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The Impact of High-Stakes Testing: The Experiences of Educators, Students, and Parents, of Trinidad and Tobago

by

Victoria Maria Cunningham

Ed D Educational Doctorate

A Dissertation Submitted to the University of Sheffield, UK in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the award of Degree

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Dedication

To the loving memory of my dear mother Lena Buchun-Julien, my father George Julien, and my dearest sister Louisa Buchun for their love, care, and unwavering support. Their words of wisdom will live on within my heart and soul. When challenges appeared, stumbling was never in Mother's vocabulary. Epitomizing the words of peace, contentment, and resilience, Mother's words "don't mind that, when you do 'good' to others, you do 'good' to yourself," kept me humble, even now. And father, tall and handsome, my protective and faithful knight in shining armour would ask "what do you need?" My dear sister, my champion and cheerleader, would say to me "it's not if we can, but it's how we can."

You all have shaped my life in ways I will treasure forever……..…….... Until we meet again!

Acknowledgments

I do wish to acknowledge my previous supervisor Pat Sikes whose advice, patience, and astuteness were instrumental in my academic development and the success of this thesis. This work would not have been possible without her input.

I would like also to recognize my supervisor Themesa Neckles who took the baton from Pat, and with her friendly guidance and assistance helped me finish the race successfully with much pride and joy.

Acknowledgments must be extended to my dear friend Gwendolyn Ahyoung for the invaluable assistance she brought to this study with her forty-two years of experience at the primary school level. Her interrogating questions and stimulating conversations contributed tremendously to this study. She always knew how to get my brain started with her “think deep” expressions.

I say thank you, and may God’s blessings shine upon you all!

Abstract

Students completing primary schooling in Trinidad and Tobago must pass the high-stakes Secondary Entrance Assessment (SEA) exam to be promoted. Although there are sufficient schools to accommodate students, the competition for high scores is equated and rewarded with placements into a few elite secondary schools. Failure to get a placement in a prestigious school can have a negative social, psychological, and emotional impact on students. This research describes and interprets the experiences of thirteen participants, and finds out their inherent beliefs and values and the ways their experiences impact their lives. Using a qualitative methodological design with unstructured and semi-structured in-depth interviews, data was collected from a purposive sample of 13 participants inclusive of primary school principals, teachers, students, and parents. Documentary analysis of pre-SEA students' writings was also used to generate data. Abraham Maslow's and Carl Roger's humanistic theory of psychology and personality development, and Paulo Freire's and Henry Giroux's critical pedagogy helped me to make sense of the collected data. A critical theoretical approach was taken using thematic analysis to arrive at my findings that are presented thematically. Findings revealed experiences of fear, academic pressure, stress and test anxiety, negative feelings, and suicidal ideation. Participants had strong educational expectations, valued extra-lesson, believed in the prestige school ideology, and believed in educational inequity. Self-recrimination, play deprivation, diminished self-worth, approval-seeking, validation behaviour, a cycle of academic indoctrination, and a helicopter parenting style, were some of the ways participants were impacted. This research study is part of a growing body of knowledge and will contribute to future research on the assessment practices and behaviours that are needed to promote students' well-being rather than focus on judging the students' worth.

KEYWORDS: SEA Exam; High-stakes Testing; In-depth Interviewing; Experiences; Impact; Qualitative research; Trinidad and Tobago

Chapter 1: Introduction and Background to the Study

Introduction

The system of selecting students at the end of primary schooling for placement into secondary schools in Trinidad and Tobago rests on performance at the Secondary Entrance Assessment (SEA) exam. This exam is administered yearly to students at the end of their primary schooling. The SEA exam is a high-stakes exam where students compete to get the highest scores possible because high scores are a major determining factor for selection and placement into elite secondary schools in the country. According to Barrow and Lochan (2012), which was around the time I began this research, approximately 25 percent of over 17,000 students sitting the SEA exam are accepted into elite schools yearly. This approximation suggests that the remaining 75 percent of candidates, along with their parents and teachers are likely to be disenchanted by a perceived lack of success. Although the number of students sitting the exam has risen to over 19,000 in 2021 (McKenzie, 2021), the yearly phenomenon remains with only a small percentage of students being successfully placed at prestigious secondary schools. This perceived lack of success by the majority of students who did not successfully pass for an elite school can hinder the Ministry of Education's (MOE) efforts to help students to achieve their personal goals and fulfill their "obligations to society" as outlined in the Ministry of Education Action Plan (MOE Action Plan, 2007 p. 17). As such, a national cry by citizens is echoed in the media, yearly, for the abolishment of the exam as controversies surrounding issues of fairness, equity, justice, and emotional and psychological harm to students, are concerns raised in the public domain.

In 2014, Loubon wrote in the Trinidad Express newspaper that the Minister of Education at that time was "welcoming suggestions to do away with the dreadful Secondary Entrance Assessment (SEA) examination" (Loubon, 2014 p. 1). The article which was published on the 9th of March prompted citizens to share their views on the issue. The Newsday newspaper provided an open invitation, via their website, for members of the public to say whether they agreed or disagreed with the Education Minister's view. They subsequently reported that 53% of respondents agreed with the education minister to "support a move to do away with the SEA exam" while 47% said they would not (Newsday Online "Quick Vote", March 2014 p.1). Such views are spoken of and shared yearly. With the exam intact, issues remain the same and the conversation continues.

Adding to this conversation, the President of the National Primary Schools Principal's Association (NPSPA) commented that the "SEA is a very onerous examination placed on 11-year-old pupils" and it puts "a lot of stress on teachers, educators, parents, and pupils" (Wayow, 2014 p.1). The President further argued that the academic focus of the exam is narrowed to cognitive ability, and "students of varying abilities are disadvantaged by the examination" (Wayow, 2014 p.1). He added that since the "SEA is an assessment designed for placement of pupils" it does not assess their "true potential" (Wayow, 2014 p. 1). When asked about the idea to remove SEA, the President of the teacher's Union the Trinidad and Tobago Unified Teachers' Association (TTUTA) Union stated that the Union agrees with the move to remove the SEA exam in principle, but felt, caution will be necessary to ensure that any replacement assessment ought to be valid and reliable (Loubon, 2014 p. 8). As such, some believe that it is time for the SEA exam to be done away with, due to the excess stress before and after the exam on children, parents, teachers, and officials at the Education ministry.

Also associated with the conversation about the SEA exam is the apparent suicide of 13-year-old Devindra Boodhoo who took his own life on the eve of his SEA exam in 2014 (Bruzual & Wayow, 2014). News of this tragedy engaged media reports throughout the islands on the morning of the exam and ignited a public debate about the value of the SEA exam. Many blame the exam for the painful tragedy. They gave voice to their feelings and opinions publicly, using various forms of media outlets. The President of the National Parent Teachers Association felt that "the child must have been under a lot of pressure," but then wondered about the source from which the pressure came. The Newsday writer also questioned the source of the pressure asking, "pressure from whom? The exam or those around him?" (Ali, 2014 p. 15).

Listening to the sentiments of interested national as they voice their opinions publicly on national news media about the value of the SEA, some felt that the exam should be abolished because too much pressure is placed on children, parents, and their teachers to get their students to pass for prestigious schools. In contrast, other interested persons felt that the exam should remain, offering several reasons. Some believe that abolishing the exam will open the doors for showing favouritism, suggesting that some students will be denied the fair opportunity to pass for a prestigious school of their choice. Others who felt that the SEA exam was needed offered several reasons. They said that the exam could be used as a "measuring stick," "a measuring tool for placement," "a tool to test students' skills and

competencies," "as a way of preparing the minds of children for future examinations," "as good training for our youths," as "another life lesson" but more so because "there is no other alternative" (Trinidad Express, 2014 p. 11, 15). The mixed views held by nationals and their generous outpouring of an array of feelings, positions, fears, concerns, cautions, and recommendations for the high-stakes SEA exam, suggest a common and collective uneasiness among those who shared their views for and against the exam. As such, I am interested in learning about the impact the high-stakes SEA exam has had on students, parents, and educators associated with the exam in Trinidad and Tobago.

Structure of the Thesis

My thesis is divided into several sections, the front matter, six chapters, my reference listing, and my appendices. The front section begins with my expressions of gratitude to those who supported and championed the work in my dedication and acknowledgment pages, followed by an abstract presenting a brief overview of the thesis contents.

The first of my six chapters present the introduction and background to the study topic. Chapter one is further divided into smaller unit sections to include the problem statement, my research questions, and the study's purpose, significance, theoretical framework, assumptions, limitations, delimitations, and scope of my study. My positionality statement as well as a few significant terms used in this thesis are defined.

The second chapter presents a review and evaluation of the previous research literature related to my research topic. Chapter three, my methodological chapter, explains the process I engaged in to get answers to my research questions. In this chapter, I present a rationale for choosing a qualitative research design. I discuss also the methods of data collection, my sampling strategies, my ethical considerations, how I established trustworthiness, my limitations and challenges in doing research in small island states, and a description of how I analysed my data.

Chapter four discusses my data analysis procedures as well as a rationale for my research questions. In this chapter, all my findings from data analysis are presented along with codes and excerpts generated for each data set to support my findings. Thematic maps

are also presented for discussion in chapter five. Chapter six summarises my research findings and my conclusions, followed by appropriate recommendations.

The Background of the Study

The Secondary Entrance Assessment exam is a government exam that is commonly known by its acronym SEA. It is part of the admissions process for all public secondary schools in Trinidad and Tobago. The SEA is an exit exam administered to standard 5 students with an age range of 11 to 13 at the end of primary schooling which students must pass to obtain a place in a secondary school in Trinidad and Tobago (UNESCO, IBE, 2012). The SEA is considered to be an exam with high stakes because students' scores derived from the exam are used for selection and placement into prestigious secondary schools and colleges in the country. High-Stakes Testing (HST) refers to the use of tests to make critical decisions about students, teachers, and schools by measuring "student achievement and school effectiveness mainly by standardized test scores" (Thompson & Harbaugh, 2012 p. 218). Nichols and Berliner (2008) describe HST as the practice of attaching important consequences to standardized test scores. The high-stakes SEA exam which was introduced in 2001 was previously known as the Common Entrance or Eleven Plus exam which was implemented in many countries within the Caribbean territory in the early 1960s (Leslie, 2003). Both exams served the same admission purpose into secondary school, however, they differed in form and format. Hence, in the Guardian of August 23rd, 2000, Leslie (2003) reported Senator Professor John Spence's statement that the common entrance exam has not been abolished, only its format has been changed. The common entrance exam was a multiple-choice format and tested a range of subjects inclusive of Mathematics, English, Social Studies, and Science (National Task Force on Education, 2003). When the common entrance exam was changed to the SEA, the multiple-choice format was removed and the only subjects tested were Language Arts, Mathematics, and Creative Writing. (GoRTT, 2021 Citizens ttconnect.gov.tt). The rationale for the format change was that students' written work would be more indicative of their level of competencies (GoRTT, 2021 Citizens ttconnect.gov.tt).

In the early history of schooling in Trinidad and Tobago, secondary schools and spaces were limited (De Lisle, 2012). As such, students had to compete to secure a secondary

school place in the College Exhibition Examination which was introduced in 1879 for students 12 years and under. Thus, when the Common Entrance exam was introduced in the early 1960s, it was accepted as an instrument of competition because it was preceded by the competitive and selective nature of the Colonial College Exhibition Examination, and secondary school spaces were still limited.

The Colonial College Exhibition Examination System

The College Exhibition examination attracted a school fee for a secondary school education, which no doubt served as a deterrent for those who could not afford the termly fee. The System also provided College Exhibition Awards to a small number of high-performing boys to go to Queens Royal College and St. Mary's College. The number of awards given, grew from 16 awards in 1941 to 100 annually by 1950 (De Lisle, 2012). The growth in yearly exhibition awards suggests that the demand for secondary school spaces far outweighed what the secondary schools could have accommodated at the time. Since gaining an exhibition award was seen as the only viable option for social and financial promotion of young nationals, especially for those who could not afford the fees, the inescapable reality for the role of the College Exhibition Examination was selection and competition.

According to Smith et al. (2008), the colonial government had placed a statute on the books earlier in 1945 to provide for universal primary education in Trinidad and Tobago, it was not until 1957, that at least 91% of the primary school-age children were receiving an education. With 91% of primary school children receiving a primary education by 1957, would suggest that more students would likely attain the level of readiness for secondary school education. However, these many students were faced with the obstacle of competition for a few scholarships for a few spaces in the few elite secondary schools on the island. Smith et al. (2008) added that the education system appeared to be distorted by the College Exhibition examination because it was "linked to the aspirations for upward mobility" (p. 223). They felt that the exam was not fair and discriminated against students, especially from rural areas in favour of those from urban areas. In commenting on the Trinidad and Tobago Education System in 1953, Smith et al. (2008) explained that the major aim of primary education was "the production of a few exceptionally trained children who can sit for the Exhibition Examination and secure admission to a 'classical' secondary school" (p. 224). Severe competition among primary school students ensued for the few scholarship places

provided by the colonial government in both government and government-assisted secondary schools. A meagre number of 178 successful pupils, out of 1,300 students sitting the exam in 1953, demonstrated the kind of competition that existed then (Smith et al., 2008). Further, there was just one government secondary school and nine denominational secondary schools in 1949. Even with an increase in schools by 1957 to two government secondary schools, 17 government-assisted, and 22 private secondary schools, secondary places were still limited and the competition persisted (Smith et al., 2008).

It is not surprising, therefore, that the early draft plan for education written after Trinidad and Tobago gained its independence from Great Britain in 1962, still placed a high degree of emphasis on the so-called "objective and scientific measurement" of students using the selection type exam as a method for selecting persons for secondary schools (Draft Plan, 1974 p. 83). Relatively few opportunities for secondary education still existed before1971 and the expectation that the 11-plus exam will be a "battle for survival" remained (Draft Plan, 1974 p. 83) despite the promise that "examinations within the education system should amount to no more than a means of assessing progress and reinforcing what has been taught" and "there would be no social pressure surrounding the tests themselves" (Draft Plan, 1974 p. 83).

Nonetheless, under the country's first Prime Minister, the Honourable Dr. Eric Williams, the Common Entrance Exam was introduced in the early 1960s post-independence. It was welcomed by many because it was seen as an opportunity, to not only earn a place at a secondary school but also as an opportunity for those who wanted a secondary school education but could not afford it; education was now free. Primary education up to age 12 was made compulsory and free in 1961 (George & Quamina-Aiyejina, 2003 Country Report). However, secondary school places still dwarfed the populace since only 20 percent of students sitting the common entrance exam were afforded a secondary education. As such, the purpose of selection and competition flourished with the Common Entrance exam.

The Common Entrance Examination in Trinidad and Tobago

The common entrance examination replaced the College Exhibition examination in 1961. The exam was made up of items from four subject areas, Mathematics, Science, Social Studies, and English with one writing exercise and the remainder were multiple-choice items

in subject areas, from which a single composite score was produced to show the students' performance. However, the multiple-choice testing format of the common entrance exam failed in its ability to determine students' level of competency (Leslie, 2003). Over several decades the exam was changed in name, format, and content and it was replaced by the Secondary Entrance Exam (SEA) in 2001. The change was made based on the recommendations of the 1998 Task Force which was set up to look at the removal of the common entrance exam (Trinidad & Tobago Task Force for the Removal of Common Entrance, 1998). Although the name and format of the exam were changed, the exam's role and function as a selection tool for placing students into secondary schools were retained by the Task Force, with little consideration given to rectifying the issues surrounding the impact the exam has had on citizens, with regards to the fairness of ability testing (De Lisle, 2012; De Lisle & Smith, 2004).

The Genesis of the Common Entrance Examination in the UK

The Common Entrance exam which was also referred to as the eleven plus exam because it was administered to children at age 11 years old and older, had its genesis early in the 20th century in the UK with the introduction of the Butler Act in 1944 (Coldron et al., 2009; Triggle & Williams, 2015). The Butler Education Act introduced the national state-funded secondary schooling using a tripartite structure of modern, technical, and grammar schools with the intent of making education available to all children with various levels of ability (Coldron et al., 2009). The tripartite system of education aimed to provide free compulsory education for all, through a highly selective school system (Blackburn & Jarman, 1992). Students were selected and divided into three groups that corresponded to the three types of schools (Coldron et al., 2009).

The tripartite system of education mapped out three different paths for 11-year-olds based on ability testing. As such, children were required to sit the 11-plus exam, which was an intelligence (IQ) test and assessment of English and Arithmetic skills (Triggle & Williams, 2015). Those with the higher academic ability which was determined by scoring in the upper quartile of a normal distribution curve went on to traditional grammar schools for education up until the age of 18, which led to a formal qualification and the possibility of entering higher education (Connelly et al., 2016; Coldron et al., 2009). Students scoring in the remaining quartiles were sent to the technical schools with the less able students being sent to

the secondary modern schools. Since technical schools were few in number, the academically able students who were considered to be better suited to receive a focused technical education or who opted out of the grammar school opportunity were placed in Technical schools (Coldron et al., 2009). The majority of the students were sent either to "a secondary modern school or a technical school where they were provided an education that was meant to train them for future employment." (Triggle & Williams, 2015 p. 344). The vast majority of students who failed the 11-plus in the early days of the tripartite system left school without any formal education (Scott & Hargreaves, 2015).

According to Scott and Hargreaves (2015 p. 4) "the use of IQ tests was widely accepted as a selective device among academics and writers of government reports, including, for example, the Spens Report (1938) and the Norwood Report (1943), both of which influenced the writing of the United Kingdom Education Act of 1944" also called the Butler Act, which was named after the Board of Education President at that time. The Butler Act was "of historic significance as, in principle, by providing free secondary education for all, it levelled the playing field and provided equality of opportunity to the population at large" (Triggle & Williams, 2015 p. 343). However, Triggle and Williams (2015) noted that although the Act did improve opportunities for those coming from working-class backgrounds, it did not then and now provide a level playing field for all because of the controversial and compulsory use of IQ tests and the theory of hereditary intelligence.

The Butler Act or 1944 Education Act incorporated the beliefs that IQ testing of children at age 11-plus could reliably predict who would succeed academically at a later time, and determined that children can be separated to be schooled differently, based on their performance at the exam (Scott & Hargreaves, 2015). The 11-plus exam which became an intelligence test comprised of "a set of IQ tests covering arithmetic, general reasoning and an essay on a prescribed topic" (Hart et al., 2012 p. 2). According to Mackintosh (1995), the 11-plus was used to cream off a small minority of students for grammar schools while the vast majority were labelled as failures. This engendered fierce competition for the few places at prestigious grammar schools which provided better opportunities for upward social mobility. In comparison, Hart et al. (2012), note that secondary modern school pupils experienced relatively poor educational opportunities, a phenomenon that has likely extended into the consciousness of the people in Trinidad and Tobago. One academic, renowned psychologist, and consultant who served on the committee to restructure the UK's educational system was Sir Cyril Burt whose work on the study of intelligence and his belief that there are "three

distinct types of minds that could be distinguished by the age of 11" was at the crux of the selective tripartite educational system and the 11-plus IQ testing exam (Burt, 1970 p. 17).

During the final years of the 1940s to the end of the 1960s, the three-tiered system offered the only form of state-funded secondary education in England and Wales with grammar schools peaking at just under 1300 to the end of the 1960s (Bolton, 2015; Morris & Perry, 2017). These elite grammar schools stressed an academic curriculum focused on literature, mathematics, and science, with old and new languages whereas the technical schools emphasized mechanical sciences and engineering (Hart et al., 2012). Alternatively, secondary modern schools concentrated on practical and basic subjects that included arithmetic, woodwork, metalwork, and domestic work (Hart et al., 2012).

According to Benn and Chitty (1996), during the 1960s the majority of public support for the tripartite system was collapsing due to concerns about the effectiveness and fairness of 11-plus exams and the selective education system. Widespread public dissatisfaction with the tripartite education system and the 11-plus exam stems from concerns over segregation, social justice, the soundness of judging aptitude at age 11, the notion of fixed and limited intelligence behind the administration of the test, the fairness and adequacy of the test, the adverse effects of selection on the primary school curriculum, its social divisiveness and disadvantages because it determines who should be prioritized for education while limiting parental choice (Stobart, 2008; Coe et al., 2008). Public dissatisfaction with the tripartite system in the 1960s, saw the 11-plus test as a crude and inconsistent approach to determining educational provision, thereby ushering in a new element of comprehensivisation (Chitty, 2007; Morris & Perry, 2017). Hence, the emergence of the comprehensive school system in the UK.

Intelligence Testing and the 11-Plus Exam in the UK

The use of intelligence testing by Cyril Burt was based on the premise that intelligence was hereditary and fixed when children are approximately eleven years (Plucker & Esping, 2014). This notion was promoted after his research on the study of intelligence with 53 pairs of twins separated at birth from data gathered between 1913 – 1932, when he was a research psychologist for the London educational system (Benham, n.d.; Rushton, 2002; Tredoux, 2015). He concluded that genetic factors determine 80% of intelligence and

constructed the notion of intelligence using the "idea of a fixed innate quality in human beings which can be measured and remains relatively stable throughout an individual's life" (Scott & Hargreaves, 2015 p. 3). As such, he proposed a testing program that was implemented in the UK (Plucker & Esping, 2014).

