

The true price of selection

Parents' stories from selective areas in England

Introduction

In the recent debate about government plans to create many more grammar schools across England we have heard little from the one group of people who understand exactly what the expansion of such a system will mean: those families who already live in selective areas. Every year tens of thousands of children across the country face the make or break 11-plus test, a flawed exam that will determine their future and possibly damage their personal and educational self-confidence for years to come.

As these vivid and often heartbreaking stories show, this is a system that breeds intolerable stress and anxiety even among the so-called ‘winners’. Tales of thousands of pounds spent on tutoring tired and reluctant primary school children spells out with chilling clarity just how much the chance of getting into a grammar depends on parental income, thus leaving behind the overwhelming majority of children right from the start.

Comprehensive Future believes that no modern education system should depend on a test that sorts our children out into winners or losers at such a young age and inevitably leaves poorer children far behind. After you have read these stories, we think you will agree.

Melissa Benn, Chair of Comprehensive Future

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“The 11-plus is a money test not an intelligence test”

My husband and I went to grammar school, and I always assumed my children would, since they are very bright. I knew there was a tutoring culture, but also knew my eldest would pass without tutoring. Then the 11-plus changed. As my eldest approached Year Five, I looked into the new test, and was shocked by my findings. The test seemed to be a GCSE English literature exam in places and the vast majority of content was from the Year 7 curriculum. How could a child pass this without tutoring, I wondered. Well, they cannot. If you have never been taught algebra, for example, then you cannot answer a question on it, not matter how intelligent you are.

The 11-plus went from being an intelligence test to a ‘how much tutoring can you afford’ test. I hate elitism, and this is elitism as its worst. Digging further, I found that the 11-plus pass rate for private school children is nearly three times the pass rate for state school children. We could not afford to tutor our child, and she didn’t respond well (to put it mildly) to our teaching.

Year Five was horrendous. Emily, who is competitive and has always been at the top of the class, was suddenly ‘overtaken’ by her tutored peers. This is what people never think about. 11-plus aside, all the tutoring over-inflated the children’s abilities, leaving Emily a little behind, leaving her feeling rubbish and depressed. She could not compete with them, they were learning tons of new things which she had no access to. The playing field was no longer level. It was a horrid year for Emily, and I couldn’t help feeling cross at this awful system that had been created.

The good news was that we made it very clear to Emily that the 11-plus was a money test, not an intelligence test, and that only the rich passed. She still wanted to take it, not wanting to be left out. She scored 118, and was delighted! She felt pleased that she got such a high score without tutoring – particularly as she knew very tutored children who got the same mark.

Why didn’t we push for an appeal? Well, I looked at the evidence of mental health issues in the grammar schools and decided I didn’t want that for my daughter. Plus, she was adamant that she wanted to go to the local secondary.

I am still not against grammar schools per se, but I believe they will need to be scrapped if the playing field isn’t levelled. Although, how can the test be made fair? There are children at the grammar schools who are less bright than my child, who may be struggling to keep up and children at secondary moderns who are very bright and possibly feeling desperate for that extra stretch. A comprehensive system would resolve these issues.

I do understand the pressure to tutor. Everyone is doing it, so if you don’t you put your child at a disadvantage. Unfortunately, for most families, there is no choice – no extra money or time for tutoring.

I opted my second daughter out of the test as she didn’t want to take it. What a relief that was! She will go to the local secondary modern with her sister – who is very happy there, thriving and blossoming. I have one more child to go through the system and I am dreading it. He is in Year Three, and I think some parents have already started the tutoring. I desperately hope the system changes by then.

“I can only stress how flawed the system is and how damaging it can be to children”

I have seen my two kids go through the Kent Test in the past two years, and can only stress how flawed the system is, and how damaging it can be to children. My daughter was lucky enough to ‘pass’ last year, but the process was one that made my wife and I extremely uncomfortable as to what we were putting her through. A few nights before the test I had looked at the search history on her internet tablet. The last search read, “How to cope when you’re panicking about something.” A ten year-old.

