

Strategies Teachers Use in Helping Students Overcome the Eleven-Plus Barrier: A Multi-site Case Study of High-stakes Testing in Belize

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Teachers preparing students to write high-stakes tests choose teaching strategies that they think will best prepare students for these exams. At the same time they attempt to provide students with the best educational experience that the school context allows. The tension between these two goals, however, sometimes forces teachers to select teaching strategies that are more aligned with one of these goals than the other. This qualitative multi-site case study draws upon an integrated conceptual framework, drawn from socio-cultural theory. The study reports on how seven elementary school teachers who prepare students to sit the Eleven-plus examination (locally known as the Primary School Examination or PSE), went about choosing the strategies they used to prepare students to write this high-stakes exam. The study also focused on the intended and unintended consequences these choices had on the quality of the educational experiences their students encountered. The results showed that the teachers in the study gave priority to three strategies when preparing students to write the high-stakes examination. These are: drill-and-practice, supplementary tutoring and reflexive praxis. These choices of strategies had both positive and negative implications for the students, whom the teachers were trying to help to overcome the barriers to the high-stakes test. The authors suggest some of the actions that could be taken to mitigate against the negative effects of the strategies selected by the teachers, for example a shift in beliefs from that of a didactic approach to teaching to constructivism.

Keywords: *Professional Practice of Teachers; Teacher-identities; Test-accountability System; High-stakes Test; Primary School Examinations, Eleven-plus Examinations; Supplementary Tutoring; Drill-and-practice; Reflexive Pedagogical Praxis*

Introduction

High-stakes testing at the primary school level has been a part of the Anglophone Caribbean education landscape for more than fifty years. One outcome of the emphasis on high-stakes test is increased pressure on teachers to raise test scores. Also, these pressures can lead to a distorting effect on teaching and learning, if teachers cannot adopt their professional identities to adequately position high-stakes test preparations strategies in their classrooms (Rex & Nelson, 2004). Identity in this context means “being recognized as a certain kind of [teacher] in a given context” (Gee, 2001, p. 99). Teachers preparing students to write high-stakes tests, therefore, choose teaching strategies that they think will best prepare students for these exams. At the same

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time they attempt to provide students with the best educational experience that the school context allows. The tension between these two goals, however, sometimes forces teachers to select teaching strategies that are more aligned with one of these goals than the other.

Socio-cultural theory posits that whether identity is conceptualized as a set of beliefs about oneself, as a subject-position in relation to other people within a practice, or as a narrative told about oneself, one's identity changes within the context of practice as one becomes adept at the practice; that is, as a result of one's learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Teacher's professional identity development, therefore happens all the time and in all contexts, through markers such as type of students they interact with, how, the context in which the interactions occurs, and so on (Holland, Lachiotte, Skinner & Cain, 2001). Though these constructs – teacher identity, agency or positioning – are different labels that essentially refer to the same idea, their connotation may be different. For example, whereas teacher identity may carry the connotation of an enduring, static and centralized self, teacher positioning point to ways in which one does not have one identity, but rather inhabits or invokes multiple identities or identifications. These identities may shift in salience and in meaning as one moves from one context, for example where there is a high alignment of the school with the pressure to raise test scores on these high-stakes tests, to the next where such alignment may not exist (Esmonde, 2009).

Against this background, it is necessary to gain greater insight into how teachers go about making these decisions when functioning within the context of Belize, a high-stakes testing learning-environment that lacks a formal test-accountability system. This qualitative multi-site case study reports on how seven elementary school teachers who prepare students to sit the Eleven-plus examination (locally known as the Primary School Examination or PSE) went about choosing the strategies they used to prepare students to write this high-stakes exam. The study also focused on the intended and unintended consequences these choices had on the quality of the educational experiences their students encountered. The study is intended to contribute to a better understanding of the purposes elementary schooling is currently serving in the Anglophone Caribbean, where high-stakes testing occurs under more or less similar circumstances of non-accountability. It is also hoped that the study will shed light on the role teacher identity, agency or positioning plays, among the teachers who operate in these schools, on the growth and development of the students they serve.

The “US” in the Study

As researchers our primary interest is in segueing how our systems of schooling functions at the micro-political level. We have always felt, like Donna Haraway (1996), that there is good reason to believe that vision is always better from below “the brilliant space platforms of the powerful” (p. 255). So we place premium on establishing the capacity to see schooling from the peripheries. This report is therefore an argument for the local or indigenous knowledge of practicing teachers (George, 1999). It is also an argument against various forms of “unlocatable, and so irresponsible knowledge claims” (Haraway, 1996, p.255) made by some researchers in their name.