His hereditarian view that intelligence can be measured by an IQ test, not only influenced the selective education policy in England but also negatively influenced other hereditarian psychologists in the United States (Plucker & Esping, 2014). For example, Arthur Jenson of the University of California, a proponent of the idea, argued against educational programmes designed to address the lack of success in lower-class blacks and white children (Mackintosh, 1995). He claimed that they were useless, and should be discontinued since genetic factors determine 80% of intelligence; a theory that completely ignored the influence of other factors in the environment. Jenson who was also at the elevation of the civil rights movement in the US argued that blacks were genetically inferior to whites (Mackintosh, 1995).

Burt's promotion of a psychological IQ testing policy and practice, to determine intelligence formed the basis of education policy in England. His IQ testing and the 11-plus exam ignored the effects of environmental variables of deprivation on students' ability to concentrate in school, like poor nutrition, conditions of isolation, lack of medical care, illness, and physical defects in hearing, sight, and speech (Rushton, 2002). His position also showed little consideration of other sociological factors such as poverty, overcrowding, employment, and family size on students' poor school performance (Rushton, 2002). As such, IQ testing could not and did not produce a fair and true determination of intelligence when so many variables were ignored.

IQ testing, therefore, and the 11-plus exam which was designed to show the heritability of mental ability, and consequentially determine social mobility and occupational class distinctions, were questioned and discredited for their lack of objectivity and reliability because it was influenced by a misrepresentation of data (Kamin, 1974; Hearnshaw,1979; Beloff, 1980). For if the test determined intelligence, then coaching and practice ought not to have improved students' test scores, but since students' performances at the exam were enhanced by preparation, the "innate qualities of intelligence in human beings was shown to have undeniable social and constructed dimensions." (Scott & Hargreaves, 2015 p. 4).

After Burt died in 1971, his work came under scrutiny and it was discovered that he unethically manufactured much of his data and purposefully misled others about his research to pronounce his discriminatory ideas of intelligence that fed his prejudices for hereditability (Kamin, 1974). Kamin (1974) exposed Burt's research data as implausible and denounced his hereditarian position. Hearnshaw (1979), Burt's biographer confirmed that Burt was "guilty" of fraud. The Sunday Times exposed the matter when it published "Crucial Data was Faked by Eminent Psychologist" (Gillie, 1976). Doctor Oliver Gillie (1976) wrote that the most sensational charge of scientific fraud this century is being levelled against Sir Cyril Burt because leading scientists were convinced that Burt published false data and invented crucial facts to support his controversial theory that intelligence is inherited. Later, the British Psychological Society endorsed the guilty verdict of fraud (Beloff, 1980). Mackintosh (1995) concluded that it was "more probable than not that some of Burt's data existed only in his imagination, in other words, that he fabricated them" (p. 148). Although there were supporters who upheld Burt's view of hereditary intelligence and IQ testing (Jenson, 1972; Eysenck, 1969; Joynson, 1989;), posthumous fraud charges levelled against him in the UK, remain.

Cyril Burt's discredited theories of intelligence and corroborated charges of fraud supported a change in school structure with the reform of the tripartite school system and the compulsory sitting of the 11-plus IQ testing exam in most regions in the UK (Triggle, 2015). Comprehensive schools, which, were ushered in, did not select their student intake based on academic achievement or perceived ability. (Connelly et al. 2016). According to Morris and Perry (2017), the Labour government in 1965 and 1966 respectively produced policy documents to encourage a shift towards comprehensivisation causing a drop in grammar schools from just under 1300 to only 261 by the end of the 1970s. However, such a position was not mandatory causing many Local Education Authorities to retain some sort of selection (Crook, Power, & Whitty, 1999). However, successive governments replaced those circulars allowing Education Authorities to decide upon local arrangements for schooling removing any pressure to become comprehensive schools (Morris & Perry, 2017). According to Cullinane (2016) from a Sutton trust Research article on the Gaps in Grammar, places within the 164 grammar schools increased from 129,000 in 1997 to 167,000 in 2016 despite the 1998 legislation banning the establishment of new grammar schools and selective education. Coughlan (2016) reported in 2015 that of the 24,000 state schools in England, only 164 were Grammar schools. Nevertheless, the issue of selective schooling in the UK has remained a

controversial and debatable political and public agenda with persistent pleas for its reintroduction from a substantial minority of the population (Coughlan, 2016). Although the 11-plus test is no longer compulsory and was gradually phased out across most regions in the UK, it is still used as a selective tool by Grammar schools in the UK to identify children's academic ability and potential (Triggle, 2015).

In Trinidad and Tobago, the 11-plus SEA exam is still a compulsory exam that remains a prominent feature of the education system in Trinidad and Tobago. The competitive patterns of behaviour that existed back then with the college exhibition exam in Trinidad and Tobago and the 11 plus-exam in the UK, remained with the continuation of the 11-plus compulsory examination in Trinidad and Tobago. The common entrance exam, a forerunner to the SEA exam, and the SEA exam have maintained their historical role of selection and segregation of students by ability and aptitude, to allocate students, to prestigious secondary schools in Trinidad and Tobago.

The inherited significant features of the tripartite system of education from colonial rule continue even after the tripartite system was abolished by our colonial influencer. According to DeLisle (2012), significant features such as the use of the 11-plus exam to test students' IQ for entrance to elite schools; the creaming of the small minority of academically able students to attend prestigious schools; the competition among students countrywide to attend these schools; and the image of predictive success later in life is still practiced. These features were ever so present with the college exhibition exam which ended in 1961; the common entrance that followed and ended in 2000, and the SEA exam which started in 2001.

Many efforts were made by the Ministry of Education at reforming and restructuring the education system in Trinidad and Tobago to alleviate inequities and create a level playing field. The Draft Plan for Educational Development in Trinidad and Tobago for 1963-1983 aimed at developing the population (GORTT Draft Plan, 1968). The plan opened opportunities for students to succeed by extending free primary education to free secondary education. Junior Secondary and Senior Comprehensive schools were built all around the island, stocked, and staffed to increase students' access to secondary education (GORTT Draft Plan, 1974). Between the years 2003 and 2006, the two-cycle secondary education system was merged into one under the umbrella of secondary schooling by the gradual de-shifting of the junior secondary schools in Trinidad and Tobago. Primary and secondary schooling remains free of charge and has since been extended to the tertiary level through the

Government's Assistance for Tertiary Expenses (GATE) Programme in 2004, thereby allowing all nationals to excel, to achieve university degrees with financial assistance from the government. According to the Website of the Office of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago (July 2017), enrolment in tertiary level education increased from 8 percent in 2002 to 65 percent by 2015. Although nationals are benefitting from the increasing opportunities for upward social mobility with free education for all students up to the tertiary level, the "battle for survival" mindset associated with the SEA exam at 11-plus remains. It is even more glaring when primary schools are judged by how many students in their standard five classes pass for a prestigious secondary school. Schools and teachers are also judged by how many of their students score in the top 100 highest scores. Even though over 19,000 students yearly, sit for the SEA exam and move on to a wide variety of secondary schools with a wide range of career opportunities, the competitive nature still exists and is perpetuated by school personnel, SEA students, teachers, and their parents.

High scores from the SEA exam are equated with placements at elite secondary schools thus showing that very little has changed over the last half-century concerning persons' mindsets. Barrow and Lochan (2012) agreed that the culture of schooling in Trinidad and Tobago today is strongly influenced by the country's colonial history which promoted an elitist school culture, leaving an elitist legacy that is present in people's minds. Even though secondary schools today can offer "a wide set of opportunities for students to progress", the "hold of the top few secondary schools on the public imagination has not broken" since "the key to success is still perceived to be through these narrow gates" (Barrow & Lochan, 2012 p. 419). Hence, the competitive drive to win a place in an elitist school has resulted in much "anxiety produced in the population" and has seen educators participating in supplementary tutoring with a student participation rate of 88.2 percent (Barrow & Lochan, 2012 p. 419). Considering that "25 percent of students are in fact accepted" into elite schools out of an average of 17000 in the country (Barrow & Lochan, 2012p. 420) suggest to me that the remaining 75 percent of candidates with their parents and educators are likely to be disenchanted by their perceived lack of success which can undermine the MOE's promise to citizens to facilitate their achievement of personal goals and fulfill their obligations to society.

The Problem Statement

The Ministry of Education's (MOE) general objective for the education system is for the preparatory stage of schooling to serve as a solid foundation for students' social and emotional development (MOE, 1993). They propose that the early years of schooling are intended to "guarantee the kind of personal and social efficacy needed to sustain and improve the democratic way of life in Trinidad and Tobago" by ensuring that "all citizens, regardless of their gender, class, culture or ethnic origin have the ability to learn" and are "provided with the opportunity to develop that potential to the fullest" (UNESCO, 2010 p. 2). In this regard, the MOE policy paper 1993-2003 presented policy options and strategies to effectively address "identified deficiencies and projected challenges in the education system" (MOE, 2005 p. 15). One of the recommendations for enhancing the quality of education and student learning speaks to the "types of assessment tools and practices" used (MOE Policy Paper, 1993 p. 2). The policy paper which subsequently influenced the development of the strategic plan 2002-2006, identified a key priority that encourages the building of schools' "capacity for continuous assessment, testing and evaluation to support the curriculum goals, particularly at the primary level" (MOE Strategic Plan, 2002 p. 9). In adherence to the requirements to improve and assess students' learning by the international Education for All (EFA) policy, the MOE EFA Action Plan 2015 recommended the implementation of a Continuous Assessment Programme (CAP) from 2003 for all primary schools. CAP was designed to fulfill a continuous diagnostic testing function, which would identify students with difficulties for remedial support and enhance learning by informing the teaching and learning process (MOE Action Plan, 2007).

However, DeLisle's (2010) report on the status of CAP in the primary school system of Trinidad and Tobago, revealed that the "system was dominated by nonusers" of continuous assessment, and efforts to implement were "not conducted in a way that provided the full benefits of formative assessment, neither was there efficient use of the data collected" (p. 3). He noted that the teacher often "minimizes the role of classroom assessment in student learning, with internal assessment often mimicking" national high-stake exams in "form and intent" (DeLisle, 2010 p. 13). He added that assessment practices were not seen as valuable "to promote student learning but rather to measure and judge the worth of the student" (DeLisle, 2010 p. 13). Hence, efforts at continuous assessment to promote learning by providing clear standards, diagnosis, feedback, and remediation faded into insignificance in favour of test preparation of students to sit the high-stakes SEA exam. The goal of using

assessment practices to promote student learning has not been realized. Schools, principals, teachers, students, and parents are narrowly focused on getting high scores on the SEA exam which may have a tremendous impact on the emotional, psychological, and economic well-being of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. One newspaper editorial said that only one percent of students pass for the 'prestige' schools (Trinidad Guardian Editorial, 2015). If that percentage was accurate at the time, it means that for every student celebrating passing for their first-choice school, there are 99 who may be disappointed and even, in the worst cases, traumatized at having failed to do so (Trinidad Guardian Editorial, 2015). To understand the impact of the high-stakes SEA exam, there is a need to learn about the experiences, perspectives, expectations, disappointments, and challenges of people who are associated with SEA.

HST has been part of the educational system in Trinidad and Tobago for over half a century. Although the stakes of winning a placement in a secondary school no longer exist because there are sufficient secondary schools to meet student needs, the stakes associated with high scores have not changed and are still equated with placement into secondary schools that are seen as prestigious by society. The social and emotional impact which includes the unintended negative outcomes and consequences for students, teachers, schools, parents, and other stakeholders associated with the drive to achieve high test scores at the SEA high-stakes exam, needs to be studied qualitatively and documented from a Trinidad and Tobago context. Hence, without listening to the experiences of citizens, and understanding the possible emotional and psychological implications and consequences of the SEA exam, little thought can be given by stakeholders to examine whether HST is in the best interest of the nation's children.

The Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to describe participants' experiences with the high-stakes SEA exam. The aim is to use a qualitative research design to find out how the lives of educators, parents, and students connected with the exam are affected. The study also seeks to learn about participants' perspectives of the exam and the beliefs and values inherent in these perspectives. The inquiry and thematic analyses of data will lead to a discussion of relevant themes for consideration by interested citizens. I hope that this study can enhance

society's understanding of the impact of the high-stakes SEA exam, inform decision-making, and encourage policy-makers to revisit the goals and objectives of educational testing and take action to improve policies and practices in primary schools of Trinidad and Tobago. At this stage in the research, the concept of high-stakes testing refers to the use of tests to make critical decisions about students, teachers, and schools by measuring student achievement and school effectiveness mainly by using standardized test scores (Thompson & Harbaugh, 2012).

The Significance of Study

The purpose of my study is to learn about the experiences, educators, students and parents have with the high-stakes SEA exam and to ascertain in what ways their experiences impact their lives. The findings of this study can add to the general body of knowledge in the field of high-stakes testing and its impact on test-takers, from a Trinidad and Tobago context. The findings could be used to inform conversations about the value of the exam to citizens of Trinidad and Tobago and to those in other Caribbean territories where high-stakes testing is currently practiced. As I read comments and expressions for and against the SEA exam, I have not seen anyone using any form of local research to substantiate their claims and their stance. What I have seen though are online views of how many responders are for the exam and how many are against it with brief comments to justify their stance. Mixed feelings from responders are also obvious. As such, my research may provide a snapshot of data that might add to the knowledge gap, particularly on how my participants experienced the SEA phenomenon, and provide lenses for understanding their feelings, and identifying their beliefs and values.

The findings can be of help to nationals with similar experiences that are either directly or indirectly associated with the high-stake SEA exam, to understand their behaviours, perspectives, values, and feelings about the exam. Coming to know and identify with my findings, presents the opportunity for policy-makers to initiate change that can have a positive influence on teachers, principals, and parents; whether in schools, classrooms, homes, and communities. They can ponder on the many ways possible actions may stem from the possible cyclical and generational harmful impact of the high-stakes SEA exam on citizens. Principals, teachers, and parents can also have the opportunity to see if they too can

identify with my participants' experiences and reflect on their practices to act in ways to prevent harm to students. My findings may have the potential to touch the hearts of principals and teachers to support their students by equally showing value for their student's emotional and psychological well-being along with their academic development.

Policy-makers who are entrusted with national development can benefit also from my findings since they can spark discussions about the impact of SEA on the human development of Trinidad and Tobago, the country's most treasured resource. Policy-makers may consider also if one of the country's major educational goals to establish a seamless system where students can transit smoothly from one level to the next is being realized and be open to investigating whether the high-stakes SEA exam could instead be working counter to its goal (UNESCO-IBE, 2012). My research can assist the Ministry of Education (MOE) to ascertain whether both human and non-human resources can be more efficient to support alternative forms of testing efforts to minimize harm to test-takers.

My research will also help develop awareness among members of the general public to see the phenomenon of SEA more comprehensively so they can recognize the possible implications of their own experiences and understand their feelings. As such, if their perspectives change, they might better deal with the feelings associated with the SEA exam.

Since answers to my research questions come from participants' experiences with the SEA exam, an understanding of the practices, issues, beliefs, and values discovered in my study could lay a foundation for further studies to be conducted on a wider scale. This can be done to see if my findings can be generalized to the larger population and to determine the extent of the impact of the high-stakes exam nationally. On the other hand, I hope that the door to research into the issues surrounding the SEA exam might be opened for additional probing qualitative research. As such, my study will have "transferability and resonance" because of its capacity "to stimulate thought, improve practices and policies and incite further research" (Padgett, 2008 p. 183).

Further, the findings of this research study will also add to the existing fund of knowledge on the impact of HST on educators, students, and parents in Trinidad and Tobago. It can also be a source of reference for researchers who may show interest in the topic.

My Research Questions

1. What are the experiences of educators, students, and parents associated with the high-stakes SEA exam?
2. What are the beliefs and values inherent in the perspectives of participants associated with the high-stakes SEA exam?
3. What impact has the experiences with the SEA exam had on participants' lives?
4. What are the implications of the study's findings?

The Theoretical Framework

Lunenburg and Irby (2008), define a theory as an organized body of interrelated concepts, assumptions, and generalizations that systematically explain regularities in behaviour. Likewise, Kerlinger and Lee (2000) also define theory as a set of interrelated constructs, definitions, and propositions that presents a systematic view of phenomena by specifying relations among them. Theories have a functional value which refers to their purpose or the type of intellectual work it does (DePoy & Gitlin, 2011). As such, some theories have a descriptive function that characterizes "what is;" an explanatory function that explains and interprets the description of a phenomenon; and theories that has a predictive function which is the future view of what may happen based on what is known (DePoy & Gitlin, 2011). These functions of theories are used to successfully guide researchers, helping them to understand the phenomenon. Grant and Osanloo (2014), in short, describe a theory as a blueprint or guide that serves as a foundation for research inquiry.

A theoretical framework on the other hand, according to Gabriel (2008), is a structure that supports the theories of a research study as well as introduces and describes the theories to explain why the research problem being studied exists. The theoretical framework narrows and limits the scope of the study, defines the research problem, informs the writing of the literature review, and guides the data collection, analysis, and interpretation of the findings (Roberts, 2010).

This research inquiry aims to describe my participants' experiences with the high-stakes SEA exam; learn about their inherent beliefs and values, and find out how their experiences with the exam have impacted their lives. Foremost among the theories that frame and lay a foundation for this research is the humanistic theories of psychology and

personality development and critical theories of education for social justice. The theorists who influence the direction of this research are humanistic psychologists Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers, and critical pedagogical theorists such as Paolo Freire, Henry Giroux, Ira Shor, and John Smyth. To explain my participants' behaviours and find answers to my research questions, the selected theories within this framework, inform the research design which includes the methods of data collection, data analysis procedure, findings, interpretations, discussions, conclusions, and recommendations. Having identified the key concepts and theorists I now explain the relevant theories to show how my research study fits.

Maslow's and Roger's Humanistic Theories of Psychology

Abraham Maslow (1908-1970) and Carl Rogers (1902-1987) are well known for their humanistic personality theories in Psychology. They both drew from existential philosophers who were concerned about how we find meaning in our existence, our purpose in life, and how we are motivated to keep living, emphasizing the uniqueness of humans while focusing on issues of free will and human responsibility (Winston, 2016). In applying the humanistic paradigm to the field of education, DeCarvalho (1991) affirmed Maslow's concept of expressive and intrinsic learning and Roger's advocacy for student-centred education as opposed to the behaviouristic paradigm and emphasis within education systems. They argued against educators who focused on training children in skills for efficiency, rather than educating the whole child, facilitating their personal growth, to help them fulfill their full potential, to become or to be that self which one truly is (Maslow 1961, 1968; Rogers, 1957, 1961, 1964; DeCarvalho, 1991).

Maslow was very much concerned about the significance of behaviour, positive regard, self-worth, self-actualization, and the healthy growth of individuals who can progress towards their personal goals (Ismail & Tekke, 2015; Maslow, 2017). In his study of human needs and motivation in the human environment, Maslow proposed a five-tier hierarchical system model of human needs designed to explain how these needs motivate human behaviour (Maslow, 1943). He theorized that persons have five types of needs that are activated in a hierarchical manner where the lowest-order needs must first be satisfied before the next is activated. These five clusters of needs from lowest to highest are physiological needs, safety needs, love and belongingness needs, esteem needs, and the need for self-actualization. Maslow conceived that certain basic physiological needs must first be met

before efforts can be made to consider safety or security needs, which in turn must be met before persons develop the need to be loved and feel a sense of belonging along with other social needs desiring to be part of groups and a family. Once such needs are satisfied persons become concerned about esteem and prestige needs. Here the need for self-worth, respect, status, recognition, admiration, and confidence become desirable. Finally, Maslow theorized the fifth and highest level that tells of the need to self-actualize which deals with the desire of people to develop their inner talents and potentials which were normally unseen.

According to Maslow (1987), the first four needs are referred to as the deficit or deficiency need or deficiency motives (D-needs) thereby suggesting that deficiency of these creates a negative motivational state that can be changed only by satisfying the need meaning that adequate gratification of a need results in the emergence of a higher-order need (Winston, 2016). In contrast, the need to self-actualize is referred to as the growth needs or being needs or growth motives (B-needs) also suggesting that satisfying these needs acts as a motivator to achieve other higher-order needs such as personal goals and ambitions (Maslow, 1987; Winston, 2016).

Along with Maslow, Rogers also acknowledged and adopted the self-actualization concept from Kurt Goldstein (1939) who referred to a pattern of resilient reorganization of a person's capacities following an injury (DeCarvalho, 1991). However, this reference was later "adapted by humanistic psychologists to describe the process of living resiliently despite one's personal, environmental, and historical shortcomings to overcome obstacles (real or perceived)" (Bland & Derobertis, 2019 p. 5). Maslow's and Goldstein's focus was on the capacity of individuals to become self-directing and psychologically whole, thereby reaching a state of self-actualization.

Maslow's order of need emergence has been challenged by many. Winston (2016) reports that critics argued that needs recur over time and that the order of need emergence is not universal, but is dependent on numerous personal and environmental variables (Agrawal & Sharma, 1977; Neher, 1991; Tang, Ibrahim & West, 2002). Yet, there were other studies conducted across 123 countries according to Winston (2016), by Tay and Diener (2011) that found that needs do arise in order as specified by Maslow. What is more, finding faults in a theory, does not necessarily render that theory less helpful for interpretation as noted by Tyson (2006). Along with Maslow, Carl Rogers's humanistic theories of personality development has much value for understanding my research data.

