



**RESPONSE TO GUIDANCE ON POST-PRIMARY
SCHOOL ADMISSIONS FOR 2010/2011 SCHOOL YEAR**

“It’s posh vs. poor”

***“The teachers in the grammar schools and
the teachers in the secondary schools – if
they all have the same qualifications, why
can’t they teach the same?”***

April 2009

Introduction

Include Youth promotes best practice with young people in need or at risk. We achieve this through the development and promotion of resources, the provision of training, information and support of practitioners and organisations. We also undertake activities aimed at influencing public policy and policy awareness – both locally and nationally.

Amongst the young people at risk with whom, and on whose behalf, Include Youth works are young people from socially disadvantaged areas, those with a learning disability, those with special needs, those who have been truanting, suspended or expelled from school, those from a care background, those who had a negative parenting experience, young people who have committed or are at risk of committing crime, misusing drugs or alcohol, undertaking unsafe sexual behaviour or other harmful activities, or of being harmed themselves.

Include Youth runs the Young Voices project, a participation project for young people who have been involved or are at risk of becoming involved in the criminal justice system, with the aim of supporting these young people to become involved in decision-making processes which impact on their lives. Currently the Young Voices Project supports young people in custody (Hydebank Wood YOC and Woodlands) as well as in the community.

Include Youth manages the LACE (Looked After Children in Education) Project which is a multi-agency partnership with the aim of promoting better educational outcomes for children and young people in care.

The Give and Take Scheme aims to improve the employability and increase the self esteem of young people in need or at risk from across Northern Ireland. The Scheme works with approximately 135 young people from a care or criminal justice background. The Scheme aims to support young people to overcome particular barriers that prevent them from moving into mainstream training or employment and towards independent living. 75% of people on the Scheme are care experienced. The Scheme provides essential skills training (ICT, English and maths) to all of the young people.

In addition, Include Youth runs the YOYO Practitioners Forum, which draws together professionals from a range of statutory, voluntary and community organisations working directly with young people in need or at risk, and meets on a quarterly basis.

General Comments

Include Youth welcomes the publication of the Guidance and is pleased to have the opportunity to make this response.

Include Youth submitted a detailed response to “Every School a Good School”, and much of the content of our response to the Guidance draws heavily on that paper. In preparation for our response to Every School a Good School we consulted young people on their experiences of the transfer test and asked their opinion on the current form of selection. We feel that much of what they said is still relevant to the current debate and we have taken this opportunity to remind the Department of their views and experiences.

The material we refer to in this response is drawn from a series of various group sessions with young people (aged 15- 21) from across the organisation. The overwhelming majority of young people we talked to had negative educational experiences and/or poor educational attainment.

We believe their comments are insightful and relevant and have much to offer any strategy designed to promote inclusive education. To improve the life chances of these young people we must understand their lives in entirety and consider how all their life experiences impact ultimately on their experience of school.

Specific Comments

Include Youth acknowledge that all children do not possess the same level of ability but we firmly believe that all children, regardless of academic ability should be valued by society and should be given the opportunity to reach their full potential. We believe that the most recent system of selection is discriminatory in a way that

impacts on the most disadvantaged and vulnerable young people. We therefore, support the Minister in her plans to abolish academic selection and wholeheartedly agree that admissions decisions should be fair and give each child the opportunity to reach their full potential.

Evidence has shown that there is a clear link between performance in the test and social disadvantage, with those living in poverty performing less well. We are also concerned that preparation for the test impacts on the learning experience in the classroom resulting in a less than complete delivery of the curriculum. There is also concern that those pupils not sitting the test do not have their wider educational needs met. Research has also highlighted the unnecessary stress sitting the test puts on young children. The recently released Kids Life and Times Survey, which surveyed over 3000 children in P7, found that only 23% of the sample felt no pressure at all doing the 11 plus (ARK, 2008).

The young people from Include Youth who were consulted on this policy document agreed that preparing for and sitting the 11 plus was a stressful time for children.

'It puts ones under stress.'

'You are too young – you are still a child.'

'It was crap, doing all the work at that age.'

'Don't agree with it – it stresses kids out''

'The 11 plus means taking it too seriously too young. It's too much responsibility to think what school to go to and what job to do.'

'What's the sense of it – I didn't do it.'

Furthermore, the young people believed that there was a stigma attached to those children who do not sit the exam, as if they were seen as second class citizens because they were not being put forward to sit it. One young woman cited the example of classmates who “*were put into a different class, P6 - people made fun of them and slagged them.*” She stated that it was humiliating and made her feel inferior to her peers who were sitting the exam.

'You felt a failure if you didn't do it.'

The young people were very aware of the divide between those who went to grammar school and those who did not.

'I just don't think it's fair, dividing the kids up like that.'

