had to be convinced of several factors, including:

First, they must be convinced that it is possible accurately to identify a child's ability at 11, the age of transfer from primary to secondary school. That age is arbitrary; in a different system we could have transfer at 13 or nine. They must be convinced also that the young person's ability will not increase, change or develop in their teenage years, and that there is a means of identifying that ability. Clearly, the consensus in Northern Ireland is that the current means, the 11-plus, is insufficiently accurate.¹⁷⁷

There was also a broad consensus among the political parties in Northern Ireland, members of the educational establishment and by the public that the education system did not meet the

¹⁷⁴ Trimble, D. (14.01.03): Parliamentary Debate. Column 596. www.publications.parliament.uk

¹⁷⁵ Kennedy, J. (14.01.03): Parliamentary Debate. Column 574. www.publications.parliament.uk

¹⁷⁶ Kennedy, J. (14.01.03): Parliamentary Debate. Column 566. www.publications.parliament.uk

¹⁷⁷ Chaytor, D. (14.01.03): Parliamentary Debate. Column 583. www.publications.parliament.uk

social disadvantaged in a satisfactory manner, the Education Minister argued.¹⁷⁸ Therefore, it was necessary to find alternative arrangements to the 11-plus. However, it was exactly the alternative the opposition was worried about: once the 11-plus was gone, what was to happen with academic selection?

“You don’t fix something that ain’t broke”

A great concern for the opposition parties was what effect the new arrangements would have on academic selection. Once the 11-plus was gone, there were especially two reasons why the opposition parties were concerned: they feared for the introduction of a comprehensive structure; and in particular, they also feared for the effects this would have on grammar schools.

According to the UUP, there were especially two reasons for keeping the education system based on a selective structure, instead of a comprehensive one.¹⁷⁹ Firstly, it was because of the effective selection system that pupils in Northern Ireland achieved better results compared to the rest of the United Kingdom. Also, despite being religiously and politically divided, in socio-economic terms, the society in Northern Ireland was more egalitarian than England, the UUP argued. According to the party, this socio-economic equality existed because of the selective education system. If a comprehensive education system was introduced, the UUP argued that it would drive the existing schools out of the state system, and into the independent sector. The party claimed that England introduced the comprehensive structure in the 1960s because it was viewed as a method for curing the social divisions. However, according to the UUP, introducing the comprehensive structure in Northern Ireland would have the opposite effect, and would reinforcing the sectarian divisions.¹⁸⁰

The DUP argued that because the Assembly did not have the opportunity to discuss this matter, it was essential that the Education Minister, Jane Kennedy listened to the comments from the political parties in Northern Ireland. According to DUP, Northern Ireland had the

¹⁷⁸ Kennedy, J. (14.01.03): Parliamentary Debate. Column 564. www.publications.parliament.uk

¹⁷⁹ Trimble, D. (14.01.03): Parliamentary Debate. Column 596. www.publications.parliament.uk

¹⁸⁰ Trimble, D. (14.01.03): Parliamentary Debate. Column 596. www.publications.parliament.uk

best education system in the United Kingdom, and should be preserved rather than destroyed, and argued that: “you don’t fix something that ain’t broke”.¹⁸¹

However, the Education Minister Jane Kennedy claimed that no decisions regarding the new arrangements for the education system had been taken. According to her, the consultation report included several options that involved academic selection.¹⁸² In order to find alternative arrangements for the education system, the Minister on the 24th of April 2003 announced that she was to establish a *Post-Primary Review Working Group*. Chaired by Steve Costello¹⁸³, the working group consisted of eleven officials, and support staff, and was to “take account of the responses to the consultation on the Burns Report, including the diversity of views on academic selection, and provide advice on options for future arrangements for post-primary education”.¹⁸⁴ The main concern regarding the establishment of the working group, from both sides of the debate seemed to be whether the members’ view on academic selection been taken into account when they were selected.¹⁸⁵ However, according to the Education Minister, the memberships were drawn from the main education interest and managing authorities, on the basis of the range and depth of their knowledge and experience on the Northern Ireland education system. The members had been selected based on their personal capacity and not on their connection to any organisation of a specific view on academic selection.¹⁸⁶

As we will see next, the results of the report raised major concerns for the opposition on the future of grammar schools. The following year, on the 26th of January 2004, the Education Minister announced the results of the Costello’s Report. The Government had accepted all of the recommendations, and the Minister argued that it provided a sound basis for moving forward.

¹⁸¹ Dodds, N. (14.01.03): Parliamentary Debate. Column 595. www.publications.parliament.uk

¹⁸² Kennedy, J. (06.03.03): Parliamentary Debate. Vol. 400 c1182W. www.publications.parliament.uk

¹⁸³ Steve Costello was a former National General Manager in Ireland for Marks and Spencer, and the Chairperson of the Northern Ireland General Consumer Council.

¹⁸⁴ Northern Ireland Affairs Committee (2004): “Future Post-Primary Arrangements in Northern Ireland. Advice from the Post-Primary Review Working Group”. London. www.deni.gov.uk (read 11.03.13)

¹⁸⁵ Hoey, K., Hunter, A. (24.06.03): Parliamentary Debate. Vol. 407 cc715-6W. www.publications.parliament.uk

¹⁸⁶ Kennedy, J. (24.06.03): Parliamentary Debate. Vol. 407 cc715-6W. www.publications.parliament.uk

What about grammar schools?

Following the considerations of the Costello Report, the Minister announced the end of academic selection, and that the new transfer would be based on an informed parental and pupil choice.¹⁸⁷ According to the Minister, the report clearly stated that it was:

(...) educationally unsound to select pupils at age eleven; that eleven is too early to commit pupils to particular pathways; and that it is unsound to believe that the more able should follow only academic courses.¹⁸⁸

Instead of a selective education system, the key concept of the Costello Report recommendation was an Entitlement Framework. Starting with the primary needs of pupils, the Entitlement Framework stated that the pupils should have access to a wide range of educational experiences and opportunities, and this was an opportunity for every pupil to reach their full potential.¹⁸⁹

Since the Costello Report had recommended the ending of academic selection and the 11-plus, several factors had to be put in place before that could happen. This included the pupil profile, which the Council for Curriculum, Examination and Assessment would develop, but also the new entrance criteria were required to determine admission in oversubscribed schools. Therefore, the selective education system would continue to run until the Autumn of 2008, which was the last time the 11-plus procedure for transfer would be used. Further on, the Minister argued that developing and implementing the new arrangement required schools to work closely together, and throughout the process the Government would provide the help necessary for that to happen. She claimed that the new arrangements had raised standards, addressed the weaknesses of the selective education system and created conditions that would enable pupils to meet the modern society with the skills and knowledge needed.¹⁹⁰

The Education Minister Jane Kennedy argued that the new arrangements were not a system of one size fits all. All of the types of schools that existed would continue to do so, because there

¹⁸⁷ Kennedy, J. (26.01.04): Parliamentary Debate. Vol. 417 cc2-4WS. www.publications.parliament.uk

¹⁸⁸ Kennedy, J. (26.01.04): Parliamentary Debate. Vol. 417 cc2-4WS. www.publications.parliament.uk

¹⁸⁹ Northern Ireland Affairs Committee (2004): "Future Post-Primary Arrangements in Northern Ireland. Advice from the Post-Primary Review Working Group". London. www.deni.gov.uk

¹⁹⁰ Kennedy, J. (26.01.04): Parliamentary Debate. Vol. 417 cc2-4WS. www.publications.parliament.uk

was no specific educational structure or model needed as long as the schools met the requirements of the Entitlement Framework. However, the opposition parties were concerned for the implications the new arrangements would have for the socially disadvantaged pupils, and ultimately for the future of grammar schools.

The Conservative party argued that the new arrangements intended to replace a system who produced educational excellence, with a system of “(...) class segregation whereby wealthy people in wealthy areas will get the best education, while poor children living in poor areas will be stuck where they are (...)”.¹⁹¹ According to the party, abolishing the 11-plus and ending academic selection, undermined the whole principle on which the grammar schools had been created.¹⁹² The DUP had already argued that the end of the selective system would without doubt mean the end of grammar schools. According to the party, the grammar schools would not be able to offer a specialist academic curriculum, when it was required to offer a wide range of educational experiences as the Entitlement Framework stated.¹⁹³ The UUP also argued that the new arrangements would mean the end of grammar schools, and questioned why the Labour government wanted to destroy the education system, which in their view had proved successful for all the people in Northern Ireland.¹⁹⁴

Barry Gardiner who replaced Jane Kennedy as the new Minister with the responsibility for Education in the spring of 2004, argued that there had been no review on the grammar schools, and these schools were just as involved in the new arrangements as they ever had been. According to him, the Costello report had clearly stated that there existed no educational benefits from segregating children at the age of eleven, or that the more able children *had* to pursue an academic rather than a vocational route.¹⁹⁵ Barry Gardiner, and the subsequent Ministers with the responsibility of Education during the period of Direct Rule, continued with the new arrangements recommended by the Costello Report.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹¹ Taylor, T. (30.06.04): Parliamentary Debate. Vol. 423 cc265-7. www.publications.parliament.uk

¹⁹² Taylor, T. (18.11.04): Parliamentary Debate. Column 291. www.publications.parliament.uk

¹⁹³ Donaldson, J. M. (14.01.03): Parliamentary Debate. Column 579. www.publications.parliament.uk

¹⁹⁴ Beggs, R. (30.06.04): Parliamentary Debate. Vol. 423 cc266. www.publications.parliament.uk

¹⁹⁵ Gardiner, B. (30.06.04): Parliamentary Debate. Vol. 423 cc265-7. www.publications.parliament.uk

¹⁹⁶ The actual proposals based on these recommendations were published for consultation the 28th of January 2005.

Following the period of consultation on the proposals recommended by the Costello Report in the spring of 2005, the schools in Northern Ireland started to prepare for the new arrangements that would follow the last planned 11-plus in the autumn of 2008. However, the political situation in Northern Ireland had changed. Following the signing of the St. Andrews Agreement in October 2006, devolution returned to Northern Ireland on the 7th of May 2007. Once again, the debate on the selective education system was in the hands of locally elected politicians in Northern Ireland. However, as we will see next the framework within which the debate was to continue had changed following the negotiations of the St. Andrews Agreement.

