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# Selecting Students for Secondary Education in a Developing Society: The case of Trinidad and Tobago

## Abstract

*The method of selecting students for secondary school in Trinidad and Tobago has undergone changes in recent years. The modifications have been effective in that they permit access to a larger number of students; they nevertheless accommodate some of the former practices of elitism in the selection process. This paper examines one of these major changes, together with implications for education and the society.*

## Résumé

*Le mode de sélection des étudiants qui entrent au secondaire à Trinidad et Tobago a subi des mutations ces dernières années. Ces modifications ont porté fruit en ce sens qu'elles permettent l'accès d'un plus grand nombre d'étudiants; elles conservent néanmoins certaines pratiques élitistes. London analyse ici l'un des principaux changements et ses répercussions sur l'éducation et la société.*

A characteristic feature of most developing nations is the high premium they put upon education and schooling, in spite of their recent experience that professional certification does not necessarily lead to employment and to material advancement. This experience of certification unaccompanied by the promise of employment is of relatively recent origin in developing nations, where the situation was different until about a decade ago. At that time gainful employment was a natural sequel to certification.

The demand for education on the part of the local society is often high, a factor in part responsible for recent expansions in the education sector in most developing nations. In the expansion programme many schools have been built, but in almost every case demand for school places still exceeds capacity. As a result, the procedures for selection of students for school, especially at the secondary level, have had to undergo refurbishment and realignment.

Since Trinidad and Tobago acceded to political independence in 1962, several adjustments have been made in that nation's examination strategies for gaining access to secondary school. Attempts have been made, for example, to relax prior levels of achievement in secondary school entrance examinations and to democratize access to secondary education via revised entrance requirements.

In spite of these recent adjustments, the logic embedded in the selection mechanism has not undergone much change. The selection procedures are designed to facilitate a certain degree of upward mobility within the local society. According to sociologist Turner (1960), patterns of upward mobility in western society may conform to one of two ideal-typical modes: the contest mode or the sponsorship mode.

In Trinidad and Tobago, the prevailing systems of examinations for selecting students for secondary education conform to the principles of both sponsorship and contest, as far as the norms for local socio-economic mobility are concerned. It is also argued that because of the "ideal" nature of Turner's (1960) classification, the examination systems referred to in Trinidad and Tobago may not provide a neat "fit" with this model, but may simply manifest a certain degree of rapprochement between the two ideals.

### **Objectives and Methodology**

The main purpose of this paper is to examine the degree to which the logic of contest and/or the logic of sponsorship, as propounded by Turner (1960), prevail(s) in the examination system used in the selection of students for secondary education in Trinidad and Tobago. Turner (1960) argues that the practice of one or the other of these forms of upward mobility leads to different consequences in the host society. Therefore, this paper will examine for Trinidad and Tobago, the possible consequences of the pattern of mobility detected in its examination system.

In order to fulfil these objectives the entrance examination (the 11-plus or Common Entrance examination), which must be written by all students as a means of gaining access to secondary schools in Trinidad and Tobago, will be analyzed. Lastly, because of the central position for the

Turner (1960) model, its main features will be discussed as a prelude to the major discussion.

### **The Turner Model**

Turner (1960) argues that two ideal typical forms of upward mobility may be found in most societies: contest mobility and sponsorship mobility. These forms of mobility are based upon what he refers to as the "prevailing folk norms" or generally agreed upon beliefs and practices of the given society, which are in turn reflected in the systems of examination practised in the schools of the society in question. These patterns of mobility are related to their respective systems of schooling, for promoting mobility is one of the basic objectives of most schooling endeavours.