We are also fully cognizant that there lies in this stance the serious danger of romanticizing and/or appropriating the visions of the less powerful while claiming to see from their positions. This notwithstanding, a subjugated standpoint is preferred because it seems to promise more adequate, sustained, objective, transforming accounts of the world of education (Haraway, 1996).

This article is therefore written from the perspective of someone who has identified himself with the politics of education in Belize for over forty years and someone who has identified herself with the politics of education in Tobago for over eight years. This suggests that we both

bring an “optics that is a politics of positioning” (Haraway 1996, p. 257). Hence, the answers the participants provided to these four sub-questions forms the basis of this preliminary report.

Our positioning of the subjugated is not exempt from critical re-examination, deconstruction, interpretation or any of the other modes of critical inquiry, nor is it an innocent positioning. On the contrary, it is preferred because in principle it is least likely to allow the denial of the critical and interpretive core of all teacher knowledge.

As a preliminary to a discussion of some of the findings of the study, we present briefs on the literature and the integrated conceptual framework that guided the study. These include a brief overview of socio-cultural theory of learning and situated learning theory’s view of identity and agency. We then argue for the importance of the identity/agency related processes in understanding how teachers position their classroom preparation strategies when preparing students to sit high-stakes test. We then present the major findings and conclude with a set of open questions for further investigations.

Theoretical Consideration

This paper discusses the ways in which seven grade-six teachers in Belize go about selecting teaching strategies while preparing students for a high-stakes test, in a country where there are no test-accountability systems in place. We examined how these teachers, when positioning their test preparation strategies, aligned with, or stymied, the pressures to raise test scores, as an expression of their own personal test-accountability (Rex & Nelson, 2004). It also reports on how looking at high-stakes testing through the lenses of teacher identity/agency related processes, provides us with some interesting insights, into some of the consequences of the teaching strategies chosen, on the quality of the educational experiences students are exposed to when preparing for a high-stakes test. This is particularly important, in the context of Belize, an environment where there is no formal test-accountability system in place.

Background: Eleven-Plus, Primary School Examination, Other High-Stakes Tests

This study is based on how teachers select their classroom preparation strategies when preparing students to sit the Eleven-Plus Examination. This examination is also known within the Caribbean as the Common Entrance Examination (CEE) or in Belize the Primary School Examinations (PSE). In carrying out this inquiry, it was assumed that adequate and appropriate test preparation plays an important role in helping students demonstrate their knowledge and skills in high-stakes testing situations (Gulek, 2003).

Not only are test preparations important, but Norton and Park (1996) in their study, found a significant relationship between test preparation and academic performance. Chittooran and Miles (2001) also concluded that adequate test preparations significantly improve students’ attitudes toward taking tests. And in a large scale study of test preparation, Miyasaka (2000) identified five types of test preparation strategies that help students more fully demonstrate their knowledge and skills on high-stakes tests. These included, teaching in the content domain of the area to be tested, using a variety of assessments and formats, teaching time management skills, fostering students’ motivation and reducing test anxiety.

The PSE is defined as a high-stakes examination administered to some students in the last year of primary education, governing admissions to various types of secondary schools (De Lisle, 2008). Because of this there is an intense competition among students to get into their first choice secondary schools (De Lisle, 2008). Furthermore, there is a defined relationship between test preparation and academic performance (Norton & Park, 1996). Thus looking at the

test preparation strategies teachers use to prepare students to sit the PSE, was considered to be also important and worthy of study.

Teacher Identity, Agency and Positioning

Socio-cultural and situated learning theorists' posit that learning to teach happens through any one of four facets. They contend that the principal form of learning happens through participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 2003; Wenger, 1998). It may also occur however in relation to social ecology (Bronfenbrenner, 1999; Erickson, 2004), through communication about the subject matter (Lerman, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978; 1986) and through a process of identity development (Martin, 2000; McAdams and Bowman, 2001; Sfard & Prusak, 2005; and Walshaw, 2005). The agency development conception allows one to use terms, like learning, identity, identification, subject position and positioning, interchangeably (Gee, 2001).

Socio-cultural theory also posits that whether identity is conceptualized as a set of beliefs about oneself (Martin, 2005), as a subject-position in relation to other people within a practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), or as a narrative told about oneself (Sfard & Prusak, 2005), one's identity changes within the context of practice as one becomes adept at the practice, that is, as a result of one's learning (Esmonde, 2009). Learning, or positioning, or identity development therefore happens all the time and in all contexts, through markers such as the language we speak, the way we dress, whom we interact with and how, and so on (Holland, Lachiotte, Skinner & Cain, 2001).

