

**WHEN CHOOSING MIGHT MEAN LOSING:
A Mixed Method Study of Secondary School Choice in the
Republic of Trinidad and Tobago**

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This article argues that Trinidad and Tobago has historically operated a system of open enrolment. Open access to schools by families may be rooted in the conflict between Church and State over schooling. The system is founded on the principle of the right of parents to choose schools for their children, first argued in the 18th century by the Church, and now included as a provision in the Trinidad and Tobago Republican Constitution. Choice of secondary school is operationalized by a system of rules for placement at eleven-plus. Parents are required to list their choice of schools and depending upon the candidates' score in the eleven-plus examination, test takers receive one of these choices or are assigned to a school by the Ministry of Education. To study the system of secondary school choice in Trinidad and Tobago, information was gathered from the registration database of 11 eleven-plus examinations spanning the period 1995–2005. Student choices were analysed along with the demographic and geographic data. In the mixed method research design, data on the construction of choice were also collected from focus group and individual laddering interviews with both parents and children at four school sites. The integrated findings suggest that the choice-making process is complex, fluid, and dynamic, with multiple markets and different consumer types. Families made decisions in which children and even outsiders had considerable voice. Making choices involved a dual process of valorization and demonization of schools, but a tendency to reject some schools was predominant in many instances. The value placed on first choice “prestige” schools may be related to the consumer values of future academic success, safety of person, and assurance of stable personal development.

Introduction

Internationally, parental choice of schools has become one of the more important education reform strategies designed to improve quality and foster excellence and diversity in schooling (Weiss, 1998). The

worldwide move towards open enrolment systems is part of a larger series of economic, social, and political changes that have occurred over the past three decades (Whitty & Edwards, 1998). These so-called “market reforms in education” include innovations such as school autonomy, per capita funding, increased accountability, pupil selection and parental choice of school (Ladd, 2002; Sepänen, 2003). Although, in reality, choice mechanisms are complex and varied with sometimes contradictory outcomes, in theory, the introduction of choice into a public school system can provide greater opportunities for disadvantaged families to select and receive the best type of schooling (Bomotti, 1998). On the one hand, parents might choose to send their children to high-quality or specialized schools within a diversified market, thereby maximizing the child’s education experience (Archbald, 2004). On the other hand, schools operating within a free market environment can attract clients who truly value the particular school product.

Greater parental choice of school within an education system can force institutions to interact with stakeholders and adopt market-oriented practices in planning improvement. Of course, such a benefit-laden scenario might be simplistic and, in reality, there are often many weaknesses and imperfections associated with the operation of choice systems (Andersen, 2008). Such flaws and distortions often lead to unintended consequences, such as greater inequity and school stratification, ethnic segregation, and this might be coupled with limited choice-making capacity for some families (Burgess, McConnell, Propper, & Wilson, 2004; Burgess, Propper, & Wilson, 2007; Saporito, 2003; Walberg, 2007; Wells, 1991). Differences in outcomes, philosophy, and values have fuelled an intense debate on the morality and efficiency of this and other market reforms (Lazaridou & Fris, 2005). Indeed, at the outset, the issues have been strongly politicized, with different stakeholders positioning themselves on different sides of the fence (Jeynes, 2000). In the United States (US), some educationists consider the school choice campaign to be nothing more than a social movement led by activists, politicians, and public personalities (Powers & Cookson, 1999). However, there is also growing evidence that some choice systems do lead to higher achievement for school systems and students (Betts & Loveless, 2005). For others, the logic and rhetoric associated with choice is very compelling (Brighouse, 2002).

School choice systems have been implemented or have developed in many different parts of the world, both in developed and developing countries (Forsey, Davies, & Walford, 2008; Salisbury & Tooley, 2005). Notable examples of open enrolment systems within the developed world are found in the US, Sweden, Denmark, New Zealand, and the United

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Kingdom (UK); and in the developing world, Chile, South Africa, and Argentina are notable (Maile, 2004). Each of these systems may be regarded as relatively unique with different sets of rules and structures governing the conduct of the choice mechanism, as seen in the case of school vouchers in the US, Chile, and Argentina (Carnoy, 1997; Narodowski & Nores, 2002). In reality, then, no one country has a monopoly on choice policy, and countries are striving to learn from each other by noting the weaknesses and challenges in implementing different sets of rules nationally or regionally.

In the US, there are a variety of choice programmes currently operating in different states, varying by target (demand or supply) and degree of choice (restricted to no restrictions). For example, some programmes may allow open enrolment within a district (intra-district choice) while other programmes allow choice across districts (inter-district choice options). Vouchers and tax credit are choice mechanisms that allow students to select either a public or private institution. Charter and magnet school programmes provide both school autonomy and flexibility, targeting specific students in the education market. Home schooling might also be considered another product in the choice scheme. As of 1997, 18 states had state-wide public school choice, 11 states had public school choice within districts, and 22 states had programmes that allowed students to access private schooling using state funds (McCabe & Vinzant, 1999). Since that time, the charter school movement has grown tremendously and now some 40 states include this particular choice programme (Center for Educational Reform, 2009).

In the UK, the national system of choice was developed as part of the education reform agenda of the 1988 Education Reform Act (Carl, 1994). This act created a system of open enrolment based on parental preference. The multiple innovations introduced in this reform package included (a) local management of schools, (b) pupil-led funding, (c) the abolition of school catchment areas, (d) parental choice, (e) specialist schools, and (f) more accessible “consumer” information (Giamouridis, 2003). In theory, parents could select any school available and schools could only reject applicants if they were physically full. The 1998 Education Act also created Grant-maintained schools, which were freed from bureaucratic control by Local Education Authorities and could therefore respond innovatively to parental demands (Bradley, 1996).

School choice systems have existed for some time in the developing world. For example, Chile has operated a national school choice based on vouchers since 1982. The voucher is a per capita subsidy, which promotes competition between the different types of schools in order to attract and retain students financed from the fiscal budget (Sapelli, 2005).

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Unlike the limited use of vouchers in the US system, where the system functions in just 12 states, Chile operates a nation-wide system that funds education in both public and private schools, the latter including both religious or non-religious institutions (Moe, 2008). Another Latin American choice system is found in Argentina, where the market for school places has developed because of the state's supply focused policies in the 1990s, and is aligned to partial or complete funding of teachers in some private schools (Narodowski, 2002). This system may be described as a quasi-monopoly rather than a quasi-market scheme (Narodowski & Andrada, 2001). Although the quality of public schools has improved, the private sector, which also offers valued bilingual education, continues to increase its market share (Potter & Hayden, 2004). Some developed countries have also recently introduced expanded school choice systems, notably South Africa after the apartheid era (Maile, 2004).

The Choice System in Trinidad and Tobago

Choice without Explicit Design

Moe (2002, 2008) has argued that whether or not there are negative or positive outcomes associated with open enrolment depends primarily upon the structure and “rules” of the choice system. He noted that:

The simple way to think of it is that school choice always operates within a structure—a framework of rules—which in turn has a lot to do with the kinds of outcomes choice will ultimately generate. In some structures, choice will lead to equity problems. In others, it will not. In still others, it will tilt the playing field in favor of the disadvantaged and aggressively promote the cause of social equity. (2002, p. 180)

Therefore, to evaluate the open enrolment system in Trinidad and Tobago, it is first necessary to explicate the system of rules and procedures that operates. In theory, a parent in Trinidad and Tobago can choose any public primary school regardless of its location and, indeed, many parents living in suburban areas have chosen primary schools located in the urban work centres. There is, however, a rarely enacted policy which gives priority of entry to students living within a three-mile radius of the school. In the case of the secondary school, families are limited to their listing of four choices provided at the sitting of the eleven-plus. For the secondary school, there is no formal restriction for choices based on location of the school. The ability of secondary schools to select students, however, is closely regulated, with only

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denominational schools having some freedom to select up to 20% of their intake. Even in this instance, however, the student must have a benchmark score that is above that of the district mean (Jules, 1994; London, 1989).

For secondary school choice, the primary mechanism operates at the transition between primary and secondary school and is an integral part of eleven-plus selection and placement. This system was installed in 1961 and placement in a particular school is based on performance on the high-stakes examination, which is administered to all students on exiting primary school. Prior to taking the examination, students are required to list their choice of secondary school and placement decisions are made primarily based on students' scores in the examination. Students with the highest scores are virtually assured of receiving their top listed choice. This mechanism of choice, selection, and placement at this level was first established in an attempt to provide a more standardized system of access to secondary schools, which were a scarce resource (M. H. Alleyne, 1995). The choice dimension of the system remains the same up to the current period, although the design and number of choices may have changed over time. For the period 2001–2006, the number of choices was increased to six. Since the system is primarily examination based, students are competing to earn their choice of school. In reality, significant numbers of students are assigned to a school outside their choice because the more popular schools have limited capacity.

A Socio-Historical Analysis of the Evolution of Choice in Trinidad and Tobago

To gain additional insight into the current operation of the rules, a historical analysis of the evolution of the current system is useful. This reveals the past issues and tensions that led to the development of the system. In this regard, the development of an open enrolment system in Trinidad and Tobago may parallel that of the Netherlands, where the choice system was created early as a consequence of accommodations between state and denominational schools along with private fee-paying schools (Ritzen, Van Dommelen, & De Vijlder, 1997). In Trinidad and Tobago, the state has traditionally funded schooling in both government and denominational schools, with both considered essentially part of the public school sector according to the 1966 Education Act. While the intention might not have been to explicitly create a competitive education market, an open enrolment system has evolved, which now allows a significant degree of parental choice for individual families in both the primary and secondary school sectors.