'It's a bad thing – the 'snobs' look down at you - if you are in a different uniform or a cheaper uniform (if you go to a secondary school and not a grammar school) they look at you in a bad way.'

'They look at us like we are druggies.'

'aye, cos all the smart ones go to grammar school and all the dunces like us go to high school.'

'People look at you better if you go to a grammar school.'

The perceptions of class divide and the impact of poverty on education also came through. The young people were in agreement that children from poorer backgrounds do less well at school than those from more well off backgrounds. The reasons cited for this varied, from the distraction of crime and anti social behaviour, to not being taught by parents that education is important and to the belief that children in better off families go to better schools.

'The richer people go to grammar schools.'

'It's just all posh people go to grammar schools''

'It's posh vs. poor'.

'We sit in different parts of the school bus – we sat at the back, they sat at the front of the bus and they wouldn't dare come to sit near the back with us. You don't see people mixing that often.'

*'You always get snobby ***** who go to posh schools and do well and ones who can't attend go to s**** schools and do badly – like Loughshore and Jaffe. They're b***** cos I used to go for only about an hour a day and I learnt f*** all – I just messed about, going mad basically.'*

Most of the young people did not want to keep the 11 plus and did not think it was the best method of selecting which school you go to. They felt that there should be more of an opportunity to educate children of mixed abilities in the same setting and were also supportive of continuous assessment rather than one definitive test.

'You shouldn't need to do a test – all schools should be able to accept you.'
'Everyone should have the same chance.'

'I think we should all be taught together – why don't they mix children and young people together in schools.'

'The teachers in the grammar schools and the teachers in the secondary schools – if they all have the same qualifications, why can't they teach the same?'

'The teachers in primary school would look at the children's weekly work for one year and look at their learning levels and decide from there.'

'In the first days or weeks in high school, you should do a test in English and Maths and then decide what level of classes you go into.'

Others however, thought there was merit in identifying and selecting pupils on their ability.

'I think it's good cos you get to see what level you are at.'

'Yes, cos some people are serious about getting a good education, so they may as well go somewhere everyone wants to do well, instead of just messing about all the time.'

'Yes, I think you have to split people up – some people might just be better than others, more gifted.'

One young man thought that this division between schools could be the very reason why some young people come into contact with the juvenile justice system.

'People in posh schools get educated and people who go to bad schools get in trouble, become a criminal, like I did. I reckon if I hadn't got chucked out of secondary schoolI wouldn't be in here.'

It is clear from these comments that young people have much to offer to the debate on post primary selection and they have clearly illustrated the impact selection has had on their lives. Most telling was their perception of the clear divide between those who sit the 11 plus and those who do not, and in turn those who attend grammar school and those who do not. The young people appear to carry the stigma of not attending a 'good' school with them for a long time and it evidently becomes a process of self labelling, where they see themselves as second class citizens.

We support the Minister's intention to increase the number of children from disadvantaged communities entering grammar school and subsequently achieving higher levels of educational attainment. We believe that the transfer process must mitigate against the disadvantages which many children face through no fault of their own. The transfer procedure utilised to date has only served to exacerbate those disadvantages and further increase the divide between those who succeed in education and those who are failed by the system. The previous system fails time and again the young people at risk with whom, and on whose behalf, Include Youth works. All too often the deciding factor in level of educational attainment has been about economic and social background and not intellectual ability.

We must however state our disappointment and dissatisfaction at the proposed transfer arrangements for our current P7 pupils. We find it deeply disturbing that children may have to sit multiple entrance exams for grammar schools and see this as a major impingement on children's rights and a serious indictment on all those

involved in making decisions on our children's future education. In the midst of the political wrangling children's best interests have been completely overlooked and it is shocking to think that the situation has been allowed to come to this level of disagreement.

Conclusions

Include Youth welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Guidance and we hope that our comments prove constructive in moving the debate forward. The young people's comments have highlighted the fact that children's experience of school is very much determined by their family background and the area in which they live. There are clear links between social disadvantage and educational disadvantage and the challenges for teachers working in disadvantaged schools. These multiplicity of factors result in the chances of doing well at school being stacked up against our most vulnerable children and young people. The young people appear to become disaffected from an early age and very often their experience at school only serves to reinforce that alienation. The current education system compounds and reinforces the multiple disadvantages and discrimination faced by our young people. We are supportive of an end to academic selection and to the introduction of a transfer procedure which places a value on all the range of a child's talents and abilities, and does not focus narrowly on academic achievement alone. We would also like to see a situation where all schools are valued and work together in a spirit of co-operation and sharing of resources, rather than one of competitiveness, which ultimately means some schools win and others lose. More importantly, it also means that pupils, families and communities lose too.

Include Youth

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