Though these constructs are different labels that essentially refers to the same idea, their connotation may be different. For example, whereas identity may carry the connotation of an enduring, static and centralized self, positioning point to ways in which one does not have one identity, but rather inhabits or invokes multiple identities or identifications. These identities may shift in salience and in meaning as one move from one context to the next (Esmonde, 2009).

However, just because ones identity, identification or subject-position, are constructed in the moment, and are therefore not predictable, does not mean that individuals have perfect freedom to construct their identities or subject-positions any way they choose. Instead, practices, or how the teachers go about selecting strategies when preparing students for the Eleven-plus Exams, are built around "a socially accepted association among ways of using language, of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and acting" (Gee, 2000, p. 103). Helms (1998) capture this image of the content and structure (Kearney, 1984) of one's subjected-positioning, or identity, in her visual model of identity shown overleaf (Figure 1).

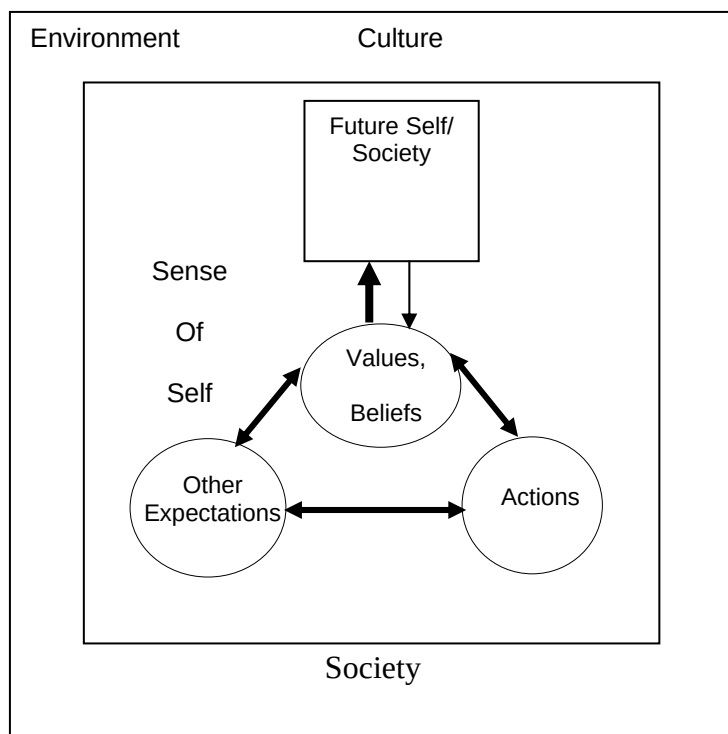


Figure 1: Visual Model of Identity (Gee, 2000)

It is important to note that the teacher's classroom learning is not so much about the individual's acquisition of bytes of knowledge, but is learning how to (i) behave appropriately in the context of the pressures to raise scores on the high-stakes examination; (ii) to read the context of the lesson and select the appropriate teaching strategy; (iii) use the right language; and (iv) to behave in ways so as to be perceived as a good teacher (Solomon, 1998; Black, 2004). Adopting these modes of belonging, or ways of being, may be easier for some teachers than for others. For example, in schools where there is a high level of alignment to the pressures to raise test scores, a teacher whose view is to resist this pressure may find adopting to the valued discourse of the school difficult, but may still teach in ways which are consistent with the cultural expectations of the school. The processes through which these modes of belonging, forms of membership, and levels of meaning occur are captured well in Wenger's model of identity formation shown overleaf (Figure 2).