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In the development of the education system in Trinidad and Tobago, London (1991) noted the emergence of several different models and variants of the secondary school created to fill specific needs of the populace at different times. These models and variants differ by governance system (church/state) by age (pre- and post-Independence), and by the curriculum and years of schooling offered. These different types now co-exist, resulting in a differentiated system in which choice sustains the differences. Campbell's (1997) seminal work on the historical development of the Trinidad and Tobago education system linked the operation of the education market to the differential value attached to schools:

What became clear is that the newer government schools established between 1958 and 1971 – not to mention the junior secondary and senior comprehensive schools of the 1970s – did not have the academic esteem of the pre-1958 denominational secondary schools. This was understandable and had less to do with the denominational or government character of the school and more with the age, tradition and experience of the schools and their staff. (p. 94)

Thus, over time, as new secondary school types were added, several different options became available to parents; however, most traditional schools have retained their high value (Hospedales, 1982).

From a sociological standpoint, it may be that the open enrolment system in Trinidad and Tobago was implicitly designed to ensure continued elite access to the traditional higher-quality, denominational schools, as Campbell (1997) has noted:

The system of recruiting students into secondary schools also worked in favour of those schools already better patronized by children of middle and upper class parents. The parents of the top 15 percent (or some other variable percentage) in the Common Entrance Examination (which replaced the College Exhibition Examination) were guaranteed entry for their children to the secondary school of the first choice. (p. 94)

More importantly, Campbell's analysis pointed to the importance of the entire selection system, inclusive of the examination and the system of rules for making choices. It is this selection/placement system that maintains the character of the education system and the differentiated school system. Indeed, if the eleven-plus were to be coupled with restrictions to choice, such as zoning, access to some traditional highly favoured schools could be substantially reduced. Historically, however,

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as London (1994) noted, past moves towards restricting choice have met strong resistance and this continues to be the case today (Gillezeau, 2009).

The legitimate right of individual families to access education in the school type of their choice gives the placement system needed defensibility, as Campbell suggested:

From the late 1830s the development of education in Trinidad was characterized by fairly constant tension and sporadic struggles between government and the churches, and between one church and another. The right to have denominational schools became an article of religious faith. In particular the Roman Catholic social doctrine of the preeminence of the family in the provision of education, though more usually stated during the nineteenth century as the primacy of the church, provided a firm philosophical base from which to fight off the centralizing efforts of Protestants oriented or secular governments. (p. 271)

From very early on, then, the question of the role of the family in determining and controlling the nature and type of education proved to be a central societal issue in Trinidad and Tobago.

Admittedly, the early schools in Trinidad and Tobago were not truly designed to foster educational productivity, at least not in the narrow sense of the term. There was certainly little intent on fostering social mobility among the local groups. Instead, at the elementary level, the aim was primarily to promote standards of morality and to cement denominational loyalties, with secondary education initially for the white upper class and narrowly modelled on the English grammar school (Campbell, 1996). Williams (1969) concluded that there was no noble purpose to early secondary schooling in Trinidad and Tobago:

The purpose of the secondary school in Trinidad was to ensure the Anglicanisation of the colony. It consciously took the English public school as its model. The external examinations of Oxford and Cambridge, in which Trinidad was the first colony to participate, strengthened the prevailing English influence. (p. 712)

In time, the growing competition between Church and State to provide secondary schools exploded in an intense figurative war between St. Mary's College (CIC) and Queen's Royal College (QRC), the most famous colleges in the country, both situated in Port of Spain (Campbell, 1997). Later, this Church-State conflict would be further fuelled by the emergence of new schools, some built by other denominational bodies

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and by the Government in the 1950s to 1970s. The recent introduction of both denominational and government schools built under the SEMP loan in the 1990s further complicates the issue; especially since new denominational schools have been built with state funds for groups that had been marginalized in the past.

The conflict between Church and State over schooling was managed but not buried in the pre-Independence era with the establishment of a Concordat between Church and State (Alleyne, 1995). After the signing of the Concordat, however, tensions continued to simmer. For example, in his analysis of the development of the Presbyterian education sector, Teelucksingh (2008) suggested that the state (through its main protagonist, then Prime Minister, Eric Williams) believed that the choice system was contributing to religious and ethnic segregation, citing the statistic that of the 487 placed in Presbyterian secondary schools in that year, 184 were Hindus, 138 were Presbyterians, 55 were Roman Catholics, and 77 were Anglicans. Teelucksingh observed:

During his public lectures in 1965, Williams continued to highlight the insubordination fostered by the denominational schools with the solution being Government secondary schools as the main agent of integration. Based on the 1965 Common Entrance Examination results, Williams emphasized that the placement at secondary schools was indicative of denominational schools having a negative effect on integration in Trinidad and Tobago. (p. 103)

Campbell (1997), however, believed that the roots of conflict went far deeper than the nationalistic value of integration and extended to fundamental differences in beliefs, ideologies, and values. Critical among these, he argued, was the right of the family to choose the type of education:

This episode was not simply a struggle of QRC supporters against CIC supporters. . . . It was a struggle between the churches and the government at the highest level: at the level of the heads of the churches and the Cabinet of the country. It was a struggle in which each side declared conflicting ideologies fundamentally incompatible. . . . For example, the Roman Catholic Church's claim that the family and not the government had primary responsibility to provide education was quite novel, but was based on long-established Roman Catholic social principles. (pp. 85–86)

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Campbell's analysis is perhaps also naïve because it ignored the critical influence of social class, and the underlying political and personal conflicts and contradictions that were publicly and privately held. What is important is that, in the context of school choice, these negotiations and agreements led to a system of rules for choosing secondary schools that currently operates. As in the past, the competition is broadly focused on two types of schools within the public school system—government and government-assisted denominational schools. Significantly, though, the government-assisted school sector remains dominant in terms of market value and resources. While the government-assisted schools have sometimes used arguments similar to private schools in situations of legal challenge, in reality, heavy reliance on government funding and the 1966 Education Act makes them essentially agents of the state (Mahabir, 2004). In reality, private secondary schooling that is independent of the funding of the state remains negligible in the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago.

The philosophy of parental choice and open enrolment that emerged out of this era is deeply enshrined in the 1976 Trinidad and Tobago Republican Constitution. While this Constitution does not explicitly support the right to education, it does acknowledge “the right of parents to provide a school of his own choice for the education of his child or ward” (Trinidad and Tobago. Government, 2000, section 4(f)). For example, Anthony (1993) noted Justice Lennox Deyalsingh's interpretation of this constitutional clause in a 1989 judgement in the case of *Mohammed et al. v. the Minister of Education and the Attorney General of Trinidad and Tobago*. The Judge reasoned that the section ensured that the “Government's control of education is not absolute,” and concluded that the “Government cannot compel a parent to send his child to a public school.” He further reasoned that if parents were not satisfied with the education afforded by the Government, they have the right by law to “provide a school of his own choice for his child's education” (p. 28). Thus, paradoxically, the Trinidad and Tobago Constitution allows for private schools that are provided either by parents or by institutions. In reality, however, the provision of successful government-assisted schools in the education market limits the need for an extensive network of private secondary (Belfield & Levin, 2002).

Although the choice mechanism at eleven-plus created a powerful formalized education market in the secondary school sector, this has not always have been recognized by the schools themselves (Oplatka, 2004). Secondary schools in Trinidad and Tobago are rarely market-oriented and do little to actively influence stakeholders' perceptions of the institution. Most schools do not have mechanisms that allow them to

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respond quickly to changing environmental demands or expectations. At the same time, successive governments have sought to provide new school types, adding to the existing variety of schools on the market without concern for the impact of market forces. For example, since 1996, a number of denominational schools have been rebuilt or remodelled. Even today, new government schools are being created, which are different to those in the past. Recent additions include 5-year government “high” schools and “magnet” schools; the latter designed to focus on four specific areas of schooling—science, performing arts, technology education, and information technology. The magnet school idea was included in the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) funded Secondary Education Modernization Programme (SEMP) and was seen as a way to “bring excitement and support by parents and others” (Inter-American Development Bank, 1999, p. 38). It is important to understand how these changing product lines influence the way families in Trinidad and Tobago choose schools.

Questions about Operation and Impact

Understanding how the secondary school choice system operates and impacts on the education system is a high priority for the Trinidad and Tobago Ministry of Education (MOE). Indeed, a number of issues have arisen, which demand better quality information on exactly how the system operates. The hope is that better quality information will lead to more effective policy making. The consequences of unpopular or ineffective policies can be significant. For example, in December 2008, the MOE unsuccessfully attempted to regulate the type of schools chosen by parents on the assumption that parents often made inappropriate choices that impacted upon placement opportunities (Webb, 2008). This attempt at regulating choice met strong opposition by key stakeholders in the system (Consultation key on SEA, 2008). Even prior to this failed attempt, there was a 2005 decision to remove the two additional choices instituted in 2001. Although the claim was that families were not using these choices, it was not clear whether such a pattern existed in all educational districts.

Perhaps, though, the most critical issue is to gauge the impact and extent of choice among system participants. It may be that although there are several choices available to parents, in reality, the most desired is the first choice school and few students receive this outcome. Indeed, some schools, most of them the older traditional colleges, high schools, and convents, have come to be known as “first choice schools” because they are held in high value by most stakeholders and are consistently chosen

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first on the parents' list of choices. Is the value attached to these schools relatively stable or are market values dynamic and fluid? Are these "first choice" schools valued primarily because of academic outcomes or are other factors important in a plural society such as Trinidad and Tobago?

