

**Selection by attainment and aptitude in English
secondary schools**

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Abstract

This paper presents the findings from a study of the admission arrangements for all secondary schools in England. It answers questions about the scale and extent of selection by attainment or aptitude including an account of partially selective schools. We sketch the history of selection, consider the similarity and differences between selection by aptitude and by attainment and analyse some of the issues associated with both kinds of selection.

Keywords:

Grammar schools, school admissions, selection by ability, attainment, and aptitude.

Introduction

The long running debate as to the fairness of selection by attainment or aptitude connects in part with the more recent debate on the problem of the relative underperformance of the English system (Marshall et al 1997; D'Addio 2007; Brook 2008). While the English system allows some children to reach very high levels of attainment it has the second largest *spread* of results between the highest attainment bands and the relatively poor attainment of the majority in the middle and lower attainment bands (OECD 2007; Brook 2008). The strong correlation between the social characteristics of children and their attainment, found consistently in studies (some of the more recent are PISA 2003 and the Sutton Trust 2006) means that children from less advantaged backgrounds in the UK do not equally share in the benefits of educational attainment. As a result

social mobility in the UK is one of the lowest of the industrialised countries (Marshall et al 1997; D'Addio 2007).

How and to what extent selection contributes to creating or solving the problems of educational performance and equality of opportunity are large questions and we cannot consider them in depth in this paper. Here we aim only to make available reliable data on the extent of, and arrangements for selection, in the hope that it is of use in those more extensive analyses. We address questions of extent, *How many secondary schools use selective criteria? What proportion of children are allocated by selective arrangements? Has selection increased or decreased?* And questions of procedure: *Are all or only some entered for the 11 plus test? What procedures are used for testing for aptitude?* We also consider the differences and similarities between selection by attainment and by aptitude.

To answer these questions we draw on the results from a study of the admission arrangements for all maintained secondary schools in England (Coldron et al 2008). As part of this research we recorded the details from the published admission arrangements of all those schools that select all or part of their intake by attainment or aptitude enabling us to provide a reliable, comprehensive and detailed picture of the extent and nature of this kind of selection. Details of the methodology can be found in the full report.

We begin by sketching the different histories of selection by attainment and by aptitude. We then present an analysis of the scale and extent of these kinds of selection including an account of partially selective schools. The similarity and

differences between selection by aptitude and by attainment are considered. Issues associated with these admission criteria are analysed.

Historical background

Selection by attainment

Education policy in 19th-century England reflected the stratification of English society, with broadly three separate kinds of school systems, 'the elementary schools for the working class, secondary for the middle class and private public schools for the ruling class' (Ball 2008, p 61). The schooling of the majority of the population was confined to the elementary stage and ended at fourteen. The 1944 Education Act introduced secondary schooling to the age of fifteen that was no longer restricted to those with the ability to pay or on the basis of social status or ability. The new arrangements did not however disrupt the broad segregation of different social groups into different sectors of schooling (McCaig 2000). The private sector remained and many of the children of the most wealthy sections of society continued to attend fee paying schoolsⁱ. For the majority of the population the Act introduced the 'tripartite' structure of modern, technical and grammar schools which were intended to be equal but different. The principles underlying this policy were that secondary education should be available to all and that children's needs were best met by differentiated provisionⁱⁱ. All children were to be entered for the test and allocation was on the basis of the score achieved. These principles were dependent on the contested notion of general ability that could be measured by a test at the age of eleven (the 11+) and the belief that children's needs could be determined by that test.

Children were to be divided into three groups matching the provision of the three types of school. At one end were children with higher academic ability, defined as those whose scores on the test were in the upper quartile of a normal distribution curve. Their needs were to be best met by an academic education in a grammar school. The majority were in the three remaining quartiles and their needs were to be met by a technical education in a Technical school or, for the less able, by a more practical education in a Secondary Modern.

In the event very few technical schools were established and it quickly became a predominantly bipartite system. The selection process favoured children from families with more social, cultural and educational capital and grammar schools were populated largely by children from relatively privileged families with parents in higher socio-economic categories (Crook et al 1999, p.11) The claim of parity of esteem became difficult to sustain, and with it the perceived unfairness whereby a single test at a given time tended to fix a child in one part of the differentiated system with little mobility between (Douglas, 1968). In addition, the technical efficacy of the 11+ test was questioned (Yates and Pidgeon 1958).

The selective system attracted criticism for the perceived role it played in exacerbating the existing class divide (Banks 1955), from influential sociologists (Kogan 1971, p.146), 'aspirational' working class parents and, crucially, the growing middle class who feared that a lack of grammar school places, restricted to a minority by design, would consign their children to secondary modern schools which they saw as a second class education. As a result there was growing support among middle class parents in the form of the Campaign for the

Advancement of State Education, for comprehensive schools which did not select or separate their intake.