On several occasions in the weeks before she had asked would we be ashamed of her if she failed? I told her that it would be the test that failed.

My son found out last week that he was not ‘deemed appropriate’ for grammar school education. He passed the overall mark, but marginally missed in one of the three components. He is quite a stoic sort of lad, and when we opened the email together, he immediately told us he was fine, he was happy. Later that night he came downstairs, and confessed that when he said he was happy he hadn’t been truthful. He sobbed. He had wanted to go to the same school as his sister.

The next morning on the way to school he had to answer the dreaded question of how he had done in the test half a dozen times, by well-meaning friends in our village. God knows how many times he faced the question that day in school, as many of his successful classmates, most of them intellectually on a par with my son, celebrated. No doubt he did as I had seen him earlier, shrugged his shoulders, gave a thumbs down, and said, “I failed”.

Tom turned ten in July – he’s a young ten, and fairly immature compared to some of his classmates. I have never been more proud of him, and saw a new emotional maturity in him as he faced that horrible day, a day that divided him from most of his closest friends and peers. I know that all of the successful kids were boys and girls who had been coached to pass the test. Some of them were tutored twice a week for up to three years! Many of their wealthy parents had decided that it was worth the expense, because if they failed the test they would send their children to a private school, something that would make the investment in tuition seem paltry.

That morning, as I saw my son’s forced smile, I knew it was us that had failed Tom. We were wrong to decide coaching was immoral and that a few practice tests in the last weeks of the summer would suffice. The test creates an economy of coaching, and despite every attempt to make it tuition proof, this continues. Looking at Tom’s peer group, I can only say this system creates a situation where the wealthiest kids will pass more often than the less wealthy, regardless of ability.

“The biggest wallets and sharpest elbows will win the day”

We live in Warwickshire, which was so laid back it never quite got around to abolishing grammar schools in the 70s. What seems to matter to win a place is the levels of commitment and anxiety of your parents. I'm sure some children beg their parents to let them take it, but there are plenty more who decide it's probably not for them.

Then there's the tutoring. I hold my hands up and say that my son has had a tutor. We momentarily thought about sticking to our principles but knuckled under. There is no avoiding that fact that the 11-plus is a competitive exam. There aren't enough school places in the borough, let alone a grammar place for every child who knows a bit of algebra.

An arms race ensues. No matter what anyone says, if you take two children of the same ability, and give one plenty of practice and send the other one in cold, the practiced child will do better. The biggest wallets and the sharpest elbows will win the day. We found someone who was kind and encouraging, and who could persuade my son to sit down and become familiar with what the questions look like and make him believe it was something he was capable of. There is also now a tuition centre in our local Sainsbury's, so your child can be tutored while you get the weekly shop done in peace. Others have had tuition since Year Three and paid for mock exams and past papers (even though they are not supposed to exist).

Small children are horrible, really horrible. They all discuss who has tutors and who doesn't. My son comes home and tells me of boys in his class who tell others that they are going to fail because they don't have one, or just that they are not up to it. And I would walk away from it all tomorrow, except for the overwhelming feeling that whatever I do, I'm failing him.

He is an intelligent boy who, at 10, I would argue has yet to decide whether to use his powers for good or evil. He is my baby boy who I still sing to sleep, and read bedtime stories. He can't be persuaded to wash more than once a week, let alone think about his future career prospects. He would like to be a stunt man or a rally driver. How on earth are we to decide now what levels of academia he will aspire to, or what kind of education he is worthy of?

The exam will test him on his vocabulary, his maths and his ability to pick out a pattern. It will not test him on his passion or enthusiasm for learning. It will not test him on his leadership skills, or a knack for conflict resolution. They will not test him on his Mr Ripley like ability to lie charmingly and convincingly to get himself out of trouble. It will not examine if he can find a better way of doing things that nobody else has thought of (even if it does involve zip wires).