3. THE SEARCH FOR CONSENSUS 2007-2011

Just over a year ago, the elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly changed the political landscape. Sinn Fein and the Democratic Unionist Party became the leading parties of their respective communities. At the time, there was much speculation that bringing these two parties to agreement together would be a difficult, if not impossible, task. In the months since the election, our efforts have been dedicated to building the trust and confidence necessary to enable these parties to lead an inclusive and stable executive.¹⁹⁷

These were the words of The Lord President of the Council in the House of Commons, Baroness Amos, when outlining the challenges of reinstating devolved government in Northern Ireland. After a long period of negotiations, however, the St. Andrews Agreement was signed in October 2006, subsequently returning devolution to Northern Ireland on the 8th of May 2007. Therefore, the future of Northern Ireland's education system was once again in the hands of locally elected politicians. Following the Assembly Elections in March 2007, the Democratic Unionist Party became not only the largest party on unionist side, but also the biggest one in Northern Ireland with 36 seats. In second place followed Sinn Fein, which also became the largest party on nationalist side with 28 seats. The result was that the DUP and Sinn Fein for the next political term were to share power, and for any new arrangement to be accepted as a way forward, due to the cross-community vote, both parties' support was needed. Also, the new Agreement had changed the framework for the debate on the selective education system. As part of the negotiations, the DUP had managed to include legal protection for academic selection. This meant that in the event of the Assembly failing to reach agreement on an alternative transfer procedure to the 11-plus, Grammar Schools would have the legal right to make their own entrance tests.

The nomination of First Minister and Deputy First Minister was now based on the party's strength in the Assembly, compared to earlier where the Assembly elected the First and Deputy First Minister based on a cross-community vote. Being the largest party overall, the DUP nominated Ian Paisley to the position of the First Minister.¹⁹⁸ Sinn Fein, which was the second largest party overall and the largest party on the nationalist side, nominated the former Education Minister, Martin McGuinness, to the position of Deputy First Minister. The elections for the Executive Ministerial posts were based on the strengths of each party at the

¹⁹⁷ The Lord President of the Council, Baroness Amos. (09.12.04): Parliamentary Debate. Column 1018. www.publications.parliament.uk

¹⁹⁸ On the 31st of May 2008 Peter Robinson took over as the leader for the DUP, and became the First Minister on the 5th of June 2008.

Assembly Election, which was the same procedure as in 1999. When the elections for the Executive ministerial posts took place, the leader of each party appointed Ministers to the Executive. Having legally secured the future of academic selection, it did not come as a surprise when the DUP did not select the Department of Education at the nomination of ministers to the departments. Being the largest party, the DUP selected first, and chose the Finance and Personnel portfolio. Following them, Sinn Fein once again selected the Department of Education, and nominated Caitriona Ruane as the new Minister of Education.

The political changes that followed the St. Andrews Agreement and the Assembly elections marked a significant change in how the debate on the selective education system was to move forward. *The second phase* of the debate is characterised by the search for consensus, and stretches from 2007 to 2011. Compared to *the first phase* (2000-2007), after the return of devolution, the debate no longer concerned whether or not change was needed, or what this change involved: *The second phase* concerned the need to create a proposal that would lead to consensus between the two strands of opinions that had emerged. More importantly, it concerned the need to create a proposal that would get the support of both Sinn Fein and the DUP.

The Issue of Clarification: Calling for Ministerial Action

In September 2007 Education Minister Caitriona Ruane announced that the 11-plus had to go, and that it would operate for the final time in 2008.¹⁹⁹ This meant that before the school year of 2009 was to begin, the Minister had to come up with a new proposal, which then had to be agreed upon by the Assembly, and subsequently implemented. According to Sinn Fein's educational spokesman at the time, John O'Dowd, the reason behind the strategy of giving a deadline for when the last 11-plus was to operate for the final time without having any alternative in place, was that in the past debates on the 11-plus and academic selection the strategy had been to find an alternative firstly, and secondly end the transfer procedure. That had not worked, therefore Sinn Fein choose to do the opposite this time, ultimately forcing the politicians to find alternative arrangements.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁹ Ruane, C. (17.09.07): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

²⁰⁰ O'Dowd, J. (19.03.09). Located in: BBC: "Northern Ireland Hearts and Minds".
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y_dAw9OYj_k&list=FL4LAhq1iZxd7pmggmRgpVFw (watched 27.03.13)

However, the Minister took her time in moving things forward, and it was not until the 15th of May the following year (2008) that the Minister brought her proposals to the Executive. The day after she met with the Committee for Education. What happened during this period from the Minister came into Office, and until the day she presented her proposals, was the creation of a political vacuum. Instead of engaging with her fellow politicians, Ruane prioritized to spend time to meet key stakeholders in the educational community to discuss the implementation of her visions. This was not well received neither by the Assembly nor the Education Committee, and they did not hold their breath in expressing their opinion on the matter. Therefore, not only did this create a political tension between the Minister and the rest of the political parties. The frustration went further in to the society, and led to an on-going uncertainty among pupils, parents, teachers, and schools which was left in the dark of what was to happen once the 11-plus was gone. It was a widespread fear that if the Minister failed in coming up with a proposal that would reach consensus in the Assembly, Northern Ireland would be left with an unregulated education system. The deadline was looked upon as an irresponsible act by the opposition and Sinn Fein's strategy came immediately under heavily attack. In the following we shall look into the nature and political content of this attack.

A lack of meat on the bone

Caitriona Ruane had made it clear from the beginning what her and her party's view on academic selection were, and that she was ready to do the job necessary to bring changes about. Ruane claimed that she would engage with the Committee of Education, the Executive, key stakeholders, as well as keeping the Assembly informed about the way forward.²⁰¹ Throughout the first year in Office, the Minister of Education attended several Assembly Meetings. In those meetings when asked about the way forward, she seemed more interested in talking about her vision for the future arrangements, than discussing how those visions could be put into practice. The Minister was criticised for her inability to discuss *how* she wanted to address these visions. Even the Alliance party, which supported Sinn Fein's view on academic selection, criticised the Minister for not discussing the actual issue: "(...) visions are all very well, but we need proposals and some meat on the bone".²⁰²

²⁰¹ Ruane, C. (17.09.07): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

²⁰² Lunn, T. (25.02.08): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

When Ruane talked about the future of the education system she implied a lot of what she wanted for it, but those visions also brought with them the questions from the Assembly of how the vision would actually be put into practice. Instead of discussing those issues with the Assembly, the Minister met with key educational stakeholders. As the Minister was not able – or willing – to discuss the implications and details of her visions, the result was that the Assembly was left to make their own interpretations of what these were. Surprisingly, given that they shared the same view on academic selection, it was the Alliance party who was first out to move a motion criticising the Minister, calling for;

That this Assembly notes with concern the lack of clarity in the Minister of Education’s proposals for post-primary transfer; and urges her to bring details of her proposals immediately before the Executive and the Assembly, to ease the concerns of parents, pupils and teachers.²⁰³

Assembly Member for the Alliance party, Trevor Lunn tried to interpret the Ministers visions and preferences presented at a previous Assembly Meeting and asked rhetorically: “Does ‘geography’ mean a postcode lottery? Does ‘community’ mean nationalists, loyalists, Protestant or Catholic? How will the receiving schools sort out the problems of oversubscription without the benefit of access to the pupil profiles?”²⁰⁴ Lunn concluded that either way, these visions did not exclude the possibility of selection, which his party held as a vital goal. Therefore, in the opinion of the Alliance party, not only did the Minister’s much talk about visions and not details leave the Assembly confused, but also lead Alliance party and other parties to question their support of Sinn Fein’s policy.

One explanations as to why the Minister chose to prioritize meetings with educational stakeholders over debating the matters with the Assembly, might be that she found that they were bodies that could provide a better way forward. Area -based planning was at the heart of the Ministers future education system, she argued.²⁰⁵ According to Ruane, planning and collaboration between schools in one area could ensure that areas ability to offer a range of pathways that was related, and responsive to the needs of each individual.²⁰⁶ She wanted to discuss the implications of implementing such visions with key educational stakeholders, who were actually going to put these into practice. According to the Minister, because these

²⁰³ Lunn, T. (25.02.08): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

²⁰⁴ Lunn, T. (15.02.08): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

²⁰⁵ Ruane, C. (15.02.08): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

²⁰⁶ Ruane, C. (15.02.08): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

stakeholders worked in the field, they had the practical input she needed for creating a proposal that would reach consensus.

For the politicians involved in the debate it seemed as if Ruane neglected her Ministerial responsibilities. The Committee for Education was to scrutinise proposals, be a part of policy development and had a consultation role with the Department of Education. Also, when it came to the consideration and development of legislation, it was to play a key role.²⁰⁷ As there was little to scrutinise, and the Committee now felt that they were denied involvement in the process it started to lose confidence in the Minister. As the DUP Member, Lord Morrow said: “(...) relations between the Minister, and the majority of the Committee are, to say the least, disharmonious. In fact, relations seem to be disintegrating daily. The only casualty of that will be the education of our children”.²⁰⁸ Also, Alliance argued that the Ministers “(...) attitude to the Committee has been contemptuous and dismissive. It seems that she wants to acknowledge that a good relationship is important, but has decided not to contribute to it”.²⁰⁹ When Caitriona Ruane was being questioned about her role as Minister of Education, she responded by accusing the political parties for not working with her in bringing new proposals forward, and claimed that instead they were engaging in political point scoring.²¹⁰

The need for cross-community support

The second phase of the debate serve as an example of how the political situation the debate happened in, greatly influenced the outcome of the debate. There had been a clear shift in how the debate continued after the return of devolution in 2007. As mentioned above, *the second phase* of the debate on the selective education system was about the search for consensus, and now this search faced a major challenge: the political structure in terms of how Northern Ireland was managed. The need for cross-community support had been introduced as a necessary measure to ensure that the political system in Northern Ireland would work. It was a measure that offered all the political parties a chance to have their say in matters that concerned them, and guaranteed that no political side (nationalist or unionist) would

²⁰⁷ Northern Ireland Assembly: “The work of the Assembly: Committee for Education”.
www.niassembly.gov.uk (read 17.10.12)

²⁰⁸ Lord Morrow (15.02.08): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

²⁰⁹ Lunn, T. (25.02.08): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

²¹⁰ Ruane, C. (17.09.07): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

systematically overrule the other. It was a matter of forcing the political parties to share power and work together on matters that ultimately concerned them all. However, what had emerged earlier in the debate was a division of the political parties into two strands of opinion on the issue of academic selection, a division that mainly followed the unionist – nationalist division. Therefore, the measure of cross-community support in this situation, worked against the political parties in solving the issue of the selective education system, and ultimately reaching consensus.