By the late 1950's a limited number of Local Education Authorities (LEAs), including London, Coventry and Bristol had responded by implementing 'experimental' comprehensives (Crook et al 1999). These tended to be purpose built 11-18 schools that typically served 'areas of new housing' (Crook et al 1999, p.12). In 1965, the newly elected Labour government introduced a non-statutory circular 10/65 (DES 1965) requesting, but not compelling, all LEAs to submit plans to provide comprehensive places. Although subsequently dismissed by the Conservative government's circular 10/70 (DES 1970) there remained a clear 'momentum' towards comprehensivisation (Crook et al 1999, p.14). Indeed, despite being opposed in principle to this trend, Margaret Thatcher's tenure as Education Secretary coincided with the creation of more comprehensives than any other before or after (Benn and Chitty 1997).

During this period, although some were closed, the majority of grammar schools merged with secondary moderns to form large neighbourhood comprehensive schools. In 1971, 18.4% of secondary pupils between 11 and 16 attended grammar schools. By 1980 this figure had reduced to 3.7% (Social Trends 1981, p.48). The 1976 Education Act introduced by Labour hastened this trend by formally preventing selection by ability or aptitude. As a consequence of this impetus from a wide coalition of interests, the proportion of 11-16 year olds in 'comprehensive' (free, non-selective) schools rose between 1965 and 1981 from about 8% to 83% under both Labour and Conservative governments (Ball 2008).

But, despite the seemingly inexorable move towards comprehensivisation, there were influential dissenting voices. The Critical Quarterly Society produced their series of 'Black papers' between 1969 and the late seventies that offered a defence of selection, critiqued liberal educational views and questioned the effectiveness of comprehensive schooling (Ball 2008, p.71). Moreover, James Callaghan's 1976 Ruskin College speech which precipitated the 'Great Debate' was widely interpreted as a significant political attack on Britain's schools' and further undermined confidence in an increasingly comprehensive based education system (O'Connor 1987, p.2). Returning to government in 1979 the Conservatives introduced the 1980 Education Act which removed the embargo on selection in the 1976 Act and permitted grammar schools to select their intakes ensuring that for the 'first time the 11-plus had... been enshrined formally in law' (Benn and Chitty 1997, p.12).

Although, most LEAs did not take the opportunity to return to a selective system, what constituted comprehensive schooling, (which from its beginning internally accommodated differentiated schooling), became increasingly blurred as central government policies sought to endorse 'choice' and 'diversity' (Crook et al 1999, p.16). This took on a variety of forms and led some to contend that choice had become a 'substitute' for selection and a vehicle to open up the opportunity for a partial return to selection, something that a minority of schools took up (Benn and Chitty 1997). Responding to a parliamentary question about the plans for selection the Conservative government's response was as follows;

'Schools which select by ability or which specialise in particular subjects, have an important part to play in giving parents a choice of schooling for their children...we believe it is up to local authorities, controlled (voluntary) schools and...grant maintained schools to make proposals for selective education if they believe that it meets the demands of the parents in the area (HC debate1995)

Although making some attempt to 'soften' the quasi-market of secondary education, New Labour's approach can be seen largely as a continuation of pre-existing Conservative policies (West and Pennel 2002). Expanding 'choice' and 'diversity' remained firmly on the policy agenda as a means of modernising and driving up standards for comprehensive education (Edwards and Tomlinson 2002). When re-elected, New Labour were reluctant to get directly involved with ending selection. Instead they introduced a 'complex' parental balloting system that gave individual communities the opportunity to remove grammar schools, effectively distancing the government (Tulloch 2006).

Following these complex ebbs and flows of policy the current stock of English secondary schools is a patchwork of comprehensive schools, grammar schools, schools that select part of their intake by attainment and specialist schools that select by aptitude. A new element in the debate has been the use of pupil level attainment data making possible comparisons at international level of more and less selective systems and to compare at a national level the relative effectiveness of selective and comprehensive schools. The OECD has conducted a series of comparative studies of national educational performance and these have concluded that more differentiated systems where children are selected onto