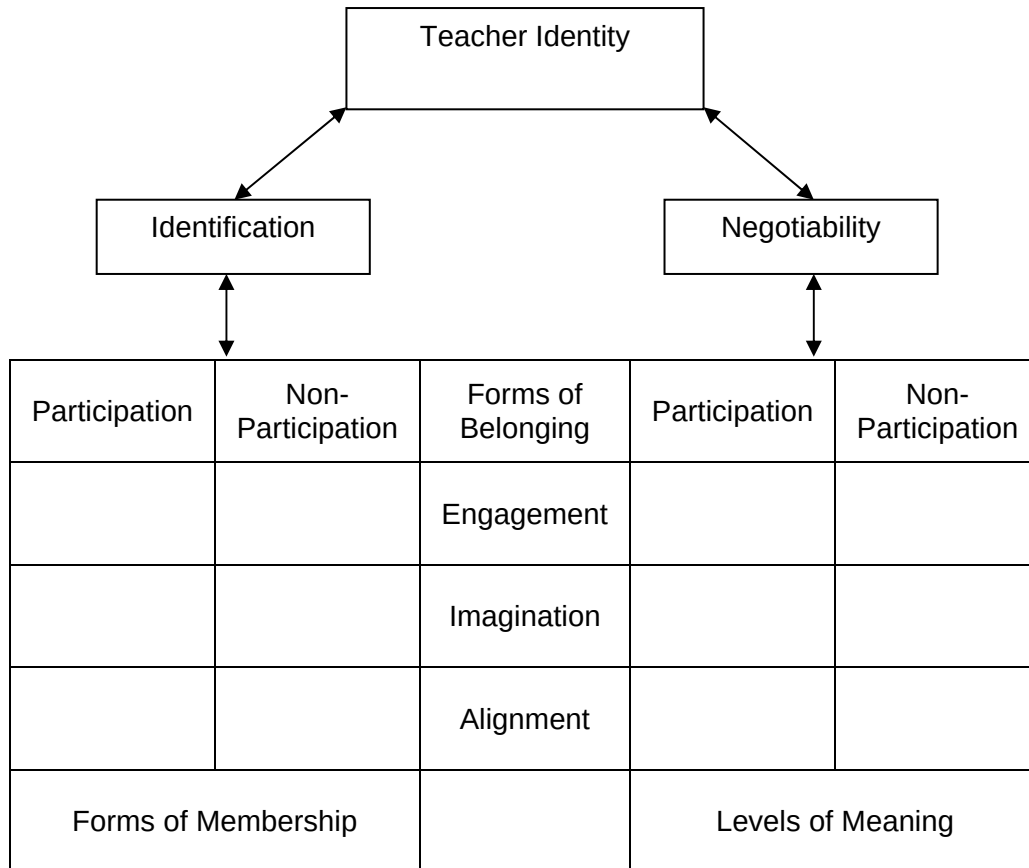


Figure 2: Model of Identity Formation (Wenger, 1998)

These frameworks will be used to explain why some teachers position certain strategies over others when preparing students to write high-stakes tests.

Research Questions

In carrying out this project, both the data collection, and the case and variable analyses were guided by the following overarching research question: How does teachers' professional identity help to position the high-stakes tests preparation strategies they select to use in their classrooms? In operationalizing this research question the following four sub-questions were generated:

1. How do teachers' views of teaching and learning influence the strategies they select to prepare students to sit the Eleven-Plus (PSE) Exams?
2. How do what teachers know, believe and value about the Eleven-Plus Exams (PSE) influences the teaching strategies they select when preparing students to sit the exams?
3. How does the school community influence the strategies teachers select in preparing student to sit the high-stakes Eleven-Plus Exams?
4. How do the perceived expectations of significant others (inside and outside the school) to raise test scores on the Eleven-Plus Exams influence teachers choice of strategies when preparing students to write this exam?

Methodology

The study involved seven participants from four school sites. A typical case sampling technique was used to select the case sites whereby one typical primary school from the North, South, East and West of the country were purposively selected. The four schools selected were then ranked on the basis of their overall performance on the PSE and labeled using their location and ranking. These rankings are as follows: E1 (school in the East has highest ranking); N2 (school in the North has second highest ranking); S3 (school in the South with the third highest ranking and W4 (school in the West has fourth highest ranking).

In selecting the seven actors a convenient sampling technique was employed. Two actors were chosen from each of the schools in the North and South. One of the actors from each of these schools was a teaching principal. The two actors from the school in the East were senior teachers, and so was the sole teacher from the school in the Western Education District. All actors were grade-six teachers and were identified by their school location and ranking. For example, N2T was used to identify a teacher from the school in the Northern Education School District.

The design for the study was a qualitative multi-site case study (four sites) design. Each of the school sites constituted a case. The actors in each school context sampled were interviewed together and each interview was carried out on a separate day. Each interview ran for about two hours. Interviews were audio-taped and tapes transcribed. To commence the analysis, a start list of thirty eight codes was generated mostly from the literature and the integrated socio-cultural conceptual framework. Following coding of the transcribed texts, a series of matrices were developed. This started with the partially-ordered meta-matrix (Miles & Huberman, 2002). The first level of analysis used the matrices to generate themes. Variable and case themes were then compared and screened for redundancies. Finally, themes were clustered based on the domain or subject of the themes, namely themes about the teaching strategies selected to deliver the PSE curriculum. This process generated eight themes – power, assessment literacy, reflexive praxis, drills, extra-lessons, unpreparedness, anxiety and alienation. Finally these were bundled under three clusters, namely strategies involving: reflexive praxis, drills and supplementary tutoring.