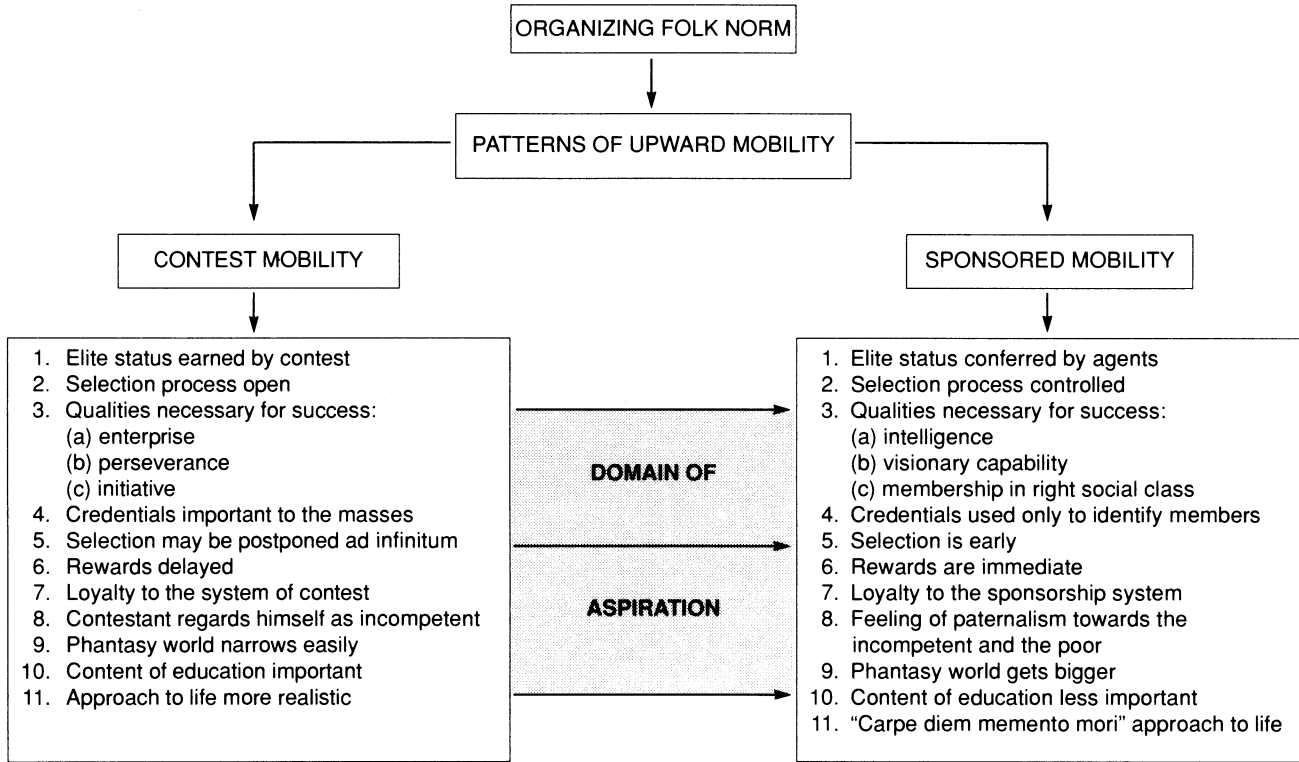
The folk norms not only play an important role in defining the types of mobility practised by the respective society, but also legitimate the systems of examination. Meyer and Rowan hint at this legitimization role of the folk norm by stating that:

Educational organizations function to maintain the societally agreed-on rites defined in societal myths . . . of education. Education rests on and obtains enormous resources from central institutional rules about what valid education is. (1978, p. 65)

Having outlined the rationale for establishment of the two forms of mobility, Turner states that:

Contest mobility is a system in which elite status is the prize in an open contest, and is taken by the aspirant's own efforts. While the contest is governed by some rules of fair play the contestants have wide latitude in the strategies they employ. Since the "prize" of successful upward mobility is not in the hands of an established elite to give out, the latter cannot determine who shall attain it and who shall not. Under sponsored mobility elite recruits are chosen by the established elite or their agents, and elite status is given on the basis of some criterion of supposed merit, and cannot be taken by any amount of effort or strategy. Upward mobility is like entry into a private club where each candidate must be "sponsored" by one or more members. Ultimately, the members grant or deny upward mobility on the basis of whether they judge the candidate to have those qualities they wish to see in fellow members. (1960, p. 856)

Figure 1  
*Summary of main features of the Turner Model*



Source: Adapted from Ralph H. Turner, Sponsored and content mobility and the school system. *Amer. Soc. Review*, vol. 25, 1960, 855-867.