The world has changed. No longer do we need children divided into manual labour and professional classes. What we need is for the next generation to be innovative, creative, push boundaries, motivate those around them, be resilient enough to get up again when things don't go their way, to collaborate even when they don't like the other person. These are not necessarily going to be found in a school where everyone is of the same ability and most have the same background, work ethic and temperament, whatever the prospectus says.

So why are we bothering with the 11-plus? The alternative schools are constantly fighting against the reality that the brightest, wealthiest and most aspirational kids have been skimmed off the top. For all the progress a grammar school child gets, the opposite occurs to the other 80 per cent. Yes, there are children who thrive and do well, but they are doing it despite the grammar system, not because of it.

If the government were serious about social mobility, they would make sure that all schools were great, with valued and rewarded teachers. Then they could shove their non-verbal reasoning.

“No-one can say this is a fair system or encourages social advancement for all”

Our first child came home from school one day asking when she was starting her tutoring... “Everyone else has started”. We hadn’t planned on tutoring – we don’t believe the selective system is right, and there are better things for our kids to be doing at the age of 10, and surely the school is doing the formal educating?

Family assumed she would ‘pass’ (we both had), and friends said she will get into the school that is right for her. She did not ‘pass’, and we sent her to the secondary modern school of her choice. By day two she was bored and disenchanted. By month two we were in the school asking if she could be challenged more, to be met by the response that she was on course for the grades predicted by their computer system and as that was fine they had no further ideas.

We began exploring all options before caving into the inevitable, and putting her through the 12-plus. We made sure she knew she might not pass, and that even if she did there was no guarantee of a place at our nearest grammar school (five minutes walk from our house). She passed! But we then had to go through the quite extraordinarily complex appeals process.

I sat with 20 other desperate people in that County Hall room listening to the Council explaining why the inclusion of our girls in our preferred grammar school would mean an unsatisfactory education for the 1000+ others. One of the parents had his lawyer with him. Having been through it once before he had sworn never to do it again without legal representation! I would never have got to that stage without a circle of informed friends, the confidence to network, access to online forums, the ability to string a sentence together, a job which enabled me to flex off for meetings and the aspiration for better for my kids.

My daughter was one of three students to be accepted. She settled straight in at the grammar school. Two years on she is on track for great grades, but more importantly is engaged, interested and challenged in her education. We know how lucky we are.

Our second child has also been unsuccessful in getting into the grammar school within walking distance, and as we could not face a repeat experience, he attends a secondary modern much further from home, and away from friends. The school ethos is fantastic, with a clear strategy for stretching, encouraging and inspiring. The problem... as a secondary modern they are facing a dire recruitment challenge, with many lessons taught by supply teachers. So we are about to fill in the forms for the 13+ to try to get him into the school he can walk to.

This situation has not been about choice for us. We knew the system was flawed but cannot move out of the area. We know the system is not about intelligence, but it has designated our kids as being better suited to one style of education than another – it is totally untrue but as a result it consigned them both, for different reasons, to flawed experiences.

It is totally naive to think that the system does not impact on the self-esteem of entire families, or that secondary modern schools can provide the same level of experience as grammar schools where alumni and parents are ploughing thousands of pounds a year into the PTAs.

Our young people continue to be categorised into haves and have-nots by means of a test at a point in time, which makes no allowance for the benefits of learning and the natural development of maturity and ability to learn. No-one can say that this is a fair system, or a system that encourages social advancement for all. Shame on a society that allows this to happen.

“No child should be put through this to get a good education”

I have one child who passed the 11-plus, one who failed and my youngest is in Year Five which, in Trafford, means I have a year of stress and uncertainty ahead of me if I decide to prepare her for the entrance exams.

My eldest daughter had always been in the most able group in her class at primary, so I felt reasonably confident that she would pass the 11-plus and as a teacher I was able to prepare her myself. This did lead to a great deal of stress and conflict at home: my daughter did not want to spend weekends learning algebra and non-verbal reasoning and I felt terrible for making her do so. But I had little choice if I wanted her to stand a chance of passing.