Carl Roger's (1959) humanistic theory of personality involves the development of a self-concept which is defined as a person's tendencies to act in ways that actualize themselves and become fully functioning persons which describe those who are well-balanced, and well-adjusted (Rogers, 1961; McLeod, 2007). Roger's theory that one's self-concept is interrelated to one's self-image, self-worth, and ideal self is of great value to discussing my research findings. According to Cervone and Pervin (2008), Rogers theorized that psychologically healthy persons are individuals who can assimilate experiences into their self-structure, noting that their self-image, or how they see themselves, has a direct effect on how they feel, think and act in the world. (Ismail & Tekke, 2015). He also theorized that one's personality which focuses on one's notion of self or self-concept is determined or influenced by one's early life experiences. As such, Roger's theory that highlights the "importance of early childhood experiences by mother and father to affect positively the feelings of self-worth" is of great value to seeking answers to my research questions (Ismail & Tekke, 2015 p. 146).

Self-worth has to do with an individual's assessment of positive self-regard where the self is defined and measured based on one's experiences with external factors that are tenuous and transient in nature according to Mayers et al. (1991). According to Baumeister (1991), self-worth is the belief that one is worthy with desirable characteristics, and is described as a basic need along with a purpose in life, self-efficacy, and value. Rogers (1959) claims that those who develop high self-worth tend to cope better with the challenges in life, and better tolerate failures and sadness. Roger's theories support the development of fully functioning persons, that is persons who can self-actualize, are well-balanced, and well adjusted (Rogers, 1961), with healthy personalities to help people act in ways that are guided by intelligence (Jourard, 1974).

Maslow's and Roger's theories of human needs offer deep insights into understanding the dynamics of human personality development and have profound implications for discussing my findings concerning my participants' experiences, their beliefs and values, and the impact of their experiences upon their lives. His theories advocate that when all levels of needs are met students can reach their full potential and maximize their learning. Despite the differences between Maslow's and Roger's self-actualizing views, the similarities in their concepts focus on the ultimate good and well-being of individuals, a concern I share with my participants in this study. Furthermore, Maslow (1987) has suggested that the need to self-actualize is most dominant among older adults. Such a view has been supported by other

researchers who have found that older adults are more self-actualizing than young adults (Ivtzan et al., 2013). This perspective also has value to this study to explain the impact the SEA exam has had on my participants, years later.

Rogers's definition of self-actualization was similar to Maslow's, which has to do with that innate, positive drive to develop and realize one's full potential. Their views on human nature and the humanistic paradigm in education focused on growth. However, Rogers had a different view on how a person self-actualizes. Maslow sees the functioning of persons as fully dependent on oneself, while Rogers emphasized the impact of their environment upon persons (Grin, 2022). Rogers believed that we can all cope with our lives and remain psychologically healthy once our innate actualizing potential is not being blocked which could result in psychological problems (Rogers, 1959, 1977). This certainly differs from Maslow's views where he believed that individual psychological harm occurs when one's needs are not being met. While Maslow used the term "instinctoid to refer to that inner core of human nature with the potential for self-actualization once basics needs are satisfied, Rogers, on the other hand, speaks of a directional and actualizing tendency toward the fulfilment of inner potential, a motivating force that drives people onward (DeCarvalho, 1991).

Despite the declared differences, I see the value of both perspectives for this research study because they both believed in a person's positive mindset and that all individuals can both develop their inner qualities and ability to fulfill their innate potentials (Grin, 2022). In short, my aim for using humanistic concepts as a frame for this research study is to find ways for encouraging societal growth and development and individual well-being, for a better quality of life. In addition to using the humanistic theories of Rogers and Maslow, I also intend to take a critical theoretical perspective to find answers to my research questions.

Critical Theory and Critical Pedagogy in Education

Critical theory represents a school of academic thought that challenges dominant ways of exploring and explaining organizational phenomena (Scherer, 2009). According to Thompson (2017), critical theory is a distinct form of knowledge derived from German idealism and Marx's writings, that is opposed to mainstream theory and social science, and empirical and positivist models of knowledge. Thompson explains that critical theory is a

form of social criticism that involves judgment, evaluation, and practical, transformative activity and allows for a comprehensive way of grasping social reality and social pathologies. Shor argues that critical theory is concerned with "empowering habits of inquiry", "critical curiosity about society", "power inequality", and change because people can be empowered to rise above any societal constraints, placed upon them (Shor, 1992 p.15; Fay, 1987).

The onset of critical theory is associated with the Frankfurt school that emerged in the 1930s by way of scholars such as Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, and Habermas (Harney, 2014). Its key theme is to destabilize and expose dominant and oppressive modes of understanding, and underlying assumptions, aimed at emancipating those excluded and silenced (Harney, 2014). According to Uddin (2019), the focus of critical theory is to understand the oppression of persons, groups, or society by engaging in a critique of personal, social, and cultural norms. However, he added that oppression might be either self-imposed or generated by external forces.

Along with its emancipatory intent, critical theories offer alternative modes or lenses, for multiple ways of understanding human experiences (Tyson, 2006). According to Tyson, such understandings can help us see ourselves and our world in valuable new ways that can influence how we educate our children, both as parents and as teachers, and help us to recognize and deal with our motives, fears, and desires. Because critical theories offer multiple ways of seeing and understanding the world, they compete for dominance in the educational and cultural communities with ensuing disagreements, and ongoing debates among practitioners and advocates resulting in different schools of thought within a single theory (Tyson, 2006). The theory or body of theories that is also used as a frame for this research is critical pedagogy.

In defining critical pedagogy, McLaren (1998) describes it as a way of thinking, about negotiating and transforming the relationship among classroom teaching, while Shor (1999) describes it as habits of thought, which include how we read, write, speak, and delve beneath the surface meaning. Giroux (2011 p. 172) explains that "central to the definition of critical pedagogy is a common concern for reforming schools and developing modes of practice. He adds that teachers and students become critical agents, as they actively question and negotiate the relationships between theory and practice, critical analysis and common sense, and learning and social change." McKernan (2013) describes critical pedagogy as a movement involving relationships of teaching and learning to help students acquire critical self-

consciousness. The foregoing definitions are key to Paulo Freire's notion of critical consciousness, classroom practices, and critical relationships for learning and social change.

Critical pedagogy provides a theoretical framework that allows me to examine the findings of this study to point out the various mechanisms and behaviours concerning the SEA exam that are discriminatory. Critical pedagogy advanced from critical theory with Paulo Freire's work in poverty-stricken north-eastern Brazil in the 1960s when as an educationalist, he introduced critical pedagogy into the mainstream of education (Kincheloe, 2007; Uddin, 2019; Abraham, 2014). In addition to Freire, other scholars over time added their voices, enriching understandings and contributing to the theoretical and practical development of this concept and educational philosophy, such as Henry Giroux, Ira Shor, Peter McLaren, Joe Kincheloe, Darren Webb, and many more. Central to Freirean critical pedagogy is the discussion of the notion of critical personal consciousness or conscientization, awareness, and understanding of society's shortcomings, which can then lead to appropriate transformative actions against oppressive educational practices and structures through critique (Freire, 1970; Freire, 1974). Based on his early experiences, Paulo observed that students were passive learners without voice or choice, memorizing what teachers transferred to them in a teacher-centred education system, with no creation of knowledge nor intellectual stimulation and social development, which he defined as the "Banking Concept of Education" to describe the practice of teachers just depositing knowledge in the heads of students (Freire, 2016 p. 73; Uddin, 2019).

As such, Freire advocated critical pedagogical approaches that are transformation-based such as the dialogue-based approach, learner-centred approach, and problem-posing approach in teaching and learning (Freire, 2016). According to Freire (2016), dialogical approaches promote and enhance students' critical thinking capability and raises the quality of classroom interaction by creating meaningful interaction between teachers and students and students and students. It requires a positive caring relational commitment between teacher and student; the teacher not placing themselves above students; not treating them as empty vessels; and engaging them in equal dialogue to achieve more knowledge and give voice to students to break the silent nature of students and the monologue of teachers (Shih, 2018).

With the intent of creating a just society where every person had equal rights and opportunities, Paulo encouraged educators to first enlighten themselves, then use their

enlightenment to encourage students to question and challenge inequalities found within schools, families, and society that are often taken for granted (Breunig, 2005). He added that critical pedagogy can also benefit privileged groups and those with positions of power, with a critical understanding of social justice, and knowledge of the ways they were oppressing the underprivileged so they can realize that their actions are oppressing and violating the rights of others (Uddin, 2019). Freire advanced educational theories to remove the curtains between the privileged class and underprivileged; enhance critical awareness about educational goals; help teachers engage their students and design lesson plans that connect learning to real-life situations using reason-seeking and problem-solving approaches and strategies, as opposed to; coaching aimed at a high performance at high-stakes test; and to ensure students get equal educational access and opportunity (Freire, 2016; Uddin, 2019). Critical pedagogy objects to instrumental reasoning, a means to an end reasoning, where knowledge is basically a means to pass a test, where test scores mean better schools and universities which in turn mean higher paying jobs, with the end being profits (Seehwa, 2012). Critical pedagogy exposes this rationality that dominates education systems because it leads to dehumanization and oppression rather than social change or the building of a better society (Seehwa, 2012).

Freire's 'pedagogy of hope' theory also has value in framing this study especially if participants' experiences, challenges, and fears with the SEA high-stakes create a sense of despair and hopelessness (2004). According to Freire "one of the tasks of the progressive educator is to unveil opportunities for hope, no matter what the obstacle is" (2004 p. 9). He believed, though, that while hope is necessary for social change, it is not enough meaning that it requires action and practice to become concrete. Giroux (2011) uses the term "educated hope" in recognition that it is through education hope is possible while Smyth (2011) affirms that hope ought to be grounded in realities of life and anchored in practice. Hooks (2003) endorses that a successful pedagogy of hope is built on the interactions of students and teachers in a form that is anti-oppressive and encourages reflexivity, dialogue, and criticality. However, Freire warned that hope should not be caught up in the dangers of neoliberal ideals, individualism, and self-improvement with the private notion of just getting ahead (Freire & Shor, 1987; Bourn, 2021). Le Grange (2011) warns also against using hope as a marketing tool for political or corporate agendas but should be grounded in people's lives and used within context as an educational pedagogical approach toward a more just and sustainable classroom and world (Giroux, 2011).

In response to Freire's pedagogy of hope, Webb (2010) describes it, as "a kind of education in hope" to highlight the challenges educators may encounter in an attempt to use Freire's pedagogy of hope approaches in the classroom. He painted a picture of conflicting demands for educators to evoke Freire's kind of hope in the classroom. However, Webb later outlined five different modes of hope: patient, critical, sound, resolute, and transformative, and associated these with different pedagogical strategies that can be used by educators to reproduce social relations and transform them (Webb, 2013).

According to Bourn (2021), this pedagogy of hope approach to learning ought to be pedagogically based, grounded in praxis, forward-thinking, question posing, and idea-generating for the future, but at the same time grounded in real issues and within students' context. As such, these ideas can add much value to the analysis of the findings of this study, especially since Freire's pedagogy of hope poses questions in light of any world issues as to the purpose of education, thereby pointing to educationalists' responsibility to highlight current issues in their pedagogical practice and exhibit the skills and belief in taking social action within a progressive educational form (Bourn, 2021; Freire, 2004). Freire's 'pedagogy of hope' approach to learning, presents a valuable tool through which change and progress are possible. This can be achieved by understanding the issues and recognizing that because of the interconnectedness of our lives such issues have to potential to disproportionately impact the poor and the marginalised (Kharas, 2020).

In addition to Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux who was another founding theorist of critical pedagogy advocated against educational establishments' obsession with high-stakes testing and teaching to the test which he refers to as part of a "pedagogy of repression" (2016, p. 58). Giroux theorizes that pedagogies of repression such as teaching to test, camouflage the role of education, promote conformity, limit students' imaginations, silence the voices of marginalized groups, and undercut the relationship between learning and social change. Giroux declares that the concept of progress is being defined through a narrow culture of metrics, measurements, and efficiency as promoted by high-stakes testing. He contends that the role of education should be seen as more than credentialing or a pathway to a job, adding that educating young people require that educators resist the notion that education is only training by not missing its role in shaping identities, desires, values and the notions of agency (Giroux, 2016). This may be done, according to Giroux, by redefining public education as democratic public spaces where formative cultures that facilitate a democracy to thrive, are created.

Critical pedagogical theories and Freire's philosophical concepts have much value as a theoretical lens for this research study. Accordingly, the banking system theory which Freire argues is an instrument of oppression where teachers are seen as the owners and transmitters of knowledge to students who are empty vessels. In contrast, the concepts of problem-posing education as an alternative to the banking system allows students to observe and describe what they see, define their problems, share their experiences and strategize to act on the problem. Praxis as Freire puts it is reflection and action upon the world to transform it (Freire, 1972, p. 51). Teachers become an agency of change by learning about the overarching structure in which they are teaching. The theory of critical consciousness is a heightened awareness that moves persons to become action-oriented as achieved through Freirean teaching approaches such as dialogue teaching, critical literacy, situated pedagogy, performing, and many more (Shor, 1987).

The data generated from this study will be examined through critical theoretical and pedagogical lenses to construct a picture of the issues involved, and develop an understanding of taken-for-granted systems, power structures, beliefs, and social conditions to identify the needed changes. A critical slant will also help me determine if participants' reality has been interpreted in ways that preserve structures of dominance, so ways of reducing them can be initiated. A critical slant can also help me to see my role as a social advocate to seek, describe and explain information that can repair social inequities in my reporting (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

I am mindful that efforts at social reform can and "have been overcome by the very systems and power relations they were expected to transform", (Pettit & Musyoki, 2004 p. 98). I am also mindful that the domain of rights can be dominated by professional knowledge and top-down notions of delivery, which often overlook important contextual and historical expressions of rights, and priorities because of embedded cultural and power relations which in turn could prevent legally enshrined rights from being realised (Pettit & Musyoki, 2004). However, I am equally confident that participatory processes have the potential to empower people through the process of constructing and using their knowledge to stimulate further inquiry and act on issues that may affect them (Reason & Bradbury, 2008).

Background and Researcher's Positionality

To describe my participants' experiences with the high-stakes SEA exam, uncover their inherent beliefs and values, and learn about their perspectives and the impact their experiences have had on their lives, my theoretical and philosophical foundations must be appropriately aligned with my methodological assumptions. This study lies in the theoretical foundation of naturalism (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The ontological position or my worldview or beliefs about the nature of social reality; my epistemological assumptions, my belief about the nature of knowledge; and my assumptions about how I interact with the environment and relate to it are influenced by my values and beliefs (Sikes, 2004). As such, my position for this research is that knowledge is subjective and that reality results from my participants' engagement with the SEA phenomenon. Therefore, to understand their reality and find answers to my research questions, my epistemological assumption points to the knowledge of my participants' experiences and the meanings that emerge from these experiences.

My study is nested in the qualitative paradigm because it allows me to explore the research problem through interactions with people, hear their voices, and decipher issues that are sensitive in nature. As such, my choice of using in-depth interviews as my primary data collection method is fitting because it acknowledges my role and involvement in the research process, findings, and presentation.

Using a variant of the naturalistic paradigm, the interpretive-constructionist approach will help me to understand what reality my participants make of the world around them, see how they interpret their experiences and learn how they assign or construct meaning and value to them (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Seeing my participants' experiences from an interpretive-constructionist perspective also allows me to view their experiences with the high-stakes SEA exam through different lenses. Such an approach makes me cognizant of my participants' expectations, and the meanings that result from their individual experiences, and perspectives. As such, I am expecting my data to lead to multiple themes, conclusions, and explanations. The interpretive-constructionist approach also allows me to look at the data using cultural lenses to identify what inherent values and beliefs participants use to interpret and make sense of their experiences. I likewise have the leeway to examine my assumptions that may influence what I see, what I look for, and the questions I ask, as I become more aware of the need to listen to my participants' understandings, even though they may differ from mine.

The naturalistic paradigm which informs my methodological assumptions suggests that the responsive interviewing model by Rubin and Rubin (2012) with in-depth interviewing as the primary tool, is a valuable style of interviewing in the data gathering process. Responsive interviewing assumes that reality is complex and allows for depth, richness of data, and subtleties to be discerned, so I can explore new areas and arrive at new interpretations of my own. Using a thematic analysis procedure, I take an inductive approach to my data analysis in identifying codes, categories, and themes from my interview transcriptions, and students' essays.

Positionality Statement

I am mindful that my positionality must be explicitly stated because my stance is not value-free but has implications for how I conduct my research, and interpret and report on the findings (Sikes, 2004). Having already described my philosophical position for this research study above, I now present my positionality statement to demonstrate my interest in this research topic.

I am the mother of three children, all of whom had to sit the compulsory high-stakes SEA exam in Trinidad and Tobago when they were between the ages of 11 and 12. I have knowledge of my children experiences when they had to prepare to sit for the high-stakes SEA exam. As a mother, I experienced the phenomenon three times. Those three experiences were remarkably different from my personal experience when I sat the exam, then known as the common entrance exam, in the mid-1970s. I am of mixed race of African and East Indian descent and grew up in the countryside within an agricultural community. My home setting was simple and humble, yet rich with love and care.

I worked in education as a secondary school teacher for twenty-eight years. Thereafter, I spent 4 four years as the Curriculum Specialist and Manager of the Curriculum and Instruction Unit at a Technical Vocational Institution of which I am still a part. I am also part of the adjunct staff at the University of the West Indies in support of teacher education for preschool, primary, and secondary school teachers for upward of 10 years. My work and experiences during my career have developed within me a passion for student learning and I feel very strongly about issues that can hinder young people's learning and development.

Hence, my keen interest lies in learning about the impact the SEA exam has had on nationals of Trinidad and Tobago.

The Assumptions, Limitations, Delimitation, and Scope of Study

My assumptions, along with the limitations, delimitations, and scope of the study are essential elements used to explain and frame my research study (Simon & Goes, 2013). For a qualitative study, Rallis and Rossman (2003) recommend that researchers need to clearly articulate their frames of reference about the topic and be aware of how our values, beliefs, assumptions, biases, and past experiences, might affect our theoretical and methodological orientation to the study. Doing so ensures that data collection is systematic and rigorous to understand complex social issues. As such, I now present the frames of reference for this study by stating the assumptions, limitations, and delimitations of the study.

Assumptions of the Study

Assumptions are an integral part of my study for without them my research problem itself could not exist (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). The following steps as seen in Table 1:0:1 were taken to ensure that each assumption below is likely to be met (Simon & Goes, 2013).

Assumptions	**Steps Taken**
1. I assume that my interviewees reported their experiences just as they occurred.	• Participants' identities remain anonymous. • I preserved their confidentiality by assigning each participant a pseudonym in the body of the transcript. • I assigned a code to each transcript known only to myself and my supervisor. • Participants are aware that confidentiality is secure. • Participants volunteered and are aware they can withdraw at any time.

2. I assume that my participants provided rich data to answer my research questions.	• Only persons connected with the SEA exam were asked to share their experiences.

Table 1:0:1 – Steps Taken to Meet my Assumptions

Limitations

Limitations are those factors that are beyond my control during my research study. Since my primary data source comes from participants sharing their experiences with the research topic, a limitation may arise as a result of selective memory where participants may or may not clearly remember experiences that occurred in the past (Roediger, 1974). Another limitation of temporal displacement or telescoping is also possible if participants recall events that occurred at one time as if they had occurred at another time (Gaskell, Wright & O'Muirchheartaigh, 2000). A bias of attribution could see some participants attributing positive events to their agency while attributing negative events and outcomes to external forces (Martinko & Mackey, 2019). There is also the possibility of participants' exaggerations where events recalled could be embellished as more significant as they were. Additionally, my interpretations of participants' responses are subject to human error and expertise.

The findings of this study cannot be generalized to other people and situations. It is limited to the participants in the study. However, it "provides an account of a setting or population that is illuminating as an extreme case or ideal type" (Maxwell, 2012 p. 245). Hence, the study can have transferability and resonance to get people thinking about changes in social structures to minimize the impact on those associated with the high-stakes SEA (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

Delimitation and Scope of Study

The delimitations are those factors of my study that are under my control. These include my choice of topic, my choice of research questions, the range and diversity of participants, and the place to conduct the study. As such, I chose the qualitative paradigm rather than the quantitative paradigm. Creswell (2013) says that "to level, all individuals to a

statistical mean overlooks the uniqueness of individuals" (p. 48). And since I am interested in the unique experiences of my participants, the quantitative paradigm is inappropriate. As such, only persons who experienced the SEA exam in one way or another have been selected for the study.

The topic is of great value to me because it is close to my heart, as a result of my own challenging experiences with the SEA exam. That is why I believe that the issues surrounding the impact of the high-stakes SEA exam on teachers, principals, students, and parents will emerge from this study.