Findings and Discussion

This section presents and discusses the major findings of the study. It is organized around significant statements the teachers made in response to the overarching question: How do teachers' professional identity help to position the high-stakes test preparation strategies they select to use in their classrooms when preparing students to write the Eleven-Plus (CEE, PSE) examinations? The findings were organized around the overarching research question and discussed in the context of the relevant literature associated with the socio-cultural theory's postulates on teacher professional identity (Gee, 2001; Helms, 1998) and its formation (Esmonde, 2009; Wenger, 1998).

The representational themes from the findings, in part, reflect the interminable dialectic, or what Wenger (1998) calls the negotiability, occurring between the positioning of the grade-six teacher's identity and the demands of the high-stakes examination system, in the context of his/her local school culture. In response to the question: how do the teachers' view of teaching and learning influence the strategies they select to prepare students to sit the Eleven-plus Exams?, the teachers identified three strategies viz. drill-and-practice, supplementary tutoring and reflexive practice, but none of the teachers showed exclusive commitment to any one of the

three strategies. Instead, the teachers from all four sites discussed their use, in quite an integrated manner, claiming that both school context and their professional views of teaching had the most influence in determining which of the three strategies they would select.

They also indicated that the struggles between the forces of the culture of the school, and the external high-stakes testing arenas (Bourdieu, 1993), were also significant in determining which combination of the three strategies they chose to deliver the Eleven-plus curriculum. The themes and clusters, together with the supporting texts from the interviews with the actors are presented in Table1. A brief description of the analysis of the data excerpt follows.

How Identity Shapes Practice: Drills, Supplementary Tutoring, Reflexive Praxis

One of the potential dangers of the latent function (Merton, 1968b) of a large scale high-stakes testing system without formal accountability structures in place, is that such an assessment system can transform the cultural spaces of schools from places where meaningful student learning occurs, to one where there is a mad rush for students to do well on these high-stakes exams. The latter can be so, sometimes, at the expense of meaningful learning (Foodun, 1992). In this regard, the grade-six teachers can at times find themselves functioning as gate-keepers whereby they are solely responsible for maintaining the balance between teaching for meaningful learning and teaching to the test. In this way they can either embellish the type of cultural transformation that tends to make elementary schooling more dysfunctional, as a result of the mad rush to get a few students among the “top” thirty (30) performers; or they can resist such tendencies by positioning their test preparation strategies in ways that enhances their reflexive pedagogic praxis (Rex & Nelson, 2004). Whether they embellish or resist such tendencies is, in part, a function of their professional identities, that is, what they know, believe and value about high-stakes testing, their perceptions of what significant others expect of them in their preparation of students to sit this high-stakes examination, and their long-term commitment to the teaching profession in such an examination environment.

As the results in Table 1 show all the teachers who participated in this study do both the embellishment and resistance to such tendencies, with some teachers favoring the drill-and-practice strategy over the reflexive praxis strategy, while others selected these strategies in the reverse order depending on their personal views of the teaching act, that is, their teacher identity. The supplementary tutoring strategy, however, was selected by all the teachers in the sample with more or less the same consistency. This suggests that the salience of the drill-and-practice or the reflexive praxis strategies as teacher-choice were better qualitative indicators of type of identity formation teachers had developed than the ubiquitous supplementary tutoring strategy.

Table 1:

Strategies Teachers Use When Preparing Students for the PSE High-stakes Examinations

Talk/Text	Interpretation: Representational Themes
E1T: “When we get back the results we analyze it immediately. I especially focus on the math results since that was one of our weakest subjects. I went to the master sheet since that would give you a break- down of where they went wrong on the problem solving paper and made notes of what I needed to do for next year, in terms of different methods of teaching and how much more time I needed to spend on a topic”.	REFLEXIVE PRAXIS Some teachers use the high-stakes test results to position how they prepare students by improving their praxis.
N2T: “Each year we review our PSE results and use that review to help us set our personal goals and plan for the next year’s cycle. First of all we want to remain at least as competitive as we were the previous year and to improve on that. The focus is on gradual sustainable improvement in students’ performance on the test. For us having one or two students pass in the top ten is not as important as having all our students improve on their test performance each year regardless of their disability. So we use the test results mainly to show us the weak areas that need more strengthening. I have my paper right here and it’s showing us that next year we need to work on problem solving more, again. Yes, problem solving, because our children did excellent in English”.	REFLEXIVE PRAXIS Teachers use the high-stakes test results to position how they prepare students by improving their praxis.
S3T: “I am one of those teachers who believe that the real problem with problem solving is that in a lot of cases the students cannot comprehend from the written text what the problem is. So we did a whole lot of comprehension exercises with our Standard VI class. I had them write stories, read stories. I had them answer questions from stories. I did a whole lot of drills in extra-classes in the evenings, and on Saturdays, in order for them to come up with ideas. In addition, I brought in a math expert from the community to provide extra help to us in addressing this math problem”.	DRILL-AND-PRACTICE Teachers use the high-stakes test results to position how they prepare students to take the test. The strategy some teachers frequently select is Extra-lessons to do more ‘drill-and-practice’ with students.
N2T: “Despite our efforts at ‘holistic’ education, because this is an inclusive education school where we do social promotion. The special needs children arrive at grade-six sometimes less prepared than the regular children and so we try to give them as much individual help as we can. To catch up, they have to participate in extra-lessons, and even though some of them complain of us pressuring them, they see that the preparation strategy has some advantages. Many of the schools in the Orange Walk education district are complaining about having to do extra-classes with their students in their grade-six classes, even though they have no special needs children. I would say that generally students are not as prepared as they should be when they begin grade-six and the general response to deal with this has been extra-lessons, outside of regular school time”.	EXTRA LESSONS Many students arrive at grade-six less prepared than they should be and have to do ‘Extra-lessons’ (supplementary tutoring) outside of regular school hours to catch up. This was a common strategy used by all the teachers with the same level of consistency.