The political parties knew that in order to reach political agreement, both nationalists and unionists had to support it, especially Sinn Fein and DUP. According to a DUP Member, the reason for the shift in the debate was they had nothing else to discuss. In order to move the debate forward, they argued, the Minister needed to put forward proposals for the Assembly to scrutinise.²¹¹ However, Sinn Fein argued that it was not that the statements and visions of the Minister lacked details: The problem was that people did not like what they heard.²¹² Sinn Fein and DUP had total opposite views on academic selection, where no visions or statements made by the Education Minister would contain any proposals based on academic selection. Also, the DUP made it very clear that, although the party agreed that Northern Ireland needed a fairer education system that matched pupils to a school of their needs, the only way this could happen was through academic selection. The DUP argued that academic selection should be a part of the Minister's proposal, if it was not, the proposal would not make it through the house.²¹³

Ideologically, the DUP acknowledged that the party was far apart from Sinn Fein on the issue. The DUP argued that it offered a system based on educational merit and ability, and accused the Minister for wanting a system based on economic and social selection.²¹⁴ However, even though there was a basic disagreement on the issues at hand, the other political parties seemed more concerned with the manner, in which the debate went on, than the issue of academic selection. The UUP was disappointed about the Minister's inability to listen, and claimed that the Minister's understanding of the word consensus was to do it her way, or no way. She did not engage with the Assembly or the Committee of education, they argued. Ultimately, what

²¹¹ Ross, A. (25.02.08): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

²¹² O'Neill, M. (25.02.08): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

²¹³ Ross, A. (25.02.08): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

²¹⁴ Wilson, S. (13.05.08): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

the UUP seemed to worry most about, was the timescale. In theory, if the UUP were to agree to the proposals, they argued that there would not be enough time to implement the new arrangements before the 11-plus was gone – what would she do then? More importantly – the UUP asked: what would the pupils, teachers and schools do in the meantime?²¹⁵

SDLP argued that there was a clear need for a clarification by the Minister on what the proposals entailed: “ (...) when people are kept in the dark and are denied information, or have information drip-fed to them, they naturally become anxious and begin to lose faith in reform”.²¹⁶ According to the party, it was essential that teachers and principles were aware of what their future role would be in the education system. SDLP argued that there had been created a situation where it was impossible for them as politicians to reassure the society that it would end well, and that their education system was taken well care of. By the way the Minister had handled things, SDLP argued, politicians was just as disillusioned and confused as the rest of the society, and described the situation as: “the blind have been leading the blind”.²¹⁷

The Alliance Party agreed with the Minister in that there was a need for change, and the sooner the better. But there was an absence of firm proposals, with the result of every party developing its own ideas. Sinn Fein had argued that one of the reasons for the Minister being attacked was that the rest of the Assembly and the Education Committee did not have any proposals to come forward with. However, according to the Alliance party, it was the role of the Minister to propose future arrangements, and the Assembly and the Education Committee to scrutinise those proposals – not the other way around: It could not be right that the key educational stakeholders knew more about the process than the Assembly did, the Alliance party argued.²¹⁸

Sinn Fein accused the political parties of feeding into the agenda that there was panic in the society, by continually describing the situation as being filled with panic. The other political parties feared for the timescale the Minister and her party had put them under by abolishing the 11-plus. Therefore, they called on action by the Minister. Sinn Fein perceived this as their

²¹⁵ McCrea, B. (25.02.08): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

²¹⁶ Bradley, D. (13.05.08): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

²¹⁷ Bradley, M. (25.02.08): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

²¹⁸ Lunn, T. (25.02.08): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

Minister being attacked, and called for the politicians to engage in the debate on a constructive manner. Given the differences of opinion on academic selection, the need for cross-community support for future arrangements of the education system, made it more difficult to create a proposal. There was a need for a compromise between the two strands of opinion in academic selection. However, would the proposal the Minister of Education brought forward offer the much-needed compromise to achieve cross-community support?

The proposal: compromising enough?

On the 15th of May 2008 the Minister of Education Caitriona Ruane launched her proposals before the Executive. Basically, the proposal included a phase out period of academic selection over three years. Also, during this transition period, a new transfer test was to be introduced to the schools that still wanted to use academic selection as entrance criteria. The Minister and her Department, however, recommended that schools should not use this test. They wanted the schools to use the new list of admission criteria, which was included in the proposal. Ultimately, the proposal meant the end of academic selection.

When the Minister launched her proposal before the Executive, both DUP and UUP rejected to discuss them. The Education Committee had concerns whether the Minister would be able to reach cross-community consensus, since the proposals actually intended to end academic selection. The UUP and DUP used the Minister's proposal for a temporary transfer test as a validation of the parties' argument that it was possible to have a transfer system based on academic selection without the distortion of the curriculum. The SDLP and Alliance party, however, did not find the proposal going far enough in ending academic selection. Instead, the parties feared it would result in a new form of academic selection. But to understand the debate better, we have to look further into the proposal.

The proposal: Crossing the Rubicon?

The proposal that the Minister presented to the Executive and the Assembly formed one part of a coherent reform package. At the time of the proposal, five Schools and Library Boards administered education. In order to reduce unnecessary spending on administration, the Minister wanted to transform those five Schools and Library Boards into one, namely the

Education and Skills Authority (ESA).²¹⁹ Also, a part of the package was Ruane's education policy "Every School a Good School", which was a Departmental policy for school improvement. It included the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) who would evaluate schools, and formally intervene if schools were found to be inadequate and unsatisfactory. This was expected that with the support of ETI, schools would make necessary improvement, and lead to an overall improvement of education standards.²²⁰

According to the Minister, if it was up to her, the first thing she would do was to abolish academic selection. However, she acknowledged that the new arrangements represented a major shift compared to the traditional method of transfer. Therefore, Ruane introduced a three-year phased approach, starting from 2010. During this transition period, schools could apply for option of admitting by academic selection on a limited basis. As pointed out above however, the Minister preferred that schools used the new admission criteria. This meant that during the first year, if approved by the Department of Education, 50% of the schools total intake could be through the use of academic selection. In 2011, the intake would be reduced to 30% and in 2012 it would be 20% of the total intake. In 2009, pupils would transfer according to the traditional method, using the 11-plus.²²¹

The Minister's proposals regarding the age of transfer to post-primary education would still be the age of 11, but Ruane initiated the development of a new entrance test by the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA).²²² To ensure that the teaching of the curriculum would not be affected by the test, in contrast to the 11-plus, this test was to be carried out at the post-primary school the child applied for. The test would also be based on the pupils expected levels of numeracy and literacy at transfer age. The Minister argued that this would allow primary school teachers to continue to teach the curriculum without being worried about training the children for the test particularly.²²³

The new admission criteria that the Minister had introduced, as part of the proposal, would be the only criteria used from 2013, and was based on geography, family situation, community,

²¹⁹ Ruane, C. (02.11.10): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

²²⁰ Ruane, C. (15.03.10): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

²²¹ Northern Ireland Department of Education. (15.05.08): "Education Minister Present Proposal to Executive Colleagues". www.deni.gov.uk (read 04.04.13)

²²² Ruane, C. (16.05.08): Northern Ireland Education Committee Meeting. Hansard Report.

²²³ Ruane, C. (16.05.08): Northern Ireland Education Committee Meeting. Hansard Report.

and social disadvantage.²²⁴ It meant that from 2013 and onwards, if approved by the Assembly, children would be able to transfer to post-primary schools at age 11. This would be based on the following criteria: the nearest suitable school, if they already had siblings on the school of their choice, and according to their entitlement to free school meals.²²⁵ At the age of 14 pupils would make an informed decision based on the advice from education professionals, including careers advice and the guidance of teachers at the child's current school. Together with their parents the pupils could then select their own future educational pathway.²²⁶ Given that the new admission criteria also included social criteria, the Minister argued that it would prevent the new admissions being based on a post-code lottery, a concern voiced by some politicians. Therefore, the pupils would still transfer to post-primary school at the age of 11, but not on the basis of academic selection. Now it was based on the new admission criteria. It was not until the age of 14 that pupils would make a choice of educational pathway.

According to the Minister, in order for her proposals to take effect, changes to the existing legislation were required.²²⁷ This meant, that the law produced as a consequence of the St. Andrews agreement, and which protected academic selection had to be changed. There were concerns regarding how Ruane would be able to get the cross-community support she needed for these legislative changes, but according to the Minister, that was a bridge she did not want to cross before they came to it.²²⁸ However, the time to cross that bridge finally came: Did the proposals offer the necessary compromise to reach cross-community support in the Assembly?

The Ruane transfer test?

One of the main difficulties with the proposals turned out to be the introduction of the new transfer test. The Minister argued that she would actively discourage schools not to opt for the new test. However, since Caitriona Ruane found it necessary for a transition period, she was

²²⁴ Department of Education (15.05.08): "Education Minister Present Proposal to Executive Colleagues". www.deni.gov.uk (read 04.04.13)

²²⁵ Department of Education (15.05.08): "Education Minister Present Proposal to Executive Colleagues". www.deni.gov.uk (read 04.04.13)

²²⁶ Ruane, C. (19.05.08): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

²²⁷ Ruane, C. (16.05.08): Northern Ireland Education Committee Meeting. Hansard Report.