Despite the important role of open enrolment in eleven-plus placement, there are few current studies on the operation or impact of the school choice system in Trinidad and Tobago. There is therefore little to go on as to why students currently choose specific schools in Trinidad and Tobago. Some speculation is possible, however, based on international studies. These studies group school attributes into two categories—academic and non-academic (Bosetti, 2004; Collins & Snell, 2000; Goldring & Hausman, 1999). Academic attributes relate to the performance of the school or the provision of some specialized academic programmes, as in the case of "magnet schools" in the US. Non-academic attributes may include school characteristics such as sporting prowess or specialized non-academic programmes. It might be that because formal information on either academic or non-academic school performance is not readily available to families in Trinidad and Tobago, that accuracy of perception becomes an important factor in choosing schools (Van Dunk & Dickman, 2002). If the situation is that some groups of families have more accurate information than others, those families with limited information might function as inert or marginalized consumers, not even seeking out or verifying information (Buckley & Schneider, 2003; Willms & Echols, 1992). With a possible information brownout or the existence of many inert consumers, some schools might be able to retain their status despite declining performance. It is important, then, to explore the situation locally in view of the context and development of the open enrolment system in Trinidad and Tobago.

Another concern is what happens when families choose schools. If schools vary greatly in quality, parents might make decisions based on some loose imaginary ranking of schools. This ranking might be primarily based on perceived school attributes, with information gathered mostly through hearsay. The valence of each attribute will then relate to the decision maker's human values and will therefore vary across families (Yang & Kayaardi, 2004). However, even if accurate information is not widely available, some parents, as active consumers, might seek out data to ensure that their choices are accurate. Thus, the absence of information on schools will impact more strongly on marginalized or inert customers. In the system of rules used in Trinidad and Tobago, information about specific choice patterns might also be a critical factor. For example, some families might be able to attain placement in a high quality school, given a particular score on the

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eleven-plus, by selecting less frequently chosen schools as their first or second choice. This system might have been used by some in choosing schools like Belmont Secondary, Iere High School, and St. George's College in the past.

A system-wide lack of credible information about schools might lead to poor decision making among marginalized customers. For example, some marginalized consumers may list only frequently chosen schools among their four choices, thereby limiting the probability of the student receiving any school of choice. Some marginalized customers may also be inert, reluctant even to participate in the process. For example, they might be willing to leave the decision making to other more informed participants, such as teachers. Thus, choice-making patterns will not be homogenous, but vary spatially. Marginalized and inert consumer patterns may be related to socio-economic factors. Thus, the geography of choice might be an important factor because of the variation in the economic and social conditions across education districts (Taylor, 2001).

Although consumers will choose a school because of its attractiveness in terms of academic or non-academic attributes, it might be that the critical process is rejecting those schools considered worthless (Bagley, Woods, & Glatter, 2001). Therefore, consumers might have a tendency to attribute a host of negative or evil qualities to some schools—a process that involves vilification or demonization of the school agency (Reay & Lucey, 2000). Choosing a demonized school would be considered risky for families when the chance of obtaining a highly valued school is very low. Choosing a demonized school might also be considered risky for families with female candidates. Some international studies have suggested that the factor with the highest valence might be the school's academic achievements (Bast & Walberg, 2004). In this regard, an early study of secondary selection in Trinidad by Hospedales (1982) measured four attributes—performance of the school, perceived intelligence of children, quality of teaching staff, and religion—with performance proving to be the most important. Hospedales, however, used a restricted sample and asked parents to list their choices retrospectively, with the child already assigned to Tunapuna Government Secondary School. R. S. Alleyne (1991), in contrast, surveyed a national sample of adult non-educators and educators and found a broad range of indigenous conceptions of excellence in schools, including intellectual supremacy, character development, self-actualization, and social consciousness.

Therefore, in the context of Trinidad and Tobago, non-academic factors like sporting prestige and all-round development might be critical when choosing schools. In any case, the value placed on different factors

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will vary over area and time. For example, a factor such as location will be related to proximity and travelling convenience (Parsons, Chalkley, & Jones, 2000; Theobald, 2005). The importance of location will change over time and context, as road networks expand or the traffic situation gets worse. Additionally, some school characteristics might be more important for particular consumers. For example, middle-class consumers might be more willing to allow their children to access valued schools located at a great distance because of their ability to cope with transportation costs. Considering the plural nature of the society and the traditional role of denominational schools, religion could be a factor of high valence for Trinidad and Tobago. All of this means that the process of making choices in Trinidad and Tobago might be relatively complex and varied; not easily amenable to superficial or quantitative analyses.

The consumer is a central element in the school choice decision-making process. As indicated earlier, differences in consumers might influence the relative importance of each factor. An important consumer characteristic in this context might be the parents' socio-economic status, which provides a useful measure of social and cultural capital. Social and cultural capital captures, in part, family and community variables such as information, trust, and norms of reciprocity in social networks. Social and cultural capital might be useful in explaining why some consumers are marginalized because they have little access to information or networks required for decision-making influence (Basu, 2006). Many of these marginalized customers may not be choosy as are customers who are integrated into the information networks of the education system. Therefore, they might be more willing to accept some of the newer products with less value than traditional offerings or products within their community settings.

Although most international studies suggest that parents are the primary decision makers, in reality, children, other family members, and teachers might be critical participants in Trinidad and Tobago. In this context, the role of the teacher or extended family member might be especially significant with marginalized and inert consumers. It is well known, for example, that teachers often advise students on what schools they should choose. The extended family might have a significant voice if they live in the same house or at a nearby location. Children might have a significant say in their choice of school in many instances, because of the central nature of the eleven-plus examinations in the lives of early adolescents. Reay and Lucey (2000) studied the choice-making process among children in the UK and found that their decision-making framework was relatively well developed. In Trinidad and Tobago, however, it might be possible for students' choices to impact even more

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strongly on family decisions, especially in some family circumstances. This paper will examine four themes related to the current operation and impact of the school choice system in Trinidad and Tobago. These include (1) schools and school types that are most highly valued; (2) possible variations in choice patterns; (3) the relationship between choice patterns, geography, and markets, and school and consumer characteristics; and (4) the relationship between choices and outcomes.

Methods and Materials

Rationale for Research Design

A mixed method research design was chosen combining quantitative and qualitative approaches (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). The use of a mixed method approach was rationalized as follows. Firstly, there were several dimensions to the school choice issue, which suggest that choosing a secondary school is a relatively complex phenomenon not easily captured by one approach alone (Shapiro, Setterlund, & Cragg, 2004). Secondly, it was only possible to address some issues using a qualitative approach, with face-to face-interviews, for example, required to provide insight into the thinking of the parents and students. The need for supplementary qualitative data is also critical in light of the limitations in the official eleven-plus database, which does not allow measurement of important consumer characteristics, such as socio-economic status. However, since individual decision-making frameworks are often idiosyncratic; a large-scale quantitative study would also be necessary to provide information on general patterns in the population. Thirdly, each data set provides valuable but independent insight. On the one hand, only the quantitative data can reveal information about changes in placement patterns over time. On the other hand, only the qualitative study can fully capture the thought processes of different consumer types. To benefit fully, inferences from the different datasets must be integrated.

A triangulated multilevel mixed method research design was selected with the intention of obtaining different but complementary evidence. Cresswell and Plano-Clark (2007) argued that triangulated designs provide a way of understanding a research question by bringing together the strengths and weaknesses of various data collection methods. In the multilevel variant of this category of mixed method design, different methods are used to investigate different parts of the system, but the results are then merged for an overall interpretation. This design, then, will allow comparison of evidence from statistical data with evidence from the qualitative findings, as well as validation of data collected using

one method. The purpose of the mixed method design in this study was triangulation, defined as convergence and corroboration of results, and complementarity, defined as elaboration, enhancement, and illustration of results from one method to the next (Greene, Caracelli, & Graham, 1989).

A feature of this research design was the access to different levels of the system using the contrasting data collection methods. The different levels of the system targeted were (a) system, (b) parents, and (c) children. The overall system was studied using a quantitative approach, whereas family and individual level data were obtained using the qualitative approaches. The mixed method approach persisted through the processes of conceptualization, data collection, and data analysis. Applying a mixed method approach in the data analysis phase required greater attention to the process of integrating the data (Bryman, 2006, 2007). So rather than reporting the findings separately, inferences are integrated to be mutually illuminating. Following Cresswell and Plano-Clark (2007), to facilitate the use of multiple methods and approaches in the study, the large research team was organized into different qualitative and quantitative teams

The qualitative study was designed to be multi-method. Four distinct qualitative methods were chosen: (1) focus group interviews with parents; (2) focus group interviews with students; (3) soft laddering (one-on-one interview with parents); and (4) hard laddering (questionnaires). A laddering interview is an in-depth, one-on-one structured dialogue that draws out the connections people make between product attributes, the consequences, and core human values (Olson & Reynolds, 2001). Laddering is an important technique used in consumer psychology to investigate perceptions and choices, and is especially useful for eliciting hierarchical constructs and personal values (Veludo-de-Oliveira, Ikeda, & Campomar, 2006). A laddering interview can best capture the complex relationship between factors used in school choice. It must be noted that although both hard (a structured questionnaire that yields quantitative and “quantitized” data) and soft laddering (interview only) methods were used, the constructivist philosophy remained dominant during this data collection phase. These different qualitative methods were intended to bring together different strengths and overlapping weaknesses in data collection approaches (Cresswell & Plano-Clark, 2007).

Sampling Procedure

Following Teddlie and Yu (2007), a multilevel mixed method sampling plan was employed. The plan included different sampling strategies for

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each unit of analysis. The use of appropriate sampling techniques in the different strands was critical to the study's legitimation (validity and trustworthiness). A census approach was employed for data from the 11 cohorts across the period 1995–2005. This dataset included six years of the Common Entrance Examination (CEE) and five years of the Secondary Entrance Assessment (SEA). Additionally, from 2001, six rather than four choices were offered to parents on the registration form. The original database required substantial verification, validation, and expansion. Additional data added included residential codes, schools, and choices.