different tracks at an early stage are less effective in achieving higher overall attainment than less differentiated systems (OECD/UNESCO-UIS 2003). With regard to the relative effectiveness of schools Schagen and Schagen (2002; 2003 and 2003a) and Atkinson and Gregg (2004) found that while standards at school level showed that children at grammar schools performed better than children at secondary modern schools the standard at LEA level showed little difference compared with non-selective LEAs. Pupil level data also reveals that grammar schools are still strongly associated with the social segregation of intakes. They are populated by children from more affluent families with higher levels of education, while secondary modern schools are populated by children from less affluent families and with parents who have fewer educational qualifications (Atkinson and Gregg 2004). Just 5.8% of pupils eligible for free school meals attend grammar schools, compared with an average of 26.4% of pupils who qualify for the same entitlement in all other school types. 12% percent of pupils in secondary modern schools are on free school meals and only 2% in grammar schools. Further, grammar school selection appears not to be solely on the basis of ability. Atkinson and Gregg (2004) found that if you were of high ability but poor you stood less chance of gaining a place, with poorer children with the same underlying ability only half as likely to attend a grammar school as other children. Other studies of grammar schools (Levacic and Marsh 2007) have highlighted that they receive more resources per child than secondary modern schools and that there is an affective dimension whereby the widespread sense of failure for those who are not 'selected' contributes to disrespect and social stigma of social groups and individuals (see Ireson and Hallam 2001 for an overview).

Selection by aptitude

Selection by aptitude was introduced as a part of the specialist schools programme launched in 1994 by the Conservative government in order to encourage secondary schools to specialise in certain subject areas as a means of increasing diversity and choice. New Labour continued the policy and it became part of their agenda of modernising comprehensive secondary education (Edwards and Whitty 1997). Schools can apply for specialist status in any of ten subjects: Arts, Humanities, Languages, Music, Sports, Technology and, since September 2002, Business and Enterprise, Engineering, Mathematics and Computing and Science.

The original plan of the Conservative government in 1996 was to allow schools to select up to 20% of their intake by aptitude, this figure to rise to 30% for technology colleges and even as high as 50% for some grant maintained schools (Edwards and Whitty 1997). However New Labour wished to cap the proportion of a schools intake that could be selected by aptitude and the 1998 School Standards and Framework Act authorised secondary schools to select a maximum of 10% of their intake on the basis of aptitude and only for certain subjectsⁱⁱⁱ. Owing to the possibility that even this 10% could be used unfairly to select children with high general attainment or socially advantaged backgrounds, any new selection by aptitude was further restricted to: Physical Education or a Sport; the Performing and/or Visual Arts; Languages; Design and Technology; Information Technology and Music. Prior selection by aptitude in subjects other than these was allowed to continue. Schools that select by attainment can also select by aptitude.

The Specialist Schools and Academies Trust is responsible for the delivery of the programme. In 2006 66% of English secondary schools were designated specialists. By 2007 specialist school status had been granted to over 2,690 specialist schools in England, accounting for about 85% of all secondary schools (Teachernet 2007). In June 2008 92% of secondary schools were specialist, and in 33 local authorities 100% of their schools were so designated (DCSF 2008) with over 2.5 million secondary school pupils in England attending a specialist school.

Similarities and differences between selection by aptitude and by attainment

The Preamble to the Labour Government's 1976 Education Act, which formally outlawed selection, explicitly referred to both ability and aptitude.

'Education is to be provided only in schools where the arrangements for the admission of pupils are not based wholly or partly on selection by reference to ability or aptitude'. (Preamble to the act).

Scepticism has been expressed about how schools can fairly establish aptitude without at the same time selecting by attainment (Education and Skills Select Committee 2004; West and Hind 2003). The current government claims that aptitude 'in certain subjects can be identified separately from ability' and the plan to increase specialisation of schools seems to be based on an assumption that particular talents in children can actually be tested for without results reflecting their general ability. The Education and Skills Committee (2003) made clear that they do not support the use of aptitude tests as part of school admissions stating that 'we could find neither evidence of a meaningful distinction between aptitude and ability nor evidence relating to the purpose or justification for selection by

aptitude' (HC94, para 139). In another report the committee cite the chief schools adjudicator Dr Philip Hunter's contention that aptitude cannot be sufficiently differentiated from ability and his associated belief that current tests of aptitude are inadequate in predicting future attainment (Education and Skills Committee 2004).

There are however important differences between selection to specialist schools by aptitude and selection to a grammar school. The distinction we wish to draw is not on what is purported to be measured (it is difficult to find a definition of aptitude that is sufficiently distinct from ability) nor on the systematic bias toward selecting children from higher socio-economic families (selection by aptitude will also contribute to social segregation), but rather on the meaning or symbolic effect (Coldron et al 2008). Grammar schools maintain and reinforce an explicit structural and symbolic hierarchy of schooling that contributes significantly to unequal outcomes and the inevitable denigration described earlier. The narrative in which they are embedded is that of *ability* – deemed to be an objectively verifiable, unchangeable and fateful attribute that evokes different life paths starting with being allocated to a grammar or secondary modern. The test claims to measure intelligence and how able a child is to learn. The implications of failing the 11+ therefore may be profoundly felt by the child, and this narrative is imposed on all children within an area that is highly selective^{iv}. It is experienced collectively as a member of the selected few or the rejected many. Specialist schools' selection by aptitude on the other hand is part of a different narrative – that of individual achievement and extraordinary talent. Selection on the basis of aptitude is likely therefore to be far less stigmatising for those failing to be selected. Nevertheless both selection by aptitude and attainment allows some already popular schools to

manage their intakes to include easier-to-educate children from already advantaged backgrounds.