²²⁸ Ruane, C. (16.05.08): Northern Ireland Education Committee Meeting. Hansard Report.

prepared to introduce this test as a compromise. The SDLP found that to be a contradictory argument: The Minister had issued the test for schools to use it, while at the same time dissuading them from doing so. The SDLP was afraid of the test becoming popular, in that it was a fair way of selecting pupils for transfer, and that the Minister now had introduced a new way of selecting based on academic selection, or what the party called the *Ruane transfer test*.²²⁹ The SDLP did not want a new transfer test, nor did they want a status quo. The party questioned if a status quo offered a better solution to the situation. There had already been 12 versions of the 11-plus, and it was still found to be fundamentally flawed. According to the SDLP, there was a need to find a long-term solution, which would address the long-term situation.²³⁰ The Alliance party also shared SDLP's concerns. The party argued that the new test seemed to be a lot easier than the 11-plus, and could lead to a scenario where parents who at the time opposed the use of testing, would change their minds.²³¹

The fact that Minister issued a transfer test at all, also fed into the reasoning of DUP and UUP that it was possible to issue a transfer test, based on academic abilities, which would not distort the teaching of the curriculum.²³² As the DUP member, and Chairman of the Education Committee at the time, Sammy Wilson argued: "(...) if, by your command, it is now possible to devise a test that is compatible with the revised curriculum, are you now saying that the original reason, or one of the original reasons, that you gave for not having a test is no longer valid?"²³³ The UUP referred to the problem associated with the introduction of such a test in the given timescale. The party claimed that a test could not be introduced without the proper means of preparation, validation, and checking if it actually worked the way it was supposed to. The UUP argued that there was a need for the test to go through a pilot scheme, however the Minister did not agree. Even though the party found the traditional 11-plus to be flawed and in a need of change, the issue of concern for the UUP was then if it would be better to introduce a new test that no one knew would work, rather than the 11-plus.²³⁴

The Minister was criticised for not wanting to discuss other proposals but her own. For example, after Ruane had met with the Committee of Education and presented her proposals,

²²⁹ Bradley, D. (16.05.08): Northern Ireland Education Committee Meeting. Hansard Report.

²³⁰ Bradley, D. (10.11.08): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

²³¹ Lunn, T. (16.05.08): Northern Ireland Education Committee Meeting. Hansard Report.

²³² McCrea, B. (10.11.08): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

²³³ Wilson, S. (16.05.08): Northern Ireland Education Committee Meeting. Hansard Report.

²³⁴ McCrea, B. (10.11.08): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

the Committee had scrutinised the proposals, and met with key educational stakeholders to get their thoughts on the issue. The Committee also collected views from the five political parties represented in the Committee, and in the end the members of the Committee held several meetings where they considered the results. However, according to the Chairman of the Committee, Mervyn Storey (DUP), all the Minister had done was to thank them for the contribution. Ruane did not want to discuss the contribution of the Committee.²³⁵

Sinn Fein responded to the criticism by accusing the Committee for not actually giving any alternative proposals. In fact, according to Sinn Fein, no political party had presented any proposals, and this had ultimately left them with only one, which was the proposal the Minister herself, had created.²³⁶ The Minister argued that she was ready to listen to suggestions, but only if those suggestions would improve her own proposals.²³⁷

The Minister claimed the proposal offered a good enough compromise between the two strands of opinions on the issue of academic selection, however not all agreed. Therefore, on the 2nd of February 2009, Caitriona Ruane withdrew her proposal, including the new transfer test. Sinn Fein claimed that the party and the Minister wanted political agreement. However, faced with the lack of cross-community support, Ruane argued that she had the responsibility to move forward.²³⁸ The Minister stated that

We need change; and I say again: I am the Minister of Education who will bring about that change. Some of you have difficulties with accepting that, but that is the reality of the situation, and change will happen.²³⁹

As we will see in the following, the situation escalated: Faced with the possibility of the Assembly failing in reaching political agreement, grammar schools started to consider using their legal right laid down in the St. Andrews agreement to make their own entrance tests. This created even stronger reactions in the Assembly.²⁴⁰

²³⁵ Storey, M. (10.11.08): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

²³⁶ O'Dowd, J. (10.11.08): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

²³⁷ Ruane, C. (19.01.09): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

²³⁸ O'Dowd, J. (10.11.08): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

²³⁹ Ruane, C. (16.05.08): Northern Ireland Education Committee Meeting. Hansard Report.

²⁴⁰ Sinn Fein. (02.02.09): "Transfer 2010 – Ruane announces details of guidance". www.sinnfein.ie (read 03.04.13)

Heading towards an unregulated education system?

The Minister of Education had failed in bringing her proposals for a discussion with the Executive on four separate occasions. In May 2008, Caitriona Ruane brought her proposals to the Executive, but the DUP and UUP refused to discuss them. Later on, she also tried to hold a meeting with the Executive, with the purpose of discussing the proposals, however that was rejected by the DUP. The Minister also wrote to every member of the Executive, where she offered a chance to discuss her proposals on a one-to-one basis. The DUP chose not to meet. The disagreement on the proposals for the new arrangements in the education sector was partly the reason why the Executive did not meet for five months from June 2008.²⁴¹ In January 2009, the Education Minister tried again, and produced a policy memorandum paper with further details about her proposals, where she also let the members of the Executive know what would happen if they again refused to discuss the matter, and not reaching an agreement. For the fourth time, the Executive refused to discuss the proposals produced by the Minister of Education.

Therefore, the Minister on the 2nd of February 2009 publicised her guiding principles for transfer 2010 without any further discussion; guidelines, which also included recommendations for admissions criteria.²⁴² A consultation period followed, but before the Assembly's reactions are presented in the following, the new guidelines for transfer that the Education Minister introduced will be explained.

The Guidelines of Transfer 2010

The guidelines were directed towards primary school principals, post-primary boards of governors, and principles, and the Education and Library Boards/Education and Skills Authority on the admission to post primary schools for 2010-2011. The guidance provided two things: the legal contexts, of which the guidelines were to operate within, followed by a menu of guidance and recommendations on admissions criteria.²⁴³ As shown above, one of the problems the Minister of Education faced when creating the new arrangements was that academic selection had been legally secured as part of the St. Andrews Agreement. Legally

²⁴¹ Knox, C. (2010:208): "Devolution and the governance of Northern Ireland". Manchester University Press. Manchester.

²⁴² Ruane, C. (16.02.09): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

²⁴³ Northern Ireland Department of Education (02.02.09): "Transfer 2010". www.deni.gov.uk (read 03.04.13)

however, the Department of Education could revise guidelines in respect of the arrangements for admissions to post-primary schools. It was the duty of educational stakeholders to *have regard to* these guidelines.²⁴⁴

It meant that although the process could run in similar ways as it had done previously, with pupils transferring to post-primary at the age of 11, the Department would not provide the transfer test, and recommended that schools did not use academic admissions criteria. The choice of words, *to have regard to*, is interesting. Because academic selection was legally protected, the Minister did not have the opportunity to legally require the educational stakeholders to follow the new guidelines. As the Assembly Member of UUP, Danny Kennedy, argued: “That means that a board of Governors can simply put the guidance on the agenda of a meeting, read it, have regard to it, decide that the guidance is not for that school and then move on”.²⁴⁵ However, what the Department *could* do was decide to not support the use of criteria based on academic abilities. As the guidelines said: “These independent ‘Entrance Tests’ are not legally prohibited from operating as part of the admissions process but will do so without the approval of the Department (...)”.²⁴⁶ By not providing a transfer test for the school year 2010 and onwards, the Department of Education made it harder for the schools not to follow their recommendations and use of their admission criteria, because schools then had to produce the tests themselves.²⁴⁷

In the part of the guidelines that concerned the academic admissions criteria, it stated that the Department of Education could not prohibit the use of academic selection for entrance, but their policy was not to use it.²⁴⁸ However, the guidelines reminded the schools who considered using academic selection of the risks involved. Previously, it was the expert body the Council for Curriculum, Examination and Assessment that had created the transfer test. When schools considered applying their own test, they needed to take into account how much effort that was needed in producing such a test.

²⁴⁴ Education Order (NI) 2006: Article 30. <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/> (read 14.05.13)

²⁴⁵ Kennedy, D. (24.03.09): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

²⁴⁶ Northern Ireland Department of Education. (01.02.09): Paragraph 9: “Entrance Tests for academic-based Transfer”. Located in “Transfer 2010” www.deni.gov.uk (03.04.13)

²⁴⁷ Northern Ireland Department of Education (02.02.09): “Transfer 2010”. www.deni.gov.uk (read 03.04.13)

²⁴⁸ Northern Ireland Department of Education (02.02.09): Paragraph 18: “The legal position and the Department’s recommendations”. Located in “Transfer 2010”. www.deni.gov.uk (read 03.04.13)

Following the Education Order (NI) 2006, the Department of Education was obliged to establish a body for parents to apply for their child to be admitted to a certain school due to “exceptional circumstances”. It was the Department that was responsible to define, through regulations, what could be considered as “exceptional circumstances”. Although the Department of Education had not completed this work yet, the intention was that it would cover situations of: Children in care of the social services, and in cases where social services recommended it. Also, according to Article 27 of the Education Order (NI) 2006, Grammar Schools could no longer refuse entrance along the lines as they had been able to previously. Finding a child to be more suited for another type of school, or a child’s academic ability not to be good enough, was no longer accepted as a reason for declining entrance to pupils.²⁴⁹ Therefore, legally, there had been some new restrictions on the admission to post-primary schools. The new recommendations on admission criteria also included changes to how entrance to post-primary schools would operate.

In the second half of the guidelines there was a menu of the Department of Education’s recommendations for admission criteria. The intention was that the Boards of Governors of post-primary schools was to create their own admissions criteria based on the menu offered by the guidelines.²⁵⁰ This menu was split, in that the first criteria listed by the Department was recommended to be the first on every post-primary schools list of admissions criteria. The rest of the menu was recommended to be part of the schools entrance criteria, however, there was no specific order assigned to them. That was up to the schools themselves to decide. The Department of Education recommended that there should be given a priority to children entitled to free school meals. This meant that the proportion of children entitled to free school meals should not be any less than the number of children entitled to free school meals that had listed the actual school as their first preference.²⁵¹

The rest of the criteria recommended in the guidelines included: *siblings* already enrolled at the schools; *eldest child eligible* to be admitted to the school, and; *feeder/named schools*, which in general meant that there should be given a priority to children for a post-primary

²⁴⁹ Northern Ireland Department of Education (02.02.09): Paragraph 13-14: “A New Exceptional Circumstances Body”. Located in “Transfer 2010”. www.deni.gov.uk (read 03.04.13)

²⁵⁰ Northern Ireland Department of Education (02.02.09): Paragraph 17: “The menu of recommended admissions criteria”. Located in “Transfer 2010”. www.deni.gov.uk (read 03.04.13)

²⁵¹ Northern Ireland Department of Education (02.02.09): Paragraph 17: “The menu of recommended admissions criteria”. Located in “Transfer 2010”. www.deni.gov.uk (read 03.04.13)

school located closely to its primary school. The criteria of *catchment* meant that priority should also be given to children living in a geographical area served by a school. However, it should only be used together with the *nearest suitable school* criteria, in order to create equal opportunity for children in rural areas, since the nearest suitable school criteria was to be used as a priority for children's normal area of residence. Also, *random selection* was included as admission criteria, however it was up to the Boards of Governors to design a method of how to apply this criteria themselves.