Time and Place of Study

The idea for this research was conceptualized after I attended the third study school arranged by Professor Pat Sikes at the British Academy Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago which was held in July 2013. My research interest before the study school was in the area of writing development at primary schools in Trinidad and Tobago. But after the presentations by Sir Hilary Beckles, Dr. Wanda Chesney, Dr. Bernice Regis Dyer, Dr. Eduardo Ali, Drs Betty Ann Rohlehr and Gordon Rohlehr, and Dr. Janice Fournillier, I wrote the question in my notebook "Why are young people not seizing the opportunities presented to them at non-prestigious secondary schools?" I recognized where my interest and passion were as a result of my own experience in supporting my children through the SEA exam. I felt the need to change the direction of my research topic to learn about the impact the high-stakes SEA exam was having on persons.

As such, I wrote the proposal for my research to inquire about the impact the high-stakes SEA exam has had on nationals in my country which I submitted in May 2014. I started fieldwork in September 2014 and ended in July 2015 at which time, data collection, and transcripts were completed. All participants are nationals of Trinidad and Tobago with the interviews and the writing of student essays.

Definition of terms

High-Stakes Test: This is usually administered nationally, using an assessment instrument or battery of instruments. The standardized test scores carry serious consequences because they are used to make critical decisions that affect the lives of students, teachers, and schools by measuring student achievement, and school effectiveness by using scores for promotion and certification (Coniam & Falvey, 2007; Marchant, 2004; Thompson & Harbaugh, 2012).

Secondary Entrance Assessment: An exit exam administered to students at the end of standard 5 in primary school for which students must pass to obtain a place in a secondary school in Trinidad and Tobago (UNESCO, IBE, 2012).

Prestige Schools: These are schools in Trinidad and Tobago that are perceived to perform better than the junior and senior comprehensive schools. They are often referred to as the first-choice schools usually denominational schools that are deemed to be more effective than government-run schools (Hackett, n.d.). Claims have been made that teachers in prestigious schools are more effective because of the impact of extra lessons and the fact that the abler students are assigned there, after the SEA exam in standard five (Hackett, n.d.). Prestige is defined as the reputation or influence derived from success, achievement, rank, or other favourable attributes deemed important by the public (dictionary.com, 2021).

Qualitative Interview Research Methodology: Davies (2006) tells us that the interview is "a method of data collection, information or opinion gathering that specifically involves asking a series of questions" in a dialogue between people where personal and social interaction occur. (as cited in Jupp, 2006 p. 157). Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) describe the interview as a professional conversation where knowledge is constructed in the interaction between interviewer and interviewee. However, Rubin & Rubin, (2012) describe qualitative interviewing as a "naturalistic research method where researchers talk to those who have knowledge of or an experience with the problem of interest" to "explore in detail the experiences, motives, and opinions of others and learn to see the world from perspectives other than their own" (p. 3).

Responsive Interviewing: This is a "style of qualitative interviewing that emphasizes the importance of building a relationship of trust between the interviewer and the interviewee that leads to more give and take in the conversation where the tone of questioning is friendly

and gentle with little confrontation. The pattern of questioning is flexible; questions evolve in response to what the interviewees have just said, and new questions are designed to tap the experience and knowledge of each interviewee" (Rubin & Rubin, 2012 p. 36).

Thematic Analysis: This is a "method of identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organizes and describes your data set in (rich) detail. However, it often goes further than this and interprets various aspects of the research topic" (Braun & Clarke, 2006 p. 6).

Chapter One Conclusion

This chapter introduces readers to my research study and my topic of interest to find out the impact of the high-stakes SEA exam on students, parents, and educators in Trinidad and Tobago. This involves learning about participants' experiences with the exam, their beliefs, and values surrounding the exam, and then finding out about the impact these experiences had on their lives.

The chapter lays a foundation for the research and provides a rationale for the research in the problem statement by describing the problem and issues involved that need to be addressed. It highlights the need for such a study to be conducted because it can provide a better understanding of this decades-long phenomenon of selection type exam for children eleven plus. It also highlights the need to find out about the social, emotional, and psychological implications involved in preparing for the high-stakes SEA exam. Such insights can help readers to discern the role of this exam and determine if it is in the best interest of nationals in Trinidad and Tobago.

This chapter also situates the context of my topic of research by providing a relevant background of the development of education in Trinidad and Tobago in the last century. The background provides a context for my thesis statement which is to find out about the impact the high-stakes SEA exam has had on students, parents, and educators associated with the exam in Trinidad and Tobago. The purpose of the study is to describe participants' experiences, interpret their beliefs and values and discern the impact on their lives using thematic analysis to answer my research questions.

In addition, the chapter sets the tone for my report by listing my research questions, followed by the research design and theoretical framework which is nested in the humanistic theories of psychology and personality development. These theories order well for providing answers to my questions and informing the research process. Also presented are my assumptions, delimitations, and limitations to articulate the frames of reference and scope for the study as well as the operative definitions that will inform my research report. I will now present a review of the related literature to determine what work has been done by others on the nature of high-stakes testing around the globe about the impact of high-stakes testing.

Chapter 2: A Review of the Related Literature

Introduction

This chapter presents a review of the literature on high-stakes testing and education and their overall impact on those involved either directly or indirectly. A "literature review is a comprehensive overview of prior research regarding a topic" (Denny & Tewksbury, 2013 p. 218). Bowers-Brown and Stevens (2010) describe a literature review as the point where the researcher gathers information to gain a greater and thorough understanding of the research topic, which can facilitate an analysis of what has already been researched, identify knowledge gaps for further exploration, and examine various theoretical positions used to interpret research findings. Put differently, Creswell (1994) adds that the purpose of a literature review is to share findings of research studies that are close to what is being researched, to relate the study to the larger context, and to provide a framework for establishing the importance of a study. According to Ridley (2008), this literature review identifies the previous research that was done which bears relation to and has an influence on my research topic and methodology.

This review does not focus on the structuring, formulation, types, and procedures for administering high-stakes testing, but rather, it focuses on learning the impact these tests have had on the lives of persons. Even though the literature covers a wide range of published and informative research materials, the review gives attention to three major themes which are prominently discussed in the literature. The themes are:

1. An overview of the high-stakes testing dilemma
2. High-stakes testing and curriculum.
3. Impacts of high-stakes testing on educators, test-takers, and their families.
4. The psychological, emotional, and physical impact of high-stakes testing.

The context for discussing these themes varies from the context of the research. However, the review provides a sense of what is already known concerning high-stakes testing and a foundation for understanding my research methodology, findings, and discussion chapters. The review also captures various viewpoints and perspectives on the research topic by using a variety of peer-reviewed academic journals, books, and educational resources. This review is used to summarize research that was done in various areas of high-

stakes testing (Bowers-Brown & Stevens, 2010). Using a thematic approach, I now present an overview of high-stakes testing in education.

An Overview of the High-Stakes Testing Dilemma

This overview of high-stakes testing is presented to convey key information about the purposes and intent of high-stakes testing and to introduce to the reader how testing institutions may use students' test results. The main purposes of high-stakes testing were discussed in an article published by UNESCO (2013a) on the culture of testing. The article identified that the main purposes of testing are selection, certification, and accountability.

High-stakes Testing and Selection

High-stakes assessment serves the purpose of selection when it is used as a chief means for controlling access and transitions to different levels of schooling, secondary schools, and prestigious schools with lucrative higher education opportunities. Coniam and Falvey (2007) explain that high-stakes assessment for older persons may occur when assessment results are used to make decisions that affect individuals' lives in significant ways such as entry into a tertiary institution, assessment of professional competence, promotion, termination, and membership or access to clubs or professional bodies. However, among younger children, test attracts high stakes when they are used as readiness test to classify, promote or and retain children (Meisels, 1989).

Madaus (1988) identifies three specific characteristics of a test that makes it high-stakes. One is when the test is perceived to have greater significance than warranted and the original purpose becomes blurred for example a test that is intended to provide supplementary information for school admission becomes an outright criterion and a measure of educational status. The second characteristic is when the test has a heavy influence on teachers' instructional behaviours and decisions. When the results of testing are published publicly, teachers are likely to pay greater attention to the tested subjects, focusing their efforts on test-specific items and formats; a behaviour that ultimately results in the narrowing of the curriculum content to tested content. The third characteristic Madaus (1988) speaks of is the transfer of control and decision-making to the agency that designs and controls the

exam. To ensure students pass the test, teachers are likely to forego research-based instructional practices in favour of test-structured teaching approaches; thereby removing instructional decision-making from the purview of the teacher which ought to be based on needs discerned from the teacher-child interaction (Meisels, 1989).

When test results are used for selection, efforts at helping students formatively may be neglected. Teachers' efforts to use the data from results formatively to make decisions about the next steps of instruction can likely be overlooked. If such data are used to inform instruction, teachers would use the collected data to interpret the meaning of scores which can be translated into actions that can better support student learning (Hopster-den Otter et al. (2017).

High-stakes Testing and Certification

High-stakes testing also serves the purpose of certifying students by using a given test to obtain knowledge of students' performance and reporting on their achievement using an official document. This document attests to the status or level of achievement for students often represented by a letter grade or graded numerical score. While certified scores on standardized testing could be seen as a noble opportunity to uncover talents and place students into programmes for the gifted, they were also used in undesirable ways because they were seen as "evidence of deficiencies leading to placement in vocational tracks or even in homes for the mentally inferior" (Amrein & Berliner, 2002 p. 2-3). Amrein and Berliner (2002) report that early in the 20th Century in the United States, certified test scores could mean acceptance or rejection from the military, and were used to unjustifiably advocate the superiority or inferiority of various races, ethnic groups, and social classes. They also noted that families made important decisions on where to live because the level of certification issued by educational institutions influenced the real estate cost since real estate agents used schools' test scores to rate the neighborhood quality which affected property value. This undesirable usage of certification unfairly maintained "the status quo along those social, ethnic, and class lines" (Amrein & Berliner, 2002 p. 2-3). They suggested that improved test scores may not necessarily allude to improved student learning but may instead be the results of increased test preparation and or the exclusion of students from the testing process. In addition to selection, high-stakes testing is also used for accountability purposes.

High-stakes Testing and Accountability

When high-stakes testing scores are used to hold individuals and institutions responsible, it constitutes a test-based accountability system that is used foremost to identify the achievement gap between economically disadvantaged and economically advantaged students according to Linn (2008). Linn adds that a test-based accountability system that operates on the assumption that high-stakes testing is an adequate measure of education goals and outcomes and assumes that the test represents the content standards. Hence, as an accountability measure, sanctions and incentives are attached as a motivation for improving educational outcomes and teacher quality to improve student achievement and reduce gaps (Hess, 2002). In the US accountability measures that may affect teachers' pay and the job can determine school funding levels and may guide school restructuring efforts (Blazer, 2011). However, the opposing views of proponents and opponents present a clear dilemma as to the value of high-stakes testing scores for accountability.

Proponents who advocate high-stakes testing as an accountability tool claim that high-stakes testing improved students' academic performance and supports its use for student promotion (Farkas et al., 2003; Roderick et al., 2002). According to Firestone et al. (2001), high-stakes testing is seen to be a highly efficient and necessary vehicle to hold schools, programmes, and larger state initiatives accountable while rewarding high performers and identifying those failing. In so doing, they can receive extra support. Hess (2002) sees rewards and sanctions as a vehicle for educational change and Stecher et al. (2003) believe that if teachers can be made aware of students' knowledge and skill levels from test scores, they can be motivated to improve their efficiency.

On the other hand, opponents view mandated high-stakes testing "as a grievous move to control, narrow and inhibit student achievement" because of its ability to adversely affect instruction and the curriculum (Amoako et al., 2019 p. 95). Teachers experienced a narrowing of the curriculum because testing became their main concern in the classroom. Mathison and Freeman (2006) reported that teachers' felt as if they had lost control over their pedagogy and claimed that high-stakes testing had not only altered their practice but it altered their priorities and purpose in teaching. In addition to extreme feelings of stress and anxiety related to high volumes of testing, they faced pressure from administrative sources, media sources, and other involved persons (Franklin & Snow-Gerono, 2007). Additional pressure to raise test scores was also felt because of fear of individual or institutional sanctions that are

involved with a test-driven accountability system (Solorzano, 2008; Amoako, et al., 2019). High-stakes accountability systems appear to come with both intended and unintended consequences that must be noted by all stakeholders in any educational reform initiative, which includes the delivery of the curriculum.

Impact of High-Stakes Testing on Curriculum Delivery

As noted above, one of the negative consequences of high-stakes testing is the narrowing of the curriculum. One of the many but simple definitions for the curriculum is a formal course of study, a body of content knowledge that students complete and pass to graduate (Harden, 2001). The concept of a curriculum which involves first the subject content, second the way it is structured and presented within a curriculum, and third the pedagogy, how it is communicated to an audience, was studied by Au (2007) using a qualitative meta-synthesis method analyzing data from 49 qualitative studies to interrogate how high-stakes testing affects curriculum. Au (2007) found that there was a "significant relationship between the implementation of high-stakes testing and changes in the content of a curriculum, the structure of knowledge contained within the content, and the types of pedagogy associated with communication of that content" (p. 262). His findings suggest that high-stakes test exerts three types of control on the curriculum which he describes as content control, formal control, and pedagogic control.

Regarding content control, over 80% of the studies pointed to content change by expansion but more so by contraction where participants reported instances of the narrowing of curriculum, or curricular contraction to tested subjects. According to Au (2007), this "phenomenon was the most prominent way in which 'teaching to the test' was manifested in the curricula, as non-tested subjects were increasingly excluded from the curricular content" indicating the overwhelming control high-stakes testing had on the curriculum (p. 262). Blazer (2011) identified four general categories of curriculum narrowing as a result of teaching to the test. One category concerns the exclusion of non-tested subject areas or an increase in time spent on the tested subject (Nichols & Berliner, 2008). Another category concerns an exclusion of non-tested topics within subject areas where teachers focus on parts of the curriculum that are tested. They have also been found to change course objectives and the sequence of the curriculum to correspond to the content and timing of tests while

emphasizing topics that appeared on the test earlier and less emphasis on topics that are not tested (Blazer, 2011; Barnes, 2005; Amrein & Berliner, 2003). The third category of curriculum narrowing was seen in the adaptation of teaching styles to resemble testing methods, with repetitious instruction of isolated pieces of content while abandoning more innovative instructional strategies in favour of finding and correcting errors and solving only those types of math problems that will be found in the test (Nichols & Berliner, 2008). The fourth category of curriculum narrowing was seen in the excessive test preparation which focused on building students' test-taking skills, working in isolation, listening, writing, and working within an allotted time. While such practices familiarize students with the question and answer formats, lots of actual teaching time is lost. In addition, the constant repetition of the same task may lead to student boredom and burnout (Rhone, 2006; Blazer, 2011). There was also a loss of instructional time due to the disruption caused by increased testing preparation time (Zellmer, Frontier & Pheifer, 2006).

Au (2007) also discovered that high-stakes testing exerted a measure of formal control over the curriculum. To a lesser degree, Au found that teachers fragmented small, individualized, and isolated test-size pieces of content as a direct relation to the tests rather than integrating content with other subject matter knowledge.

Additionally, in a significant number of studies "participants reported that their pedagogy changed in response to high-stakes testing with an increase in teacher-centred instruction associated with lecturing and direct transmission of test-related facts" (Au, 2007 p. 263). In his paper, Madaus (1988) writes that teachers' instruction is increasingly driven by the testing process and this distorts the test's ability to serve as a valid indicator of the knowledge and skills it was originally intended to measure. These findings point to a significant negative impact of high-stakes testing on the curriculum and further suggest an added impact upon curriculum implementers and users, such as educators and test-takers, and by extension their families.

Impacts of High-stakes Testing on Educators, Test-Takers, and their Families

Despite opposing views, researchers have identified both positive and negative consequences of high-stakes testing on those close to the phenomenon. One study by Jones and Egley (2007) claims that because of high-stakes testing there is an increase in more

focused professional development for educators while Cizek (2001) suggests that high-stakes testing has certainly increased teachers' knowledge about testing. A few studies suggest that high-stakes testing leads teachers to better align instruction with content standards to ensure students are taught and tested on the content and skills (Perkins & Wellman, 2008; Yeh, 2005; Stecher 2002), while other researchers noted that when high-stakes testing results are paired with meaningful systems of support, more remediation opportunities are presented to support students' learning (Barnes, 2005; Gayler, et al., 2003).

A review of the literature on the impact of high-stakes testing revealed that many of the studies were conducted in the US (Polesel et al., 2012). Noteworthy was the discovery that the negative consequences of high-stakes testing far outweigh any positive impact. With regards to the negative impact on students' health and well-being, Stiggins (1999) explains that while high-stakes testing puts pressure on students to do well when such pressure is accompanied by a lack of support, they experience anxiety and a sense of futility. Wheelock et al (2002) identified a range of emotions from an analysis of participants' drawings and associate high-stakes tests with feelings of boredom, anger, motivation, and confidence. These include nervousness, feelings of isolation, alienation, and concern about the consequence of failures (Triplett & Barksdale, 2005). Children were also found to label themselves as failures, holding negative self-perceptions of themselves as a result of test anxiety (Cohen 1989; Reay & Williams, 1999). As such, the stress of high-stakes testing can contribute to student discouragement and eventual dropping out of school according to Lewis (2000) with a negative impact on students' self-esteem and a low teacher expectation (Perrone, 1991). With regards to students with learning disabilities, it was found that those who failed a minimum competency exam had higher dropout rates than regular education students (Macmillan et al., 1996).

Even classroom behaviours and social interactions between students and teachers are affected because of the pressure of high-stakes testing (Schroeder, 2006). Feelings of incompetence, negative labelling by teachers, increase in suspensions and undesirable behaviours, test avoidance, lowered self-esteem and confidence, freezing with fear during tests, emotional, psychological, and physical distress such as the inability to sleep, confusion, frustration, headaches, children's exhaustion, crying and vomiting are associated effects of high-stakes testing on students (Brown et al., 2004; Paris & McEvoy, 2000; Flores & Clark, 2003; Madaus, 2009). Barksdale-Ladd and Thomas (2000) report from their teacher interviews that the teachers were aware that they transferred their anxiety to their students

because of the pressure they experienced with testing. This clearly would have an impact on their learning.

Impact on Learning

With regards to students' learning, Paris (2000) finds that high-stakes testing information does not provide an accurate measure of student learning because of the differences in students' background knowledge and motivation, their possible levels of stress due to neighborhood violence, or family instability. Therefore, this information would likely be a poor source and is not suitable to use as a diagnostic tool for teachers and parents. The information from the test highlights what students did at a particular time under certain conditions on a limited task (Munro, 2010). According to Blazer (2011), high-stakes testing can damage students' intrinsic motivation and discourage them from exploring subjects that are not tested. Stecher et al. (2002) note that students become more competitive undermining group learning. Paris (2000) argues that testing regimes can foster low-level thinking and promote the valuing of outcome measures as opposed to the processes of learning. Speaking from an Australian context Lobascher (2011 p. 13) notes that high-stakes testing affects student learning because "methods of teaching that promote shallow and superficial learning rather than deep conceptual understanding" are encouraged by narrowly focusing on limited skills and risking the potential of students to develop socially and personally. Effects of testing also included the argument in Lobacher's (2011, p. 15-16) summary that "testing detracts teachers from being creative and removes the intrinsic motivation of love of learning in students, replacing this with extrinsic reward and threats which reduce the enjoyment of the teaching and learning experience." Not only were teachers affected but school leaders were affected likewise.

Impact on School Leaders

In her study on the impact of high-stakes testing on school leadership, Oliveras-Ortiz (2015) reports that the majority of the principals surveyed believed that maintaining the quality of instruction in the classroom and the pressure to produce high scores have impacted their leadership. One of her principals wrote in an open-ended questionnaire that she feels

pressured to drive her teachers, sometimes to the point of exhaustion, noting that her teachers would give up everything, even their family time to work with students to produce high scores in a one-day exam; an exam that does not measure all the content the students have learned so their school would not be labelled a failure (Oliveras-Ortiz, 2015). The same school principal noted that she feared burnout for her teachers and wrote that the "joy has been sucked right out of teaching because of the high demands of the test" (Oliveras-Ortiz, 2015p. 12). If principals experienced such pressure and exhaustion, it likely the parents of the test-takers would also be impacted.

Impact on Parents

Barksdale-Ladd and Thomas (2000) shared the pressure the parents in their interview experienced on the impact of testing. They found that several parents in the focus group reported that they knew of other parents who would keep their children home when there is a test to avoid a low score on their children's record which could have repercussions for college acceptance later on. While some parents criticized the value of the test referring to it as an unnecessary burden on their children, one that lacks balance in learning, other parents admitted they exerted pressure on their children to do well and worked hard to help them with their homework throughout the school year, using professionally prepared materials to coach their children in test-taking. Yet another parent commented that she saw how the results of high-stakes testing crushed her child saying it took something away from him because he used to be a child that couldn't wait to go to school and that was gone in him. (Barksdale-Ladd and Thomas, 2000). These studies underscore the value of understanding how persons connected with high-stakes testing can be impacted which includes the psychological, emotional, and physical impact.