As the exam drew closer, nerves amongst the parents of other children in her class were contagious and I had many sleepless nights worrying about the exam. On the day of the first exam, I felt physically sick. My daughter sat three exams and was so exhausted after the third that she looked ill. I felt horribly guilty for putting her through it but felt I had no other option due to Trafford being wholly selective. Luckily she passed but most of her friends did not, so her friendship circles were broken up, adding to her worries about leaving primary school.

My second daughter had identical levels of attainment to her older sister so I assumed that she too would go to grammar. She however wanted to go the non-selective high school where most of her friends were going. This led to a year of horrendous arguments and stress. I felt that I had to give her the same chances as her sister and that as an able pupil she ought to go to a grammar. The only preparation she did for the exam was under duress and ultimately she did not pass. My daughter was fine with this but I felt that I had failed her as a parent.

I now have to face the 11-plus rigmarole again with my youngest daughter and whilst my heart tells me to turn my back on the whole system, spend quality time with her instead and send her to the non-selective school that I now know to be very good, my head tells me that I should give her the opportunity her sisters had. I really resent being put in this situation by an unfair, outdated selective system. My friends who live in neighbouring areas do not have to go through this; their children are able to go to comprehensives where they have equality of opportunity and are not judged by their school uniform.

In my time tutoring for the 11-plus I have encountered many situations and outcomes that have led me to conclude that the selective system we have in Trafford is unfair. I've seen many very bright children not pass due to exam nerves and less able children hit lucky on the day and pass. You either pass or you don't – having a bad day or panicking is just seen as an excuse. For many children of a broadly similar ability the exam becomes little more than a lottery of luck rather than a test of ability.

I do not accept that grammar schools in any way facilitate social mobility – the chances of a child passing the exam without significant preparation, whether with a tutor or their parent are long gone. The percentages of children gaining a place at a grammar school in the least affluent area of Trafford, compared with most affluent, speak volumes.

I believe that the pressure of the system has a very detrimental effect on the mental health of children and personally know of several children who have fallen ill under the weight of expectation. Children who don't pass often suffer significant, sometimes lifelong, damage to their self-esteem. No child should be put through this to get a good education and no child should be labelled a failure at ten or eleven years-old. I do not believe that the annual misery inflicted on the majority of the children who take the 11-plus in Trafford, is worth the advantage for the lucky few.

“How they performed on that one day when they were 10 years old will have an impact on the rest of their lives”

There are many things that happen in my local area (Watford) as a result of our partially selective system. Firstly, a significant number of parents send their children to independent prep schools to give them a better chance of getting a place at Watford Boys' or Watford Girls' Grammar Schools, meaning that increasing numbers of bright, state-educated local children now see these schools as totally out of their reach. They are effectively private schools, but without the big fee.

Secondly, the private tutoring phenomenon is thriving. And not just for a month or two before the test either. Many children are being tutored for a whole year or two beforehand – that's right, children aged eight and nine years old are spending time after school and at weekends prepping for a test. Surely the test is designed to identify naturally bright children whether or not they have had tutoring? You might think so, yes. But of course those children who have spent time getting used to how the test is structured, doing practice papers and answering questions under pressure have an advantage over those who have received no tutoring.

Even those well-intentioned parents who wholeheartedly disagree with private tutoring in principle end up giving in. It is easy to say that you would never get a tutor for your child when the whole process is a long way off; but when you start to see the rest of the year group being prepped for a test that your child will also be taking, of course it is natural to want your own child to have a fair chance too.

Another thing that happens as a result of our partially selective system is this – children frequently do not attend their local school. And really, what should a school be? Part of and representative of a community, is what I like to think. Surely every child should have the chance to attend their local secondary school if they want to, but that often does not happen here because where you end up going to secondary school is based on how you perform in a test when you are ten years old. And so bright children from further afield often gain places at excellent schools at the expense of local children. Friends are frequently split up at a time when the very thing that matters to most children of that age is staying with their friends.