For the qualitative study, schools were first sampled from each of the eight districts using the criteria of SEA performance, socio-economic status of the pupil roll, and location in the district. A list of 40 schools was then obtained, from which 18 schools were selected. For this paper, data were analysed from 4 of 18 schools distributed in four education districts. At each school, parents and students were selected by the interviewers, school principals, and Standard 5 teachers. Focus group and individual interviews were conducted with the participants. Generally, the students and parents were from different families, since participation by parents was purely voluntary. The total number of participants in the qualitative phase was 26 students and 24 parents distributed in 4 primary schools (8 focus groups). The schools included a middle-income government primary school from the suburban area of west Trinidad; a denominational school in central semi-rural/semi-urban Trinidad; a middle-income, high-achieving school in the capital city; and one rural government primary school in Tobago. The sites captured families in different economic situations from different geographic locations.

Instrumentation

Semi-structured interview schedules were constructed and piloted for both the focus group and laddering interviews. For the focus group interviews with (a) parents and (b) children, the initial issues were identified from the literature. These issues were school popularity, demonized schools, alert and inert clients, marginal customers, product attributes, family dynamics of choice, education markets, parent wishes or choices, matching schools with children, academic reputation of schools, single-sex schooling, and rational choice theory—logic, values and concerns that drive choice. A final list of questions and probes was obtained after discussion with team members and a formal pilot of the instruments.

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A number of additional techniques were used to enhance participants' responses in the children focus group sessions (Bystedt, Lynn, & Potts, 2003). These included verbalization techniques for enhancing participant responses to the request: "Please explain your thinking when you made your choices?" The verbalization techniques included (a) concept mapping, used for questions on school attributes and choice; and (b) story telling in the children's interview, used to identify features of "demonized" and "highly valued" schools. The protocol for the laddering interview was adapted following Reynolds and Gutman (2001). The soft laddering and hard laddering (structured questionnaire) were used at the same time. In the procedure, respondents were asked to write down the choices they originally made and to describe the qualities (attributes) of the school. They were then asked to further describe attributes that distinguished between the different schools. After listing the qualities in order, they were asked iteratively why each quality was important, focusing first on consequences and then values.

Data Analysis Methods

The database for student registration at eleven-plus over the period 1995–2001 was obtained. The total number of students in the 11-year database was 175,945 (1995–2000) and 103,804 (2001–2005). For the period 1995–2000, there were four choices for each student and six choices for the period 2001–2005. The database was recoded for area of residence, and each school choice was identified as first, second, third, and so on. The database was then verified and validated. Descriptive data were collected for the schools chosen in the fourth to sixth registered choices. The correlation coefficients describing the relationship between the parent's religion and school choices were also obtained. Each analysis was done separately for males and females because gender is a factor influencing choice patterns and because a number of highly valued schools are single-sex. Schools were categorized by (1) the management authority, (2) the period built, and (3) the number of years of schooling as described by London (1991). The main indicator of value was the number of students choosing the school as the targeted choice. In the case of first choice schools, this is a very important indicator because it indicates the families' ranking of the school in the list of choices. In the pilot interview study, it became apparent that parents paid considerable attention to selecting the first choice school and that different factors led to the lower choices.

For the qualitative data, the data from both interview sets were first transcribed and then subjected to a coding process. The coding process

was done by five independent readers. Themes and sub-themes were then identified collaboratively, and tables and narratives generated based on inter-rater agreement. Illustrative statements were agreed to by the entire group. Only data from the soft laddering were included in this analysis.

Results

Which Schools Were Most Highly Valued?

To answer this question, data were analysed separately for the CEE (1995–2000) and the SEA (2001–2005). Tables 1 and 2 show the ranking of the 10 most highly valued schools as measured by the number of times the school was chosen as first choice. For both periods, the list contained only traditional schools (built prior to the 1960s). As shown in Table 1, the most frequently chosen school for males was Queen’s Royal College, a government institution. However, the other seven single-sex schools were all denominational—five Catholic, one Presbyterian, and one Anglican. There were two co-educational schools in the top 10 (St. Stephen’s and North Eastern Colleges) for the period 1995–2000, but only the former appears for the period 2001–2005.

As shown in Table 2, traditional schools also dominated the rankings for females across both periods. However, Lakshmi Girls Hindu College was ranked as No. 9 in both time periods. The change of rankings for the two time periods suggests a relative decline in the perceived value of some traditional schools, like Bishop Antsey High School (BAHS). However, St. Augustine Girls and Naparima Girls improved their rankings over time. Significantly, for the period 2001–2005, BAHS East, a new school to the market, was able to enter the top 10 rankings. There is only one mixed school in the top 10 most highly valued schools for girls. This was North Eastern College for the period 1995–2000; however, the school did not maintain its position in 2001–2005.

What were the Common Choice Patterns?

Table 3 provides the pattern of choices for the two designated periods based on (a) the school’s management authority, (b) the period when built, and (c) the number of years of schooling offered. The data were collected only for the first choice decision, considered the most desired outcome. As shown, in terms of the entire population, government schools were most commonly chosen in both time periods followed by Catholic schools. The relative number choosing denominational schools increased in the 2001–2005 time period. For females, only 31.3% of the population chose a government school, implying that close to 70% of the families chose a denominational school for their female child.

Table 1. Percentage of Parents With Male Students Naming School as First Choice

CEE (1995–2000)						
Schools Chosen by Males in the CEE (Ranked by Total No. Choosing)	Total % of Students Choosing School Annually					
	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
1) Queen's Royal College	5.8	6.2	6.8	7.5	6.2	5.9
2) Hillview College, Tunapuna	4.4	5.1	4.9	4.8	4.4	4.2
3) Presentation College, Chaguanas	5.0	5.0	4.9	4.2	3.9	3.4
4) St. Mary's College	4.6	5.2	4.3	3.7	3.5	3.8
5) Naparima College	4.2	4.3	3.8	3.6	3.5	3.4
6) Fatima College	4.5	4.2	3.6	3.5	3.4	3.2
7) North Eastern College, Sangre Grande	3.8	3.4	3.8	3.6	3.9	3.6
8) Presentation College, San Fernando	4.7	4.0	4.0	3.4	2.9	2.8
9) St. Stephen's College, Princes Town	4.1	3.6	3.4	3.1	3.2	2.7
10) Holy Cross College, Arima	3.2	2.6	3.0	3.8	3.3	2.8
SEA (2001–2005)						
Schools Chosen by Males in the SEA (Ranked by Total No. Choosing)	% of Students Choosing School Annually					
	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	
1) Queen's Royal College	6.6	6.2	7.1	7.4	7.2	
2) Presentation College, Chaguanas	5.4	6.0	6.4	7.0	6.6	
3) Hillview College, Tunapuna	5.2	5.3	6.2	6.7	6.1	
4) Presentation College, San Fernando	4.9	5.6	5.4	5.2	4.9	
5) Naparima College	4.4	4.3	5.1	5.5	6.0	
6) St. Mary's College	5.1	5.4	4.8	4.5	4.6	
7) Fatima College	3.8	4.0	4.0	4.3	4.7	
8) Holy Cross College, Arima	3.8	3.2	2.9	2.9	3.1	
9) St. Stephen's College, Princes Town	3.2	3.3	3.3	3.1	2.9	

Table 2. Percentage of Parents With Female Students Naming School as First Choice

----- CEE (1995–2000) -----						
Schools Chosen by Females (Ranked by Total)	% of Students Choosing School Annually					
	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
1) Bishop Anstey High School	5.2	5.3	5.3	5.6	5.3	4.9
2) Naparima Girls High School	6.1	5.9	5.3	5.5	4.5	4.1
3) St. Joseph's Convent, St. Joseph	5.0	4.9	5.7	5.0	4.6	4.4
4) St. Augustine Girls High School	5.2	5.4	5.0	5.0	4.4	4.5
5) Holy Faith Convent, Couva	5.3	5.6	5.0	4.3	4.1	3.8
6) North Eastern College, Sangre Grande	4.3	3.6	3.6	4.1	4.4	4.2
7) St. Joseph's Convent, POS	4.2	4.0	4.2	3.9	3.5	3.3
8) St. Stephen's College, Princes Town	4.5	4.3	3.5	3.3	3.4	3.1
9) Lakshmi Girls Hindu College	2.6	3.6	3.3	3.3	3.2	3.2
10) Holy Name Convent, POS	3.0	3.3	3.3	3.2	3.0	2.9
----- SEA (2001–2005) -----						
Schools Chosen by Females (Ranked by Total)	% of Students Choosing School Annually					
	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	
1) St. Augustine Girls High School	7.1	7.5	8.4	9.6	8.7	
2) Naparima Girls High School	6.4	7.4	7.6	8.2	7.8	
3) Bishop Anstey High School	5.6	6.2	5.4	5.5	5.8	
4) St. Joseph's Convent, St. Joseph	5.3	5.4	5.0	5.9	6.1	
5) Holy Faith Convent, Couva	5.2	5.9	5.8	5.1	5.4	
6) St. Joseph's Convent, POS	4.4	4.7	4.5	5.3	4.9	
7) Holy Name Convent, POS	3.3	3.9	3.9	3.6	3.6	
8) St. Joseph's Convent, San Fernando	3.7	3.4	3.8	3.5	3.6	
9) Lakshmi Girls Hindu College	3.5	3.3	3.3	3.8	3.4	
10) Bishop Anstey High School East	1.0	4.1	4.1	4.1	3.9	

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The small numbers choosing Hindu and Muslim schools may have reflected the low numbers of schools for these denominations. However, with the building of new Muslim and Hindu secondary schools during this period, the numbers choosing these schools increased somewhat in the 2001–2005 period.