Contest mobility may therefore be likened to a sporting event in which many contestants are competing for a few recognized prizes. The contest is fair only if all the players compete on an equal basis, and victory is solely by one's own efforts. Thus, as Bernstein (1975) points out in his discussion of the relationship between school and society, individualism, enterprise, perseverance, and personal initiative are some of the main principles of solidarity that distinguish contestants in a framework of contest mobility.

In contrast, sponsored mobility rejects the contest and favours a controlled selection process, in which elites or their agents are deemed to be the best qualified to choose individuals to be recipients of elite status. Whereas in contest mobility the governing objective is to give elite status to those who earn it, in sponsored mobility the elite society becomes the agent that establishes and interprets its own entrance criteria.

The diagram in Figure 1 is an attempt to summarize, compare, and contrast the main features of the patterns of sponsorship and of contest found in the Turner (1960) model of social mobility. In its adapted format, the model (Figure 1) accepts that the organizing folk norms, that is, the generally agreed upon beliefs and practices of the society, engender two patterns of upward mobility, the contest type and the sponsorship type. Figure 1 also indicates a "domain of aspiration" in which contest participants aspire to effect mobility through existing "sponsorship" devices, but in which sponsored participants do not aspire for mobility through "contest" devices. That is, aspiration is unidirectional, with contest participants aspiring for upward mobility through the less rigorous and demanding devices of sponsorship.

Each pattern of mobility suggested in the Turner model is predicated upon a certain internal logic, and contest and sponsorship are the two forms of mobility that inform systems of examinations in most societies. The extent to which the 11-plus examination in Trinidad and Tobago manifests Turner's (1960) sponsorship and/or contest will now be examined.

### **The 11-Plus Examination**

The 11-plus or Common Entrance Examination was introduced into Trinidad and Tobago from the United Kingdom in the early 1960s, as the basic method for selecting candidates for secondary education. As the name implies, this examination is "common", open to all students who qualify on the basis of chronological age. Officially, students should not be coached for this examination, but should succeed (or fail) on the basis of "natural ability."

This policy assumes an egalitarian administration of the 11-plus examination whereby opportunity must be given to all. This egalitarian principle is enshrined in the Constitution of the State (Trinidad and Tobago), and suggests that state examinations are "contest" as opposed to "sponsorship".

In practice, there is compliance with this official policy. Partly because of a shortage of secondary school places, the 11-plus examination is keen competition. However, sponsorship enters and partly determines the nature of the competition. From birth some students are registered in "good" schools from which a "good" pass in the 11-plus examination may be expected. Admission to such schools is usually limited to students coming from privileged families of the local society.

This element of sponsorship within contest mobility is exaggerated at about the age of ten, when students may be given "extra lessons" before and after school hours in preparation for the 11-plus examination. Extra help is not free, so only the well-to-do can afford it. The mechanism is essentially a head-start strategy which disadvantages the student of the poor.

The logic of sponsorship and the logic of contest are also reflected in the perception of local high schools. Schools, especially those at the secondary level, are perceived as "prestige" and "non-prestige". Thus, "success" at the 11-plus examination is determined not merely by gaining a passing mark, but essentially by passing "high enough" to be placed in a "prestige" school. Ignominy and shame often attend the aspirant to a "prestige" school, who is placed in a second-rate school as a result of his placement on the 11-plus examination.

In recent years about 25,000 students write the 11-plus examination annually, of which about 20,000 gain access to secondary schools. Of this figure of 20,000 only about 5,000 are allocated to the "prestige" schools. This paucity of places, together with scarcity of resources (especially in respect of other schools) provides a breeding ground for sponsorship within the 11-plus examination. One of these mechanisms is locally referred to as "The Concordat."

The Concordat is an official and legal agreement between the Government and the Boards of Management of the local denominational secondary schools, which guarantees the right of their principals to admit up to 20% of their first-year intake of students, without strict consideration of the results of the 11-plus examination. These denominational secondary schools are the "prestige" schools of the nation. No other secondary school in the state may admit beginning students without strict reference to the student's performance on the 11-plus examination. This central logic of The

Concordat has not been questioned by the local society; its well-spring being some of the deep cultural values held by the population.