Sinn Fein argued that if schools used the guiding principles the Minister had issued, there would be no selection.²⁵² According to the party, grammar schools would eventually acknowledge that it was better for their pupils to be part of what they called the mainstream education, hence referring to the use of Ruane's guidelines. The Minister claimed that the Department of Education was not responsible nor were they duty bound to fund the grammar schools that wished to continue to use academic selection as entrance criteria.²⁵³ This meant, that if schools chose to develop their own entrance tests based on academic selection, they would have to pay for the extra costs themselves.

The consultation period that was established on the Guidelines for Transfer lasted from the Education Minister published them on the 2nd of February, and until the 27th of April. During this consultation period, the main problem according to the majority of the political parties in the Assembly was that the system the Minister had introduced was unregulated. It meant, that there was no way of knowing if the new arrangements would lead to a new selective system or not. The Minister had left that decision to be made outside the Assembly and the Executive, and ultimately now it was up to the schools to decide. As we will see in the following, the Assembly reacted very strongly to the new arrangements. Especially the Alliance party and the SDLP did not find the new arrangements to be an improvement, and called for the Education Minister to reinstate her previous proposal.

²⁵² Ruane, C. (16.02.09): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

²⁵³ Ruane, C. (19.01.09): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

Alliance Party and SDLP call for the proposed transfer test

SDLP argued that the new educational arrangements following the guiding principles, was not an improvement of the former arrangements. According to SDLP, by introducing the guiding principles the Minister had ensured a continuation of a selective system, and also ensured the continuation of children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds would still be disadvantaged. The Education Minister argued that these guiding principles gave the clarity for which the parents, schools and pupils had been longing for. By opposite, the SDLP claimed that the Minister had placed a great deal of stress upon them. Alliance party supported the view of SDLP, and on the 24th of March 2009, the party put forward a motion in the Assembly, wanting to go back to the test the Minister had proposed to introduce last year:

I beg to move: That this Assembly notes that schools may choose to use an examination as part of their entry criteria under the Minister of Education's 2010 guidelines; calls on the Minister of Education to re-commission the CCEA test, she abandoned on 2 February 2009, that schools may then use for a maximum of two years; and calls on the Executive to agree new, legally binding guidelines for post-primary transfer for use from 2011.²⁵⁴

While emphasising that the party's long-term approach to the issue remained unaltered, the Alliance party acknowledged that this amendment demonstrated a major shift in the their way of thinking. The reason for the shift was that the Alliance party found it to be a need for a short-term solution to the situation, and in the meanwhile, the political parties could reconsider the way forward on the issue of the education system. Ultimately, the party asked for the Minister to revisit her last proposed transfer test. Although the Alliance party admitted that the test did not receive unanimous support when proposed by the Minister, it did at least have a widespread support among educationalists. The new transfer test, together with the best of the issued guidelines for transfer 2010, could provide a balanced intake for the schools, the Alliance party argued.²⁵⁵

If the Assembly had accepted the Ministers proposals, the Alliance party argued that progress could be made. However, that was not the case anymore. Now, it was either the Alliance party's compromise or the Guidelines for Transfer 2010 that was on the table. The Alliance

²⁵⁴ Lunn, T. (24.03.09): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

²⁵⁵ Lunn, T. (24.03.09): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

party argued that the party had put its core principles on hold for the greater good, and asked the political parties in the Assembly to do the same.²⁵⁶

The SDLP responded to the motion by putting forward its own amendment:

That this Assembly notes that schools may choose to use an examination as part of their entry criteria under the Minister of Education's 2010 guidelines; calls on the Minister of Education to ensure the provision of a CCEA test, as she previously proposed, for a maximum of two years; believes that no school should be allowed to admit its full year 8 pupil quota using the outcomes of that test alone or using any other test; recommends the admission criteria as outlined in the Minister's statement on transfer 2010 on 2 February 2009 and welcomes the first criterion as a means of ensuring that all schools help tackle social deprivation; and further calls on the Minister of Education to set up a new educator-led working group tasked with building a sustainable consensus on non-selective transfer whose recommendations the Executive and the Assembly would use as the basis for legally binding regulations from 2011 at the latest.²⁵⁷

A lot of what the Alliance party proposed in the motion could also be found in the amendment put forward by the SDLP. Both of the parties called on the Minister to go back to her proposed transfer test. Also, both of the parties argued that the Minister should allow a two year period of temporary arrangements, in order for the Assembly to reach consensus on a long term solution for the education system. However, there were three issues the SDLP found necessary to include: First of all, to prevent the new arrangements from becoming another means of academic selection, it was a need to clarify that the new transfer test could not be used as entrance criteria alone. Secondly, the SDLP argued that to tackle the problem of social deprivation, the first criterion in the Minister's Guidelines for Transfer 2010 should be implemented in the entrance criteria. Thirdly, the SDLP argued that one of the reasons no consensus on the future education system had been reached, was that the debate so far had lacked the practical implication of how a non-selective education system would work. In order for the parties involved to accomplish a degree of confidence in this type of system, the SDLP argued that there was a need for an education-led working group. During the two-year period with the proposed interim measures, the SDLP claimed that this group would be able to show the practical implications of the proposals by the Department of Education.²⁵⁸

Previously, the UUP together with DUP rejected to discuss the Minister's proposal. Now, however, the UUP supported the amendment put forward by the SDLP, and the DUP supported the motion of Alliance party. However, the parties did not support it for the same

²⁵⁶ Lunn, T. (24.03.09): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

²⁵⁷ Bradley, D. (24.03.09): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

²⁵⁸ Bradley, D. (24.03.09): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

reasons. Although the UUP recognized that grammar schools considered introducing their own tests, the party did not find it to be a sustainable solution for transfer in the future. Interestingly, when the Minister put forward her proposal, the UUP had problems with the new transfer test, and questioned if it would be better to introduce a new test without having a pilot scheme to see if it actually worked. Now, the UUP argued that the party was “happy to support the recommissioning of the CCEA test, which the Minister unwisely abandoned”.²⁵⁹ The DUP claimed that Sinn Fein had not been able to abolish academic selection, which was secured in the St. Andrews Agreement. According to DUP, Sinn Fein had problems with acknowledging this, and the DUP found that the Alliance party’s motion recognised the reality: schools could choose to issue their own entrance tests. The motion proposed a two-year breathing space, in which the DUP found necessary to have a proper debate, and calm reflection on the issue.

The DUP did not find the motion put forward by the Alliance party to propose the best solution to the situation. Still, the party claimed it provided a better alternative rather than having no selection. The DUP argued, however, that the retention of selection remained an important part of its education policy. The party could not support the amendment of SDLP, arguing that: “Given that academic selection has been retained through legislation, it would have been a much more productive use of the SDLP’s time to put forward a proposal incorporating that fact in a way that would be of benefit to children across Northern Ireland”.²⁶⁰ The DUP claimed that if what the Minister had previously said was the case, that the Council for Curriculum, Assessment and Examination could produce a new transfer test, then it should be done. During a three-year period, when this temporary transfer test was to be used, the parties should work together to create a long-term method of transfer, which included academic selection and that also addressed the flaws on the previous 11-plus.²⁶¹

The Minister of Education argued that the Alliance party’s motion, and the SDLP’s amendment was “(...) yet another attempt to block or slow down the process of change that I have set in motion”.²⁶² Ruane also accused the parties for trying to keep an education system that had already proven to be a failed one, and for proposing to keep the status quo. The

²⁵⁹ McCrea, B. (24.03.09): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

²⁶⁰ McIlveen, M. (24.03.09): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

²⁶¹ McIlveen, M. (24.03.09): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

²⁶² Ruane, C. (24.03.09): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

Minister and her party found it regrettable that the Alliance party and the SDLP had departed from the parties previous education policy.²⁶³ Also, Sinn Fein questioned their actions, as both parties previously had argued for a non-selective education system. However, when the Minister of Education put forward her original proposal which ultimately meant the end of academic selection, neither Alliance party nor SDLP supported the proposal. In fact, SDLP had accused the Minister for caving into pressure from the parties who opposed reform.

By putting forward their motions, the Alliance party and SDLP had found a way of retaining academic selection into the future, Sinn Fein argued. The motion thus marked an example of yet another betrayal of the mandate to abolish academic selection, which Alliance party and SDLP had argued for throughout the process.²⁶⁴ On the SDLP's proposal of the set up of a education working group, the Minister responded: "(...) as if Burns, Gallagher, Costello and the non-selective systems that dominate the PISA tables have not told us enough already".²⁶⁵ According to the Minister, seeking interim measures gave a clear message of wanting to keep the status quo. That meant two more years of social selection. As Sinn Fein argued: "On Sinn Fein's watch, the system will not continue".²⁶⁶ The absence of a transfer test and no regulation was the results of the refusal to engage politically, and to discuss the proposals, according to the Minister. Ruane argued: "Rather than continue to knock on doors that have already been shut in our faces, rather than revisit ideas of proposals blocked, then blocked again (...). The train has left the station. Transfer 2010 is departmental policy (...)".²⁶⁷

Moving forward with no consensus

As mentioned earlier, the Guiding Principles on Transfer 2010 were a part of Sinn Fein's education reform package. According to the Minister of Education, the guidelines represented the foundation of that reform package. Once that was in place, it was time to move on. The Alliance party initiated talks between the parties of the Assembly, to try and find a solution to the unregulated education system, but Sinn Fein choose not to join.