Psychological, Emotional & Physical Impact of High-Stakes Testing

Researchers have found that the pressures associated with high-stakes testing can lead to emotional, psychological, and physical distress in students. Such effects include feelings of incompetence, negative labelling by teachers, increased suspensions and undesirable behaviours, test avoidance, lowered self-esteem, and confidence, freezing with fear during

tests, emotional, psychological, and physical distress such as the inability to sleep, confusion, frustration, headaches, children's exhaustion, crying and vomiting are associated effects of high-stakes testing on students (Brown et al., 2004; Paris & McEvoy, 2000; Flores & Clark, 2003; Madaus, 2009; Barksdale-Ladd & Thomas, 2000). Triplett and Barksdale (2005), and Wheelock et al., (2002) found that students experienced a range of emotions such as anger, motivation, confidence, nervousness, feelings of isolation, alienation, and concern about the consequence of failures. In the testing environment, students fear failure and see it as a threat to their ego or self-esteem (Spielberger, 1966). Some may suffer from exam phobia, an irrational fear characterized by a strong fear of performing in a way that is humiliating or embarrassing, with others judging them negatively while others may experience discomfort and anxiety during the exam and may seek ways to avoid the situation (Javed & Khan, 2011).

Anxiety and Fear

Regarding anxiety Pittman and Karle (2015) describe it as a complex emotional response that is similar to fear because they both stem from brain processes, and produce similar physiological and behavioural reactions. According to Pittman and Karle, fear is associated with the presence of clear imminent danger, and identifiable threat, while anxiety occurs when we feel that sense of dread or discomfort even though we are not in danger at that moment (2015).

McFarland (1987) defines fear as a motivational state aroused by specific stimuli that gives rise to defensive behaviour or escape. In contrast, anxiety occurs in the absence of immediate peril as a generalized response to an unknown threat or internal conflict (Pittman & Karle, 2015; Steimer, 2002; Craig et al., 1995). While fear and anxiety are normal human experiences, problems arise when they begin to interfere with the important aspects of one's life, limiting persons' lives in many ways, by robbing them of their capacity to fulfill and complete basic daily activities and preventing them from fully engaging in life (Pittman & Karle, 2015). Steimer (2002) adds that although anxiety is a natural adaptive reaction, it can become pathological and interfere with one's ability to cope successfully with various challenges or stressful events, even altering body conditions such as the formation of gastric ulcers.

Pittman and Karle explain that the amygdala, an almond-shaped structure located near the centre of the brain is the source of both positive and negative reactions over which we

have no control, and operates as a built-in alarm system to identify threats and send a danger signal (2015). As noted by LeDoux and Daw (2018) the amygdala is a central hub in the circuitry of freezing in response to fear or threat stimuli producing the fight, flight, or freeze response, which can be triggered by fear, anxiety, aggression, and anger, in preparing the body for action (Simic et al., 2021).

Linsambarth et al. (2017), confirm that the amygdala has a central role in anxiety responses to stressful and arousing situations. As such, physical effects associated with amygdala-based anxiety physiological responses may include a pounding heart or changes in heart rate and blood pressure, sweating, trembling, stomach distress, hyperventilation, panic attack, and increased blood flow and somatic sensations (Simic et al., 2021; Steimer, 2002). LeDoux (1996) explains that the amygdala has the neurological capability to override other brain processes, strongly influencing the brain's cortex which is responsible for reason-based thinking processes; processes that students would need very much during the high-stakes SEA exam. Goleman (2005) refers to overreaction to stress as "amygdala hijack" disabling rational, reasoned responses. LeDoux and Schiller (2009) add that amygdala can also influence the cortex by causing the release of chemicals that affects the entire brain that changes the way a person thinks. According to Guy-Evans (2021), the amygdala cannot differentiate between physical and emotional threats, so sudden stressful situations can trigger the amygdala to automatically respond before the frontal lobe has had a chance to provide logical reasoning to situations.

LeDoux (2000) further explains that the amygdala also plays a central role by "integrating rapid, direct thalamic inputs, e.g., visual information, with more detailed information, originating from longer and slower neural pathways" (p. 238). Therefore, if the amygdala is activated by threatening stimuli, the sensory information from the thalamus to the frontal lobes of the cortex which is responsible for higher brain functions such as perception, decision-making, and language, and back to the thalamus for logical reasoning, would be interrupted (Guy-Evans, 2021). Fear of high-stakes tests could negatively influence the cognitive processes, perception, selective attention, and explicit memory of students which can ultimately interfere with their exam performances. If the exam is seen as a threatening stimulus, there is the likelihood for test-takers to freeze up, feeling paralyzed under extreme stress brought about by the exam. Since fear and anxiety can hinder students' performance during an exam, strategies for coping with amygdala-based anxiety and emotions may need to be considered for test-takers.

Emotions

Regarding emotions, Letourneau (1878) defined them as passions of short duration with several physiological and behavioural responses being associated with strong emotions. Such changes may include responses such as changes in heart rate and secretions, paralysis of voluntary muscles, and alteration of sensory perceptions, including the feeling of physical pain. Steimer (2002) notes that Letourneau's views on emotion still have much value. He explains that since emotions are intricately linked to organic life, strong emotion such as fear is associated with physical effects such as increased blood flow. This has been confirmed by modern neuroscience and has implications for vulnerability to anxiety and mood disorders and feelings of anger (Davidson, 2002; Wheelock et al, 2000).

MacIntyre and Vincze (2017) also examined both positive and negative emotions to student-motivation to learn and found that motivation-related constructs are more strongly correlated with positive emotions than with negative emotions, which seem to suggest a negative impact of intense emotions on test-takers motivation to learn. In addition, Ashcraft and Kirk (2001) add that anxiety tends to reduce working memory capacity, impede cognitive capacity, and impair memory recall, all of which SEA students need to perform well in the exam and when coping with academic stress (Hembree, 1988).

Academic Stress

In addition, academic pressure or academic stress which refers to the day-to-day stress experienced by students in advance of the exam has also been found to affect test-takers (Banks & Smyth, 2015). According to Connor (2003), high-stakes testing can push levels of anxiety in some students beyond what is acceptable or even manageable. In their study, Banks and Smyth's (2015) findings highlight that academic pressure and stressors are constructed within the context of a school, from the impact of teacher-student relations, peer relations, and the curriculum. These findings seem to suggest that the schools can buffer the academic stressors students encounter leading up to exams by providing social support, fostering positive teacher-student relationships, and reducing fear appeals.

Banks and Smyth (2015) also link school-related stress and academic pressure with a person's self-image, which is the extent to which students feel capable of coping with school

work. The more negative a view, students have of themselves, the more likely they will experience stressful events (Garton & Pratt, 1995). As such, efforts at developing students' self-esteem can serve as a protective factor against the impact of academic pressures and stress and reduce feelings of stress and panic with pending exams (Schraml et al., 2011). While parental support can be a factor in mitigating the impact of academic pressure, if their expectation of their children's performance is unrealistic, academic pressure and stress levels are likely to increase. As the pressure and stress increase, students with a poor self-image would likely be most disadvantaged.

According to Roger's (1959) theory, children's self-worth which is their positive regard for themselves is affected by their childhood experiences with those close to them, their mother, father, and even their teachers (Ismail & Tekke, 2015). If students' negative experiences affect their self-worth, according to Rogers (1961) students will be less likely to cope with ensuing challenges in their lives, experience difficulty tolerating failures, and coping with sadness. This conclusion highlights the importance for schools and family members to create and provide positive childhood experiences to build children's self-worth.

According to Maslow's (1943) theory, human needs motivate human behaviours. Therefore, when students' desire to feel secure and their safety and security needs are unmet and undermined by a plethora of negative feelings from their experience with the exam, they could have difficulty aspiring and satisfying their need for self-worth, respect, status, recognition, admiration, and confidence. Once these needs remain unmet, students can become at risk of developing into psychologically healthy persons with ensuing difficulty with how they see themselves, think, feel and act in the world (Cervone & Pervin, 2008).

Examination Stress

In addition to academic stress, examination stress is defined in a broader way than test anxiety and is an umbrella term used to refer to the negative effects associated with examinations which can include the pressure of time, the exhaustion of having to sit multiple exams in a day, and its interference on relationships and social activities (Putwain, 2008). Test anxiety on the other hand is an effect of examination stress, a situation-specific trait that may affect persons differently because it is based on the extent to which persons may find an exam threatening, which makes it different from anxiety in general (Spielberger & Vagg,

1995). It refers to the appraisal of tests as threatening or anxiety-provoking that could be related to lower academic achievement and test performance (Zeidner, 1998; Hembree, 1998). This could be detrimental to overall academic success (Chapell et al., 2005). Students who are test-anxious react with extensive worry, mental disorganization, tension, and maladaptive cognitions such as threat perception, reduced self-efficacy anticipatory failure attribution, and self-criticism (Mathews et al., 1999). Zeidner (1998), also identified three components, cognitive, affective, and behavioural to show how test anxiety can affect students. The cognitive might be affected when students experience a flurry of negative thoughts, make belittling statements about themselves and experience difficulties in recalling facts and comprehension. The affective could be affected when their physiological state experiences, tension, tight muscles, and trembling. The behavioural could be affected when they exhibit poor study skills, avoidance, and procrastination of work. It is not surprising, therefore, that higher levels of cognitive test anxiety were associated with significantly lower test scores showing that test anxiety can interfere with academic performance measures of students (Cassady & Johnson, 2001). According to Putwain (2008), examination students become stressed and experience test anxiety when they contemplate the educational consequences of their performance at the exam; when they judge themselves based on their grades; when they fear being judged by others, and fear appeals by teachers or the repeated messages by teachers, and others such as parents.

Fear Appeals

'Fear appeals' refer to messages used by teachers under pressure, as they repeatedly remind students about the importance of passing exams and the consequences of failure (Putwain & Roberts, 2009). Fear appeals are also described as threat-based messages used before exams that focus on the negative consequence of test failure by provoking students' fear of negative consequences (von der Embse et al., 2015). Although fear appeals are used in an attempt to increase test performance, these messages may be counter-productive because they can make students feel threatened and anxious, thereby lowering their performance (Putwain & Best, 2012; Putwain & Symes, 2014).

On the contrary, it is recommended that instead of using fear appeals, von der Embse et al. (2015), recommend that "efficacy appeals" may be used because these are non-threatening messages that are generally more effective over time because they reinforce how

capable students can reach their goals and produce more positive performance outcomes. Unfortunately, many students resort to self-harming practices because of their inability to cope.

Self-Harming

Self-harm is defined as the deliberate harm to one's body, without the intent of committing suicide and could be described as self-abuse, self-inflicted violence, self-injury, self-mutilation, or self-injurious behaviour (McDougall et al., 2010). According to McDougall et al. (2010), self-harm is not about ending life but more about regulating emotions, survival, and coping with stress that occurs impulsively. They add that self-harming describes the behaviour and not the intent and may include self-mutilation, burning, banging head and other body parts against the wall, hair pulling, biting and swallowing, or inserting objects. Other definitions note that people who self-harm, usually do so in a state of high emotional distress and unbearable inner turmoil. They see it as a way to express deep emotional feelings, and deep distress, and to cope with painful and difficult feelings.

Kilroy-Findley (2015) notes that the psychological drivers of deliberate self-harm stem from one's emotional release valve, self-punishment for perceived guilt when one is deeply distressed, and an attempt to gain some control of life. This information seems to suggest that there is a need for concern about the level of distress test-takers are placed under, especially if such distress may drive some students to inflict harm upon themselves as a form of emotional release.

Since low self-esteem is also linked to deliberate self-harming it highlights the importance of building students' self-esteem very early (Kilroy-Findley, 2015). This position is supported by Rogers's (1959) theory that persons with high self-worth tend to cope better with the challenges of life and develop to become fully functioning persons while Maslow (1943) emphasized the need for children to feel safe and secure to position themselves to learn.

Parenting and High-Stakes Testing

An over-involvement of parents in their children's lives, providing them developmentally and contextually inappropriate level of control through advice, direction, and problem-solving assistance is referred to as helicopter parenting (Nelson, 2010; LeMoyne & Buchanan, 2011). It is characterized as parenting that is high on control and low on granting autonomy; overprotective or solicitous which is often linked with maladaptive outcomes such as anxiety-related problems, social withdrawal, shyness, and peer difficulties in younger children (Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2012; Bayer, et al., 2006). According to Moilanen and Manuel (2019), helicopter parenting occurs most in middle to upper-class families where the stakes are high for parents to be able to show off their children's success and they are concerned about reaping the rewards for themselves and not really about what their children want. She adds that helicopter parenting does more harm than just build resentment toward an interfering parent but children may take the overindulgent parental decisions to heart, which in turn can undermine their sense of self-concept and their ability to self-regulate. Schiffrin et al. (2019) associate overinvolved parenting with lower and poor academic achievement as a result of decreased self-efficacy, lower academic engagement, increased procrastination, dependence on extrinsic motivation, perfectionism, feelings of entitlement, and the avoidance of goals. Moilanen and Manuel (2019) explain that in the face of problems, over-parented children lack the autonomy to deal with problems, require more oversight, and may experience heightened anxiety which leads to problems associated with depression. There is a likely long-term impact where children of this parenting style perpetuate this cycle of helicopter parenting with their children as they grow into adulthood.

Such parenting style has been found to have adverse effects on the social and emotional well-being of emerging adults (LeMoyne & Buchanan, 2011). Cook's (2020) findings suggest that young people who were victims of more helicopter parenting also reported decreased fulfilment of basic psychological needs and more depressive symptoms, decreased friendship and dating relationship competence, and increased substance abuse. On the other hand, some engage in self-blaming behaviours.

Self-Blaming Behaviours

The act of accusing and blaming oneself; a remorseful persistent blaming that is accompanied by elevated distress, the feeling of regret, and self-criticism is referred to as self-recrimination (Merriam-Webster, online). One student participant wrote that she will not forgive herself, even expressing her desire for "God to take her" if she did not pass for a prestigious school. One parent participant was tearfully self-blaming and self-criticizing even as she recounted the disappointment, she caused her parents when she failed to pass for a prestigious school to please them. Another parent self-criticized and felt he couldn't forgive himself, expressing an intense feeling of self-recrimination for the level of distress and anxiety he caused his son by pressuring him to pass for a prestigious school; a feat his son never achieved.

Shahar (2015) defines self-criticism as an intense and persistent relationship with the self, characterized by an uncompromising demand for high standards in performance and by an expression of hostility and derogation towards the self when these high standards are inevitably not met. Self-criticism can take two forms, the hated self which is characterized by disgust, contempt, and hatred of self, and the inadequate self which is characterized by feelings of inadequacy and inferiority (Gilbert, et al., 2004a). Such thoughts of self-condemnation may contribute to depression and even suicidal ideation (Beck, et al., 1983; O'Connor & Noyce, 2008). Shahar (2015) proposes that self-criticism can perpetuate a cycle of depression as it can lead to negative interpersonal events which can reduce social support, which could lead to further self-criticism and ongoing depression.

To minimize the negative impact of persons experiencing an intense feeling of self-recrimination, such ones may need to seek professional help to learn to reassure themselves by becoming warm and tender, forgiving and compassionate toward themselves. (Wu et al., 2018). Other researchers have found that the more individuals reassure themselves, the more they experience self-warmth and the higher their emotional well-being and they are less likely to remain depressed (Neff & MCGehee, 2010; Lopez et al., 2018; Barcaccia et al., 2020). On the contrary, some require more than self-assurance, needing validation to feel good about themselves.

Validation

Validation is defined as communicating to others that their feelings, thoughts, and actions make sense and are understandable within their context and situation and can be described as the recognition and acceptance of someone else's experience (Linehan, 1993; Rathus & Miller, 2015; Hall, 2012). Approval-seeking which is described as a human need for social approval facilitates the need for reassurance or external validation (Martin, 1984). Approval-seeking and external validation are essential components of human motivation as purported by Maslow's (1954) love, belonging, and esteem needs. Hence, it is normal for children to seek validation and approval from others. As noted by Wei et al. (2005), "external sources of affirmation promote an increasingly positive self-appraisal and a growing capacity in older children and adolescents to validate and reinforce themselves." (p. 369). Even in adulthood, occasional reassurance may prove beneficial in stressful situations and encourages social rapport (Cutrona & Russell, 1990). Kim and Kim (2013) add that validation can be effective in lowering negative moods and aggression among undergraduate students. However, if students' need for external validation escalated to the point where their sole objective was to please others even if it conflicts with their feelings; if they get depressed and sad based on what others think about their performance; if their self-worth and self-esteem are dependent on obtaining others' approval; if they begin to experience social anxiety, performance anxiety; attachment anxiety and demonstrate an inability to regulate strong emotions, then optimal childhood development which is expected to produce healthy, well-adjusted young people and adults would be at risk (Wei et al., 2005).

Self-esteem is defined as an individual sense of self-worth and self-respect and positively correlates with a person's well-being, and life satisfaction (Garcia et al., 2019; Diener & Diener, 1995). Crocker and Wolfe's (2001) model proposes that individuals base their self-worth on seven different contingencies; academic competence, physical appearance, virtue, having God's love, love from family, outdoing others in competitions, and obtaining other persons' approval. Students who base their self-worth on the academic competence domain, tend to experience lower self-esteem and depressive symptoms when they perform poorly or less than expected when compared with students whose self-worth was less invested in this domain of academic performance (Crocker et al., 2003).

Chapter Two Conclusion

This review of the literature provided an overview of high-stakes testing. According to Madaus (1988), testing is used for selection, certification, and educational accountability. The first is characterized by how decisions are made about students. Such decisions are based on their assessment results which allow them to be selected to access or transition to different levels of schooling opportunities. The second is characterized by the certification of students' knowledge and skills using grades and numerical scores, based on their test performance, while the third, is for holding individuals and educational institutions accountable.

This review also discusses the ongoing dilemma between proponents and opponents of high-stakes testing within school systems. The literature demonstrates that this phenomenon has been studied for several decades drawing the interest of many on an international scale. On one hand, high-stakes testing has been seen as a tool for improving students' academic achievement, increasing teachers' knowledge of high-stakes testing, and improving their ability to align their instruction to content standards. (Farkas et al., 2003; Roderick et al., 2002; Firestone et al., 200; Perkins & Wellman, 2008). On the other hand, more of the literature considered for this review projected the harmful psychological, emotional, and physical impact high-stakes testing had on students, their educators, their parents, as well as student learning, and the curriculum delivery process and methodology (Nichols & Berliner, 2008; Amoako et al., 2019; Au, 2007; Nichols & Blazer, 2011; Berliner, 2008; Zellmer, Frontier & Pheifer, 2006). Despite opposing views, researchers have conceded that there are both positive and negative disadvantages arising from high-stakes testing (Egley, 2007; Cizek, 2001; Yeh, 2005).

Even so, the impact of high-stakes testing highlighted by several researchers, cannot be ignored or seen as a mere disadvantage because of the nature of the impact high-stakes testing has had on school leaders, teachers, students, and their parents. Students experienced anger, nervousness, feelings of isolation and alienation, feeling like failures, negative perception of self, lowered self-esteem, discouragement, fear, anxiety, and academic and examination-related stress and phobias, frustration, headaches, vomiting, crying, and exhaustion (Pittman & Karle, 2015; Brown et al., 2004; Paris & McEvoy, 2000; Flores & Clark, 2003; Madaus, 2009; Barksdale-Ladd & Thomas, 2000; Triplett and Barksdale, 2005). Some students who experienced deep distress engaged in self-harming and self-blaming behaviours as a way to express deep emotional distress, while others developed an escalated

need for external validation to feel a sense of worth (Kilroy-Findley, 2015; Gilbert, et al., 2004a; Wei et al., 2005). Parents, on the other hand, exhibited helicopter parenting behaviours, characterized by being overprotective and over-controlling toward their children which are linked to anxiety-related problems, social withdrawal, shyness, and peer difficulty (Nelson, 2010; LeMoyne & Buchanan, 2011; Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2012; Bayer, et al., 2006). What is more, educators were found to experience exhaustion and burn-out, in the face of pressure, which resulted in curriculum narrowing and the use of fear appeals to pressure students to get high scores (Putwain & Roberts, 2009).

The findings from the literature provide a clear direction to proceed with my research. It points to how I can get clear answers to my research questions concerning my participants' experiences, their perspectives, beliefs, and values, and the many ways their lives were impacted by their experiences with the high-stakes SEA exam. The review also provided a fine foundation to engage in the analysis of data and to search for the answers to my research questions.

Moreover, the review demonstrates a key conclusion, that the intent of high-stakes testing assessment systems was not designed to put the learner at the centre of learning, nor was it designed to measure their progress with the intent of improving their learning opportunities. Rather the focus was on judging what students knew and can do at a given point in time. That judgment fed the decisions made about them and strongly influenced their progress on the educational spectrum.

This review also provided a better understanding of the current research on the impact of high-stakes testing from the work done by other researchers and situates my research study within the context of the wider research community. The following chapter now presents the methodology for this study and the description of how I carried out my research study to find answers to my research questions.

Chapter 3: The Methodology of the Study

An Introduction and Overview

The Ministry of Education in Trinidad and Tobago has as its general objective to provide an education system that fosters a democratic way of life by ensuring that "all citizens, regardless of their gender, class, culture or ethnic origin have the ability to learn" and are "provided with the opportunity to develop that potential to the fullest" (UNESCO, 2010 p. 2; MOE, 1993). However, among the deficiency identified in the education system that can hamper this objective is the predominant use of assessments and exams to measure and judge the worth of students rather than promote student learning through continuous assessment accompanied by clear standards, diagnosis, feedback, and remediation (DeLisle, 2010). At the primary level of schooling, educators and parents are narrowly focused on exam preparation. Their main objective is to help students get high scores on the SEA exam, so they can have a chance of selection and placement into elite secondary schools. However, they take lightly the possibility of harmful physical, social, emotional, and psychological impacts the SEA experience may have on those involved.