The Secondary School Admissions study

The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) commissioned Sheffield Hallam University, in conjunction with NatCen, to map the admission arrangements of all maintained secondary schools in England in 2006 and to assess the experiences, views and expectations of parents and carers who applied for a place. We gathered details of admission arrangements for all maintained schools from the composite prospectuses sent to parents by each Local Authority (LA) in England and conducted a survey of a nationally representative sample of parents and carers who had applied for a place in the first year of secondary school beginning in September 2006. We also gathered data on outcomes by requesting from each LA what proportion of parents gained which of their preferences on the national allocation day and what proportion had expressed no preference. The results were analysed for each LA in relation to secondary data on population density, level of cross border traffic, appeals and segregation between schools.

The scale and extent of selection by attainment

Authorities with selective schools

There are 43 local authorities with schools that use selection by prior attainment as part of their admissions criteria but they differ markedly in the intensity and in the impact selection has on the majority. Some schools (grammar) select all and some (partially selective schools) part of their intake by attainment as measured in

a test. In order to adequately describe and assess the impact of selection in a particular local authority, it is necessary to take account of all selective places in the area. Table I gives the proportions of selective places available in each of the 43 authorities with selective schools calculated from the planned admission number of each school. The darker shaded areas have over 25% of selective places and would be 'wholly selective' on one of the definitions sometimes used. But this definition obscures three important facts, first that there are other authorities with high proportions of selective places just below this threshold (e.g. the six lightly shaded areas with about a fifth of their places being selective); second, that the proportion of selective places is well above 25% in seven of the eight most highly selective LAs; and third that the effect of smaller proportions of selective places on the intakes of other schools may still be significant.

The effects of any particular admission arrangements (including this kind of selection) are highly dependent on local context. It is useful therefore to distinguish the different contexts of selective places. To do this properly for each of the authorities would require analysis at a level of detail beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless we can usefully distinguish four broad categories. First, there are *highly selective/high impact/explicitly selective areas*. These are areas with a minimum of 20% selective places and selection is likely to impact not only on their own schools but also on surrounding LA areas, effectively creating a grammar and secondary modern system within a wider area. Second, there are *nominally comprehensive areas with some grammar schools recruiting effectively from the whole area*. These are local authorities with between 10% and 17% of selective places which are likely to significantly affect the balance of attainment of the intake

of all other schools but not so radically as to describe them as secondary modern intakes. Third there are *areas, where the proportion of selective places is small but concentrated in particular towns or cities* such that they recruit from a relatively restricted area creating grammar and secondary modern school enclaves in a wider comprehensive context. Finally, there are the *comprehensive areas with isolated but prestigious grammar schools* that recruit from a wide area but leave the intake of nearby comprehensive schools relatively unaffected

Methods of entry to selective tests

The way children get to access the 11+ test forms a significant part of the process of admission to selective schools. The test provides a child with the opportunity to demonstrate their 'ability' and forms the basis upon which decisions are made about which children are allocated a selective place. Given that parents differ in significantly in their engagement with the choice process (Gewirtz et al 1995; Flatley et al 2001; Ball 2003; Coldron et al 2008) any form of disparity in how children access the 11+ test is potentially discriminatory. Flatley et al (2001) found there to be three methods in highly selective areas. One was the *universal opt out* system where all children were automatically tested in their primary schools or elsewhere, thereby creating no obvious equity issues beyond those generally associated with selective systems. A second method was where parents were *invited to opt in* to the test. In this case they had to apply to the school for their child to be entered for the test which was held in a place other than the primary school and at a given time which was often a weekend. Finally, in 2001, some areas entered children on the *primary school's recommendation* (with parents able to include them by request). We found in 2006 that only the first two systems were

in operation amongst the fourteen most selective areas. The vast majority of highly selective LAs (ten out of fourteen) were opt-in, thus raising the potential for inequity in areas with non-universal entry.

Grammar schools

There are in total 164 grammar schools which have wholly selective intakes. The majority (108) are located in the 14 most selective authorities. There are more grammar schools that are foundation schools than any other type (Figure 1).