Let's also think about these children, who instead of developing a love of reading or dance or sports are spending time preparing for a test. They are not developing in-depth or useful knowledge of anything, they are being taught how to pass a test. They are being forced to compare themselves to their peers and being labelled at an age when learning should still be fun. How they performed on that one day when they were 10 years old will have an impact on the rest of their lives; when we all know that children develop at different rates.

And what about the pressure to live up to parents' expectations? Parents who have paid for extra tutoring sessions, who may have taken on a second job or extra shifts to be able to afford the private tutoring in the first place. How does a child feel telling their parents that actually, the tutoring didn't quite pay off this time? And if the child is successful, what about when she arrives at the school that she has been tutored to get into? What about the child who has scraped her way into the grammar school, but then feels like she is under-achieving because she is getting Bs when most of her classmates are on As and A*s?

I have one final question, which is this – why don't we value young people for anything other than the ability to pass tests anymore? That's what I would really like to know.

“What was the point of all that stress, pressure and divisiveness imposed on our ten year-olds if outcomes are just as good at comprehensive schools?”

The first I knew about children in Maidenhead attending selective schools in neighbouring Buckinghamshire was when an estate agent congratulated me for viewing a house in the “grammar school catchment”.* I looked down at my three-year-old and one-year-old and thought that we had a long way to go until we had to worry about secondary education. I had attended my local comprehensive as had my husband and we were both quite satisfied with our schooling, progressing on to degree courses and professional careers. We had assumed our children would take the same route.

Sooner than I had anticipated, wherever there were mothers, there were conversations on the topic. At the school gate, whilst watching swimming lessons, at coffee mornings or Book Group the chat inevitably came round to ‘11-plus’, ‘grammar schools’, ‘tutoring’. My daughter was given a verbal reasoning test papers book for her seventh birthday by a well-meaning party guest’s parent!

There were rumours of who was trying for grammar school, who had passed, whether the catchment area had changed, which grammar was best-regarded. There were whisperings of who had been admitted, who was going to appeal or retry through the 12-plus.

When my eldest was in Year Five I received a phone-call from one classmate’s mother. She wanted to know if we were embarking on the 11-plus and was surprised when I said no. “But you’re bound to do the best for your child, you’ll be holding her back by denying her a grammar school opportunity.”

As mums talked so did the children. So, to be fair we took our eldest to the grammar school open evening. Her review was, “They’re rather stuck up and go on a lot about rowing”, so that was the end of our brief flirtation with the concept of selective education.

Meanwhile some went to private tutors, missed after-school clubs or declined invitations to tea. Family life was placed on hold in some households for the 11-plus. And then the results arrived – some happy families, some disappointments and one successful child said to another who had failed, “I’ll go to a better school and university and get a better job and drive a better car than you.” And there were still eight months of Year Six to enjoy together.

My daughter went to the local comprehensive and her friend went a Buckinghamshire grammar. Seven years elapsed at that comprehensive school during which time she went from child to being a young, confident woman, gained great GCSEs grades, took leadership and mentoring roles through the house system, participated in musicals and plays, sang at the Royal Albert Hall and to our local MP (now the PM) at the inauguration of the new drama studio, played hockey on the astro-turf, mixed with a variety of ethnicities, abilities and backgrounds, went on visits to Oxford, Reading and Royal Holloway universities. I ended up wondering what more she could have possibly benefited from if she had gone to a grammar?

So, fast-forward to summer 2016: The grammar school girl got her predicted grades and went to her first choice Russell Group University, as did my daughter. And I am left questioning – what was the point of all that stress, pressure and divisiveness imposed on our ten year olds if the outcomes are just as good at our comprehensive schools?

* Maidenhead dispensed with selective state secondary schools in the early 1970s with the five secondary schools becoming comprehensives. But some families still apply for grammar school places just over the border in Bucks.

“It felt that selection had become ‘selection by tutoring’ – for those who could pay. I saw stressed out parents with stressed out children in their wake.”