²⁶³ McLaughlin, M. (24.03.09): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

²⁶⁴ McLaughlin, M. (24.03.09): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

²⁶⁵ Ruane, C. (24.03.09): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

²⁶⁶ O'Dowd, J. (24.03.09): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

²⁶⁷ Ruane, C. (24.03.09): Northern Ireland Assembly Meeting. Hansard Report.

As I have shown above, the St. Andrews Agreement and the Assembly Election in 2007 shaped the future for the debate on the selective education system in two ways. Firstly, as part of the St. Andrews Agreement negotiations, DUP managed to legally protect academic selection. Secondly, the results of the Assembly Elections in 2007 was that DUP and Sinn Fein became the two biggest parties on unionist and nationalist side, respectively. Therefore, in order to reach political agreement on any issue, the support of both parties was needed. As we have seen during the process of this debate, the DUP's and Sinn Fein's view on academic selection in particular, was fundamentally split. As long as any proposal did not include academic selection as part of their entrance criteria, DUP could veto. As long as the proposal did include academic selection criteria, Sinn Fein could veto.

In the search for consensus, the politicians faced the constitutional settlements of the Belfast Agreement and the St. Andrews Agreement. The cross-community vote arrangements together with two very differentiated opinions on the selective education system, made it impossible for the Assembly to reach consensus. Ultimately, no political agreement has been reached. Ignoring the Assembly's dissatisfaction, the Minister of Education, Caitriona Ruane decided to move forward and issued her guidelines for transfer 2010. The Guidelines for Transfer 2010, was followed by the Guidelines for Transfer 2011. The Minister and her party believed that eventually, the use of guidelines would become the mainstream because they believed that after a while, post-primary schools favouring academic selection would see the advantages of using the guidelines. However, there was no way of knowing what the outcome would be. The guidelines were non-legislative, with the result of some schools still chose to use academic selection as entrance criteria. It meant that pupil's who wanted entrance to these grammar schools, given that each grammar school could create its own separate transfer test, now faced more than one transfer test.

As we have seen so far, the debate on the selective education system did not have a proper ending in terms of the political parties reaching consensus on the issue of academic selection. However, the debate had an end in the sense that the new departmental policy that was introduced did not depend on academic selection and the 11-plus. The debate on the selective education system had been the major issue in the educational landscape in both the first- and the second phase of this debate. As we will see in the following, during the election campaign leading up to the United Kingdom General Election in 2011, the political parties seemed to have had a change of priority when it came to the debate on the selective education system.

Winners and losers?

On February 10th, 2009 the Chairman of the Education Committee, Mervyn Storey said to the *Belfast Telegraph*: “I want parents, pupils, and teachers to understand that academic selection will continue in Northern Ireland. There is absolutely nothing which Caitriona Ruane or indeed anyone else can do to alter that reality”.²⁶⁸ However, in an interview in 2011, two years later, Storey admitted that academic selection was no longer a priority for the Committee, saying that “Our difficulty in putting transfer as a priority that in the absence of political consensus, all you will do is discuss and discuss and you won’t get outcomes. So, reluctantly and unfortunately, what we now have to recognise is that the process is already in place”.²⁶⁹ What had happened?

The debate on the selective education system in Northern Ireland had been one of the “high political” issues during the last decade.²⁷⁰ When the Guiding Principles on Transfer 2010 was announced as the new Departmental Policy for Education in 2009, and despite the political parties strong reactions to it being faced with an unregulated education system, the Education Minister moved forward. The situation two years later was somewhat different. As the Chairman of the Education Committee argued, the politicians could discuss and discuss, but there would be no outcomes. It seemed that Sinn Fein, the Education Minister and the Committee for Education had come to terms with the situation of having an unregulated education system, and had moved forward. In the 2011 Assembly Election, Sinn Fein once again selected the Department of Education, and the former educational spokesman John O’Dowd became the new Minister of Education.

In the following, I have chosen to study the political parties 2011 Assembly Election Manifestos, to find how each party described the situation on the education front. These Manifestos also explain the political parties main priorities, as well as their strategies for the next political term. Finally, we will discuss whether there have been any winners and losers in

²⁶⁸ Quote located in: Torney, K. (10.02.09): “Schools will ignore Ruane guidelines”.
www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk (read 08.04.13)

²⁶⁹ Quote located in: Blee, E. (28.01.11): “Mervyn Storey: top priorities on Education Committee”.
www.agendani.com (read 08.04.13)

²⁷⁰ Knox, C. (2010:31): “Devolution and the governance of Northern Ireland”. Manchester University Press. Manchester and New York.

this debate, and to what degree one can argue that the debate on the selective education system has an end.

Chaos in the education system of Northern Ireland?

In the party's Assembly Election Manifesto for 2011, Sinn Fein argued that one of their achievements in the past four years of having the Department of Education Portfolio, had been to end the 11-plus. Instead of transfer to post-primary education based on a test, the party had introduced a system based on "parental preference and a Pupil Profile to inform parents of children transferring to all ability (11-18) post-primary education".²⁷¹ However, the rest of the political parties did not have the same perception of what had happened. The Alliance party argued that one of the most important issue that faced the society still remained the debate on the structure on their education system. According to the Alliance party, it was vital that educational decisions were based on what was best for their children, instead of political positions, hence referring to the educational deadlock that the politicians had come to, with DUP and Sinn Fein not being able to reach agreement. Although the Alliance party welcomed the end of the 11-plus, the party argued that what had replaced it was not an improvement. It was an education system that placed too much burden on children and teachers. Alliance party claimed that the previous Minister, Caitriona Ruane, had failed to engage on the matter, and ignored calls for talk on the important issue.²⁷²

The SDLP argued that instead of having a debate on the children and their future, the previous four years had been about the he politics of stalemate. According to the party, it was now a "chaotic situation created by Sinn Fein and the DUP through the parties failure to agree a way forward on post-primary transfer".²⁷³ The UUP argued that to abolish the 11-plus with no alternative in place was thoughtless, and had led to moving from a poor situation to one of self-inflicted chaos. Faced with the unregulated system, the UUP claimed that the state had lost control over a major component in the delivery of education. It was an education system where schools competed for enrolments, which was neither conductive nor fair, the UUP argued. Also, the party claimed that the new arrangements involved a risk to the great results

²⁷¹ Sinn Fein: 2011 Assembly Election Manifesto. www.sinnfein.ie (read 08.04.13)

²⁷² Alliance Party: 2011 Assembly Election Manifesto. www.allianceparty.org (Read 11.04.13)

²⁷³ SDLP: 2011 Assembly Election Manifesto. www.sdlp.ie (Read 10.04.13)

produced by grammar schools, which now admitted pupils with lower grades.²⁷⁴ The DUP described the last four years as ones of chaos in the Department of Education.²⁷⁵ However, contrasting Sinn Fein's description of their achievement during the last four years, DUP argued that they had saved Grammar Schools, and preserved their rights to include academic selection as entrance criteria.²⁷⁶ However, will the character of these descriptions be found in the political parties future educational priorities and strategies?

Future educational priorities and strategies

An interesting aspect emerged during the 2011 Assembly election campaign when the political parties were describing their future plans for the education system. The space awarded by the political parties on how to solve the situation on the transfer system, varied. Therefore, it appeared to be a misconception between *how* the parties described the education system, and the actual *role* they allocated for it in their future plans.

As part of their achievement in ending the 11-plus and the introduction of a new arrangements for transfer, Sinn Fein argued that in the next four years, the party would keep on moving forward, and support and promote the rest of their education reform package. This involved the establishment of the Education and Skills Authority (ESA), instead of the nine Education and Library Boards to manage their schools; the Early Years (0-6) Strategy, aimed to even out inequality in their education system during the early years; the Entitlement Framework which aimed to get 24 key stage subjects at 14, and 27 subjects post-16 for the pupils to choose from; the numeracy and literacy strategy which aimed to raise standards in numeracy and literacy; and the Special Education Need (SEN) strategy which was to develop means to help children who needed it as early as possible in their school years.

The Alliance party argued in their election manifesto that not enough had been done to achieve consensus on the structure in the education system. Therefore, the party would continue to work towards reaching consensus. Although the Alliance party wanted this to be done in a constructive and non-confrontational manner, the party gave no further detail on how it was to happen in practice. What seemed to be the top priority of the Alliance party in

²⁷⁴ UUP: Education Policy on Academic Selection. www.uup.org (Read 08.04.13)

²⁷⁵ DUP: Education Policy: "Education Putting our young people first". www.mydup.com (Read 08.04.11)

²⁷⁶ DUP. (12.04.11): "40 Of Our Achievements in 4 Years". www.mydup.com (Read 11.04.13)

this election was to support integrated and mixed education. The party viewed integrated education as part of the solution. According to the Alliance party, there was a range of options to work towards integrated education. Also, the party argued integrated education would provide the social, economical benefits, and most of all allow them to create the much-needed modern education system “fit for the 21st century”.²⁷⁷

SDLP argued that the uncertainty around the transfer to post-primary schools needed to be resolved. The way the party intended to do this was to move beyond the political stalemate. Therefore, their top priority in doing so was to invest and provide for nursery and primary school children. The party would also make further and higher education a priority. The SDLP would make sure that children could receive the support they needed to secure their places at universities and colleges. Integrated education was also an important issue for the SDLP, and the party argued that it was many possibilities to have a shared education, without the loss of diversity in the community.

Both the Alliance party and SDLP supported the establishment of Education and Skills Authority, because it would offer a better way to administer the education sector. The parties also supported Sinn Fein in that literacy and numeracy; and early years (0-6) strategies were good initiatives to tackle underachievement.