Proportionally, grammar schools accounted for 16% of foundation schools, 7% of voluntary aided schools, and 2.3% of community/voluntary controlled schools. In line with the increase in the secondary school population there has been a small increase in the numbers of children attending selective schools. But the proportion has slightly increased because selective schools have expanded more than other schools. In 1980 3.7% of secondary school pupils aged 11 to 16 attended grammar schools (Social Trends, 1981, p.40) this proportion had increased to 3.9% in 2007 (DCSF 2008a). The number of children attending grammar schools between 1997 and 2007 rose from 94,300 to 111,960 (DCSF 2008a); an increase of 17,660 or the intake of about 12 secondary schools. This represents an increase in grammar school places of 18.7%, which is significantly more than the 8.7% increase in secondary school places across all maintained secondary schools in the same ten year period^v. The new Secretary of State for Education has taken steps to prevent secondary schools with selective policies from applying for expansion under the 'successful and popular' schools initiative; in effect schools with selective arrangements are precluded from applying for monies from the Standards and Diversity Capital Fund to expand their schools (DCSF, 2008b).

Partially selective schools

In this section we look more closely at places in partially selective schools. In 2006 we found only 37 such schools (1% of all secondary schools) these are spread between 20 different local authorities, 19 are foundation schools, 14 voluntary aided and 4 are community schools. They are found in different types of local authority with 3 in Outer London, 2 in Inner London, 8 in other metropolitan areas, and 7 in non-metropolitan areas. The percentage of the school's intake selected by general ability ranges from 9% to 43% (mean = 21%). Whilst these 37 are a small minority of schools, there are clusters in some areas that select a substantial proportion and this is likely to have a significant impact on the balance of intakes within their local context. However, more detailed knowledge of the specific cases would be needed to understand the full effect.

In 2006, we found there to be 23,994 proposed selective places available for those transferring to the first year of secondary school. This amounted to 3.5% of the available secondary school places. Partially selective places accounted for 6.3% (1512) of the selective places available^{vi}.

Issues associated with selection by attainment

In the 14 most selective authorities in Table I there were, on average, more appeals, fewer parents gained their first preference and the intakes were more socially segregated than in all other authorities. On average, in the 14 most selective Local Authorities around 13% of admissions resulted in an appeal being lodged (compared with less than 10% in other LAs). In non-selective authorities 88% of parents gained their first preference school, compared to just 78% in the 14 highly selective authorities. On average the 2004 dissimilarity index (a measure

of segregation Allen and Vignoles, 2006) was substantially larger for the fourteen most selective local authorities^{vii}. These findings are in keeping with previous studies that have highlighted how grammar schools have a significantly more advantaged intake than other schools in their area (Levacic and Marsh 2007; DCSF 2008a). Furthermore, selective LAs acquired on average a higher proportion of high attaining pupils and lost comparatively more low-attaining pupils (DCSF 2008a). This means that the selective authorities are having an impact on an area much wider than their own Local Authority.

The scale and extent of selection by aptitude

Proportions and types of schools

The proportion of children selected by aptitude has been rising. Flatley et al (2001) found that 1.4% of all secondary schools in 1999 selected by aptitude. By 2001 West and Hind (2003) calculated that this had risen to 3%. Since then the number of schools on the specialist school programme has increased greatly and the proportion of specialist schools that select by aptitude has risen. Of the 2,076 specialist schools in 2006, we found 12% of these were selecting their intake on the basis of aptitude. This is 5% of all schools.

Currently then, the vast majority of specialist schools choose not to select on the basis of aptitude, however the proportions vary by school type. Academies are the most likely to select by aptitude, however total numbers of academies in 2006 were very low. Foundation schools are the next most likely. A foundation school is six times more likely to select by aptitude than schools run by the local authority (i.e. community and voluntary controlled schools). The smaller proportion of

voluntary controlled and community schools with specialist status may go some way towards explaining this.

A further explanation for the low take up by community schools may be that they are restrained from using the selective option by the local authority which acts as their admission authority. It may also be that, as the proportion of specialist schools has increased more undersubscribed schools have been included and for them the selective option is redundant because they must admit every pupil who applies. Despite a relatively small proportion of schools selecting by aptitude at present the option remains, and therefore the potential exists, for an expansion of selection by aptitude. Although there is little to suggest in the current context that this potential will be realised, schools are sensitive to context (Gewirtz et al 1995; Woods et al 1998) and it is conceivable that changes in national or local policy, for example making all schools foundation, voluntary aided or academies, could trigger greater competition and a greater take up of the selective option. Hunter (2003) found for example that some schools were selecting in this way because schools around them were doing so.

Schools that select more than 10%

The figure of 10% selection was intended to provide sufficient diversity within schools, but be low enough as to not 'change the character of the school' Edwards (1998). As this number is a low proportion of the school's total intake it should not have the same wholesale effect on the surrounding authority as selection by attainment. Prior to the *Standards and Framework Act 1998* schools had been able to select a higher proportion of their students by aptitude and a small number of schools had chosen to do so. The 1998 Act allowed them to continue. We

found 9 schools that selected more than 10% of their intake. Five of these selected between 15% and 17% of their intake, three between 20% and 27%, and one as much as 40%.

