

# THE IMPACT OF SECONDARY SCHOOL SELECTION PROCESS ON THE PERFORMANCE OF STUDENTS

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## ABSTRACT

The study examined the impact of school selection process on the academic performance of minority ethnic students and finds that career aspiration and classification of children on bases of their ethnicity significantly affect performance. The study confirms the view that children from background with history of academic attainment also aspire to achieve similar success. The type of school; grammar or public school and the selection policy are not found to be of any significant impact. However, there is a significant correlation between the type of school and career aspiration of the students.

**Key words:** ethnic minority, performance, selection, children

## INTRODUCTION

The low participation of certain group of students in higher education programmes have been recognised over the years by both the government and educationists as an issue of concern. Incidentally, in most identified cases of low participation, cultural; financial and social factors play vital roles in the obstruction of certain social groups to higher education and progression in acquiring higher education (Hayton & Paczuska, 2002).

The system of banding used in England was to ensure a balanced intake in the secondary schools which arguably failed to achieve its aims. Banding was introduced to ensure that comprehensive schools led an academically balanced intake, ILEA transferred arrangements was made to replace selection of testing for grammar selective schools. However, Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) children are assessed by head teachers in their primary school using verbal reasoning test and placed into a band group.

West (2004) mentioned three band groups: Above, Average, Average and Below Average, the children performance is not, however, affected by the secondary school allocation under ILEA, it was noted that there is a higher percentage of children placed in their first choice of school. The initial reason test was abolished and replaced with a London Reading Test (LRT) to identify the number of children who would need additional help in secondary school. It was noted that head teachers could not place children with EAL in correct bands of their ability due to language barrier. In addition, children from ethnic minorities are placed to lower verbal reasoning groups. More so, Voluntary aided schools have a right to their entry choice.

The gradual changes to comprehensive schools made it possible to compare the effect of comprehensive and selective system; there was little difference in performance. Jesson (2000) observed that pupils in comprehensive schools performed better compared to Grammar schools. The same research, found out that

average pupil in comprehensive schools performed better at GCSE compared to those in selective. His work has been criticised for focusing on only GCSE outcomes while ignoring achievements in schools. However, he noted that selective schools had generally higher attainment which suggests the selective system is most effective in the first three years of secondary school education.

Schagen & Schagen (2003) also studied the impact of selective systems on young Key stage 3 children and confirmed that the minority ethnic background children were most adversely affected by the selection. The small number of grammar schools has made the selection even more discriminatory. Gillborn and Mirza (2000) suggested that the term 'underachievement' has become loaded in stereotype and has somehow slipped into the pervasive 'discourse of despair' among and about some ethnic minority groups. They contended that some groups, say Africa Caribbean's may be ranked low in the national measure of achievement, yet the said group may well be achieving highly in some schools and some LEAs.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The following research questions were outlined to guide the study:

1. How does criteria used in selecting students into grammar and state schools as it affects minority ethnic groups?
2. What is the level of difference in the academic performance and behaviour of children attending grammar schools with those in state schools?
3. To what extent does school admission and selection policy impact on the performance and progression of ethnic minority children in schools?

## **REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

The literature focuses on two key strands: the school selection process and academic performance. The admission and selection policy has been a key player in the placement of children in schools. The performance of the students, particularly those from the minority ethnic group has often raised concerns due to underperformance, thus warranting scrutiny of the selection policy.

The Education Act 1944 which introduced the tripartite structure of modern, technical and grammar schools was intended at injecting equality and eliminating all prejudice and hindrance in the choice of schools. Coldron et al (2009) opined that the main principle behind the policy was for secondary education to be accessible for all children. This implies equality and absence of any discrimination on bases of ethnicity and ability. The choice of school had earlier been tainted with several accusations of bias, often at the detriment of the poor and minority groups. Atkinson & Gregg, (2004) noted that grammar schools are populated by children from wealthy families with higher levels of education while comprehensive are populated by children from the less wealthy families with parents who have fewer education qualifications. They argued that the use of the aptitude test in selection of pupils is inadequate as it leans towards predicting future attainment of pupils.

The selection policy often identifies students by their ability. West (2004) mentioned three band groups: those above average, average and below average. The local education authority tested pupils in their final year of

primary school and allocating them to band groups. However, by 1990, there were noticeable changes to secondary school admissions policy. Most schools in inner London stopped using banding system. Banding was just seen as an unfair system of children intake into secondary (comprehensive) schools since children are placed into schools based on their ability. London Reading Test (LRT) was also introduced to identify the number of children who would need additional help in secondary school. It was noted that head teachers could not place children within correct bands of their ability due to language barrier. In addition, children from ethnic minorities are placed to lower verbal reasoning groups. Most parents were not getting their first preference with the band system.