As opposed to the Alliance party and the SDLP, the UUP argued that the parties remained committed to the policy of academic selection.²⁷⁸ The UUP would reiterate their call for introducing a temporary transfer test, for a period of two years. The party believed that these two years was needed in order for the political parties to reach an agreement on a long time solution for the transfer procedure. However, no details on how the UUP was going to achieve this were given. The UUP’s education policy also included other priorities: one of them was integrated education. UUP’s long-time educational goal for the education system was to create a single education system where children were taught together. The party argued that their segregated education system was no longer appropriate. There was no need for children to be educated separately because they came from different backgrounds.²⁷⁹

²⁷⁷ Alliance Party: 2011 Assembly Election Manifesto. www.allianceparty.org (Read 11.04.13)

²⁷⁸ UUP: Education Policy. www.uup.org (Read 08.04.13)

²⁷⁹ UUP: Education Policy. www.uup.org (Read 08.04.13)

According to UUP, the *Shared Education Programme (SEP)*²⁸⁰ was an example of the willingness of schools, pupils and parents to move towards sharing. Therefore, the UUP would work to make sure that all schools should have the opportunity to participate in this programme. Also, the party's focus in the next four years would be on the developments of Special Education Needs; Free School Meals; Educational Inequality and Standards in literacy and numeracy.²⁸¹

In their Assembly Election 2011 Manifesto, the DUP argued it would bring stability to the education sector.²⁸² In order to do that, a long-term plan for the education sector was needed. In this long-term plan, a roadmap for the creation of a single education system seemed to be the main priority of the party. The DUP would promote sharing between schools, including resources, assets and spaces. However, academic selection also remained an important part of this long-term plan. The DUP would continue to support academic selection, which in the party's own opinion, provided the best way of matching pupils to the most appropriate post-primary school according to their individual needs.²⁸³ Supporting academic selection also included the preservation of grammar schools, and letting the Boards of Governors decide what kind of admission criteria they found suitable. Instead of having the schools themselves being responsible for creating their own transfer test, the DUP would work to deliver a single form for assessment for post-primary transfer. For the pupils who did not want to pursue education through grammar schools, the DUP argued it would deliver other attractive vocational opportunities for them to pursue. Other priorities of the DUP remained similar to the once of Sinn Fein, Alliance party, SDLP and the UUP. Underachievement was still an issue that needed to be addressed, and early years measures and special education needs programme remained important elements in that work.²⁸⁴

The Alliance party, the UUP and SDLP described the situation as a self-inflicted chaos and argued that it had happened because of the political stalemate between Sinn Fein and the DUP. However, at the same time, the parties did not allow as much space as previously for the debate on the selective education system in their manifestos. It seemed as if they had

²⁸⁰ SEP first started in 2007. It is a cross-sectorial collaboration programme concentrating on substantive, curriculum based activities.

²⁸¹ UUP: Education Policy. www.uup.org (Read 08.04.13)

²⁸² DUP: 2011 Assembly Election Manifesto. www.mydup.com (read 08.04.13)

²⁸³ DUP: 2011 Assembly Election Manifesto. www.mydup.com (read 08.04.13)

²⁸⁴ DUP: 2011 Assembly Election Manifesto. www.mydup.com (read 08.04.13)

moved away from the political stalemate on academic selection, and had started to look at other factors to improve the education system. Central to these plans were the development of strategies on early years measures and special needs programmes, but also integrated education.

The debate on the religiously segregated education system had been an issue of discussion among the politicians, however not in the same manner as the debate on the selective education system had been. Although it was the Labour Government who first initiated the research on the effects of the selective education system, it was Sinn Fein who drove the debate forward by launching a debate on the issue, and initiating more research. While the issue of integrated education have been a subject of political discussion, no political party have initiated or acted as a driving force in putting this issue on the political agenda. As mentioned previously, the religiously segregated education system has been one of the most studied fields within the educational research in Northern Ireland; however, researchers have been divided in terms of what kind of role integrated education played in reconciliation in the community. However, the issue of integrated education becoming a central element in the political parties manifestos marks a striking change, and might suggest that it will be an important matter on the political agenda in the next four years to come. Did this mean the end of the debate on the selective education system, and in that case, was there any winners and losers in this debate?

One of their achievements according to Sinn Fein was that the party had ended the 11-plus, and introduced a new Education Policy which did not depend on academic selection. The new transfer arrangements to post-primary education were based on pupils' and parental choice. According to the party, the vital element of the party's education reform package had been dealt with. Sinn Fein would continue to develop the rest of this education reform package. The political parties attention seemed to have turned away from the issue of academic selection. This seems to suggest that in practice, Sinn Fein has won.

On the other hand, the new education arrangements did not come as a result of political agreement. Consequently, academic selection still remains a part of the transfer procedure, because the DUP had legally secured it as part of the negotiations in the St. Andrews Agreement. In this sense, the debate on the selective education system does not have an ending, and so far it can be argued that in theory the DUP has won. But was it just in theory?

The latest figures on the number of grammar schools who chose to use academic selection, and the total number of pupils in year 7 who took the test might suggest the opposite.²⁸⁵

When the Guidelines for Transfer 2010 were introduced, Sinn Fein ended all-party talks on the issue of the selective education system, which broke down in 2010. Since then, the issue of academic selection has not been on the political agenda. However, the number of pupils in year 7 who took the unregulated transfers tests two years later in 2012 might suggest that this will change. Four years after the last official 11-plus was held, 68 Grammar schools still used academic selection as entrance criteria.²⁸⁶ 13,865 pupils took the unofficial transfer tests in 2012, which accounted for around 64% of the total number of pupils in year 7.²⁸⁷ Although the Catholic Bishops claimed that all of their Grammar schools would move away from using academic selection as entrance criteria by the year of 2015, only two of the Catholic Grammar schools have officially confirmed this as of December 2012.²⁸⁸

Will there be a phase 3 of this debate? One of the main questions that followed the former Education Minister Martin McGuinness decision to end the 11-plus in October 2002 was whether it was the will of the people to end academic selection. The latest figures on the number of pupils taking the unofficial transfer tests might suggest otherwise. I believe that we have not seen the end of the debate on the selective education system in Northern Ireland.

²⁸⁵ Fergus, L. (10.11.12): "Two-thirds of P7s take transfer tests". www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk (Read 09.05.13)

²⁸⁶ Fergus, L. (10.11.12): "Two-thirds of P7s take transfer tests". www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk (Read 09.05.13)

²⁸⁷ Fergus, L. (10.11.12): "Two-thirds of P7s take transfer tests". www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk (Read 09.05.13)

²⁸⁸ *UTV News* (09.11.12): "Record entry for grammar school tests". www.u.tv.news/ (Read 09.05.13)

CONCLUSION

In the years following the signing of the Belfast Agreement in 1998, the central issue of discussion was the future of Northern Ireland. The politicians turned to the role of education, and it was especially one area in the education sector that received a great deal of attention: Academic selection. The selective education system became one of the most debated matters on the political agenda in Northern Ireland. I have analysed the process of this debate, and the first main problem I addressed in the introduction of this thesis was: *What were the political parties' views on academic selection; which arguments did they use and which political strategies did they follow during the debate? Which political cleavages can be identified in the debate, and did the parties' visions, arguments or strategies change throughout the process?*

The first phase of the debate was characterised by the presentation of views and visions on education, it was a phase that involved the struggle to define change: *Whether* there was a need for change and *what* this change was to be. It was a phase where the political parties could give their views and visions on the future arrangement for the education system. A central goal was that any new arrangements should provide equality of opportunity for all. But it was when the parties were to address *how* this vision was to be achieved, that a marked division of opinion became visible: One that opposed academic selection, and one that favoured academic selection. An interesting aspect that emerged was that these two strands of opinions fell along the same lines as the nationalist vs. unionist cleavage.

On the nationalist side we have Sinn Fein, which had the responsibility for the Department of Education throughout the entire period of this debate, with the exception of the periods of Direct Rule. It was the Minister of Education, Martin McGuinness who launched this debate, and ultimately it was Sinn Fein who was driving this debate forward by initiating discussions, research, consultation periods, and that came up with proposals for new arrangements in the education system. Although Sinn Fein took an open approach to this debate, the party made it clear that they opposed the 11-plus and academic selection. The party viewed the 11-plus as the symptom, but claimed that it was academic selection that was the problem, therefore the two issues was interchangeably connected. Also, the SDLP opposed academic selection, and continued to believe that a comprehensive education system was needed to provide equality of opportunity for all. Although the Alliance party and Northern Ireland Women's Coalition

party did not identify themselves according to nationalist or unionist terms, the parties supported the nationalist parties opinion on the issue of academic selection. The Alliance party originally chose a more centred approach to this issue, were the party argued that some form of selection could be found to be inevitable when discussing the future education arrangements. However as the debate continued, the party moved towards the same opinion as that of the SDLP and Sinn Fein, and supported the parties' view in the abolishment of academic selection and the 11-plus.

However, the unionist parties, with the exception of the PUP, had the opposite view. The DUP made their position clear, and argued that because children had different abilities there should be different educational routes available for them to follow. The only way to provide the best measure for deciding which pathway to follow was academic selection. According to the DUP, the problem was found within the secondary school sector, and not because of academic selection. Therefore, the party claimed that it was the secondary schools that the politicians should work to improve. Initially, there seemed to be some ambiguities within the UUP on the issue of academic selection. However, as the process continued, the UUP favoured academic selection, although the party admitted that there were flaws related to the 11-plus. The PUP distinguished itself from the rest of the unionist parties. To the PUP it was a major concern that the results produced by the 11-plus indicated that pupils from protestant working class areas performed worse compared to pupils from catholic working class areas. Therefore, the PUP opposed the 11-plus and academic selection, and supported the views of the nationalist parties.

Although the two strands of opinions continued to play an important role in the next phase, it was especially in the second phase of this debate that the political framework became a prominent feature. The Northern Ireland Assembly was suspended in October 2002, and was under Direct Rule from Westminster. The responsibility for the progress of the debate therefore moved to the so-called appointed ministers in Westminster. After the signing of the St. Andrews Agreement in 2006, and the return of devolution in Northern Ireland in 2007, there was a significant change to the debate on the selective education system. The debate no longer involved the definition of change, now it was about the search for consensus. The period of Direct Rule, along with the requirements from the St. Andrews Agreement, created a larger pressure for the politicians and the political parties in Northern Ireland to work collaboratively. This search faced several challenges, due to the implication of the tense

political situation, which appeared in a more direct way in the second phase, compared to the former. Central to the framework influencing the debate in this phase was the fact that academic selection had been legally secured as part of the negotiations in the St. Andrews Agreement, the need for cross-community support, and the need for cross-community support.