I was educated in Sussex, a fully comprehensive area. Many of my peers achieved outstanding results at O level, went on to the local sixth form (the old grammar school) and onto to top universities including Oxford and Cambridge. The school also supported the less able children really well. We even had a thriving school farm.

So when I moved and started my family in Buckinghamshire, I was astonished to discover that the county operated a selective education system and I soon began to experience its fallout. Friends of my children began disappearing off to private tutors after school. By Year Five, pretty much all of their friends were being tutored. Reluctantly, to ‘level the playing field’ I caved in and my eldest daughter started tutoring. We did not, however, tutor our youngest daughter – she felt completely overwhelmed by the experience.

To me, it felt that selection had become ‘selection by tutoring’, i.e. for those who could pay. I saw stressed out parents with stressed out children in their wake. Fearful parents seemed to be prepared to do anything to obtain that coveted place at grammar school. If you had the knowledge of how the appeal system worked and the confidence to use it, that seemed to be a definite advantage.

It saddened me to know that my own wonderful, fully inclusive, school experience was being denied to my own children. All my Year Six peers came up with me from our primary school to the local comprehensive.

I now have two daughters at two different schools – one at a grammar school, one at a secondary modern – and I am already seeing the inequity of selection. Secondary moderns have to work hard at raising the confidence of their new year 7s. They don’t seem to have access to the deep pockets of parents, ex-parents and alumni of the grammar schools. They also have children joining throughout the year, and in the town of High Wycombe, many of these children have little or no English. This simply does not happen in the grammar schools.

To me, the selective education system embeds disadvantage throughout the process: up to and then beyond the 11-plus exam.

“The message that has not got out there is the damage that grammar schools do to choice. I don’t have a choice.”

We live in Sevenoaks. If my daughter doesn’t pass the 11-plus her options are to go to a new religious free school or the local academy, which OFSTED say requires improvement.

I think the message that has not got out there is the damage having grammar schools in an area does to choice. I don’t have a choice. All the ‘clever’ kids get into grammar school and the rest go to the academy or start praying.

What are my options then as a ‘non-believer’ to give my child the best education? My only choice is to pay for tutoring to be in with a chance of a grammar place. We have spent £2000 in tutoring fees over the past year. That’s just once a week. Everyone I know does this. Or they can afford to be a stay-at-home mum and tutor their child themselves.

I’m envious of friends who live in areas where there are just good comprehensives. No stress for the 10 year-old, no sense of failure, just the quality free education they are entitled to.

This two tier system is unsustainable. They should end grammar schools now, not grow the system. I’ve written to my MP, but what else can I do?

“My son may have just had a bad day, but now he is labelled a failure”

We decided to enter our son for the grammar school entrance exam, because he is very bright and always did well at school. He wanted to do it, because he wanted to go to the same school as his friends and they were all sitting the exam.

It is kind of expected, in Trafford, if your child is reasonably bright that you will put them in for the exam. There is then the question of whether to get a tutor. You are told by those who have previous experience that “you have to get a tutor”, the kid will have no chance otherwise.

Despite being clever, and being tutored, my son failed, by five marks. He was 10 years and 6 weeks old when he took the exam and he says that he found it very stressful. (I’ve heard of children being sick as they wait in the queue to take the exam, because of the pressure to succeed.) My son may have just had a bad day, but now he is labelled a failure. Fortunately, he found the positive in the situation, “I didn’t really want to go there anyway, Mum.”

However, he says that some of his friends who also ‘failed’ to make the grade now feel as though they are not very clever even though they are. These children are now 12 years old and have spent the first year of their secondary school careers feeling like failures. These are not necessarily children who are ‘less academic’ and will be better placed taking a technical career path (whatever that is supposed to mean). Lots of these children are bright, engaged and enthusiastic learners who want to do well. They just didn’t do as well in one exam, on one day when they were 10 years old.