Concordat privileges may be considered the epitome of sponsorship within a contest framework. Prior to the official release of the examination results, principals of "prestige" denominational high schools are summoned to the Ministry of Education to select their 20% of first-year students. Principals do not have a completely free hand: they may choose only from a list handed to them by the Ministry of Education. The list contains the names of students who achieved only a certain minimum score on the 11-plus examination, but not all students whose names appear on this list are chosen.

"Many are called, but few are chosen" is the principle of this process. From the list referred to, principals may freely and legitimately select those students who satisfy certain unwritten criteria. Very often these conditions are based on family connections, influence in the society, political affiliation, and wealth. Within such a sponsorship framework the poor, the disenfranchised, the weak, and the uninfluential do not have a second chance at "prestige" secondary schooling.

Because of prestige attached to the denominational secondary schools, the most gifted students are attracted to them. About 80% of their students ranked highly in the 11-plus examination, most of them coming from families who share similar social class characteristics. As far as these schools are concerned, The Concordat allows for a second chance for students of a more privileged social class background to attend a "prestige" school, but at the same time reentrenches the unfortunate and the underprivileged in their socio-economic milieu, by virtue of their incapability to compete successfully for selection for a prestige school through a second chance valve.

One of the potential results of this dual practice of sponsorship via the Concordat, and of contest via placement in the 11-plus examination, is the encouragement and perpetuation of a social class cleavage which Trinidad and Tobago has attempted to dismantle. One therefore finds in Trinidad and Tobago "prestige" denominational secondary schools where members of the more privileged class are further socialized into certain norms, and "non-prestige", or "second-rate", government-run schools where less fortunate students predominate and are socialized into different social, perceptual, and behavioural norms.

The logic of contest in the 11-plus examination is also manifested in the concept of the "second-chance", recently built into the examination system. It gives the 12-plus students a chance to repeat the 11-plus

examination, thereby gaining potential access into an upper-class school. This opportunity is open to students who did not secure a place at a secondary school on their first 11-plus examination, and to those who wish to repeat the examination for a "better placement."

The strategy of the "second-chance" approximates what Bowles and Gintis (1976) refer to as a confidence mechanism, the application of which merely heightens the rationale for contest among students, in the hope that the desired pass for the desired school would be achieved on the second round. This kind of logic is not only tantalizing, but has the effect of legitimizing in the minds of the poor (and the unsuccessful in particular) that their inability is the reason they have not "made the grade." In Turner's model, the legitimization of such feelings of failure is inherent to the logic of contest mobility.

### Consequences for the Local Society

It was indicated above that Turner's model is dynamic, with the ability to point to consequences for society. Thus, although the model does not neatly fit the 11-plus examination system found in Trinidad and Tobago, certain consequences for the local society may be observed as a result of the differential practice of the logic of sponsorship and the logic of contest, which have been found to operate in the examination system discussed.

In the first instance, the presence of the two forms of logic found in the 11-plus examination divides the students and potentially lead to a dichotomized society where the "hewers of wood" are separated from the "drawers of water." This kind of distinction has been shaped by the traditional local society, but has recently been subjected to change through those efforts to unshackle and liberate the nation politically and socially in the post-independence era. The socio-economic distinctions implied in the above examination and selection procedures are therefore vestiges of a previous model of social formation which particular grass-roots elements in the local society have struggled for many years to change. The Concordat, symbol of sponsorship, serves to dull the edge of the contest ideal, which post-independence governments have attempted to popularize at the expense of sponsorship elements in the system of education.

Why sponsorship, and in particular sponsorship through an instrument such as The Concordat, persists is worthy of future investigation. Boudon (1974) suggests that such persistence may be legitimized through the value system accepted by the society as being "natural" or "right". If this is the case in Trinidad and Tobago, then social justification may be found for the Government's recent efforts to promote



the contest ideal, vis-à-vis the sponsorship ideal, in its secondary school selection process. On the other hand promotion of a contest form of selection, and retention of the sponsorship mode through an agency such as The Concordat, could suggest two interesting features about Trinidad and Tobago society: its desire for melioristic changes in education along democratic lines, and its attempt to retain a by-product of a previous approach to social formation. That approach is essentially of the sponsorship type.