The data suggest that some new SEMP high schools might have been perceived as a better-quality, more highly valued product, offering 5- to 7-year schooling instead of the 2–4 years offered in the junior secondary/senior comprehensive system (built 1971–1990). Although most families rejected the new sector schools built in 1971–1990 during the period 2001–2005 (9.3% to 9.4%), slightly more were willing to accept some of the schools built after 1991 (1.04% to 12.6%). However, the great majority of families continued to prefer the traditional schools, and the relative numbers choosing this type of school increased notably from between 39% in the period 1995–2000 and 47% in the period 2001–2005. “Years of schooling” provided by the institution remained an important characteristic, with the traditional school usually offering secondary education up to 18+. The data show that in the period 2001–2005, more than 60% of the families chose a 7-year school for males and females.

Table 4 provides the 10 top-ranked schools for choices 5 and 6 during the period 2001 and 2006 along with the number of families choosing. As shown for males, the most frequent option was no choice. This suggests that many families did not find these additional options necessary. For families that did make a choice, they most often selected a new sector or traditional school providing a 5- or 7-year education. A number of government schools built in the 1960s were included in this ranking, such as Tunapuna Government, San Fernando Government, Woodbrook Government, and St. James Government Secondary. Families also selected some of the more highly valued new sector 3-year schools such as Curepe, Chaguanas, Couva, San Fernando East, and Five Rivers Junior Secondary Schools. The pattern of choices for the females was very similar to that of males. Again, for choice number six, the most common option was no choice. Both El Dorado schools were highly ranked in the fifth and sixth choice list.

The Complexity of Choice: Markets, Consumer Attributes, and Products

In reality, the choice process may be much more complex than captured in the first two themes. It is likely that choice patterns would vary across education district and markets. Data addressing this issue were gathered using both quantitative and qualitative methodologies.

Table 3. Schools Within Three Categories Chosen as First Choice

<i>----- Government vs Denominational Schools -----</i>				
(1) Management Authority of School	% Choosing Schools for First Choice			
	1995–2000		2001–2005	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Government	53.2	44.0	42.4	31.3
Catholic	24.6	23.7	29.2	27.5
Presbyterian	10.4	11.7	12.6	17.0
Anglican	6.7	11.9	7.3	12.6
Hindu	-	3.2	1.4	4.3
Muslim	2.5	2.8	3.6	4.1
<i>----- Traditional vs Newer Schools -----</i>				
(2) Period When Built	% Choosing Schools for First Choice			
	1995–2000		2001–2005	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Before 1950	39.2	37.4	47.0	47.4
1950–1970	33.6	36.7	27.7	29.3
1971–1990	18.8	18.2	9.3	9.4
After 1991	5.4	4.5	12.3	10.6
<i>----- Length of Schooling Provided -----</i>				
(3) Years of Schooling	% Choosing Schools for First Choice			
	1995–2000		2001–2005	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Less than 5 years	10.7	8.0	2.9	4.6
5-year schools	17.5	20.4	13.4	15.4
7-year schools	55.9	57.3	67.8	61.8

The quantitative study. Tables 5 and 6 provide the ranked listing of schools chosen for males and females over the period 1995–2005. The percentages choosing the school first across the seven education districts in Trinidad are also provided. The main pattern suggests that there were separate markets (circuits of schooling) in the North, South, South-East, and East of the country (Ball, Bowe, & Gewirtz, 1995). For example, St. Stephen’s was attractive for many families in the South Eastern District whilst Naparima College in the city of San Fernando was relatively less attractive. Therefore, all traditional schools do not necessarily compete against others nationally, but the competition between schools may be focused in circuits or markets. These circuits or markets are often bounded by accessible education districts, but in some cases a school’s

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market might extend across multiple districts. The data also show that the market boundaries were quite different for males and females. For example, although some families in the South Eastern district were reluctant to choose St. Stephen's College for their daughters, they were willing to select the same school for their sons.

Table 4. Top Ten Schools Chosen for Choices 5 & 6 for Males & Females (1995–2005)

----- <i>Males</i> -----			
Fifth Place Choice	No.	Sixth Place Choice	No.
NONE	1,763	NONE	3,058
El Dorado Sec. (M)	1,588	Curepe Jr. Sec. (M)	2,140
Tunapuna Govt. Sec. (M)	1,504	El Dorado Sec. (M)	1,541
San Fernando Sec. (M)	1,491	Woodbrook Govt. Sec. (M)	1,297
Woodbrook Govt. Sec. (M)	1,403	Chaguanas Jr. Sec. (M)	1,264
St. James Sec. (M)	1,370	Couva Jr. Sec. (M)	1,191
El Dorado Sec. Compre. (M)	1,322	St. James Sec. (M)	1,169
Curepe Jr. Sec. (M)	1,200	San Fernando East Jr. Sec. (M)	1,168
Tranquility Govt. Sec. (M)	1,106	Five Rivers Jr. Sec. (M)	1,100
San Fernando Sec. Compre. (M)	957	Carapichaima Jr. Sec. (M)	1,085
----- <i>Females</i> -----			
El Dorado Sec. (M)	1,698	NONE	3,008
NONE	1,691	Curepe Jr. Sec. (M)	2,062
Tunapuna Govt. Sec. (M)	1,672	El Dorado Sec. (M)	1,678
Woodbrook Govt. Sec. (M)	1,575	Woodbrook Govt. Sec. (M)	1,463
San Fernando Sec. School (M)	1,429	St. James Sec. (M)	1,363
El Dorado Sec. Compre. (M)	1,421	Chaguanas Jr. Sec. (M)	1,230
St. James Sec. (M)	1,370	Tunapuna Govt. Sec. (M)	1,223
Tranquility Govt. Sec. (M)	1,023	Couva Jr. Sec. (M)	1,196
Arima Sec. (M)	1,021	San Fernando East Jr. Sec. (M)	1,176

As shown in Table 5, some schools attracted significant numbers of children from families located across different education districts. Examples are St. Mary's College and Queen's Royal College, which were the older traditional major boys' secondary schools. Although more

than 60% of students choosing these schools as first choice were from Port of Spain and Environs, significant numbers in three other education districts (Caroni, North Eastern, and St. George East) also chose these schools. No school, however, attracted children from more than four education districts. Some highly valued schools had a more restricted market, exacting a “pull” on fewer than three districts and primarily for students from one major district. Examples include Presentation College, Chaguanas, and Holy Cross College, Arima. However, a degree of dynamism was also apparent in the market, with some schools attracting clientele from a broader range of markets in 2001–2005 compared with 1995–2000. For example, in the case of Fatima College, there was a slight increase in the number of students in Caroni and North Eastern District putting this school as first choice.

As shown in Table 6, the situation with the traditional Port of Spain girls’ schools was quite different. For example, more than 80% of the students indicating Holy Name Convent as their first choice came from Port of Spain and Environs, whereas, for BAHS, which is metres away, this figure was only 62%–75%, with close to 20% of these first choices coming from families living in St. George East. This suggests that although these two schools are located in the same general vicinity, they may compete only partially. Some girls’ schools like Naparima and St. Augustine, however, attracted significant numbers of students from as many as four educational districts, spanning quite a broad geographical area.

Table 7 provides the collated data for the entire 10-year period based on the stated religion of the family and the school of choice. The table addresses the issue of the “attractiveness” of denominational schools for the different religious groups. As shown, families that tended to choose the government schools as first choice were from the relatively small, non-mainstreamed denominations such as the Baptists (55.7 % males, 47.2% females); Orisha (60.0% males, 47.6% females); Jehovah’s Witnesses (52.8% males, 38.7% females); and Seventh-day Adventists (46.45% males, 38.55% females). In all cases, these groups were more willing to take greater risks with their males. This might be due to the existence of several high-achieving government single-sex schools for males, but this alone would not explain these numbers. In terms of the percentages among the groups, Pentecostals (Evangelical Christians) were an increasingly large denominational group, but families professing this faith seemed more reluctant to choose Presbyterian (12.0% males, 17.9% females) and Catholic schools (27.1% males, 24.3% females) for first choice.

Table 5. Top Ten Schools Chosen as First Choice by Males Across Educational Districts

----- Common Entrance Examination (1995–2000) -----							
Schools Chosen by Males (1995–2000)	% Choosing as First Choice by District						
	Caroni	North Eastern	POS & Environs	St. George East	St. Patrick	South Eastern	Victoria
1) Queen's Royal College	7.4	2.5	61.7	28.0			
2) Hillview College, Tunapuna	11.9	7.5	2.1	78.4			
3) Presentation College, Chaguanas	90.7			4.6			2.9
4) St. Mary's College	8.1	2.6	57.7	31.0			
5) Naparima College	5.1				20.6	10.1	64.1
6) Fatima College	3.5		75.8	19.6			
7) North Eastern College		76.0		16.4		7.1	
8) Presentation College, San Fernando	6.1				21.5	8.7	63.4
9) St. Stephen's College, Princes Town						77.7	21.6
10) Holy Cross College, Arima	1.4	16.2		80.6			
----- Secondary Entrance Assessment (2001–2005) -----							
Schools Chosen by Males (2001–2005)	% Choosing as First Choice by District						
	Caroni	North Eastern	POS & Environs	St. George East	St. Patrick	South Eastern	Victoria
1) Queen's Royal College	6.0	3.8	61.3	28.2			
2) Presentation College, Chaguanas	88.9		1.0	7.4			2.6
3) Hillview College, Tunapuna	10.4	12.1	2.2	74.9			
4) Presentation College, San Fernando	5.0				20.1	9.6	64.8
5) Naparima College					23.4	12.0	59.6
6) St. Mary's College	5.4	4.0	60.6	29.4			
7) Fatima College	4.0	1.5	73.0	20.7			
8) Holy Cross College, Arima	1.9	26.5	1.4	69.5			
9) St. Stephen's College, Princes Town						78.8	19.8
10) North Eastern College		76.0		13.4		10.1	

