

Choosing a Secondary School

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Each year, around this time, families of Eleven Plus candidates make one of the most important schooling decisions. Some believe that it is a decision which affects the career of the child for life. That decision is the choice of four secondary schools. Who chooses these schools? Which school is most often listed as first choice? What are the factors influencing those choices and what processes are involved? A research team at the School of Education recently addressed these questions in a year-long research project. We interviewed parents and students and examined over one-and-a half million choices made between 1995 and 2005 across the Common Entrance Examination and the Secondary Entrance Assessment.

The secondary school choice process in Trinidad and Tobago is interestingly complex and nuanced. However, it is not unique because school choice is an important component of current education reform in many countries, such as the US, UK, and New Zealand. The system of secondary school choice in Trinidad and Tobago has not been explicitly designed, but has evolved as part of the dual-controlled system and is apparently enshrined in the Constitution. In the case of secondary schools, in theory, the choice of school is completely open, assuming that the student scores highly. For example, it is possible, although improbable, that a student in Tobago might choose Presentation College, San Fernando or Naparima Girls as their first choice

Parents have an important role in choosing the four schools, but in many instances advice is received from members of the extended family and especially from teachers. We found that in many instances children, however, had a significant voice in the process, even when that voice was set within parental limits. For example, a child might be allowed to choose between several schools provided by the parent. Thus, it is better to think of local school choice in the context of a family dynamic.

Carl Campbell has documented the historical conflict between the church and state for the secondary school sector, so it is interesting that Queen's Royal College is by far the school most often chosen for first choice. To some this finding might seem strange, but it is better understood in the context of what drives the choice process in the consumer.

To investigate the choice process we used a technique from Consumer Psychology called *Laddering*. This is a hierarchical interview process in which the respondent makes clear the order of his choices and provides reasons for his choices and the ranking of the choices. Academic performance is an important factor in school choice, but so is the overall quality of education captured in holistic goals and discipline. In a rapidly changing society, parents do not want to lose their adolescent child and this becomes the prime motive in choosing a school that will (1) keep the child safe and (2) develop the kind of man or woman the parent desires. Thus, more than academic performance is involved in secondary school choice in Trinidad and Tobago.

We found an elaborate process of vilification and valorisation of schools founded upon multiple societal myths (“Junior Secondary schools are bad,” etc.) dominating the decision-making process in students. Vilification (thinking and saying that the school is all bad) and valorisation (imagining that some schools are praiseworthy in everything) resulted in the choice process being strongly emotive. Thus, parents and children were often afraid of being placed in the “wrong” schools. Such strong feelings would mean that in less valued schools, a strong self-fulfilling prophecy might operate.

Many families were inert consumers and simply did not have enough accurate information to make sound choices. Informed consumers were usually of the middle and upper social classes and had greater access to information and networks that ensured better decisions.

In the UK, choosing a secondary school is a formal process and much information is available to all consumers. The *Daily Telegraph* recently published a 250+ page book entitled “Your School, Your Choice,” written by John Chard. There are even publications, such as “How to Win Your School Appeal,” which explain the admission process and detail how to lodge an appeal to the Local Education Authority.

Much then needs to be done in our country to help parents make better choices. But even more must be done by schools to market themselves. In a true education market, choice is not inevitable and schools can make themselves more attractive to clients to ensure a better fit.

This article was written on October 14th, 2008, prior to the Ministry of Education’s new proposals.

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