The purpose of this study was to describe and interpret the experiences educators, parents and students have with the SEA exam, to explore their beliefs and values surrounding SEA, and to learn about the impact their experiences have had on their lives by using a qualitative methodological research design. Qualitative thematic data analysis was used to identify patterns followed by discussions of multiple themes which enhanced my understanding of the SEA phenomenon. Such understandings can be used to inform policy and decision-making that can align testing practices with national educational goals and objectives.

This study was nested in the naturalistic paradigm or worldview and an interpretive constructionist approach. The naturalistic paradigm assumes that there are multiple interpretations of reality and my goal was to understand how each of my participants constructed their own reality with the social context of their experiences (MacDonald & Headlam, 1986). The interpretive constructionist approach allowed me to view the data through multiple lenses. The goal is to understand participants' realities and to learn how they interpret their experiences and assign meanings and values to them (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

After a brief introduction and overview of this study, this chapter restates my research questions. It then discusses my methodological considerations and assumptions and provides a rationale for using a qualitative methodological research design to find answers to my research questions. The chapter includes a description of my research samples and a description of the type of information I needed to look for to address my research questions. A snapshot of my research design is also presented, along with an explanation of my data collection methods and procedures, as well as a report on how I proceeded to collect my data. Ethical considerations, establishing trustworthiness, and limitations for my study are also discussed along with the ethical considerations for doing research in small island states. Finally, the chapter ends with a chapter conclusion.

My Research Questions

1. What are the experiences of educators, students, and parents associated with the high-stakes SEA exam?
2. What are the beliefs and values in the perspectives of participants associated with the high-stakes SEA exam?
3. What impact has the experiences with the SEA exam had on participants' lives?
4. What are the implications of the study's findings?

Methodological Considerations and Assumptions

Research methodology is described as a systematic, theoretical analysis of the methods applied to a field of study which comprises a body of methods and principles that are associated with a branch of knowledge, philosophies, and approaches (Igwenagu, 2016). This branch of knowledge of research methodology outlines how a research project is undertaken, and the design process or developmental procedure for carrying out the research. It involves the use of concepts such as paradigms, and systematic qualitative and quantitative techniques that guide how the research is conducted and how the data is analyzed. The research methodology differs from the research methods. While the research methodology provides the theoretical underpinnings and assumptions for understanding the research

process, the research methods on the other hand define the means, mode, or strategies for actually collecting the data.

Duffy & Chenail (2008) explain that every research design reflects a particular paradigm or worldview and contains a set of values about its ontology, epistemology, methodology, and axiology. Hitchcock and Hughes (1995) suggest that my ontological assumptions about the nature of reality give rise to my epistemological assumptions about the ways of researching and enquiring into the nature of reality, which in turn, would lead to my choice of methods for data collection (p. 21). Hence, if my data collection methods do not match my philosophical bases, the research process may be incongruent with my assumptions and the fidelity and quality of my research findings could be questionable.

If my ontological assumption was that the world exists as an empirical entity, with hard tangible, and immobile structures that were independent of the cognitive thoughts of humans (Gill & Johnson, 1997), my choice of research methods would seek to reduce the role of educators, students and parents to elements that were subject to the influence of a "deterministic set of forces" (Morgan & Smircich, 1980 p. 498). Such a view was identified by Cohen et al. (2011) as the positivist modernist view where I would see the world as "orderly, controllable, predictable, standardized, mechanistic, deterministic, stable, objective, rational, impersonal, largely inflexible, a closed system whose study yields immutable, universal laws and patterns of behaviour" (p. 26). Consequently, my chosen methods would seek to identify and quantify causal relationships to explain patterns of social behaviour (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Lowe, 1991) using empirical surveys and experiments (Remenyi, Williams, Money & Swartz, 1998). Such methods would lead to the manipulation of data using a variety of statistical analyses to explain the nature of the world by examining relationships between elements with no consideration for context (Morgan & Smircich, 1980). Such a view is aligned with a quantitative methodology.

However, if I relax my ontological assumption to see the social world as a form of an open-ended process rather than concrete, human beings are likely to be acknowledged not just as responders to their environment but could actively contribute to the construction of its reality, making scientific type research methods inappropriate (Morgan & Smircich, 1980). My choice of research methods would not be the closed procedures where I could externally observe and measure what was seen, but rather my choice would be more appropriate

methods that allow for investigation of the phenomenon from within such as in-depth interviewing methods (Morgan & Smircich, 1980).

On the other hand, if my assumptions were concerned with critically analyzing a situation to develop an understanding of taken-for-granted systems, power structures, beliefs, and social conditions and uncover oppressive power arrangements, I would take a critical perspective to this research (Beaumont, 2006). While critical theories share some ideas of the interpretative paradigms, they focus greatly on "empowering habits of inquiry", "critical curiosity about society", "power inequality" and change (Shor, 1992 p.15). Critical researchers are concerned with how the "structures of power, culture, class, race, and gender shape human experiences within a society" (Duffy & Chenail, 2008 p. 28). Therefore, what counts as knowledge is influenced by communities that define what is acceptable (Cohen et al., 2011). Hence, critical researchers may employ whatever methods are available for further inquiry, so they are not stuck within the parameters of a quantitative or qualitative paradigm nor are they biased toward a specific direction before doing research (Beaumont, 2006). In addition, since critical researchers believe that knowledge is socially constructed, research methods are to be "participatory, dialogical and interrogatory" in nature (Duffy & Chenail, 2008 p. 28) such as in-depth semi-structured and unstructured interview methods which can enable dialogue between participants in the research to yield data that has the potential to create change by transforming socially unjust policies, social structures, beliefs, and practices to resolve power imbalance in society (Taylor & Medina, 2013). Duffy and Chenail (2008) suggest possible research designs, values, and philosophies that can match methodologies to various research perspectives.

The Rationale for Choosing a Qualitative Research Design

The qualitative paradigm was appropriate for nesting this study because it came with a series of inherent assumptions that were aligned with my theoretical assumptions, that reality is subjective and therefore, realities for my participants would differ. Qualitative research embraced approaches that were naturalistic, and interpretive and allowed for multiple methods of inquiry to be used (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). I believe that my participants' reality with their engagement with the exam could be influenced by complex and contextual situations, which could be reconstructed through interaction and conversation.

Contained in the naturalistic paradigm are ideas of interpretive constructionism which echoed my belief, that each of my participants saw their experiences through different lenses, because of differences in their backgrounds, roles and positions, contextual knowledge, and their interaction with those around them. As such, their expectations, which differed, led to different conclusions and multiple realities that came to be known through their interpretations. Since I was interested in describing these interpretations, qualitative research became the ideal theoretical paradigm for me to seek answers to my research questions.

While the quantitative research paradigm might have been considered, it would not have been appropriate for this research study for several reasons. Firstly, the ideas of one fixed reality that underpin quantitative research, with one objective truth that could be observed and measured, were not aligned with the purpose of my study. Learning about my participants' experiences, beliefs, values, and perspectives required open-ended conversational and constructive enquiry found in qualitative research. Secondly, I could not measure my participants' experiences, beliefs, and values if I did not know what they were. And finally, my study is based on finding answers through inquiry, discovery, and interpretation and the quantitative paradigm could not facilitate these processes.

Furthermore, using a qualitative research methodology facilitated the use of qualitative methods for data collection, with face-to-face in-depth interviews as my primary method. This method allowed me to become the co-constructor of knowledge rather than being the one that simply received the knowledge (Rallis & Rossman, 2003). Merriam (1998) noted that a primary method of data collection is often supported by other methods to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. As such, I was able to use other qualitative methods for data collection to ensure the trustworthiness of my findings.

The qualitative paradigm also facilitated my use of document analysis which provided important discoverable insights into all of the students' experiences, beliefs, values, and expectations of the exam. The essays were written by pre-SEA students and represented a source of textual data, which were expressed in their own words and dialect and were just ready for analysis (Creswell, 2008).

Positionality Statement

Having engaging conversations as I conducted interviews with participants of this study, was not new to me. Before conducting my research, I had worked on other research projects with the School of Education at the University of the West Indies as a research officer in the field. My visits to classrooms throughout several elementary schools in Trinidad and Tobago, gathering data for documentary analysis and interviewing teachers, provided me with an experience that prepared me for using in-depth interviews and documentary analysis as my methods of data collection in this research.

The Research Sample for In-depth Interviewing

A purposeful sample of thirteen, inclusive of male and female participants of varying ages including students, parents, school principals, and teachers was interviewed. Participants were selected based on their ability to provide information-rich data that answered my research questions (Patton, 1990). Since I wanted to learn about persons' experiences, beliefs, and values concerning the high-stakes SEA exam and to learn also the impact it had on their lives, I deliberately selected persons who held that information (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Hence, the sample was more purposeful and meaningful and not one of convenience, based on the availability of participants. While I originally intended to interview eight participants, the number grew to thirteen for three reasons. First, I had a desire to capture as many perspectives as possible, and second, I wanted to ensure that I had sufficient data that was rich enough to generate thick descriptions for my research finding (Geertz, 1973). Finally, I had no difficulty in getting people, all of whom wanted to share their experiences with me. Although I could have extended the number further, I had to desist from doing further interviews because I felt I had reached a point of saturation and I started to feel overwhelmed by the data. I also feared information overload which would have required additional time for analysis.

The Sampling Strategy. The sampling strategy I used for selecting this purposeful sample was described by Patton (1990) as a maximum variation sampling. I was able to interview individuals with diverse characteristics aimed at describing emerging themes. Identifying common themes and patterns that emerged from a variety of interviewees was of great "value in capturing core experiences" and shared aspects (Patton, 1990 p. 172). As

such, participants varied in age, gender and occupation, and lived in various parts of Trinidad and Tobago. I came to know of participants because of my work in supporting teacher education at various schools. Before data collection, I gave careful thought to ascertaining who the likely holders of the knowledge were. I wrote down their names and made contact using the telephone to set appointments for interviews. As I collected the data my participants provided, I digitally recorded their rich experiences with the eleven-plus exam.

The Interviewees' Demographics & Contextual Information. The following table explains the details of my interviewees presented in alphabetic order of their pseudonyms. The variety in age, gender, and ethnicity was purposefully explored to demonstrate respect for diversity. As such, I intended to be inclusive and to endear all readers, especially since Trinidad and Tobago is a diverse, multicultural, and multi-ethnic society.

Of the thirteen participants, three teenagers were included in the sample because their experiences with the exam would be notably recent within the last decade. However, the student essays captured a range of views from this pre and early teen group. The older participants not only had experiences with the exam as parents and educators but they all would have experienced the exam having done the exam themselves as children. Hence, their stories were based on experiences that spanned decades, adding to the richness of the data. Their rich experiences with the high-stakes exam were similar even though participants would have done the exam with a different name and format, either the common entrance or the SEA. The following Table 3:0:1 which is designed by Bloomberg and Volpe (2012 p. 9) was used to describe the demographics of my interviewee participants.

#	Pseudonyms	Age Range	Gender	Ethnicity	Occupation & Status at the time of Interview	Level of Education
1.	Alice	45-50	Female	Afro-Trinidadian	Parent – Alice was a mother of four children, three of whom had done the SEA exam. She	Diploma

					worked at the Bank as a loan officer.	
2.	Betty	55-60	Female	Afro-Trinidadian	Educator – Betty was a Primary School Teacher that taught Standards 4 & 5 classes where she prepared students for the 11 plus exam for 30 years. Betty lived in a well-developed area in Trincity, east of Trinidad, and worked at a school for 32 years in Laventille, a high-poverty area, east of the capital city Port-of-Spain.	Diploma
3.	Caroline	45-50	Female	Mixed Race	Educator – Caroline was a Primary school teacher that taught the SEA class for over 18 years. She lives in east Trinidad and works at a school close to her home.	Undergraduate

4.	Cole	50-55	Male	Afro-Trinidadian	Parent – Cole was the father of two children. His son had completed the SEA exam. He worked at a telecommunication company and had a background in the union that stood in the defense of workers' rights.	Diploma
5.	Gwyneth	60-65	Female	Afro-Trinidadian	Educator - Retired primary school Principal and SEA teacher for over 20 years. Gwyneth also taught at the tertiary level and was herself a Ph.D. student.	Post Graduate
6.	Lyn	60-65	Female	Afro-Trinidadian	Educator – Retired principal from a prestigious primary school in the south of Trinidad, San Fernando.	Undergraduate
7.	Mark	11-15	Male	Mixed	Student – Mark was in form one at	Secondary School

					secondary school. He had completed the SEA exam in a little over one year.	
8.	Mathew	55-60	Male	Mixed	Educator – Mathew was an educator at the tertiary level at a Law school in St. Augustine Trinidad. He also lived in the same area	Post Graduate
9.	Neema	30-35	Female	Indo-Trinidadian	Educator – Neema was a primary school teacher for 6 years and taught the SEA class for 4 years.	Undergraduate
10.	Nina	15-20	Female	Mixed	Student - Nina was in form 4 at a secondary school. She had completed the SEA exam	Ordinary Level
11.	Rita	50-55	Female	Mixed	Educational Psychologist	Post Graduate
12.	Sarah	50-55	Female	Afro-Trinidadian	Educator - Sarah was a primary school principal for 6 years and was a	Undergraduate

					SEA teacher for 12 years	
13.	Vaughn	15-20	Male	Mixed	Student - Vaughn completed his secondary education and is employed in customer sales. He is working and going to school on weekends	Certificate

Table 3:0:1 – Demographics of Interviewees Participants

The Research Sample of Participants for Documentary Analysis

To get a snapshot of how students felt about the exam, I chose a purposeful sample; a class of standard five students with boys and girls to write essays. Since the students were in the process of preparing for the SEA exam, I felt they were in an ideal position to share their own lived experiences and their feelings, as well as their hopes and expectations. This sample was one of convenience. I knew the principal of the primary school. As such, I was granted permission to gain access to the students. After the students wrote their essays, I collected and secured them, and then I left the school premises.

The Sampling Strategy. This purposeful strategy described by Patton (1990) was a confirming or disconfirming strategy. The strategy described my decision to gather this form of data from the students' essays. The decision was made after I listened to my participants' experiences during the interviews. Patton described the process where early in the research the researcher begins to identify patterns based on the data gathered from exploration and decides to confirm or disconfirm their importance and meanings. This explains why this sampling procedure took place during the course of the study, as it unfolded. I felt this approach was needed after I had learned what some of my participants' experiences had been

from the interviews I conducted early on. I felt a need to follow up and explore how students were thinking a few months before the exam to get a sense of and confirm the "importance and meanings of possible patterns" and to note "the viability of emergent findings with new data" that could be generated (Patton 1990 p. 178). This sample could also be described as a homogeneous sample because I was able to describe the thoughts and feelings of people with a similar schooling background, experiencing the same phenomenon at a given time (Patton, 1990).

The Class Demographic. The sample fifth standard class had 16 pre-SEA students, with 7 girls and 9 boys ranging between the ages of 11 and 14 years old. Each student was asked to write their age and gender on the cover of the essay response paper. Based on what they wrote on the cover page I assigned a code name to each student to be able to identify each document.

Although the exam was intended for 11-year-olds, their ages differed for several reasons. I have observed, from my own experience, where parents registered children for entry into primary school at 6 plus rather than at age 5, so after 7 years of primary schooling, they will be at age 13. Then, there are instances where students were retained rather than promoted to the next grade level because of poor academic performance and reading difficulties. The other possibility arises when students who would have failed the SEA exam previously must repeat the exam since they had two chances to do the exam. The next scenario that could account for the variance in students' ages may have occurred when parents were dissatisfied with the school their children passed for in their first attempt at the exam. They would then request the school to allow their children to repeat the SEA exam the following year in hope that they would pass for a prestigious school of their choice with a second chance.

The Materials Used in the Data Collection Process

A Five-page Interview Guide. For the in-depth interviews, I prepared an interview guide to remind myself of my primary focus before each interview session. The interview guide could be found in the appendix. Page one restated my research questions and the procedure I engaged in before the start of each interview. Page two had a list of research reminders that were consistent with my choice of using in-depth interviews as a method of

data collection. Page three listed a series of broad open-ended questions and possible probing questions that allowed interviewees to share their experiences freely with me. Page four remained blank for note-taking and page five contained a table where I aligned my research questions, with possible interview questions and questions for analysis. This helped me to remain focused on my research objectives throughout the process.

The Students' Essay Booklets. To get Pre-SEA students to write their essays for analysis, I designed a three-page booklet that was given to each student which could be seen in the appendix. On the first page, I wrote a letter to the students introducing myself and stating my interest with brief instructions. On the second page, I provided a prompt to stimulate students' thinking to write their thoughts, feelings, and experiences about the upcoming SEA exam they were scheduled to sit in a few months, on pages 2 and 3. In my introductory note, I told the students that they did not have to write their names on the booklet and reassured them that their written expressions would remain confidential.

A Digital Recorder. The digital recorder was used to record all interview sessions with my research participants. I used free online transcription software to transcribe the contents of my recordings. The printed transcripts were used for analysis.

An Overview of the Types of Information Needed

To learn about participants' experiences with the SEA exam and learn about their values and perspectives and ascertain what impact these experiences had on their lives, I focused on obtaining information from various participants using two different data collection techniques to get answers to my four research questions. The information which fell into four basic categories was described as contextual, perceptual, demographic, and theoretical information (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). The contextual information included the history and background of participants' employment and educational status, and the positions they held at the time of the interview. Their demographic information included their age, gender, where they worked, and ethnicity. The perceptual information needed had to do with my participants' experiences, beliefs, and values about the SEA exam and underlying issues while the theoretical information was derived through an ongoing review of the literature that supported my methodological approach, methods of data collection, the interpretation, data analysis, discussion, and recommendations. The following table,

Table 3:0:2 a design by Bloomberg and Volpe (2012 p. 10) and presents a summary of the type of knowledge I needed to address my research questions.

Information Type	**Researcher Needed**	**Method of Data Collection**
Contextual	• History and background information • To know how participants were connected to the exam	Review of the Literature Interview
Demographic	Descriptive information such as participants' age group, occupation, gender, ethnicity	Interview
Perceptual	Descriptions of participants' experiences and explanations through an interpretation of their issues, beliefs, and values as they relate to the SEA exam	In-depth Interviews Document Analysis – Student Essays
Theoretical	Information on high-stakes testing, qualitative research, interview methods, data collection methods such as responsive in-depth interviewing and document analysis; coding, and thematic analysis	Review of the literature
Research Question 1.	• To learn and describe participants' experiences before, during, and after the SEA exam	In-depth interview Document analysis

What are the experiences of educators, students, and parents associated with the high-stakes SEA exam?	• To understand the meanings of these experiences and explore possible implications. • To learn how these experiences made participants feel about themselves and others. • A description of participants' feelings and emotions they experienced with the high-stakes test • To learn of others' input, who were co-constructors of participants' shared experiences	
Research Question 2. What are the beliefs and values in the perspectives of participants associated with the high-stakes SEA exam?	• To learn what beliefs, interests, and values participants hold and how these inform their perspectives about the exam. • To understand why participants, hold their expressed beliefs. • To explore the possible implications of participants' beliefs, values, and perspectives on education development.	In-depth interview Document analysis
Research Question 3. What impact has the experiences with the SEA exam had on participants' lives?	• To learn of the impact participants' experiences have had on their lives. • To learn of ways, the experiences changed their lives. • To understand how their experiences with the exam had affected their views, beliefs, perspectives, decisions, and behaviours after the phenomenon	In-depth Interview

Research Question 4. What are the implications of the study's findings?	• To determine what recommendations can be made moving forward based on the findings of the study.	In-depth Interviews Documentary analysis of student essays

Table 3:0:2 – Types of Knowledge Needed to Answer my Research Questions

Research Design

This section outlines the research design and methodology I used in conducting my research. The research design, which is illustrated graphically is followed by the various steps I took in researching, from data collection to analysis.

According to Creswell (2008) "research designs are specific procedures involved in the last three steps of the research process: data collection, data analysis and report writing" (p. 59). Leedy (1997) defines research design as a plan or overall framework for collecting the data. This plan directs the selection of research participants and data collection procedures that could lead to answers to research questions that could be judged as sound and credible (MacMillan & Schumacher, 2001). The research design also operates as a bridge between the research questions and the execution strategy (Durrheim (2004). Below is a diagram of the research design and methodology for my study as seen in Figure 3:0:1.