Table 6. Top Ten Schools Chosen as First Choice by Females Across Educational Districts

----- Common Entrance Examination (1995–2000) -----							
Schools Chosen by Females (1995–2000)	% Choosing as First Choice by District						
	Caroni	North Eastern	POS & Environs	St. George East	St. Patrick	South Eastern	Victoria
1) Bishop Anstey High School	4.4	1.2	72.9	21.0			
2) Naparima Girls High School	5.7				18.7	11.9	63.3
3) St. Joseph's Convent, St. Joseph	8.5	5.7	3.3	82.0			
4) St. Augustine Girls High School	28.0	11.6	4.0	55.7			
5) Holy Faith Convent, Couva	85.6						13.1
6) North Eastern College		75.2		17.1		7.4	
7) St. Joseph's Convent, POS	6.5	3.4	74.8	14.9			
8) St. Stephen's College, Princes Town							
9) Lakshmi Girls Hindu College	33.0	5.6		60.7			
10) Holy Name Convent, POS	3.3		80.9	13.7			
----- Secondary Entrance Assessment (2001–2005) -----							
Schools Chosen by Females (2001–2005)	% Choosing as First Choice by District						
	Caroni	North Eastern	POS & Environs	St. George East	St. Patrick	South Eastern	Victoria
1) St. Augustine Girls High School	27.3	11.4	4.0	56.5			
2) Naparima Girls High School	4.9				22.5	13.9	58.2
3) Bishop Anstey High School	3.3	2.2	75.8	18.2			
4) St. Joseph's Convent, St. Joseph	8.3	8.5	3.9	48.9			
5) Holy Faith Convent, Couva	3.2	2.1	81.1	13.2			
6) St. Joseph's Convent, POS	3.9	3.0	80.0	12.9			
7) Holy Name Convent, POS	3.2	2.1	81.1	13.2			
8) St. Joseph's Convent, San Fernando	2.2				25.6	10.4	61.3
9) Lakshmi Girls Hindu College	29.4	12.3	0.6	57.5			
10) Bishop Anstey High School East	3.1	8.0	6.2	82.3			

Table 7. Management Authority of Schools Chosen by Candidates' Denominations

----- <i>Males</i> -----										
Religion of Candidates (1995–2005)										
Religion of School	Anglican	Baptist	Hindu	Islam	Roman Catholic	Presbyterian	Seventh-day Adventist	Jehovah's Witnesses	Pentecostal	Orisha
Anglican	11.0	10.3	6.4	5.3	4.9	5.8	11.3	7.9	7.3	7.5
Baptist	0.4	7.3	1.2	1.1	0.6	1.2	1.5	1.1	1.2	1.3
Catholic	27.1	18.9	24.7	26.7	41.6	19.9	17.5	22.5	27.1	27.5
Government	51.8	55.7	33.3	27.4	43.0	18.4	46.4	52.8	46.5	60.0
Hindu	0.0	0.2	5.6	0.7	0.3	0.6	0.1	0.3	0.6	1.3
Islam	1.6	1.4	6.9	19.7	0.9	4.5	0.9	1.5	2.8	0.0
Pentecostal	0.3	0.2	0.1	0.0	0.1	0.4	0.0	0.1	1.0	0.0
Presbyterian	6.7	4.2	21.3	18.9	7.4	48.8	7.1	12.1	12.0	2.5
Private	0.3	0.5	0.1	0.0	0.6	0.1	9.9	0.7	0.5	0.0
----- <i>Females</i> -----										
Religion of Candidates (1995–2005)										
Religion of School	Anglican	Baptist	Hindu	Islam	Roman Catholic	Presbyterian	Seventh-day Adventist	Jehovah's Witnesses	Pentecostal	Orisha
Anglican	26.3	16.1	6.5	7.3	9.8	4.8	18.6	15.7	14.8	14.3
Baptist	0.7	7.5	1.0	1.0	0.6	0.7	1.6	1.7	1.1	2.4
Catholic	21.8	16.7	21.4	19.7	44.5	13.3	14.5	23.0	24.3	25.0
Government	37.7	47.2	22.7	17.3	31.4	11.6	38.5	38.7	34.7	47.6
Hindu	0.7	0.6	17.2	3.7	1.2	2.8	0.6	0.9	1.3	0.0
Islam	1.6	2.4	6.4	21.3	1.6	5.5	1.5	1.9	3.8	1.2
Pentecostal	0.1	0.1	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.1	0.1	0.0	0.7	0.0
Presbyterian	9.9	7.9	24.6	29.2	9.7	61.1	10.9	17.2	17.9	8.3
Private	0.3	0.5	0.0	0.0	0.3	18.6	8.5	0.4	0.3	0.0

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Presbyterians (18.4% males, 11.6 females) and Muslims (27.4% males, 17.3% females) were most reluctant to choose government schools for first choice. Presbyterians were more likely than other groups to choose private schooling for their daughters (18.6%) in the event they did not get a school of their own choice. Interestingly, although Hindus rejected the government schools for their daughters, many were willing to select the government schools for their sons (33.3% males, 17.2% females). Presbyterians (48.8% males, 61.1% females) and Catholics (43.3% males, 44.5% females) were more likely to put their own schools as first choice. Clearly, among both groups, Presbyterians were most likely to choose a school of their own denomination for their female child. The relatively low figure for Catholics is interesting considering that the large majority of high-achieving girls' schools were Catholic. Anglicans were often not attracted to their own schools (11.0% males, 26.3% females) and tended to favour the government schools, even though a number of high-achieving schools were also Anglican, including three in the top 10: St Stephen's College, BAHS, and BAHS East.

The qualitative study. Analysis of the text data identified 11 salient issues, categorized into three groups: (a) the school chosen, (b) the family and student choosing, and (c) the societal milieu. In terms of the school chosen, parents were most often concerned with (1) security, (2) public image, (3) single-gender schooling, (4) location, and (5) the management authority of the school. For the family and student choosing, frequently cited concerns centred on (6) aspirations and desires; (7) family, cultural, and generational traditions; (8) the student's own intellectual capability, perceived merit, or career potential; and (9) specific family dynamics and localized community experiences. Parents were also concerned with wider social issues impinging on their decisions, such as (10) mistrust of the placement process and (11) perceptions of a pervasive lack of fairness in the system.

The focus group interview data from parents confirmed an overwhelming tendency for families to choose high-achieving 7-year denominational schools located in the urban areas. In some cases where a government school was included in the choice list, it might be added as a third or fourth choice school and often on the advice of the class teacher. According to this data, teachers often assumed an advisory role in the choice process, balancing the school selected with the perceived ability of the child. This is illustrated in the following conversation with a Muslim female parent, who talked about the role of the teacher in choosing schools for her child:

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Yes, I guess they really looked at their marks and how they performed to know [what choice to make]. As I said the teacher checked for the marks, and he advised every one of us, that this is a school way above your child's [ability]. We recommend [instead] this one; she has a quicker chance of getting into such and such [a school].

So this is where we were being guided along as well by the teacher. This is the scenario: the teacher and me. I am talking to my husband and I am telling him exactly what is being said so it is a joint thing with the teacher and the parents.

I am concerned about his marks and what the teacher said. I went to the school there and the teacher gave me advice about the school I chose. That is [my child's] level and that is the reason why I didn't choose any junior secondary school.

Therefore, the decision-making process might include parties outside the family circle. A more important finding was that students were never just inert onlookers but were often active participants in the decision-making process. In some cases, children's role could be dominant; more often, however, they were involved in a process of negotiation and compromise with adult decision makers. In such instances, children were keenly sensitive to the family's capability and needs and were therefore willing to make accommodations. This might mean accepting schools that were less than favourable. For example, although a particular prestige school might be highly valued, it might be located far away from the family's residence. Thus, the cost of transportation or the difficulty in accessing the school would make it difficult for parents to support the child's choice financially. In such instances, students were often willing to accept an alternative school equally highly valued but closer to the family's residence.

This ability of children to influence the choice process was often related to their emerging role as power-brokering early adolescents. As one student from an urban government school confidently said "*Well I sitting the exam so I put my two choices first, she [her mother] put her two choices last, since she had to write the list.*" At the same time, as expected, there was also continued ambivalence and dependence upon the adults involved in the decision-making process. Thus, it was customary to give greater weight to the voice of parents, teachers, and even members of the extended family. However, it was not always possible to weigh precisely the role of each participant and, in some situations, children could have a significant or final say. For example, one female student from a high-achieving primary school in the suburbs described her negotiated role in the choice-making process:

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Well, I was really planning a long time to go St. Augustine [Girls High School], I just had my mind set on that [school] because plenty people told me that to try for St. Joseph and not to go for St. Augustine Girls High School. Even my teacher recommended [that] I go for St. Joseph but I am still trying for St. Augustine Girls High School. [Interviewer: Did you choose St. Augustine Girls High School against your teacher's advice?] No, he told us that he was just recommending those, that they are just schools he recommended and that the parents could make other choices, but I did put in the other two choices (Student in focus group).

In another illustrative anecdote, a female parent from central Trinidad described how she worked along with her child in coming to the final list of choices:

Parent: I liked the history and discipline of the school, the reputation of the school, the track record, [it was] good for discipline, which no one else [in the focus group] really said but is that a factor for everybody else. Yes, not only academic reputation but discipline.

Interviewer: When you were making these choices did your child get involved and what was the level of this involvement?

Parent: Well I had to change some of my choices because I wanted her to be happy with the choices. I wanted her to be involved. She gave me a list of schools and I chose some and I chose the ones I think are the best.

Interviewer: So she gave you her preferred list and how many schools?

Parent: It was six schools. You chose four out of there and I even talked her out of one I chose and she didn't like.