The more competitive the system, the greater the number of children who are rejected since only few are selected. Coldron et al., (2009) stated that the test measures children's intelligence and how they are able to learn. On the other hand, specialist schools selection is likely less stigmatising for those that failed to be selected. The process of admission to selective schools is discriminatory. There are three methods in highly selective areas: the universal opt out, invited to opt in and primary school recommendation systems. They argued that the selective aptitude enhances the choice of available places only to those who have the capacity to excel in a particular subject but could not, and only contributes to social selection by default.

In a study by Iannelli, (2008), the Scottish comprehensive school has a higher overall participation rates and more inclusive and free at compulsory level. The academic performance of children is often influenced by a number of factors. Family background, ethnicity and the career aspiration of the student have often been a contributory factor to the excellence or failure of the children. Mocetti (2010) observed that schools failed to fill up the gaps of those children coming from less- advantaged and ethnic minority families. Such inequalities are increasingly strengthened with the compelling risk of mistaking privilege with merit in the school environment. The fact that the social selection starts at such early age deserves greater attention in the policy debate.

Several studies have opined that children from ethnic minorities have not had similar measure of success within the British education system as other indigenous groups have had, even though surveys shown that families from ethnic minorities tend to be more positive about the values and needs for education than their white counter parts (DfEE, 2001). Indeed, recent statistics show that black boys were more likely to be excluded (83% of the permanent exclusions in 1995-6) six times higher than their white counterparts. Poor academic outcomes of children from ethnic minorities particularly black boys, have well been documented (DfES, 2004), (Osbourne, 2000), (Majors, 2000) and it is suggested that the differences in attainment levels, particularly in GCSEs between black children and their white counterparts may represent a long process of decline in relative attainment of ethnic minority pupils in the compulsory education system.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The main research tool used in the data collection is questionnaire, supplemented by interview. The questionnaire contains three sections of five open – ended questions each. The respondents include parents, teachers and students in secondary school. The teachers are those directly involved in the teaching of students from the ethnic minority students. Parents and their children of same group are also the respondents. An equal number of 5 students were selected from both grammar and public schools. The total sample in the study is 15.

The questionnaire was supplement by few interview questions in which the respondents (teachers, parents and students) are asked to respond to questions on the selection policy of admission (see the appendix for the questionnaire and interview questions).

The data obtained from the questionnaire were keyed into SPSS programme and analysed. Three statistical tools are used in the data analyses: descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation), correlation and the standard deviation. While the mean and standard deviation measure the centrality of the variable responses, the correlation coefficient measures the relationship among the variables. The standard regression examines the effect of the independent variable on the academic performance of the ethnic minority students. The regression equation can be represented by the following simple equation:

$$\text{Performance} = \beta + \textit{selection} + \textit{behaviour} + \textit{ethnicity} + \textit{career} + \textit{satisfaction} + \textit{school} + \xi$$

**Where:**

Performance - the academic achievement of minority ethnic students

Selection - the selection policy of admission into grammar/public schools

Behaviour - the attitude, outwards disposition of students of ethnic minority

Ethnic - this includes students from non- white background

Career - the career plan, aspiration after secondary school such as university education  
vocation training, jobs, dropping out after school.

Satisfaction – the enjoyment and satisfaction of in the present school (grammar/public)

School- whether present school is grammar or public school

$\xi$ - Error term

$\beta$ - Constant term

## FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The results from the data obtained from the questionnaire and interview are presented and analysed in this section. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of all the variables used in the research and shows the mean and standard deviation.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics

Variables	Mean	Standard deviation
school	1.50	0.53
Satisfaction	2.00	0.82
Career	2.30	1.34
Performance	1.60	0.84
Ethnicity	2.00	0.05
Behaviour	1.50	0.71
Selection	2.07	0.58

The value of the standard deviations are minimal and less than 1.00 except for *career*. This shows the centrality of the mean responses of the respondents. The highest mean being *career*, with a mean of 2.30 and a standard deviation of 1.34. The variables; *school* and *behaviour* have mean response of 1.50 each and a standard deviation of 0.53 and 0.71 respectively.

To establish any possible relationship among the variables, the Pearson correlation is used to test the correlations of the variables. This is necessary as to verify the extent significant relationship existing among the variables. The correlation result is reported in Table 2 and shows the significant interrelationship among the variables.