Methods of assessment

The frequencies of specialisms selected for in 2006 are given in Figure 2. The method by which level of aptitude is assessed is of interest. When selection on the basis of aptitude was introduced, the government stated that this must not be misused as a means of introducing or restoring partial selection by general academic ability. The DfES distinguished aptitude from ability by defining it as a question of potential rather than of current capacity, therefore a natural talent or gift which an individual may possess. There has been much speculation and disagreement as to whether this can actually be tested for, with many being highly sceptical about how schools could actually test for aptitude without in reality selecting by attainment (Education and Skills Select Committee 2004; West and Hind 2003).

Admission authorities themselves determine how aptitude is to be assessed. Guidelines have been set out as to how this can reasonably be done (Specialist Schools and Academies Trust 2005). Schools must ensure tests do not assess academic ability, by examining the ability profile of those selected by aptitude to ascertain if this is representative of all those applying, and if this is not the case, tests must be adjusted. The chief adjudicator has also made clear that when testing for aptitude, schools must use either a well-established aptitude test, or, if there is no such test, 'objective assessment against published criteria by a qualified person independent of the school' (Specialist Schools and Academies

Trust 2005). In practice schools may be loosely interpreting these guidelines. For example a recent adjudication ruled that a school that had been using a test for 'aptitude' in fact was testing on achievement (Office of the School Adjudicator, decision ADA 000854, 20 July 2006).

In relation to the science and technology specialism of the City Technology Colleges (CTCs) two reports commissioned by the DfEE called into question the validity of such aptitude tests (Coffey & Whetton 1996 and Barber and McCallum 1996). Coffey & Whetton (1996) reported that a pupil's aptitude on entrance to a school and their later performance levels in the particular subject had a lack of consistency. Barber and McCallum (1996) reported mixed views on whether ability and aptitude could be separated. Moreover two of the CTCs actually refused to put into place aptitude tests on the grounds that applicants were too young to be categorised in that way and that the tests could not control for effects of prior learning and parental encouragement.

In addition, some forms of aptitude test such as live auditions, are subject to the same criticism as interviews in that they provide the means for selection on social grounds. While the 2003 School Admissions Code of Practice stated that there should be no interviews (DfES 2003 para. 3.16) and interviewing is now outlawed (see section 1.46 School Admissions Code (DfES 2007) the use of interviews or live auditions is allowed:

solely for the purpose of assessing a child's suitability for a boarding place, or to auditions, or other oral or practical tests in order to ascertain a child's

aptitude in a particular subject at schools with a permitted form of selection by aptitude. (section 1.46 and 1.47)

Given these concerns it is of particular interest to look at the methods the schools in 2006 used. We found five categories in the composite prospectuses and give their frequencies in Figure 3. The most common category was a live test^{viii} or audition and this included auditions for Music and Drama, and Sports trials. Worryingly there was a large proportion of schools for which we could not determine the method of selection and this means that their admission arrangements are not fully transparent in the composite prospectuses.

Issues associated with selection by aptitude

There are a number of possible implications arising from selecting by aptitude. A school that selects by aptitude enhances choice by making places available to those pupils who have a capacity to excel in a particular subject but would not otherwise fit the other criteria to be accepted into the school, for example those living outside the school's immediate catchment area. However, selection by aptitude also presents a method by which popular schools may admit a disproportionate number of higher attaining children by using covert selective techniques (Edwards and Whitty 1997). Research on schools in London revealed that some schools had used 'unusual talent,' in certain specialist subjects in order to 'increase the proportion of academically able children from middle class families' (Gewirtz et al 1995). Also, certain specialisms such as those in the arts could potentially attract more than the average number of girls to the school and therefore this may improve their position in league tables as girls typically achieve higher results in exams than boys (Edwards 1998). By opting for selection by aptitude oversubscribed schools give themselves more means to 'cherry pick' the

'easier to educate children' (Edwards 1998). This would not have the same effect for undersubscribed schools because they must accept all who apply.

There are also strong arguments to suggest that selection by aptitude is likely to be socially selective by default even without active covert selection by schools. The aptitude tests are 'susceptible to the effects of factors related to socio-economic status' (Stringer 2008). A high relative attainment in any of the subjects (even Sport) is likely to have involved expense of time and money for travelling, equipment and training. More affluent families have more of these resources as well as more social and cultural capital. In addition, parents from higher socio-economic groups tend to be more active in choosing a school and to be more willing for their children to travel away from their nearest school (financial resources will play a part in this as well) and so they may be more likely to apply for the aptitude places.