As the data examples in Table 1 show, improving praxis tends to be the preferred positioning strategy for test preparation by some teachers. Though the examples [reflexive praxis] are of teachers operating in the high and medium level performing schools (E1 & N2) respectively, this strategy choice is not limited only to those teachers operating in the high-end schools. It does occur among the teachers in the sample working at the two low performing schools (S3 & W4) also, but the codes for this theme from their interview text were much fewer. From the analysis of the transcripts of the interviews, the teachers in the two underperforming schools (S3 & W4) seem to prefer the ‘drill-and-practice’ test preparation strategy. The quote from S3T and W4T underscores this point:

I did a whole lot of drills in extra-classes in the evenings and on Saturdays, in order for them to come up with ideas [S3T].

W4T: *“Yes I do use the results of the PSE to make decisions and have for years been trying to get administration to take a whole school approach with this but have not been successful to get them to buy in. For example, I always have a chat with them in administration on our weaknesses on the exam. I always tell them that the main weaknesses of our school are in the math and writing areas... with math I see that it’s basically problem solving because of the same reason that students have challenges in the writing area: many of them can’t read when they arrive at standard six!”*

According to Freire (1987) praxis, or what Bourdieu (1967) has labeled habitus, is a form of practice or actions that are the outcome of the dialectical relationship between structure and agency. Structure in this context refers to the patterned interactions and persistent relationships between the teacher, the local school community and the high-stakes examination system. Agency is actions that are perpetuated by actors, in this case, teachers. When teachers function as agents, “whatever action that occurs would not have occurred, in that way, were it not for the fact that [the teacher] intervened and took the action in question” (Freire, 1987, p. 269). Praxis, or habitus, as a form of teacher positioning is therefore not objectively determined, nor is it the product of free will (Bourdieu, 1993).

Praxis can be thought of as a type of practice grounded in a set of ideas a teacher has developed through socialization in the field of schooling about how the world of educating children works, what is to be valued in that world, what one’s place in that world is, and what didactic and pedagogical approaches are the correct or proper ones. In this context, praxis translates notions of agency and power into strategies useful for test preparation more so for teachers in the high-end schools, while at the same time challenging the constraints and inequities of the high-stakes examination system as the teacher at the high end E1 school suggest below:

E1T: “I don’t think the PSE hold a lot of benefits. Frankly, no, because when the results are released I have never seen a parent or guardian who fully understands what the results say about our system of schooling beyond the top thirty (30) students who they see as representing the top thirty schools. They never seem to understand that that’s a few or one student from a school and so the big picture of schooling in Belize is lost. The whole population of primary school students and our 300 plus primary schools are judged solely by the top 30 spaces on the PSE exam, which to me does not make sense”.

In other words, reflexive praxis as a form of positioning emphasizes the role of the individual teacher. It allows him/her to understand and create his/her own solutions to the problems the students face with the high-stakes test. This mode of operation is free from the

mediation, or the definition of good practice, by the school or other educational agencies. It is a standard that the individual teacher sets and consistently maintains as part of his/her personal accountability system.

‘Drill-and-practice’, on the other hand, whereby students experience the same phenomenon repeatedly as in an algorithm, is a much more mechanical and disempowering form of action when utilized as a test-preparation strategy, and appears to be a the dominant of positioning by teachers with a certain professional identity type. Doing “a whole lot of drills in extra-classes in the evenings and on Saturdays [S3T]”, seems a limited but non-transformative way to get students “to come up with [novel] ideas” to solve word problems in Mathematics. Furthermore, this form of positioning seems to give priority to rote learning and to reinforce a type of action that does not have the potential to help students solve the type of contradictions they face in high-stakes testing. This is so especially in Mathematics among the teachers operating in the low-end schools or those with certain beliefs about teaching and learning, and may instead be contributing further to the alienation of students from the education system through what Sarason (1983) calls learned helplessness.