Table 2: Correlation of study variables

Variables	School	Satisfaction	Career	Performance	Ethnicity	Behaviour	Selection
School	1						
Satisfaction	0.775**	1					
Career	0.867**	0.916**	1				
Performance	0.365	0.354	0.360	1			
Ethnicity	0.800**	0.904**	0.946**	0.091	1		
Behaviour	0.745**	0.770**	0.881**	0.002	0.984**	1	
Selection	0.816**	0.791**	0.837**	0.373	0.816**	0.609*	1

\*\*correlation is significant at 0.01 levels (2-tailed) \*correlation is significant at 0.05 levels (2-tailed)

The table shows that most of the variables are significant correlated. For instance, *school* is significant correlated with *satisfaction* at 0.775, *career* at 0.867, and *ethnicity* at 0.800, *behaviour* 0.745 and *selection* at 0.816 respectively. This implies that there is a strong interrelationship that exists among the variables; each could be affected by another's reaction.

However, not all the variables show significant or strong correlation. *Performance* does not show any relationship with *ethnicity*, *behaviour* and *selection*. The relationship between *performance* with *school*, *satisfaction* and *career* are also non-significant.

The importance of establishing any relationship among the variables is to help understand the influence and impact of each variable among the others. However, to specifically, assess the impact the independent variables have on the dependent variable (*performance*), the standard regression is applied. The regression measure the individual impact of all the other variables (*selection*, *behaviour*, *ethnicity*, *career* and *satisfaction*) on the dependent variable - *performance*.

Table 3: Standard Regression

Dependent variable = performance		
Variables	Model 1	Model 2
Constant	1.833 (1.655)	2.500 (2.692)
Selection	0.075 (0.202)	-0.236 (-0.316)
Behaviour	-0.714 (-1.454)	-9.919 (-2.000)
Ethnicity	-2.130 (-3.306) *	-1.826 (-3.114) *
Career	2.510 (3.650) *	2.896 (4.880) **
Satisfaction	-	0.639 (1.225)
School	-	0.471 (1.069)
Adj. R sq.	0.781	0.775
Mean sq	2.167	2.625
Observation	10	10

\*significant at 0.01 level; \*\*significant at 0.05 level. Figures in parentheses are the t-statistics while others are the variables coefficients

The regression result is presented in Table 3. The results are in two models and shows the coefficient and t-statistics (shown in parentheses) of each of the independent variables.

The regression result shows that career has the most positive significant effect on the performance of the ethnic minority students. The variable has a coefficient of 2.510 and t-statistics of 3.650 in model 1, which is significant at 0.01. The significance of *career* remains even stronger on the model 2 with a coefficient of 2.896 and t-statistic of 4.880. This implies that *career* is a dominate factor in the overall academic performance of students from the minority ethnic group. The variable *ethnicity* shows a significant negative significance with *performance* of the students from the ethnic minority group. The variable has a coefficient of -2.130 and -1.826 and t-statistics of -3.306 and -3.114 respectively. This implies that ethnic background of the students from minority group has a negative impact on their performance. This result can be explained by the sometimes, negative stigma attributed to minority ethnic students.

The results obtained are not entirely surprising. Majors (2000) assert that the prospect of good career has a propelling effect on students. This is particularly important for students from minority ethnic group whose academic career prospects are hardly encouraging; either because of poor family orientation or lack of vision. Gillborn and Mirza (2000) found that black minority students often aspire lower than their white counterparts into positions of leadership and public service. Those with such aspirations are not surprisingly good at their academic performance.

## CRITIQUE OF RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research is a quantitative study, using primary data. A major shortcoming of the research technique is the analytical tools and the small sample size. Regression results are more reliable with a large sample. Hartas (2010) posits that large quantity of data yields more reliable and generalised results. The study was also confirmed to schools and minority ethnic groups within the Kent councils. A wider sample selection would ensure that the result reflects the minority students irrespective of area of settlement.

The questionnaire was closed ended which ensured that respondents tick options of their choice. The questions were drawn to primarily reflect only the research interest. This did not give room for parents to add as much information as possible. These shortcomings may have a significant impact on the results

## CONCLUSION

The study was set out to investigate the difference in academic achievement between students attending grammar and public schools. It also examines their academic performance and behaviour as it affects the minority group. The school admission policy and its impact on performance and progression on minority ethnic students were also investigated.

The study shows that career aspiration is the most significant factor affecting academic performance of children from minority ethnic background. Students from an established academic background are likely to perform better than other. The study also found that identifying and classifying students on basis of their colour and ethnicity, significant affect their performance. This is becomes noticeable in environments where minority groups are stigmatised with name callings as a result of their ethnic background. However, such stigma can be reduced with proper supervision by the teachers, ensuring that the feeling equality is entrenched among all the students.

Contrary to some studies, the choice of school (whether grammar or public) and the school selection policy do not play any significant role in the academic performance of ethnic minority children.

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