Conclusions

Selection by prior attainment remains a significant factor in the English secondary school system. Although the proportion of pupils taking a selective place at a grammar or partially selective school is quite small at around 4% it also affects a further 10% to 12% who attend other schools where the average prior attainment of the pupils is reduced. In some cases this effect is felt beyond the borders of the local authorities where the selective schools are located. Although schools are currently prohibited from becoming selective, those schools that remain selective have grown in size.

We have argued that selection by aptitude is different from selection by general ability. Nevertheless, selection by aptitude not only offers a means of direct selection, but it is also likely to lead to social selection by default. The great majority of specialist schools do not use selection in order to fulfil their specialist school mission, but the potential to do so is there.

Selection by prior attainment is currently also largely selection by social background (Atkinson and Gregg 2004). This affects the social as well as the attainment characteristics of the intakes of all schools in the area. Both selection by attainment and by aptitude form part of the context of the general sorting of children into secondary schools.

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Table I Selective places available (PAN) in local authorities with selective schools**

		Total Places	Selective Places	%Selective Places
1	Trafford	3066	1200	39
2	Southend-on-Sea	2178	750	34
3	Buckinghamshire	5794	1980	34
4	Slough	1557	530	34
5	Kent	16781	4830	29
6	Bexley	3451	991	29
7	Sutton	2641	737	28
8	Medway	3714	954	26
9	Lincolnshire	8665	2065	24
10	Poole	1705	360	21
11	Wirral	4472	938	21
12	Reading	1127	234	21
13	Kingston upon Thames	1441	284	20
14	Torbay	1275	240	19
15	Bournemouth	1888	312	17
16	Barnet	3513	569	16
17	Plymouth	3217	414	13
18	Calderdale	2763	310	11
19	Gloucestershire	7251	810	11
20	Wandsworth	1926	194	10
21	Birmingham	13033	999	8
22	Warwickshire	6495	428	7
23	Telford and Wrekin	2230	146	7
24	Bromley	3919	242	6
25	Enfield	3473	180	5
26	Walsall	3864	192	5
27	Wiltshire	5558	248	5
28	North Yorkshire	8123	340	4
29	Stoke-on-Trent	2891	120	4
30	Croydon	3776	138	4
31	Wolverhampton	3008	108	4
32	Lancashire	14667	524	4
33	Hertfordshire	13802	434	3
34	Kirklees	5158	150	3
35	Essex	17212	484	3
36	Liverpool	6063	161	3
37	Cumbria	6726	120	2
38	Devon	8209	120	2
39	Redbridge	3246	27	1
40	Surrey	10891	85	1
41	Southwark	2416	18	1
42	Peterborough	2412	12	1
43	Dudley	4135	16	0