Of particular significance in this phase is also the dynamics that emerged between the political parties. Following the Assembly elections in 2003 and 2007, there was a fundamental rearranging in the strength of the political parties: The UUP that was the former largest party on Unionist side had lost many of their electoral votes to the DUP, which now had become the largest party on unionist side. Overall, the DUP had become the largest party in Northern Ireland. The same had happened on the nationalist side, where the SDLP, the former largest party, had lost many of its electoral votes to Sinn Fein that now had become the largest party on nationalist side. Overall, Sinn Fein had become the second largest party.

As mentioned in chapter 2 in the period of Direct Rule from 2002 to 2007, one of the main concerns of the UUP and the DUP was what would happen once academic selection was gone, and how that would eventually affect grammar schools. Therefore, the DUP managed to legally secure academic selection in the St. Andrews Agreement. It meant that if there was no political agreement reached on the issue of academic selection, grammar schools were free to create their own entrance tests. The political parties faced major challenges when working towards a proposal that would provide the necessary consensus. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the political system that was introduced in Northern Ireland after the signing of the Belfast Agreement, involved the need for cross-community support on any political decision that was to be made.

Cross-community voting arrangement was introduced as a measure to ensure that when a political agreement had been reached, it had been based on a power-sharing arrangement that had the support from each side of the community. It was a necessary measure to ensure that devolution could continue. Given that the DUP and Sinn Fein had become the largest parties on each side of their respective community, both their support was needed to reach political agreement. However, these parties belonged to the opposite sides in the debate. It meant that if a proposal did not include academic selection, DUP could veto, and if it did include academic selection, Sinn Fein could veto. Ultimately, this meant that no consensus could be

reached without changes in the policies of these two parties. It also meant that to a large degree, the SDLP, the UUP and Alliance party were left out of the equation.

The second main problem I addressed throughout this thesis was: *How did the unstable political situation in Northern Ireland influence the debate on academic selection?* Studying this debate has also given a deeper insight into the workings and dynamics of the new Northern Irish governmental system in a formative period. Overall, this debate has to a large extent been about the parties fronting their own policy. The discussions in the Assembly involved a lot of talk about the importance of reaching consensus, however, no political party was prepared to make the compromise needed in order to achieve political agreement. This was especially the case when the Minister of Education presented her proposals in May 2008. As this proposal involved the end of academic selection, one would have expected that it would have the support of at least Alliance party and the SDLP, who favoured a non-academic education system. However, that was not the case.

This might be explained by the special dynamics between the parties on each side of the nationalist/unionist division, as well as within the communities. First of all, the DUP did not accept Sinn Fein as a member of the Northern Ireland Executive. In fact there were two occasions when the DUP tried to first exclude Sinn Fein from the Executive, and secondly to remove Martin McGuinness from the position as Minister of Education. Going back to the beginning of the debate, the DUP, and to a certain degree the UUP as well, did not participate as much in the beginning of this debate as they did when the review body was established, and proposals were on the table. This increase in participation could be explained in that the parties did not acknowledge and recognise Sinn Fein as a worthy member of the Executive or the Assembly in the first years following the signing of the Belfast Agreement in 1998. However, once the process of the debate started to include actual proposals, the parties could not afford to lose, and therefore got more involved in the debate.

Secondly, this dynamics could also be found within the communities as well. Besides the competition of becoming the largest party overall in Northern Ireland, there was also a struggle between the parties to become the largest party within each community. This was especially the case for the SDLP and Sinn Fein on the nationalist side. The SDLP was the largest party on nationalist side after the Assembly election in 1998, however, in the following Assembly Elections in 2003 and 2007, they lost the majority of their electoral votes

to Sinn Fein. The same pattern could be found on unionist side, where DUP won the majority of the unionist votes over the UUP, and became the largest party. An interesting aspect was that both the DUP and Sinn Fein were found to have very strong principled views in most political matters, however the SDLP and UUP had for a long time been in the middle, and were more inclined to find a solution. This could partly explain why both the UUP and the SDLP had lost their votes to the DUP and Sinn Fein respectively. It seems that the electorate in the respective communities found Sinn Fein and the DUP the better representatives of their communities' interests in the on-going political struggle in the Assembly. Thus, the conditions created because of this internal dynamics might explain why the SDLP did not want to support Sinn Fein's proposal even though SDLP also wanted to end academic selection. It was not that they did not support the end of academic selection, however, in order to regain the position as the largest party on nationalist side, it seems that the SDLP found it necessary to promote the party's own opinion in the debate.

A culture of political point scoring had emerged. Instead of the debate moving forward, and political agreement being reached, the political parties moved in circles where each of them promoted their own opinion on the issue. The debate no longer concerned *what* the political parties' opinion on academic selection was, the debate was now about the parties promoting their own views as the *right* one, in order to achieve the support of the electorate. Ultimately, the culture of political point scoring led to a political deadlock on the issue of academic selection, and Sinn Fein moved forward with their Guidelines for Transfer 2010, and ended the all-party talks on the issue in 2010.

There are two ways to interpret this so-called deadlock. The fact that the political parties did not reach political agreement might suggest that it was a general political deadlock produced by a political power sharing governmental framework that instead of creating conditions that would favour compromise, did the opposite.

It is significant here that this debate involved very strong views on the issue of academic selection, views which fell together with the traditional lines of divisions between nationalists and unionists. The mechanism introduced to prevent any of these sides to dominate the other, made it thus impossible for the political parties to reach a majority decision. Therefore, the debate resulted into a culture of political point scoring: There was a lot of talk about the need to reach consensus, however, there was also a lack of willingness to make the compromise

needed for consensus to be achieved. This resulted in the political parties being unable to reach consensus on the issue of academic selection, and Northern Ireland was thus left with an unregulated education system.

On the other hand, we can attack this problem from another angle. Yes, the debate on the selective education system involved continuous rounds of discussing the same issue over and over again, without any political agreement being reached. However, it is impossible to understand the logic of this debate simply by comparing it with other political systems. Because this is such a different political system, and the debate takes place in such an unstable political context, it is probably more fruitful to compare it to itself to how the political situation used to be.

When the Belfast Agreement was signed in 1998, the society in Northern Ireland had been in conflict for nearly four decades. The British government in Westminster had to introduce Direct Rule, because the local authority was unable to govern its own country. The signing of the agreement marked a milestone in the process towards peace in Northern Ireland, and for a long time the society could start looking towards the future. However, some of the political parties' represented in the Assembly on the 29th of November when devolution of power returned to Northern Ireland, were former enemies. Some of the parties did not recognise each other at first, as the example of the DUP who tried to exclude Sinn Fein from the Executive in 2000, and later on tried to remove Martin McGuinness from his position as the Minister of Education. The Northern Ireland Assembly and the Executive was suspended on four occasions in the first decade after the agreement, the last one lasted for nearly five years. Still, what happened after devolution returned in May 2007 was that the former enemies of the DUP and Sinn Fein had agreed to share power. Following the Assembly Elections in 2003 and 2007, the DUP and Sinn Fein had become the largest parties in Northern Ireland respectively. Today, Northern Ireland is in its longest period of devolution after the signing of the Belfast Agreement.

The debate on the selective education system involved very, strongly held views on academic selection and especially fervent, were the differences of opinions between the DUP and Sinn Fein. Ultimately, the debate came to the point where both of the parties' support, were needed to reach political agreement. And yes, the two parties did not reach political agreement on the issue of academic selection and Northern Ireland was left with an unregulated education

system. Despite all of this, no crisis emerged in the sense that the Assembly and the Executive were suspended. Devolution in Northern Ireland still exists, even though the two parties that were to share power had *the most* differentiated views on one of the major issues on the political agenda. This is a major achievement. Likewise is the achievement of Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness working together, and sharing power as First Minister and Deputy First Minister. Two years before the signing of the St. Andrews Agreement, there were few who would have thought that it could ever be possible that the DUP and Sinn Fein shared power.

The political process in Northern Ireland can at times be confusing and slow, and the distance between the political parties are sometimes so far apart that a deadlock is unavoidable. However, there still exist an arena for political issues to be discussed, and political agreement being reached.

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Abstract

Fredsavtalen i 1998 markerte en viktig milepæl i den nord-irske fredsprosessen, og i denne sammenheng ble fremtiden til Nord-Irland et sentralt tema. Samfunnet vendte seg mot utdanningssektoren og dens muligheter for forsoning. Men det var særlig én side ved det nord-irske skolesystemet som fikk spesiell oppmerksomhet på det politiske plan: det selektive utdanningssystemet, som innebar at resultatene fra den såkalte 11-pluss-testen, avgjorde om elevene fikk gå på de mer akademisk-rettete ”Grammar Schools”, eller vanlige ”Secondary Schools”. Denne metoden, akademisk seleksjon, ble et av de mest debatterte tema blant politikerne i løpet av det første tiåret etter at fredsavtalen ble inngått.

I denne oppgaven har jeg studert denne debatten som fant sted i perioden 2000-2011, og har vurdert hvilke syn de nord-irske partiene hadde i forhold til akademisk seleksjon, hvordan partiene argumenterte og hvilke strategier de fulgte i løpet av denne debatten. Det ble tidlig klart at denne debatten innebar delte oppfatninger om hvilke effekter akademisk seleksjon hadde for elevene. Det har derfor vært en viktig del av denne oppgaven å fremheve hva disse ulike oppfatningene innebar. Et sentralt moment har også vært at partienes meninger, argumentasjoner og strategier har utviklet seg gjennom prosessen, som også har vært et viktig aspekt å følge gjennom debatten.

Nord-Irland var inne i en svært ustabil politisk periode når denne debatten foregikk, der konflikten fortsatt preget forholdene mellom de politiske partiene. Grunnet uenigheter mellom partiene ble det nord-irske parlamentet og regjeringen suspendert opp til flere ganger i denne perioden, noe som førte til at debatten ble flyttet til Westminster. På den måten, hadde den politiske situasjonen i Nord-Irland en sterk innflytelse i forhold til de politiske rammevilkår debatten om akademisk seleksjon utviklet seg innenfor. Dette har også vært et sentralt tema i denne oppgaven, der min studie i tillegg til å gi innsikt i de ulike synspunktene på utdanningsspørsmål, også bidrar til å kaste nytt lys over utviklingen av nord-irsk politikk etter fredsavtalen i 1998.