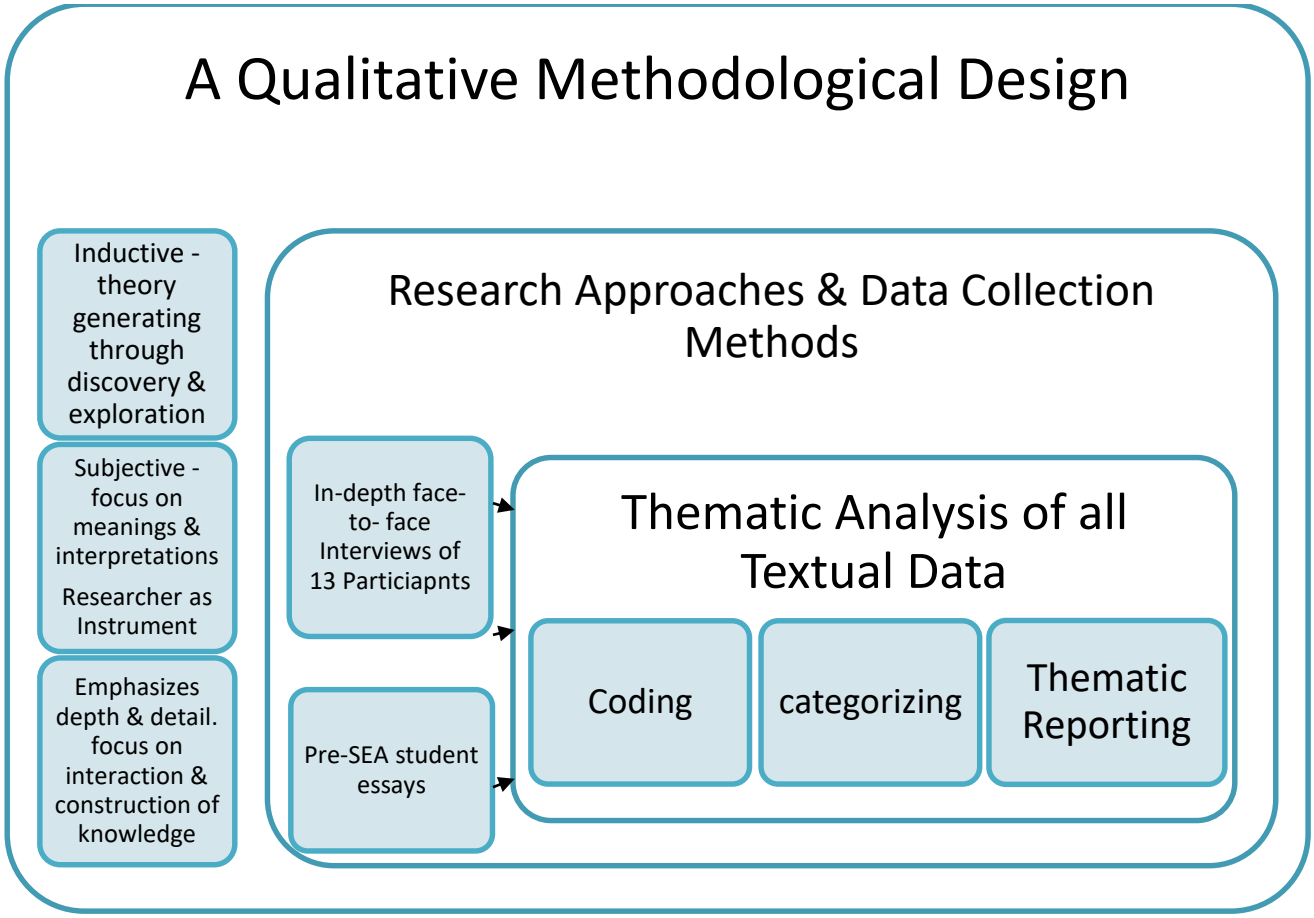

Figure 3:0:1 – Research Design and Methodology

Data Collection Methods, Settings, and Procedures

The methods or tools used for collecting the data were in-depth interviews and students' pre-SEA essays. The in-depth interviews were used as the primary tool for data collection.

In-depth Interviewing. In-depth interviewing describes "groups of methods" that are "usually orchestrated and directed" to permit dialogue and to gather information from participants about a topic (Litchman, 2006 p. 116). Unlike structured interviews that were often used to produce data that could be quantified, I chose the semi-structured and unstructured in-depth interviewing format because it was appropriate for qualitative research with an individual (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Rubin and Rubin (2012) suggest that high-quality research produces results, that are fresh and real, and that contain conclusions

that make complex reality understandable to readers. As such, the qualitative responsive interviewing model by Rubin and Rubin (2012) which sees reality as complex and interesting, influenced and informed the way I conducted my interviews.

Although the in-depth interview method was advantageous in providing more detailed information than what would have been collected, had I used a predetermined survey or questionnaire, there would have been some possible limitations (Boyce & Neale, 2006). Boyce and Neale (2006) suggest that interviewees' responses may be prone to bias, especially if they might have a stake in a program; in this case the SEA exam. But the nature of the research, especially after their experiences with the exam, presented no advantage or benefit to any of the participants. Hence, this bias did not affect my research. However, Boyce and Neale (2006) spoke of the in-depth interviewing process as being time-intensive. This drawback I experienced; conducting, transcribing, and analysing the in-depth interviews was indeed time-intensive, laborious, and mentally and emotionally tiring (Boyce & Neale, 2006).

Even so, I believed that the semi-structured and unstructured open-ended interview questions prompted my interviewees to respond openly and freely, with leeway to reply, which allowed flexibility. I was able to adjust my questions to pursue topics of interest and probed issues relevant to my study. The data collected depended on listening keenly to participants' responses to my interview prompts. My focus was on developing an interactive and balanced relationship, and rapport with all my interviewees to gain their trust and encourage disclosure. I was able to elicit information on attitudes, opinions, perspectives, and understandings to provide the best re-presentations as possible of their reality. I was mindful of the suggestions Barbour and Schostak (2005) made for ensuring that the power relations between myself and my interviewees were balanced. Barbour and Schostak (2005) suggest four ways of balancing the power relationship. They recommended that the interviewer communicate the value of the interview to the interviewees in words; assure participants of the need for accuracy and honesty; be clear about the intended meanings the interviewees intend to convey and keep questions short but encourage extended responses. Respondents were also allowed to ask questions.

In-depth interviewing helped me to learn what the interviewees thought and how they felt about the SEA exam and allowed for deep exploration of shared meanings during analysis (Rubin and Rubin, 1995). A purposive sample of 13 participants was interviewed, all

of whom were able to generate data about the SEA phenomena to answer my research questions.

The setting for conducting in-depth interviews varied. Twelve of my thirteen interviewees were interviewed in quiet settings with very little interruption. The interviews were conducted in relaxed and comfortable settings. Of the twelve interviewees, three came to my home for the interviews to be conducted, two I visited at their private and quiet offices and seven of them, I visited at their homes. The quiet settings encouraged a rapport that was smooth, fluent, and rich with data generation and construction. Since in-depth one-on-one interviewing involved an extendable conversation that was intensive and highly interactive, a quiet and uninterrupted setting was valuable for drawing out in-depth information. The aim was to get clear answers and to interpret the in-depth meanings interviewees brought to the conversation (Kvale, 1996; Alshenqeeti, 2014). The quiet settings also contributed to the open-ended conversation with the flexibility and freedom to explore ideas and interesting developments while encouraging the interviewees to elaborate on issues (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002). One teacher was interviewed during the lunch hour at the school where she worked. While we conversed freely, we did experience frequent interruptions from students entering the class. As such, I found myself repeating my questions to her and reminding her of what we were talking about before the interruption.

The procedure for setting up the interviews started with the making of appointments using the telephone. As I met with participants, I warmly greeted and sensitized them to my research and its purpose, both before and at the time of the interview. I endeavoured to make them feel comfortable while conveying the value of their contribution to my research. Very early I sought to build rapport and gain their trust. Thereafter, I presented a copy of the information sheet to each participant and invited them to read along, then I answered their questions. I also gave a copy of the consent form, which I read along with them. I asked each participant to sign three copies of the research information sheet and three copies of the consent forms. After signing, I left a copy of the research information sheet and a signed consent form with each participant (See appendix for samples). After getting their permission to digitally record, I then proceeded to set up two digital recorders to record the interview. I informed the participants at all times when I was about to begin recording and when I stopped the recorder.

I used an unstructured interview guide I had previously prepared an interview guide which can be seen in the appendix as Data Collection Instrument 1 – Interview Guide. The Interview Guide outlined my research topic, research questions, and the procedures for supporting the interview process. Since my primary focus was to learn from my participants' experiences, I endeavoured to ask questions that were non-leading, broad, and open-ended. I probed beyond their responses when I wanted to clarify misunderstandings. I also asked the same questions in different ways to ensure my understanding of their responses was clear. I took brief jottings as they spoke, writing significant words and phrases that can shed light on their experiences.

How I conducted the interviews demonstrated care for the interviewees. I presented myself as a learner and friend during the process and avoided asking personal questions so as not to offend the participants. I maintained a free-flowing, conversational, friendly, and supportive disposition with participants, especially when they became emotional while recounting their experiences.

After conducting the interviews, I asked participants for the opportunity to conduct follow-up interview sessions, if the need to probe any issue arose from the first interview. Thereafter, I promised to make available to the interviewees the findings of my research and I thanked them for their willingness to participate in my research.

Documentary Analysis as a Research Method. Documentary analysis is defined as a procedure that is conducted systematically for reviewing and evaluating either printed or electronic documents in qualitative research (Bowen, 2009). Atkinson and Coffey (1997) classify documents as social facts that are produced, shared, and used in an organized manner. Documentary analysis is also described as a technique used to "categorise, investigate, interpret and identify the limitations of physical sources" either private or public documents (Payne & Payne, 2004). Guided by these definitions, I was able to use this method to review, evaluate and interpret the social facts nested within the writings of the participants and subsequently arrived at themes.

Documents for analysis could be classified as public documents, in the case of a government publication, private documents that emanate from civil society organisations, and personal documents from individuals (Mogalakwe, 2006). Bowen (2009) identifies a comprehensive list of documents that can be subjected to documentary analysis, some of which may include advertisements, agendas, attendance registers, meeting minutes, manuals,

background papers, books, brochures, diaries, journals, event programs, letters, maps, charts, press releases, program proposals and scripts, organizational and institutional reports and various public records. Among these, were diaries, journals, and letters that provided written text of a personal and expressive nature and could be classified as personal records. A personal record is so defined not only to suggest that they were written by persons but more so because those records were made originally with the expressed intent "to vent emotions, to justify personal actions, to jog individual memory or to convey private instruction" (Zachert, 1969 p. 337). Zachert (1969) notes that usually, the originators of such personal records created them to be shared with other persons with whom he or she enjoyed a more or less intimate relationship with or for his or her subsequent use or pleasure. These personal records could also be classified as primary documents rather than secondary documents. Primary documents are so described to suggest that they are eyewitness accounts that were produced by persons who have experienced the social phenomenon under study while secondary documents are written by persons who were not present at the scene but heard of the eyewitness accounts (Mogalakwe, 2006).

These documents were analysed because they contained information relevant to my research about the social phenomenon, I was interested in studying. The primary documents also yielded data in the form of excerpts, quotations, or entire passages which can be organized into themes and categories for analysis (Bailey, 1994; Bowen, 2009). As such, the data within the documents were carefully examined and interpreted to elicit meaning and gain understanding, to develop empirical knowledge (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Bowen (2009) highlights several reasons for using document analysis. He notes that documents can provide a valuable source of data to assist the researcher in understanding the background and the context in which research participants must operate. They could be useful for generating new interview questions and provide an opportunity for a researcher to track possible changes and development during a study by comparing different drafts of documents. He adds that documentary analysis can be useful for corroborating evidence collected from another data source and serve as a source of supplemental research data for analysis.

Documentary analysis was of great value to my research study. Not only did it shed insights into my participants' world, but I came to understand better the challenges students in a pre-SEA class could encounter. I also gained insight into students' thinking, feelings,

beliefs, fears, and values. The students' written pieces, which provided valuable first-hand information, from the students' perspective, supplemented the data I collected from the interview method which contributed to my knowledge base. The documentary analysis helped with the triangulation of data collected from the various methods. This approach was used to support and verify findings. The idea was to look for convergence of information from various sources to add a greater level of confidence in the trustworthiness and credibility of my study (Bowen, 2009).

After gaining permission from the school's principal to interact with the participants, I prepared a three-page data collection tool which can be seen in the appendix as Data Collection Instrument 2 – Student Essay Template which was used for the students to write. On page one, I wrote a brief letter to the students introducing myself and communicating my purpose as a student researcher. In the letter, I conveyed my interest in learning about their experiences during their preparation for the upcoming SEA exam. I also asked them to freely describe how they felt. To ensure that the students felt comfortable and protected about writing, I specifically stated in my letter, which I read aloud for them as well, that they did not need to write their names on the tool. This was done to remove any hesitation and uncertainties that may hinder students' free expression, to remove any fear of being identified, and to ensure anonymity. I also promised the students that their responses would not be shared with members of the school community but would remain confidential.

The student participants wrote their essays in a classroom setting with wooden benches and tables that can seat at least two students at a time. The SEA standard five class was separated from the other classes by blackboards. As such, we did not have the privilege of quiet for this process. I was concerned that the level of noise would affect the students' concentration but apparently, it did not. The students appeared to have worked well under the conditions. It was then I realized that the students had grown accustomed to working with that level of noise in such an open setting, separated only by blackboards. On the other hand, I was not accustomed to that level of noise, and what I thought was noise for me, was, in fact, the norm for them, because they had practically spent seven years in school learning within the same setting.

As the students wrote, they were not bounded by time because I did not want to add pressure to the process instead, I wanted them to feel as relaxed as possible to write their pieces without anxiety. During the process, the students asked questions for clarity which I

gave. After they had completed the pieces, I collected them. I thanked the students for sharing their experiences with me and I reassured them of confidentiality and anonymity. I also thanked the school's principal and the class teacher who were absent during the process before exiting the school premises.

The student essays were personal in nature and functioned like letters, journals, and diaries. They emanate directly from the students with fresh, original, untainted, and intimate stories crowded with their concerns, hopes, and wishes for their performance in the SEA exam. They were described as primary sources because they were original documents of data, immediate and first-hand accounts of the SEA exam created by the participants themselves who were directly connected and experienced the phenomenon under study (Smithsonian Institution Archives, n.d.). The students' essays were written for sharing with another person. The essays were informational just like journals but they were more focused on capturing the students' thoughts, feelings, and experiences surrounding their preparation for the SEA exam. As such, they were encouraged to use an expressive and personal style of writing while writing about a specific topic.

Data Analysis and Synthesis

Thematic analysis is an analytic method taken to data analysis that involves a series of steps, procedures, or phases aimed at identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meanings called themes, that are found within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2017). It also "moves beyond the counting of explicit words and phrases and focuses on identifying and describing both implicit and explicit ideas within the data, that is, themes." (Guest et, al., 2014 p. 9). According to Braun and Clarke, codes which are the smallest units for analysis, relative to the research questions, become the building blocks for themes, which are larger units of understanding or meanings. The themes that are generated by the researcher after the process of coding, are organized into thematic concepts or core ideas (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Guest et al. (2014) added their twist to thematic analysis in their book Applied Thematic Analysis. They added the term "applied" conveys their belief that good data analysis combines appropriate elements and techniques from various traditions and epistemological perspectives. They claim that applied thematic analysis is a type of inductive

analysis that involves multiple analytical techniques to rigorously analyse qualitative data for theme identification, and data reduction to be able to find solutions to real-world problems. They advocate a pragmatic framework for data analysis by taking a practical approach to processes and procedures by using analytical techniques and tools to distill my data. Their approach is to first identify themes in the text, then the themes are transformed into codes and aggregated into a codebook. However, I mostly used Braun and Clarke's (2006) process to first generate initial codes. Once these codes were identified, they were placed into categories. Finally, I was able to begin theme generation and development. Both processes came into play as I was going back and forth interrogating the data.

Thematic analysis was my preferred method of analysis for distilling my data. First, I felt that it was well suited and aligned to the exploratory, interpretive, and constructivist epistemological nature of my research. Secondly, it allowed me to discover the themes from the data and guide my reporting. It was flexible and useful for exploring and capturing the complexities of meaning within and across my data sets, which richly reflected my research participants' lived experiences, views, beliefs, and perspectives (Braun & Clarke, 2017; Guest et al. 2014). I was able to use features of Guest et al.'s (2014) applied thematic analysis techniques for planning the coding process so it can be done systematically. Braun and Clarke's six-phase process provided an efficient, understandable, and easy-to-use sequence for guiding the process for analysis along with the actions that are needed for each phase. Although I was guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases, I also benefitted from using some of Guest et al. ideas such as developing an analysis plan to focus my analysis process and their strategies for code identification, generation, and the theme.

The phases began for me by becoming familiar with the data. Transcribing the data, by reading and re-reading the data sets, accomplished that task. The second phase saw the generation of initial codes, where a semantic approach to coding was taken to address my first research question aimed at discovering what my participants' experiences with the high-stakes SEA exam were. However, I took a more latent approach to code my data to learn about my participants' beliefs and values about the SEA exam and how their experiences of preparing for and taking the exam impacted their lives. Searching for latent codes sought of captured my participants' assumptions. This approach sought to look for concepts and assumptions underpinning portions of the reported data that were not very explicit. Searching for latent codes sought to capture the assumptions behind the semantic or surface meanings of what is explicitly said or not said in the data.

The subsequent third phase involved manually searching for themes by sorting the codes into possible themes while matching them with their respective pieces of text or extracts. For examples of how the themes were generated, see the three tables entitled "Qualitative Data Reduction Matrix" in the appendix of this thesis (Miles & Huberman (1994). The data reduction matrices employed a reduction technique for data analysis. They were used to organize the data and present the codes to demonstrate how the themes were generated. Each table was aligned to my research questions and provided a snapshot of the coded text (see appendix).

Thereafter, I developed a code frequency table that identified the codes, the number of times the codes were identified across the different data sets, and cues to help me identify the data document from which the code came, either a transcript or an essay (Guest et al., 2014). A code frequency table was identified for the first three research questions (see appendix for three code frequency tables).

The textual data were coded manually using different colours as a visual aid. The coloured pens were useful for sorting and grouping codes into their umbrella-like themes. The names of codes were also written down along with a description. In this way, I was able to group codes into categories, which in turn generated themes.

Phase four saw the production of my thematic maps. To produce these, I had to review and refine my initial themes to ensure that they reflected my data set. The patterns demonstrated coherence for each theme, and the themes ultimately addressed my research questions. Phase five involved a detailed analysis of each theme and phase six produced the written report with data extracts as evidence of themes generated from within the data sets.

Ethical Considerations

In this section, I present the ethical considerations and concepts that supported and informed how I went about conducting my research (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Ethics, which is derived from the Greek word ethos is translated as character or customs in English (Gray, 2014). With regards to customs, research ethics refers to a set of rules or guidelines by which the researcher must operate to ensure trustworthy outcomes that can be defended and respected by the research community (Simon, 1995 in Pring 2000). With regards to character,

Pring (2000) places the responsibility of ethics directly on the character of the researcher with the expectation that he or she will be trustworthy showing the moral virtues of courage, honesty, concern for others' well-being, modesty especially about the worth of the research, and humility when criticized (Pring, 2001).

Since research ethics influence the practices of a researcher, our ethical compass should move beyond the ethical process of competence but instead, should be reflected in the very being of the researcher by his or her demonstration of the ethics of care (Gibbs & Costley, 2006). The ethics of care is described as an ontological realization that influences the various methodological processes and codes of ethical practice for the researcher. Pring (2001) notes that ethics demands that the researcher engages in moral deliberation considering the context of the research, especially when given the nature of the intimate and private interaction between the researcher and the interviewees. This would, therefore, demand the need for the researcher to demonstrate respect for participants' privacy while seeking to establish open and honest communications taking care to not misrepresent the data in any way. As such, ethical concerns that must be taken into consideration for qualitative research are anonymity, confidentiality, and informed consent (Richards & Schwartz, 2002).

Since my study was qualitative and focused on people and their natural environments the concept of relationships and the power between myself and my participants became significant because of the ensuing interactions (Orb et al., 2001). One ethical principle for researching with human participants issued by the British Psychological Society (BPS) reminded me that my "investigation should be considered from the standpoint of all participants; foreseeable threats to their psychological well-being, health, values or dignity should be eliminated" (Eysenck, 2004 p. 8). As such, the foremost ethical principle that guided my actions as I interacted with different ones to gather data, was to not harm my participants.

The principles of autonomy, beneficence, and justice were of great value and were used to ease difficulties associated with the emotive and sensitive conversations, that were inherent in my research. (Orb et al., 2001). Adhering to the principle of autonomy, I respected participants' rights to choose what questions they would or would not answer as well as ensure that they fully understood the implications of participating in the study before they all signed the consent forms. They were also informed that they can freely ask questions before

deciding to participate. Such efforts were taken to ensure that there was no intrusion on my part into the autonomy of my participants especially when sensitive issues arose.

I also applied the principle of beneficence by minimizing any risks of harm to my participants and by seeking ethical clearance from the Ethical Board at the University of Sheffield. I ensured justice by using only those participants who had first-hand experience with the SEA exam. The ethics of care and respect for participants' privacy moved me to inform participants of the purpose of my study and seek their approval through consent, to participate with the assurance that their anonymity will be maintained and their confidentiality protected. To maintain their anonymity, I assigned codes to all interview transcripts and used pseudonyms instead of the actual names of participants. Such efforts protected my participants because there was no clear link made between participants and the transcripts.