My son is a brilliant mathematician, a “maths genius” according to his maths teacher and he loves computing. His friend is a fantastic writer, but he struggles with his self-belief because he thinks he mustn’t be that clever... because he failed an exam. They will succeed though, but not because of the selective system. Any success they achieve will be in spite of it. But they will always carry the knowledge that they failed their 11-plus and that makes me sad.

The selective system is divisive. This was demonstrated to me when we attended the open evening at our local grammar school, and the headteacher announced in his welcome speech that, “We only have the best of the best here.” I was appalled. What sort of message is this? If this is the message given in that school, the kids who go there can only end up thinking they are ‘better’ than others like my boy. How is this good for either set of children or for society?

I have another younger son, currently in Year Five, who is dyslexic. I know that there is simply no point even considering entering him for the grammar school entrance exam as I know he would fail, despite being above average intelligence. It is my understanding that the grammar school makes no allowances for dyslexic children, such as extra time etc. This sends out a rather strong message that these children are not welcome. In Trafford children with SEN seem to be forgotten about, in favour of lauding our grammar school system.

It feels very much like there is an ‘us and them’ situation in Trafford. Those parents whose children pass can feel somewhat superior, while those whose children don’t make it often feel resentful towards those who do. People won’t admit it, but that is the truth of the situation.

It would be so much better if our children could attend an outstanding comprehensive where they could all receive the best standard of education, but without all the stress and division created by the selective system we experience in Trafford.

“Our son is an example of the kind of child that could slip completely through the gaps in an all-or-nothing grammar/secondary modern system”

I am very much aware that my comfortable middle-class lifestyle owes much to the fact that my parents sat the 11-plus in 1951 and passed. In 1979 and 1981 respectively, my brother and I followed suit. What we all had in common was that apart from Granny making Dad wear his best corduroy suit, nobody was prepped in any way for the exam – we just went and did it. Not everyone in our family passed though, and the difference in life outcomes for my aunts and uncles, and their children and grandchildren, was and is dramatic.

My husband was educated comprehensively in his home country, and he has always wondered whether a grammar-style education would have given him that extra push. Not that he has done badly, but you can't help wondering, can you? That's why I let him persuade me to enter our son for the 11-plus. One thing we did agree on though was that he would not be tutored. We felt it was too much pressure at his age, but it does seem to be very difficult to pass without it these days.

Our son was put on the gifted and talented list ('G&T' as my step-mother calls it) for maths in Year One. He is passionate about maths and science and his ambition is to be an astrophysicist. He is not so passionate about English though. Despite my protestations that people like Brian Cox need to be able to present their ideas clearly and convincingly, he still struggles to see the point.

That is why it is so difficult to choose the 'right' school for him. Do we send him to a grammar school where he will be able to pursue his passion for maths, but where English is always going to be a struggle? Or do we send him to a non-selective school where he will get the English support he needs but may not reach his full potential with the maths?

Well last Friday, our dilemma was solved because we received his 11-plus results. I refuse to use the 'f' word, so instead I will just say that he did not pass. His maths and non-verbal reasoning were good, but the verbal reasoning score was a full 30 points lower. There does not seem any point in appealing – we do feel he would struggle in a grammar school and we are lucky to have a good comprehensive just around the corner from us (we live in a non-selective authority which borders a selective one). He is a resilient child and we are confident he will do well.

He is a great example, however, of the kind of child that could slip completely through the gaps in an all-or-nothing grammar/secondary modern system; like my cousin who was brilliant at maths but was not even offered the chance to sit the 'O' level – the only option was the CSE.

Every year, our local comprehensive sends a couple of pupils to Oxbridge, and a greater number to other Russell Group universities. We are not happy that our son has had to face disappointment at such a young age, but we do feel relieved that the dazzling and confusing array of choices we faced has been narrowed down to one good school that will take him as far as he wants to go. Imagine if all families had a school like this on their doorsteps – children could go back to being children again, instead of spending their evenings and weekends being hot-housed for an exam that they are more likely to fail than pass.