

The Eleven Plus Legacy

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Toyota celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2007. From small beginnings, continuous improvement and product innovation have resulted in a legacy of quality. Interestingly, another legacy began in the Anglophone Caribbean around the same time—the Eleven Plus examination, first implemented in Jamaica in 1957 and in Trinidad and Tobago in 1961.

The Eleven Plus holds a unique position in the education systems of the Caribbean because it selects and places students into different secondary schools, thereby shaping the system's architecture and outcomes. The Caribbean Eleven Plus is administered to every child at 11+ years of age and so it influences early adolescence and identity formation of an entire age group. In other words, “doing the Eleven Plus” is an essential part of boyhood and girlhood.

Eleven Plus selective systems still operate in a limited way in Northern Ireland and some English Local Education Authorities (LEAs). In Northern Ireland, mounting pressure has led to a reconsideration of the examination's role for selection to grammar schools. The 2008/9 edition of the optional 11-plus Transfer Test in Northern Ireland was supposed to have been the last. However, as Trinidad and Tobago learnt in 1998, abolishing a selection system and developing viable alternatives can be very difficult. The Irish coalition government itself remains divided on this issue and already, some grammar schools have decided to “rebel” and use their own tests of selection.

Interestingly, discussion on these issues in Trinidad and Tobago and the rest of the Anglophone Caribbean has been surprisingly muted. The Eleven plus retains a kind of legitimacy that other parts of the education system do not have. This is surprising considering that Trinidad and Tobago is moving towards a seamless education system. Yet, some do not see a conflict between implementing a seamless education system and maintaining a high-stakes placement examination at the transition from primary to secondary school.

So, then, should we retain selection at eleven plus? Should that selection system remain examination-based or should non-ability criteria be used instead? If it remains examination-based, do we test ability or achievement? If achievement, what subjects and with what item formats? Perhaps the first question is the most important to answer right now. Results from international assessments of educational achievement, such as the Progress in Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), suggest that selective systems do less well. Perhaps we are too often distracted by the performance of a few high-achieving students above the 95th percentile, forgetting that only 2% of our students were above the advanced benchmark in the 2006 PIRLS reading test.

If Trinidad and Tobago wants to fully develop its human capital, it cannot just depend on a stable of highly gifted students; instead, it must improve outcomes for all students, who constitute the fabric of industry and society. Are we helped or hindered by a high-stakes examination at eleven plus? What are the consequences of using a selection examination so early in a child's development?

For measurement experts, there is little on the technical soundness or validity of the examination to make judgements either for or against. In the heyday of Eleven Plus research in the 1970s and 1980s, empirical studies and government reports often pointed to differential outcomes for the major groups. A measurement expert, however, might ask, How can you even measure achievement when students have different opportunities to learn? It may be that the Eleven Plus is simply good at reproducing rather than changing the societal structure. While a few disadvantaged students might receive placements to their schools of choice, the most recent work published by Clement Jackson of Cornell University suggests that, overall, there is little value added within our differentiated school system.

Our initial work on the Trinidad and Tobago Eleven Plus points to rather large differences in performance and placements across gender and geographic location. For the period 1995 to 2005, we found that males perform consistently poorly on Language Arts and the Essay in the rural administrative districts on the east of the island of Trinidad. In Tobago, from 1999 there was a notable and persistent female advantage in both Mathematics and Language. Should we tolerate such large achievement gaps for exogenous variables like gender and locality, over which students have no control? Can this be fair? Is the examination design fair? Perhaps, in time, these studies will help stakeholders better judge and re-evaluate our legacy of fifty years.

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