Additionally, current literature on problem solving suggests that students’ dependence on algorithms impedes as oppose to help their problem solving processes, in that the student who relies heavily on using algorithms in most cases lack deep conceptual understanding (Lorenzo, 2005). Algorithmic approach to problem solving has been shown to limit their abilities to adopt and apply their previous knowledge to unfamiliar problems (Bodner, 2003). As far back as 1984, Frazer and Sleet had provided empirical evidence of this in their study on students’ abilities to solve science problems, whose solutions required more than one step to solve. These researchers and others since then, for example Lorenzo (2005) and Gunderson (2011), determined that some students were able to successfully solve the sub-problems at individual stages but could not manage to solve the complete problem when it was presented to them as a whole. They ascribed this to the learners’ inability to plan a solution to the problem. Hence, drill-and-practice as a stand-alone strategy, will not “get students to come up with novel ideas” to solve word problems in Mathematics, in the way S3T is endeavoring to do.

Furthermore, the way students employ their problem solving strategies may detract from their ability to solve complex problems. The two tools most commonly employed by students during problem solving are the algorithms, we discussed above, and heuristics (Bodner, 1987; Frank, Baker & Herron, 1987; Gunderson, 2011). Algorithms as we pointed out are straight forward procedures that students select, almost automatically as a result of drills in their use, and apply to produce an answer. For example, in the context of the high-stakes PSE test, an algorithmic unit analysis may be used to solve multi-steps profit-and-loss problems. The use of algorithmic or drill-and-practice methods helps to provide learners with problem solving practice and gives them a repertoire of tools that can be used with heuristic type problem solving.

Heuristics are general procedures that may or may not lead students to a solution to the problem. When a learner is faced with a problem for which there is no apparent solution or adaptable algorithm, they are forced to develop and test a new model to arrive at a solution. In preparing students for the high-stakes test, instead of focusing on drills or algorithms only, teachers’ foci should have been on increasing students’ awareness to using heuristics in their problem solving process.

The third and final strategy that the teachers in this sample used to help students overcome some the barriers of the high-stakes Eleven-plus (CEE, PSE) Exams is supplementary tutoring. As the data examples in Table 1 show, generally, students are not as prepared as they

should be when they begin grade-six. This unpreparedness also helps to determine what teaching strategies will be deployed in test preparation. The most common teaching strategy adopted by the sample of teachers who participated in this study was extra lessons. Extra lessons, or supplementary tutoring, refer to additional classes after school and on Saturdays, usually provided by the grade-six teacher “to help the students to catch up”.

The extensive supplementary tutoring literature (Barrow and Lochan, 2011; Bray, 2006) does not cite the inadequate preparation in pre-extra lessons classes as one of the reasons why students access supplementary tutoring or the shadow education system of a country (Stevenson & Baker, 1994). This may also account for why in the Anglophone Caribbean region the extra-lessons tutors are almost always the grade-six teacher, whereas at the secondary level the extra-lessons tutor is almost always some other teacher than the mainstream teacher. Furthermore, it may also help to explain why supplementary tutors do not, at this level, insist on collecting a fee for their services from those students who may not be able to afford it, since the act of providing this service is an expression of teachers’ own personal accountability in response to high-stakes testing (Rex & Nelson, 2004).

How the student responds to the pressures of an expanded school day is in part related to how the teacher presents the option to the student. When students are involved meaningfully in the negotiation process they end up “[seeing] that the preparation strategy [extra-lessons] has some advantages [N2T]”. When they are not as involved in this negotiation process, as was the case at W4 where the teacher admitted that,

“So for me, it’s a lot more like pressuring them and stressing them out. Put my boot on their corns, so to speak” [W4T],

students become not only more anxious about spending more time at school doing school work, time which they would have normally spent enjoying their childhood, but also become more ambivalent about, and more alienated from the high-stakes test itself, as the quote from a student that W2T recalls below suggests:

“Miss, why do we have to take the PSE? Why do we have to do all this meaningless work? ... I am tired”. [W4T]

The propensity and ability to negotiate meaning with students is a dimension of teacher’s identity (Wenger, 1998). According to Wenger the economy of meaning, or negotiability, is a competence teachers develop best in schools that are configured as learning communities. Learning communities are school communities that are pregnant with reflective practitioner teachers at various levels of competence to negotiate the economy of meaning of schooling. Wenger describes such a community using the metaphor of the onion where the concentric layers represent community members at various levels of development of the economy of meaning with regards to schooling with novice teachers at the periphery and master teachers at the centre. The majority of teachers are in the middle, most of whom are mentored by the master teachers as they grow towards the center to become master teachers themselves.