Not only schools, but also teachers and the image which the larger society holds about them, are affected as well by the ideology of contest and the ideology of sponsorship which prevail in the 11-plus examination. It was remarked above that the operationalization of the two ideologies leads to two different categories of secondary school students, in two different types of schools. By extension, the teachers who teach in each type of school are automatically subjected as well to the same kind of societal evaluation. Thus, in spite of the fact that common standards of certification are required for entering the teaching profession, teachers in local "prestige" schools are considered as being more professional than those teachers in "non-prestige" schools.

This difference in the societal image of the teacher has proven to be counter-productive as far as teacher output is concerned. In general, it is believed that teachers in the "prestige" schools are more industrious and more competent than their counterparts in the "non-prestige" schools. This belief on the part of the local society appears to be a realization of the prophecy of self-fulfilment, in that the teachers themselves have come to internalize these differences and act accordingly. This difference in teacher behaviour and output is particularly harmful to the local society, because of the fact that the teachers in "non-prestige" schools, who apparently produce less, comprise about 80% of the national teaching corps.

Differences in the two modes of socio-economic mobility are indirectly associated with differences in the spatial distribution of educational facilities as well. In Trinidad and Tobago there exists a strong urban bias in favour of "prestige" secondary schools, while "non-prestige" schools are usually found in rural districts. The denominational secondary schools, where sponsorship as a mode of selection of students applies, are the older schools which have built up for themselves a certain enviable tradition in academic performance. These schools are located in the major urban centres. On the other hand the "non-prestige" schools, constructed under the more recent school building programmes, have been located in the rural areas supposedly in an attempt to equalize access of educational opportunities for the local population. It is in these newer, "non-prestige" schools where the logic of contest, and not the logic of sponsorship as

explained in the Turner (1960) model, is applied as the sole rationale for student admission.

So intense is the competition in the 11-plus examination that preparation for it and expectation of the results have become in almost every case a "family affair." The routine of family living often becomes disrupted, as parents are obliged to make personal sacrifices and adjustments in family routine to obtain extra lessons for their children in preparation for this examination. Parent involvement is also manifested at the time of release of the results of the examination. There is abundant evidence that parents vicariously share with their children the agony of eager expectation of these results, thereby rearranging the normal flow of sentiments and activities in everyday family living.

These traumatic experiences have not gone unnoticed by local policy makers, who have attempted at best to mitigate the problem. One of the solutions engaged, for example, has taken the form of an attempt to standardize all secondary schools in the nation through a curricular adjustment to be manifested in what is to be known as the "national model" school. The desire to squeeze all secondary schools in the nation into one national mold has been accepted as government policy, but became a particular educational goal only during the early part of this decade when the economic fortunes of Trinidad and Tobago were more promising.

The stipulation which mandated the new "national model" school states as follows:

That an integrated comprehensive programme embracing the academic, pre-technician, commercial, general industrial, and limited specialized craft training, utilizing common facilities and with common management be adopted as the national model for secondary education. It is recognized that the constraints of finance, management and teaching resources may force a phased implementation of such a policy, but this model should be the basis for the planning of all future facilities . (Prime Minister's Proposals, 1975, p. 4)

The call for such a change from a perceived two-tier system to a single-tier "National Model" system represents a call for a symbolic change in secondary education in Trinidad and Tobago. The transformation called for in the National Model is certainly intended in part to cushion and, if possible, eliminate the societal ills engendered by the operation of sponsorship and contest logic in the selection process for secondary school. However, as Deal and Wisk (1983) have remarked, such symbolic changes in school systems are difficult to accomplish. Whether or not this endeavour

will prove successful in Trinidad and Tobago will be known only with the passage of time, and through the continued struggles for a fiercely contested terrain, the school.

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