

Title: Dilemmas and dynamics relating to selection for secondary schooling in Trinidad and Tobago

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Abstract:

The high-stakes eleven plus placement examination has remained a feature of the education systems of many postcolonial Anglophone Caribbean territories. Originally based on a British model, it was introduced to the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago in 1961 and was perceived to be the fairest means of allocating the limited number of secondary school places. The expansion of the secondary sector and the achievement of universal secondary education, however, have had little impact on the selection role and societal significance of the examination in the local context. This qualitative study draws on concepts of cultural and social capital and power, and the theoretical work of sociological and educational researchers such as Bourdieu, Foucault, Bernstein, Dore and Broadfoot, to investigate whose interests are being served by maintaining the selective examination system. This is done with reference to implications that stem from the uncritical transfer of educational and assessment policies and practices to, and within, small states. More specifically, critical discourse analysis, and four detailed school case studies, are employed to examine the extent to which the Trinidad and Tobago eleven plus reproduces patterns of power and social inequity in practice. In developing the arguments, the study draws upon experiential knowledge based on my own varied professional experience within the Trinidad education system. Metaphor informs the stages of data analysis and allows the voices of the research participants to be foregrounded in the presentation of the data. Additionally, metaphor offers an important bridge that connects the findings with the key theoretical concepts that guide the study. The findings suggest that students are unequally positioned in terms of access to the cultural, social and linguistic capital that is taken for granted, and indeed required and rewarded, by the examination. It is argued that the linguistic and cultural competence demanded by the examination process requires initial familiarisation within the family and that those students who are better placed, in terms of the quantity and quality of such capital, have a better feel for the game and a significant advantage at the eleven plus level. These findings are consistent with Bourdieu's theory that education systems reproduce the unequal distribution of cultural capital and therefore contribute to the reproduction of inequities in the social structure. In concluding, it is argued that the eleven-plus examination symbolises and is located within the power struggles and ideological disconnections that marked its introduction to Trinidad and Tobago in the 1960s.