In Tobago, families were more willing to invest in a new sector school located in their community. Surprisingly, however, not all the parents used their full four choices. This might be related to the lack of variety in the Tobago market or a different perspective on education and its purpose. For example, one male Tobagonian parent reflected on why he was willing to choose a rural secondary school ahead of the traditional high-achieving urban institution:

I live in Speyside and I actually see what takes place in the school. From my point of view . . . I would have chosen Speyside High School for my daughter so she will have more time for herself and she would study more and learn to finish all her school work. But if I have to put a school like Scarborough, it would be very hard for her because she would have to get up 4 o'clock in the morning and she would not have time to do her homework and time for herself; that is why I chose Speyside High

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School. There are computers [there], and I bought one for her. She likes sports, they go and run. That is why I put Speyside as her first choice.

The decision-making process was fuelled by the dual process of valorizing and demonizing schools. This tendency to paint vivid pictures of schools as either heroic or villainous dramatically increased the emotional content of decision making, and raised the stakes and risks involved in making poor decisions. The dual and interlocked processes of valorization and demonization were based on strongly held perceptions of schools and snippets of information obtained from teachers, family members, and friends. For example, two female students of a high-achieving primary school in the suburbs of Port of Spain spoke about their impression of schools chosen:

Student No. 1 (African Trinidadian female): I want to pass for Bishop Anstey High School. Why? Because it is a very good school, the children are very educated and they come out to be very good people, some people turn out to be doctors and other good stuff like my teacher Miss Wright who is a very good teacher.

Student No. 2 (Indian Trinidadian female): I picked Holy Name Convent because my sister went there and she told me that they are a lot of nice people there and teachers really try to [help you succeed].

While valorization and demonization worked together as a dual process, painting the school as a villain was often the dominant process in many instances of decision making, with students and parents simply excluding schools they considered violent and corrupting. It appeared that families believed that these institutions could change the character of their children. The following excerpt from the focus group at the same high-achieving urban Port of Spain school reveals the prominent role of demonizing schools:

Student No. 3 (African Trinidadian female): I don't want to go D.M. because it have plenty real nastiness going on. And in CC, I don't find the principal is all that pleasant because my aunty used to go to that school and she was sick and my mother went to give her an excuse for my aunty and she said [bad things]. I don't want to pass for WS either, because I hear a lot of bad things about it and I just don't like the uniform. I don't want to pass for a Junior Secondary [school] because I would get so much licks . . . they might beat me up because I done already kind of shy and kind of mad and they does take advantage of people [like that]. So I don't want to be [taken] advantage of, I done already shy, I don't know how to fight because I didn't grow up in that kind of way.

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Student No. 2 (Indian Trinidadian female): I just don't want to go to a junior secondary school at all. There is a lot of bacchanal there. All the teachers are nice but I don't want to deal with these children in school and a lot of fighting everyday.

It appeared that some school attributes did not have the same valence for males and females, so that while families were sometimes willing to allow males to travel a great distance to their school of choice, they were very reluctant to allow the same for females. For adults, the most important decision makers in many cases were mothers, although grandmothers, aunts, and sisters might be involved. While fathers appeared absent from this sample, they were often in the background and set the parameters for the final decision.

The relative importance of the child's involvement depended on the dynamics of each family. Where children's voices were dominant, they were at the centre of the decision-making process, often "informing" the parent of their preferences, with the parent acceding to the child's wishes; but in other cases the child had a say within the parameters set by the parents. Whether child or adult, consumers did not have equal sophistication in choice making, and in a culture where information was not readily available, awareness, autonomy, and self-assuredness became critical factors. Students in the Port of Spain area where there were many schools seemed to have a more elaborated decision-making framework, having reviewed the schools that appeared attractive or unattractive.

Parents tried to balance different functional and psycho-social consequences of school attributes. Thus, one parent rationalized her reasons for placing the same local secondary school repeatedly:

It is easy for me here; it is easy access for me. It is easier for me because I don't have to pay transportation. It is a financial thing as well as a system thing. As well as [what] you said, familiarity with the environment.

Parents in the focus groups understood the problems they faced in judging the prestige of the school and the risks involved in sending their children to schools that were rejected or demonized. In Central Trinidad, for example, although parents admitted that some new sector schools did not have a bad reputation, they were still concerned with being left with the choice of having to purchase space at a private school if they obtained a placement that was unacceptable. Thus, one parent reflected on the apparent inequity created by competing schools:

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So how is a decision going to be made? Even with a credit system, how would a decision be made about who goes to Presentation and who goes to a [junior secondary school]? It should not have prestige schools and lower ranked schools, it should just be schools and [we] don't label the schools. That is where you don't have that happening abroad.

The complexity of the choice system created many anomalies closely observed by parents and children. These anomalies were often used as evidence of unfairness. Students at a high-achieving urban primary school discussed stories that supported their view that there was graft in the process of choice/school selection:

My cousin's friend had all his choices as colleges and he got in the 80s and he passed for a junior secondary school. I know some of my friends [who] scored 86 and 83, 80 in Creative Writing and still passed for San Juan Secondary when they were supposed to go a Convent or College.

When we did SEA, he made 86 or 87 in grammar and he was placed in Diego Martin Secondary. In [school named] here, some boys, they . . . get less marks than other boys . . . My cousin too scored in the 80s and he was placed in a junior secondary school because of where he lived.

While there were valid reasons for each outcome, even students perceived limitations in the choice process and considered their being placed by the Ministry as an unfair outcome.

The laddering interviews and the focus groups were concentrated on the deeply held values that led to the different decisions. Schools appeared to be repositories for many deep-seated fears, fantasies, and dreams. Moreover, the process of moving towards a secondary school in itself created anxiety, moral panic, and trepidation. This meant that the families had a strong emotional response to the process and they viewed the opportunity to choose in terms of ownership and power over their destinies. Indeed, some parents believed that much had already been taken away from them by the society and the school system, and that there was a need to steady the child, buffering them against foreseen turbulence.

The ideal product was a school that was efficient in building academic, emotional, and social competence; was at a safe distance from home; and in which discipline and order prevailed. Contrary to the expectations of some, academic criteria were not always dominant but were considered along with additional criteria. One parent from central Trinidad spoke at length about her choice of school for her son. As she did so, she balanced the valence of multiple factors, including location,

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nature of the school, intergenerational issues, and issues regarding the prestige of the school:

Interviewer: Why did you choose those schools?

Parent: [I chose] Hillview, because of location.

Interviewer: So where do you live?

Parent: I live in El Socorro and my [other] daughter attends St. Augustine Girls so it will be the same direction plus because of the reputation of the school. We chose St. Mary's because his father is [went to that school]. I don't really want him going into Port of Spain but we still chose what was considered the top school [in the country] and St. George's is also in our area. It is the last choice because I really don't want him going to a co-ed school. I really prefer him in an all-boys' school, but as I said those are all the top schools. In my book those are the schools that are doing well.

In summary, families expected that the school would (1) provide their children with access to the subjects they need to pursue their career and their lives; (2) help their children become the persons the parents envisioned they could be; (3) help their children develop and grow without fear of becoming tainted or hurt; and (4) help their children to reach psychological maturity free of fear.

Choices and Placement Outcomes

Table 8 provides data on the number and percentages of students in the eight education districts who received one or other of their different choices. The table emphasizes that, in the end, choices may simply be wishes. Therefore, in the Trinidad and Tobago system, greater choice opportunities might not lead to desired outcomes because students have to compete for available spaces in a small number of highly valued schools. As shown, despite the increased number of schools built to accommodate universal secondary education, less than 20% of the students in most education divisions in Trinidad received their first choice school. In Tobago, with a relatively small population, the situation is quite different, with close to 50% of the children receiving their first choice in the period 2001–2005.

Table 8. Percentages of Candidates Receiving Each Choice Across Educational Districts

----- 1995–2000 CEE Choices -----									
All Administrative Districts	Percentages Receiving Each Choice								MOE Assigned
	Nos.	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	Unplaced	
Caroni	25,395	13.0	13.0	16.3	15.7			7.7	26.6
North Eastern	10,357	11.9	13.5	12.2	13.4			13.0	23.0
POS & Environs	33,562	10.1	6.7	10.6	18.3			5.7	42.9
St. George East	40,158	9.8	7.8	11.4	16.5			7.2	40.1
St. Patrick	18,428	12.8	12.1	18.5	32.1			2.3	19.9
South Eastern	14,191	14.0	15.0	19.4	14.6			7.8	21.4
Victoria	25,755	14.4	12.6	15.7	23.8			4.6	24.3
Tobago	8,099	21.9	18.0	4.6	4.5			21.0	7.0
----- 2001–2005 SEA Choices -----									
All Administrative Districts	Percentages Receiving Each Choice								MOE Assigned
	Nos.	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	Unplaced	
Caroni	15,004	15.2	14.7	15.1	15.1	14.3	12.4		13.6
North Eastern	6,059	16.3	20.4	15.9	13.6	11.0	8.5		14.3
POS & Environs	19,728	15.0	7.0	8.4	10.6	12.2	16.7		30.1
St. George East	24,024	14.7	19.1	10.6	11.8	13.7	14.4		24.7
St. Patrick	11,161	14.6	13.8	14.4	13.3	12.3	17.7		14.3
South Eastern	8,120	18.4	13.4	19.8	16.7	13.3	9.3		9.5
Victoria	14,960	17.0	12.0	12.7	13.6	15.3	16.3		13.2
Tobago	4,748	27.6	23.7	9.0	15.5	6.5	7.0		11.2

Table 9. Percentages of Candidates Receiving First Choice in Selected Communities in the Port of Spain & Environs Educational District

	----- Percentages receiving each choice -----									
	BNI †	Nos	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	Min.	UnP
1995–2000 CEE										
Goodwood Park	75	63	49.2	0.0	3.2	9.5			28.6	0.0
Bayshore	73	61	52.5	1.4	4.9	6.6			1.3	0.0
Victoria Gardens	71	70	32.9	14.4	5.7	7.1			34.3	1.4
Beetham	41	389	4.4	51.0	11.1	14.7			48.8	14.4
John John	43*	145	7.6	7.7	11.0	7.6			17.2	51.0
Caledonia No. 2	49*	191	4.7	7.9	11.5	11.5			57.1	7.7
2001–2005 SEA										
Goodwood Park	75	39	59.0		12.8	5.1	5.1	2.6	2.6	
Bayshore	73	21	57.1		4.8	9.5	4.8	4.8	14.3	
Victoria Gardens	71	31	71.0		3.2	3.2	0.0	0.0	6.5	
Beetham	41	291	6.2		6.5	11.0	23.0	21.3	23.5	
John John	43*	97	5.2	6.2	10.4	10.3	15.5	22.7	33.0	
Caledonia No. 2	49*	107	4.7	6.5	9.3	13.1	15.0	17.8	34.6	

*Community BNI estimated from the reported BNI of general neighbourhood

† Basic Needs Index-Measure of Poverty in Community

Min. = Ministry Assigned School UnP = Student unplaced.