**NB Includes places in wholly and partially selective schools

Figure 1

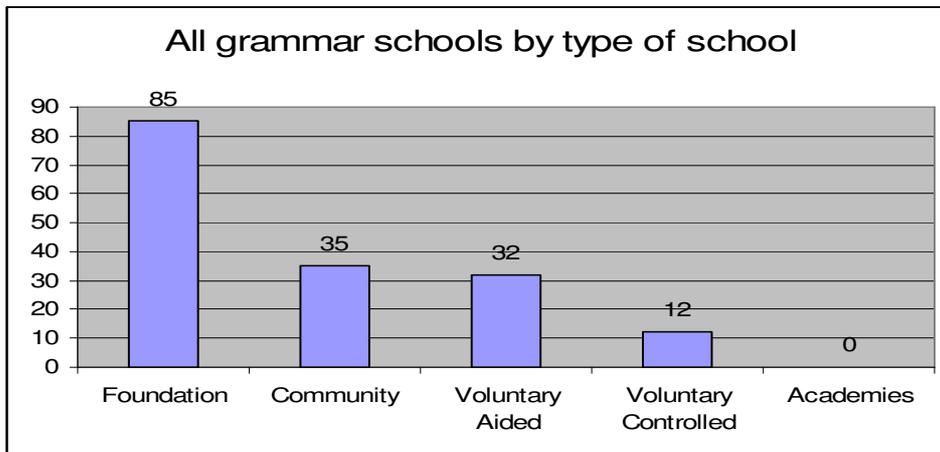


Figure 2

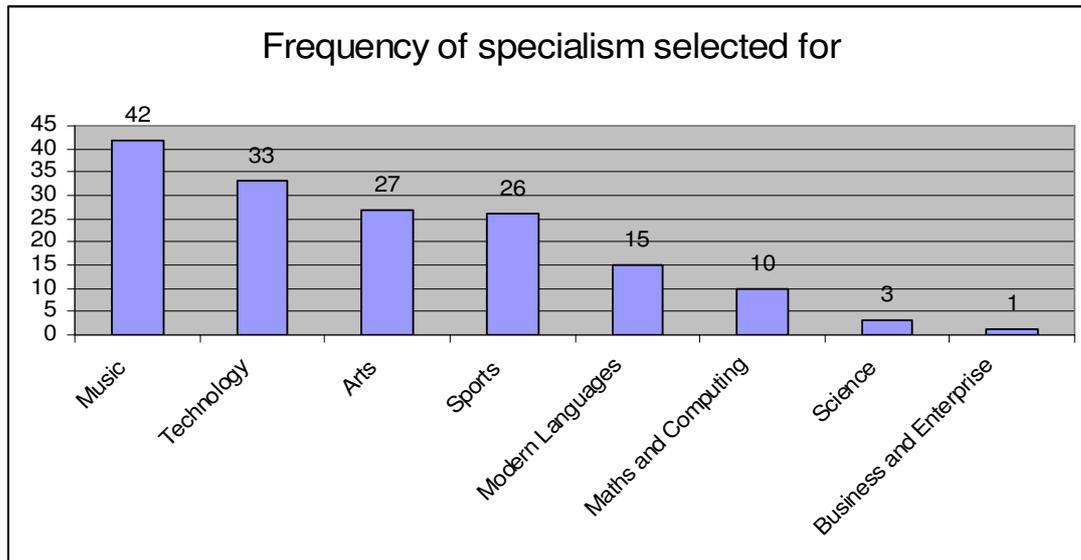
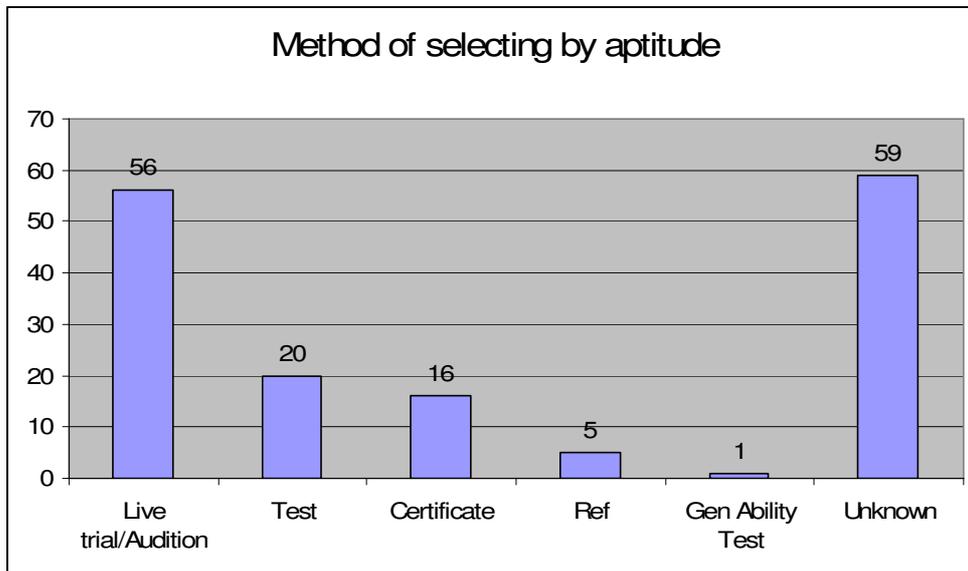


Figure 3 -



Notes

- ⁱ Currently about 7% of all children opt out of the publicly funded sector.
- ⁱⁱ The 1944 Act allowed for the creation of comprehensive schools which would combine these strands, but only very few were founded in the decade and a half after 1944 and they maintained the principle of differentiated provision within the same school but not determined by a single test at the age of eleven. (See for example Holyhead County school 2008).
- ⁱⁱⁱ This right not only applies to schools in the Specialist Schools Programme; any admission authority may decide to give priority in this way although it appears to be the case that schools currently choosing to select by aptitude are predominantly designated specialist. We have not currently calculated how many schools not in the Specialist Schools Programme select their intake on the basis of aptitude however numbers are thought to be very low.
- ^{iv} A definition of a highly selective area is not straightforward but in our study we took this to be one where the proportion of selective places is approximately 20% or more which in effect means that all schools in the area are significantly affected such that the non-grammar schools have what could be called a secondary modern intake.
- ^v Figures quoted for maintained secondary schools; includes grammar schools, CTCs and from 2002 onwards academies.
- ^{vi} It is important to emphasise when considering these figures that they relate to planned admission numbers (obtained via secondary school admission prospectuses) and are therefore not the same as the number of pupils actually admitted.
- ^{vii} Dissimilarity index for selective authorities (mean = 0.36, median = 0.37) and non-selective authorities (mean & median = 0.27)
- ^{viii} The category "Test" included tests for specific modern languages as well as unspecified test for technology.