Chapter 5
High-Stakes Testing in Saint Lucia: Common Entrance Teachers’ Perception of the Changing Face of the Eleven Plus Examination and Their Role in the Partial Zoning Initiative

Madgerie Jameson-Charles
University of the West Indies, Trinidad and Tobago

ABSTRACT

The question of selection of students into secondary school is important for the education system in Saint Lucia. Education officials are faced with the arduous task to assign students to a particular secondary school based on merit and school choice. The paper explores St. Lucian Common Entrance teachers’ perception of the changes in the eleven plus examination for students’ advancement to secondary schools. A qualitative methodology was used to capture teachers’ stories about the changing face of the eleven plus examination and their roles in the implementation of the new partial zoning initiative. Focus groups and individual interviews were conducted with teachers from the eight educational districts in Saint Lucia to give their opinion on the changing face of the Common Entrance Examination. Results reveal that the teachers were generally pleased with the changes in the CEE and welcomed the partial zoning initiative. Although they believed that the partial zoning would benefit the communities, they expressed reservations about the public awareness on the initiative and the preparation of secondary schools to handle the changes. Teachers recommended an effective public awareness campaign and intense dialogue with parents of children involved so that they would make informed choices on the matter.

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INTRODUCTION

High-stakes examinations such as the Common Entrance Examination (CEE) are still evident in many Caribbean territories although there has been the move towards the attainment of universal secondary education for all students. Every year, thousands of Standard Four (Grade 6) students in Saint Lucia anxiously await the results of the CEE. The CEE is considered a high stakes examination because the students’ exam scores determine whether they are selected and placed at a secondary school of their choice. The high stakes CEE was necessary for the selection of students given the limited number of secondary school places that were available before 2013. It was the most practical method of assigning students into secondary school because it served as a selection mechanism.

The assignment of students’ secondary school of choice has been an arduous task for educators over the years. Prior to 1970, there were three institutions for secondary education, one public and two private. Admission to these institutions was based on the institutions’ own developed and administered ‘Entrance Examinations’ and the spaces available were limited. Tuition fees were paid by successful students. This was a challenge for students whose parents were not able to afford the tuition fees. For example, in 1945, my mother was successful at the Entrance Examination but my grandmother was not able to pay the tuition fees for her to access secondary education. Secondary education was not available to every citizen because of economic constraints and social class determined access to secondary education, my mother told me “Two of them in her village succeed at the Entrance Examination but the student who received the scholarship was the one whose parents were rich” (personal communication). During this era, many upper class parents sent their children abroad to universities and secondary schools because of the limited number of secondary school places (Gordon, 1963).

In 1970, the selection mechanism carried the nomenclature Common Entrance Examination. Students’ assignment to secondary schools via the CEE was based on their performance, school choice and availability of school place. Prior to the examination, parents of students have to indicate their school choices in order of preference on prescribed forms. Students are assigned to school of choice based on their results.

There was an imminent move to expand the educational landscape and educational opportunities for all citizens in Saint Lucia. One initiative was the implementation of the lower/junior secondary system in 1974 to give more students the opportunity to attend secondary school. This provided some comfort for many students and parents. One reason school fees were no longer an issue was because students were able to access secondary education based on merit. The CEE as selection mechanism continued because the places available at the schools could not accommodate all
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