A community of learners is a community where the teachers reflect critically on all aspects of schooling, including on the testing environment in which the school operates. They are generally characterized by their independent thoughts on things like assessment and would align themselves with high-stakes testing only if they feel like it’s serving the greater purpose of the holistic education of the child. It is a unique and valued type of teacher identity and teachers who embrace it mostly select the reflective praxis strategy not only when preparing students to sit high-stakes examinations (e.g. E1T and N2T in this study), but in preparing students for life and the “world of work” (Wenger, 1998, p.24).

Implications and Conclusions

Positioning test preparation strategies while working with students about to write high-stakes examinations can generate some intended and unintended consequences for both teachers and students. An example of the latter is the case of the students at the low performing primary school in Western Belize, W4. As a result of the teaching strategy chosen by the teacher, drill-and-practice and supplementary tutoring, the students ended up questioning the very purposes of the test for which the strategy was selected to better prepare them for: “Miss, why do we have to take the PSE? Why do we have to do all this meaningless work?” [W4T].

It is therefore important to inform teachers of some of the unanticipated consequences of the strategies they position when preparing students for high-stakes tests and how these are affecting the children in their care in unintentional ways. Some of these unanticipated consequences include: test anxiety, learned helplessness and in some cases even alienation from the schooling system.

In summary, utilizing the integrated socio-cultural conceptual framework as our analytic lens, the data examples from the four sites brought light to three core teaching strategies that are engendered by teachers who function in a high-stakes testing learning-environment, which lacks a test-accountability system. These strategies include: reflexive praxis, drill-and-practice, and supplementary tutoring. The seven teachers who participated in this study took stances in each of these dimensions as they responded to the overarching research question: how does teachers’ professional identity help to position the test preparation strategies they select to use in their classroom? A qualitative analysis of their responses to this question revealed their preference for these three teaching strategies and the consequences these choices had for the teachers and the students writing the high-stakes test. Some of the implications this has for high-stakes testing can consequently be inferred.

The first is that high-stakes testing assumes a level of pedagogical competence on the part of teachers preparing the students to sit the exam. In a high-stakes testing environment, for teachers whose pedagogical content knowledge is limited, this pedagogic limit can become a hazard that can contribute to the level of risks to which the students are exposed. For example, this level of risk can be moderate, or even high, for students if the strategies in the teachers’ repertoire are limited to just drill-and-practice and supplementary tutoring; since these strategies in combination have been shown to raise certain students’ levels of anxiety towards the high-stakes test. In extreme cases this can contribute to students’ alienation from the education system. Prior knowledge of the teacher’s level of pedagogical competence is therefore important. In cases where significant gaps exist, teachers must be provided with training opportunities to fill this breach. Such professional development must include extensive practice in the use of reflexive pedagogical praxis as a source of personal knowledge development about teaching and learning. In so doing we can lower the risks to which students are exposed, when operating in high-stakes testing environments that lacks a test-accountability framework.

Most importantly, high-stakes testing systems assume that the teachers preparing students to write the exams have acquired a certain level of agency through which they can decide, on their own, on which of the teaching strategies is most appropriate to select depending on the context. The study showed that in many cases, this assumed level of agency on the part of the teachers preparing the students for this high-stakes test was absent.

Agency is, in part, a belief system that teachers hold. It is a belief system that is predicated on the notion of learning whereby students should be allowed to work together to discover knowledge and apply their knowledge as they solve real world problems (Loepp, 1999).

That is, teachers with a high level of agency have adapted the view that learning – individually as well as in collaboration – takes place through the activity of the learner in solving real world problems and not through this over-emphasis on algorithms alone. More of our teachers who are preparing students to write high-stakes examinations must shift their beliefs systems from what they are currently, which is one that is primarily didactic in nature (Beijaard, Meijer & Verloop, 2004). In this study this view is best illustrated by teacher S3T in his efforts at teaching creative thinking to his students:

“I did a whole lot of drills in extra classes in the evenings in order for them to come up with novel ideas” [S3T].

If teachers are to be more helpful to students in overcoming some of the barriers to high-stakes testing, they need to shift their beliefs system to one that has a foundation in constructivism. Foras Nespor (1987) and Pajares (1994) have emphasized, if teachers have beliefs that are constraining their practice, efforts must be made to get them to deconstruct such beliefs with the aim of replacing them with more appropriate ones; despite the many challenges of doing so.

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