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Comparing the two periods (1995–2000 and 2001–2005), it was apparent that although the situation had improved in Port of Spain and Environs and St. George East in terms of the number of students obtaining their first choice school, there were still notable deficiencies in the period 2001–2005. As shown, fewer students received choices 2 to 6 in these education districts. The impact of this finding is significant because these divisions have the greatest number of eligible students in the eleven-plus. As a consequence, 30.1% of the students in Port of Spain and Environs and 24.7% in St. George East were placed by the MOE, even with six available choices. The lowest number of students assigned to schools outside the choice list was found in the South Eastern Education Division.

Table 9 provides data on the numbers of students receiving their choices across six communities located in the Diego Martin and San Juan-Laventille administrative regions. Both regions fall within the educational district known as Port of Spain and Environs. The Basic Needs Index (BNI) was used to classify each district in terms of economic status (Kairi Consultants, 2007). As shown, outcomes varied sharply, with the more disadvantaged regions reporting low numbers receiving their first choice (Range = 4.4% to 7.6%) for both time periods. Communities with a high BNI (low deprivation) all reported relatively high percentages receiving their first choice (Range = 32.9% to 71.0%). Interestingly, of the six listed communities, the disadvantaged communities like Beetham also reported the highest number of candidates. At the same time, the numbers of students assigned by the MOE and those not receiving a school during the period 1995–2000 were also high.

Discussion

This study explored the issue of family choice of secondary school in the education system of Trinidad and Tobago using a mixed method approach. System-level functioning was investigated using a quantitative descriptive study of 279,749 decisions over a period of 10 years and two different administrations of the eleven-plus examination (176,002 family decisions for 1995–2000 and 103,902 decisions for the period 2001–2005). This amounted to a total of 1,327,420 choices analysed for the secondary schools (704,008 for 1995–2000 and 623,412 for 2001–2005). During the period 2006–2007, a small-scale qualitative study was conducted among parents and children using three schools in Trinidad and one school in Tobago to provide insight into the construction of school choice among students and parents. The qualitative study was

designed to illuminate, elaborate, and validate key issues identified in the system-level quantitative study. This discussion section seeks to integrate findings from both data sources.

Trinidad and Tobago has operated an education market in which there is competition between different types of secondary schools. These different school types vary by governance, years of schooling provided, and age built (London, 1991). The government-assisted schools in the secondary sector were older and many were more highly valued than the newly built government schools. The government-assisted schools were run by the various religious denominations. The systematic open enrolment system operated at the transition to secondary schools in a formalized component of the selection and placement system at eleven-plus. There are few restrictions as to individual choice so that, in theory, a student in the furthest part of the island can gain access to a highly valued school in the urban areas. In reality, there were specific markets or circuits of schooling created by the accessibility of highly valued schools to students from all areas.

Most of the highly valued schools were of the denominational type. However, the top 10 ranking included the oldest government school, Queen's Royal College. The market appeared relatively dynamic so that some newly created schools could become highly attractive to consumers in a short time. Examples of this dynamism were seen in the case of BAHS East in the quantitative analysis and Speyside High School in the qualitative analysis. The apparent dynamism of the market suggests that once a school is perceived as a quality product, it could quickly position itself within the education market. This was also evident in the case of the most recently built high schools such as Cunupia and Waterloo built under the SEMP loan. Families found this product more attractive than the new sector junior secondary school. The question seems to be, though: How do we determine what factors contribute to consumers placing a high value on the product? The data from the focus group interviews with parents and children suggested that families most valued schools which contributed to the development of the child academically and socially. While different families placed different emphases on the two areas, the ultimate focus was on the protection of the child from physical, academic, and emotional harm. Academic prestige was important for first choice schools, but parents increasingly weighed other factors in the lower choices.

The mechanism of making choices involved both the demonizing and valorizing of schools within the circuit. In many cases, demonizing of some schools led to rejection and, in some cases, this process appeared to be the dominant factor (Croft, 2004). However, in many other instances,

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valorization was also a significant factor. Most families placed the highest value on traditional denominational schools and this valuation remained relatively stable in the absence of formal information. The valuing of schools was related to personal consumer values of safety, security, and growth. Government new sector schools rarely provided information about the quality of education offered, and hence were more often demonized and some families even considered them as spoilers in the education process. Such demonization led to rejection of these schools as worthy agents of socialization and education for young ones in the family. Information about schools in the system was relatively limited so that even when schools were valorized, families often relied on anecdotal accounts. It might be that many decisions, then, were made on the basis of inaccurate information. This lack of information coupled with the nature of the system maintained the hegemony of the traditional schools. So that while there was some dynamism and fluidity in the education market, the traditional product retained the highest value.

Multiple factors guided the decision-making process and no one attribute, including religion, was deemed critically important. Indeed, both the quantitative and qualitative data confirmed that not all families valued religion as an important attribute governing their choice of school. It appeared that some groups (those that did not have their own schools) were quite prepared to choose government schools. It might be that these groups perceived a level of discrimination in the system. While, historically, denominational schools are accepted by all members of the society, the discourse surrounding *Sumayyah Mohammed v Board of Management of Holy Name Convent Secondary School* (1994) suggests that there were multiple tensions in this plural society as upsurging and traditional religions vied for support and popularity (Mahabir, 2004). It may be that government schools provide the best solution to developing a culture of true inclusion in line with stated constitutional guarantees.

A notable finding was that it was families who made choices and not just parents. In many instances children had considerable say in determining their fate. In some instances parents negotiated with children, and in other instances children were allowed to choose within a set of parameters. Teachers and other members of the extended family could also play a significant role in guiding families in the choice-making process. The role of a teacher in this instance could be pivotal since some teachers understood how the choice system operated and hence their advice could be critical. Whether or not other members of the family had a say depended upon the dynamics and culture of the family. In some instances, since the mother had the role of protector and

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educator, much was left to her, with the father on occasion as background guard of the moral and value component.

Educational Implications

There were many nuances involved in the choice process within Trinidad and Tobago. For example, it appeared that families made very different decisions for males and females based on differential valuing of school attributes. Thus gender was interwoven into the mechanism of choosing schools (George, 2007; Stambach & David, 2005). It may not at all be possible to develop a unified school choice policy agenda which will ensure equity and fairness until consumers become convinced that most schools can deliver the expected outcomes. Once the school system is highly differentiated, some parents and children will choose primarily by rejecting certain schools. As London (1994) has suggested, new sector and government schools might have to better market themselves. The quantitative data suggest that the market is dynamic and fluid enough to allow quick recognition of excellence. For example, a school with the proven quality of BAHS East was quickly accepted by consumers as having high value or prestige. Informing and involving parents must begin at the MOE level and filter down to individual primary and secondary schools under a system of school-based management.

The MOE's decision to reduce the number of choices from six to four was an interesting one. The data suggested that the fifth and sixth choice had little value for many respondents but not for all. There were different circuits of schooling and these lower choices were critical in some of the areas where placement was difficult, such as in Caroni and St. George East. The fifth and sixth choices were also important for female candidates, as revealed in Table 4. For these reasons, it seems that the MOE might wish to reflect on the fairness of reverting to four available choices, especially in districts where there are many available schools. In any case, it is better to allow families to choose rather than to impose a choice as occurs when the choice is four. The MOE should certainly avoid any attempt to regulate choice until more data are available on functioning and outcomes associated with the particular choice system in Trinidad and Tobago. In any case, it is apparent that increasing choice opportunities is a growing educational trend that may enhance some outcomes if structured right.

In the end, as shown by the quantitative data, few students obtained their first choice anyway. Students from disadvantaged communities were very unlikely to be placed in any of their four choices, which raised general questions of fairness and equity. These concerns are not easily

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addressed as Trinidad and Tobago continues to grapple with persistent achievement gaps in both the primary and secondary sectors. Such inequity is not directly related to the choice system alone but more directly to the great differences between schools. The current system of rules for parental choice and the differentiated systems of schools may not allow the majority of students to be winners, both in terms of making efficient decisions and in receiving their desired outcome. In the end, then, both students and schools may be losing in this unique system of choice.

Notes

1. Other contributors to this study were: Cheryl Bowrin-Williams, Sherma Joseph, Wendy-Ann Plante, Patricia Hernandez, Rinelle Lee-Piggott, Deon Rodriguez, Rhoda Mohammed, Kamini Bhagaloo, Sabrina McMillan, Alicia Gayah-Batchasingh, Isabelle Burris-Paul, Deryck Kistow, Narissa Leon, and Genevieve Andrews-Thompson.
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