To adhere to the principle of social justice, I avoided exploitative practices like coercion and deception by being keen to recognize any vulnerability, managing sensitive and emotional issues, being an emphatic and non-judgemental listener, and acknowledging their contributions as valuable. Guided by the principle of voluntarism participants were informed that control over what was said, how it was said, and their choice to speak on a topic, remained with them so they could feel comfortable and confident to withdraw at any time if a topic became overwhelming (Ramos, 1989). I was also mindful to act with neutrality and fairness, the same way I would like others to act toward me in any given situation, respecting "differences in status, race, gender, language, and other social identity considerations" (Rallis & Rossman, 2003 p. 72; Duffy & Chenail, 2008).

Being a reflexive researcher is also of great value to get rich data from my interview sessions. Kleinsasser (2000) summarises Schwandt's (1997) definition of reflexivity as the "process of critical self-reflection on one's biases, theoretical predispositions, preferences; an acknowledgment of the inquirer's place in the setting, context and social phenomenon he or she seeks to understand and a means for critical examination of the entire research process" (p. 155). Being reflexive helps me to think of my social roles and those of my interviewees by "acknowledging power differentials between them and integrating reciprocity into the creation of knowledge" (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006 p. 317). I was also mindful of the social differences that exist in our social worlds and that these "respective social roles always shape the interview process" (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006 p. 317).

Incorporating the notion of reciprocity into my research design underscores my obligation to support my participants in taking action to improve their lives and to address any imbalance of power I may have over interviewees (Zigo, 2001) Reciprocity refers to a "cooperative exchange of help in which two parties strives for an arrangement where everyone benefits" (Curry, 2012 p. 91). Hence, I strove for a give and take between my interviewees. Hence, an effort was made to capture their lived experiences accurately and avoid what had been described as rape research practices (Reinharz, 1979, Curry, 2012). I also strove for reciprocation by developing a rapport during the in-depth interviews to build positive relationships (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Rapport involves building trust and respect for the interviewees creating a safe and comfortable environment for the interviewee to share experiences. The notions of reflexivity and reciprocity helped me to become sensitive to the level of influence my assumptions could have on my findings and to be alert to avoid any potential for unethical use of data (Eysenck, 2004).

Doing Research in a Small Island State

According to Schembri and Sciberras (2020), there were several challenges inherent in doing research in small island states. They noted that small island states presented a narrow territory for conducting research. As such, the issue of research fatigue, anonymity, and confidentiality of research participants and participating schools were at risk. Therefore, ascribing pseudonyms alone to participants selected using purposive sampling could have been insufficient to avoid participants and participating schools from being traced and identified since the mere mention of the geographical areas of the participating schools was itself a clue to revealing the schools' identity (Schembri & Sciberras, 2020).

Researching within narrow territories made it difficult to keep personal and professional matters that were confidential from the public domain because of the tightly networked society (Morrison, 2006). To ensure ethical considerations were shown within the limitations of research in small states, Guillemin and Gillam (2004) recommended that researchers apply reflexivity in research by reflecting on how the research could affect participants before the research is conducted. Appropriate measures were taken to ensure the necessary ethical principles of voluntarism, anonymity, and confidentiality were adhered to (Crossley & Vulliamy, 1997).

Since this research was conducted in a small island state of Trinidad and Tobago with a population of less than 1.5 million, there were implications for recording and reporting my findings. First, I experienced what Moosa (2013) spoke of when one of my research participants was not hesitant to be named while the others appreciated that their identity is kept anonymous. Moosa (2013) also noted that participants wanting to be named could be considered an empowering action. However, to ensure the protection of all, pseudonyms were ascribed to participants, and the names of all the primary and secondary schools were mentioned by my interviewees in the study.

The anonymity of participants and schools mentioned were concealed to ensure readers of my research findings would be unable to identify, and link information to my participants (Babbie, 2013). On the other hand, confidentiality spoke to maintaining privacy and demonstrating discretion in handling the data in the manner that was agreed upon by participants when they gave their consent to become research participants (Bickman & Rog, 2009). During my interview sessions, participants openly confided and revealed their experiences with the SEA high-stakes exam. They revealed names, of primary and secondary schools which included the names of prestigious schools, students craved to pass for, and the names of schools they dreaded passing for. The revelation of the identities of these schools could have much significance for future research. However, to protect participants and to ensure no harm would be brought to schools, all participants and named schools were given pseudonyms.

Despite efforts to maintain participants' anonymity and confidentiality, I was mindful and very much aware that the nationals of Trinidad and Tobago were all too familiar with the sensitive nature of the research topic and the SEA exam because it has been part of the experience of every child and adult within the government education system of Trinidad and Tobago. So even with pseudonyms attached to schools and a few prestigious secondary schools when compared to government secondary schools in Trinidad and Tobago, there is the distinct possibility of identifying the schools named by my participants because they are well known within the public domain.

Establishing Trustworthiness

To ensure that my research can be evaluated as being of high quality there are several aspects of trustworthiness that were considered during the research process. Trustworthiness is the naturalistic term used to refer to the quality of a research project. It speaks to how a researcher can persuade his or her audiences that the findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to and taking account of (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Trustworthiness is comparable to establishing the conventional quality criteria of validity and reliability used with research founded on the rationalistic quantitative paradigm. However, since my study is nested in the naturalistic constructionist and interpretivist inquiry, and the findings and interpretations are based on the co-construction and interpretations of participants' original multiple realities, the inquiry needs to be judged as credible (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As such, the research techniques and strategies I employed were consistent with establishing trustworthiness for a naturalistic research inquiry.

Lincoln and Guba's (1985) standard for trustworthiness attends to the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability for competent practice. This standard is recognized and accepted by the larger qualitative research community as critical and highly influential (Loh, 2013). Rossman and Rallis (2003) wrote that an unethical study is not a trustworthy study. They emphasize the interrelatedness of standards for ethical conduct with the standards for competent practice and stress that both standards must be met for a study to be considered trustworthy. They saw as necessary the ethics of care, rights and responsibilities, social justice, privacy, confidentiality, and informed consent as necessary for a study to be judged trustworthy. However, ethical considerations are discussed in the ethical section of this chapter. Concerning the competence for practice and to ensure the quality and trustworthiness of this naturalist research, I used the four criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability to guide the way I conducted my research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

To establish credibility, the techniques of prolonged engagement influenced my approach to gathering data from my participants. I used the principle of prolonged engagement in the field with some of my interviewees by extending the session to allow for probing while allowing sufficient time for respondent's clarification of their experiences. Triangulation of data sources was realized when I interviewed thirteen participants of varying ages and gender and got multiple perspectives on the same research issue. Peer review was

also done when I enlisted the guidance of my research supervisor who critiqued my research process and shared her professional insights and guidance.

To ensure my study met the criteria of transferability, I endeavoured to gather data that was descriptive, rich and thick, and with depth. This was done by getting multiple data sources from persons from different contexts. These multiple data sources were analysed and common themes were extracted from them using thematic analyses. The study also met the dependability criteria because along with using a triangulation of data sources, data-collection methods were also triangulated as a means of cross-checking information and to ensure a full and accurate understanding of the research topic was obtained and re-presented. For corroboration, the data from the document review, and analysis were triangulated with the data collected from multiple interviewees to demonstrate the criteria of dependability. Confirmability was established using an audit trail. The information coming from the interviews was rich and informative. This led to the decision of soliciting students' writings by using essays that provided a snapshot of their views and perspectives about their feelings concerning the SEA exam for which they were preparing. I wanted to hear the voices of the students themselves.

The Limitations of the Study

The limitations highlight the possible weaknesses of this study and allow readers to judge the potential impact of the research findings with them in mind (Rallis & Rossman, 2003). Price and Murnan (2004) describe a study's limitations as those characteristics of the study's design or methodology that impacted or influenced the interpretations of the research findings. They explained that the "limitation of a study design or instrument is the systematic bias that the researcher did not or could not control and which could inappropriately affect the results" (Price & Murnan, 2004 p. 66). The latter definition seems to suggest that the researcher can employ strategies to minimize any negative impact the limitations can have on the findings.

There is much value to acknowledging a study's limitation with the detail necessary, to make them informative to readers, peer reviewers, and researchers (Aguinis & Edwards, 2014; Olufowote, 2017). According to Price and Murnan (2004), the limitations offer an opportunity to demonstrate that I have critically thought about the appropriateness of a

qualitative methodology for answering my research questions and that I was mindful of the possible limitations of my data collection methods. With such knowledge, I was well poised to take the necessary steps to alleviate the negative impact of any limitations inherent in my research design (Price & Murnan, 2004). Acknowledging the study's limitations also provided an opportunity to make suggestions for future research (Price & Murnan, 2004).

A researcher may experience possible limitations associated with the methodology, which speaks to the sample size, reliance on a single data collection technique, sample selection procedures, types of data collection techniques, and self-reported data (Rallis & Rossman, 2003; Price & Murnan, 2004). Limitations could arise when the researcher is unable to gain access to data, people, organizations, and documents. However, my sample size was appropriate to supply adequate and rich data for analysis. It did not limit my findings because my sample was not too small, which could have led to inadequate data for analysis nor was it too large to prevent deep rich data. I also used multiple data collection methods that were appropriately and epistemologically aligned with my study's subjective ontology to avoid a methodological mishap that could have limited my findings. Access to data, documents and the school were not limitations either. However, after a critical analysis of where my study stood in relation to the possible limitations of a qualitative research study, I have concluded that the potential limitations of my study are inherent in using the qualitative in-depth interview method because I acted as the research instrument, gathered and analysed the data, and reported on the findings.

Inherent in using interviews as a data collection method in my research design were the limitations mentioned in Chapter One of my thesis in preparation for my data collection. Aguinis and Edwards (2014) suggested that limitations can be considered before data collection to minimize threats to a study's internal validity. In chapter one, I spoke of the potential limitations associated with in-depth interviews such as selective memory (Roediger, 1974), telescoping (Gaskell et al., 2000), attribution (Martinko & Mackey, 2019), and exaggeration. I acknowledged these potential limitations upon the findings of my study as I recorded all the experiences my participants shared. After all, these experiences were theirs, and after learning what they were and having made sense of them, I understood the impact their experiences had on their lives which was the focus of this study.

In anticipation of these limitations before the data collection process, I employed a series of strategies to minimize any negative impact limitations associated with self-reported

data in qualitative research could have on my findings. While participants shared their life stories, there was a natural tendency of telescoping in participants' responses where they recalled an experience but reported that it happened earlier than it did, known as backward telescoping, or reported the experience as a recent one, known as forward telescoping (Gaskel et al., 2000). One strategy to minimize this occurrence was to include what Loftus and Marbuger (1983) called landmark events or temporal markers by using the word "when" in my questioning as an estimation strategy to help jog participants' memory, to identify more accurately, the reference periods and time frames of their shared experiences.

The limitation of attribution could happen when people are less likely to attribute negative events and experiences to themselves but are more inclined to attribute the negative event to the intentions of external agents (Morewedge & Norton, 2009). I had no control over this occurrence. However, in a few instances where I suspected cases of attribution, I rephrased the questions and probed participants more deeply. I saw it as an opportunity to explore further and longer to uncover inconsistencies and to gain insights into interviewees' perspectives, values, and beliefs about the high-stakes SEA exam in their lives. As such, a few interview sessions were extended allowing participants repeated opportunities for interaction and extended responses. This strategy was influenced by using the principle of prolonged engagement, which involves spending more time with participants, which could make withholding information, exaggerations, or lying by respondents less likely. Liebow (1993) notes that "lies do not really hold up well over long periods of time" (p. 321). Nevertheless, I could not overstress the value of building a rapport and a trusting relationship with my participants, because doing so, went a long way in helping my participants to share their stories candidly.

The possible limitation of selective memory, inherent in interview research, where participants remember what they could, either deliberately or unconsciously was insignificant to my research. This was so because it is more important to my study that my participants recorded in their mental histories, what they experienced, what was real to them, and not the facts themselves (Muylaert et al., 2014). For it is this kind of data that adds significance to my research findings.

Chapter 3 Conclusion

This chapter presented a detailed description of the research methodology I used to gain answers to my research questions. An overview of the study was introduced with a reiteration of my questions. The qualitative methodological research design was aimed at finding out about the impact of the high-stakes SEA exam from the experiences of educators, students, and parents who were associated with the exam in Trinidad and Tobago. The study also explored their beliefs and perspectives regarding the SEA exam and the impact their experiences had on their lives. The participant sample was made up of 13 purposefully selected persons who were interviewed, and student essays written by 16 pre-SEA students for documentary analyses. Using these two data-collection methods, the data were examined against the literature review and themes emerged.

In this chapter, I discussed my thoughts about research methodologies and their inherent assumptions to demonstrate why a qualitative research design was best suited for seeking answers to my research questions. The research design which was described in detail pointed to my choice of methods that were appropriate for collecting the data, which would be analysed using thematic analysis. These were in-depth interviews, and documentary analysis, which were congruent with the qualitative paradigm.

This chapter also described each of my research samples, the sampling strategies, and the interviewees' demographics. The data collection materials, the processes for collecting the data, and preparing the written documents to facilitate analysis were described in detail.

All data were analysed using thematic analysis. However, to ensure that the findings of the research are trustworthy, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were used for guiding the research process. Included also in this chapter were the limitations I encountered and strategies I employed to minimize the impact the limitations had on the research findings. These limitations included the challenges of doing research in small island states. Now the data set was analysed, the findings to my research questions would now be presented in the following chapter.

Chapter 4: Findings

Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from the thematic analysis of my qualitative research study to learn and describe the experiences, beliefs, and values, that educators, parents, and students had with the high-stakes SEA exam in Trinidad and Tobago. I believe that an exploration of this phenomenon will provide all stakeholders with a better understanding and inform decision-makers and policy-makers to take the necessary steps to improve testing policies and practices that can better benefit the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago and by extension the wider community.

The findings of this study provided answers to the following research questions and the research data would be presented thematically in three categories in response to the following questions.

1. What are the experiences of educators, students, and parents associated with the high-stakes SEA exam?
2. What are the beliefs and values in the perspectives of participants associated with the high-stakes SEA exam?
3. What impact has the experiences with the SEA exam had on participants' lives?
4. What are the implications of the study's findings?

This chapter begins with a rationale for each of my research questions. It then provides a brief description of the demographics of my research participants, a summary of my data sets, and a summary of my data analysis procedure. Thereafter, the summary of findings is presented after restating each research question, along with the codes, themes, and accompanying vignettes. A table is also prepared to communicate the number of participants for which the code was applied which could be found in the appendix.

My research samples were divided into three categories. For conducting the in-depth interviews, a purposeful sample of thirteen participants inclusive of students, parents, school principals, and teachers, all of whom had provided information-rich data because of their close connection to the SEA exam. Their responses were digitally recorded and transcribed

for analysis. Interviewees varied in gender, ethnicity, age groups, level of education, and profession. Greater details on the demographics of my interviewees were outlined in Chapter 3 of the study. They were chosen because of their rich experiences with the SEA exam either as a student, a parent, or an educator. The second research sample involved a standard-five class of 16 pre-SEA exam students between the ages of 11 to 14 years old. There were 7 girls and 9 boys who wrote individual essays about their experiences preparing for the high-stake SEA exam. The students' essays were gathered as data and were analysed using documentary analysis.

Data Analysis Procedure

My data collection methods were qualitative in-depth interviewing and documentary analysis. Audio-recorded interviews were transcribed. The interview transcriptions and students' essays were all analysed using thematic analysis. The data sets were read repeatedly to become thoroughly familiar with the data. Using a series of coloured markers, codes were manually identified by underlining units of data or codes. I had to constantly remind myself of what my research questions were to identify the codes that would match the questions. By keeping my analytical objectives or research questions in mind, notes were then written to the side, then colours were applied to related codes as I read further along. These codes were later collated into categories and distinct themes with observable patterns were generated. These were used to construct a thematic map which is presented in this chapter.

To help with my search for themes I was guided by Ryan and Bernard's (2003) techniques for identifying themes using linguistic cues. They noted that if repetition is evident where a concept reoccurs across several transcripts, it is likely a theme. I also noted their suggestions of looking for indigenous cues, in my case the Trinidad Creole language which holds meaning to help discern deeper meanings, especially for those latent ones. Looking for metaphors and analogies as well as linguistic connectors such as the words and phrases that allude to causal relationships like "because," "if," "since" and "as a result" were useful. These connectors exposed participants' systems of beliefs that led me to identify answers to the research questions.

The Rationale for my Research Questions.

My first research question aimed to learn about the experiences of educators, students, and parents associated with the high-stakes SEA exam. My interest in acquiring this knowledge began for several reasons. First, learning from others' experiences reveals patterns that could facilitate knowledge transfer and knowledge integration from an experienced person to a lesser experienced person (Moskaliuk et al., 2016). Knowledge of others' experiences could support my readers' application of the underlying principles and concepts involved in experiences they might have in similar situations. This could require a reduced cognitive effort on their part as they try to understand a phenomenon (Moskaliuk et al., 2016).

Second, Fazey and Marton (2002) suggest that when people gain a new experience, their understanding of their place in the world and the way they perceive and act in the world changes. Thus, learning from others with rich experiences regarding the SEA exam could help my readers to become more open about thinking differently, which can reduce the likelihood of erroneous interpretations regarding the impact of the exam. They would be able to perceive and act differently in ways that can benefit both themselves and others (Fazey, Fazey & Fazey, 2005).

My second research question sort to find out the beliefs and values participants held concerning the high-stakes SEA exam. Beliefs are described as deep-set assumptions that persons hold to be true or real about themselves, others, or about a different phenomenon that is happening within their environment (Moise, 2014). Beliefs are held as true by persons and refer to one's subjective judgements about some aspect of self or the world (Underwood, 2002). Values on the other hand are described as a measure of worth or importance a person attaches to something or a phenomenon that is often reflected in the things we do and how we live (Moise, 2014). Since values are aligned with our beliefs, they are capable of influencing our behaviours and attitudes. Thus, when my participants adopt and internalize other persons' beliefs, believing them to be true, they could act on such beliefs although such beliefs may be irrational and unproven, and might not be in their interest or the interest of others (Moise, 2014). As such, identifying what participants' beliefs are and their ensuing values regarding the SEA exam is crucial to the findings of this study to explain participants' experiences and behaviours.

My third research question sought to learn what impact participants' experiences with the SEA exam had on their lives. Since the impact of high-stakes testing had been researched worldwide and the effects have been openly published and highlighted in detail in my literature review, this question needed to be asked so an answer can be given from a Trinidad and Tobago context. In addition, news of the impact of the SEA exam in Trinidad and Tobago has been anecdotal thus far. Therefore, this question allows for an opportunity to provide a documented record through this study.

My fourth question is concerned with the implications of the findings of this study and its ensuing discussions and recommendations. The question which is identified in the literature as the "so what?" speaks to my study's significance and relevance and would be answered in my conclusion chapter (Selwyn, 2013). This question allows me to highlight to my readers the value of my study's findings to the national community in Trinidad and Tobago and the value of adding to the existing body of knowledge on the impact of high-stakes testing.

Presentation of Findings

The findings are presented in the following format. First, the research questions are restated followed by a summary of the codes that were generated from analysis using a data reduction technique. Miles and Huberman (1994) define data reduction as a form of analysis that sharpens, sorts, focuses, discards, and organizes data in such a way that conclusions can be drawn and verified. The tables developed were placed in the appendix and can be seen in Appendix Table 0:1 – Qualitative Data Reduction Matrix for Experiences Codes, Appendix Table 0:3 – Qualitative Data Reduction Matrix for Beliefs and Values Codes, and Appendix Table 0:5 – Qualitative Data Reduction Matrix for Life Impact Codes. For each research question, a *Qualitative Data Reduction Matrix* with the identified codes, related quotes, and vignettes along with the data source identification number and the data collection method was included. This was done for several reasons. First, they provided a snapshot of my coded data and showed the connections of the codes to the raw data. Second, I could quickly locate the original data source of my quoted texts for verification. Finally, I could develop summaries of the coded text more efficiently.

Also, the Data Reduction Matrix for each research question was followed by the development of *Code Frequency Tables* which could be found in Appendix Table 0:2 – Code Frequency Table on Experiences, Appendix Table 0:4 – Code Frequency Table on Beliefs and Values, and Appendix Table 0:6 – Code Frequency Table for Codes on Life Impact. These tables provided snapshots of the codes discovered from each data source. They also provided insight into how participants define these codes as well as the frequencies of occurrences from the various data sets. The co-occurrence of codes and themes, the frequency of their occurrences, and the data collection methods and sources from which they were generated, demonstrated validity and reliability through the triangulation of the data sources (Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2014).

After each research question, the codes found from each data set - the student essays and the interview transcripts as they relate to each research question would be presented. Then I would present the themes generated from the codes according to the research questions. Also, the findings from the interview transcripts would be presented according to the participants' grouping such as the educational psychologist, SEA teachers, principals, parents of SEA students, post-SEA students, and other citizens interviewed. Subsequently, all themes would be discussed in chapter 5.

Findings to Research Question 1

What are the experiences of educators, students, and parents associated with the high-stakes SEA exam?

An analysis of the data sets, the interview transcripts, and the students' essays, revealed what the experiences of participants associated with the high-stakes SEA exams were. The codes identified from each data set are now presented and could be seen in the data reduction matrices and frequency tables generated for each research question in the appendix, followed by the ensuing themes.

Experiences Codes Generated from Analysing Students' Essays

An analysis of students' essays who were preparing for the upcoming SEA eleven-plus exam revealed that the students experienced a plethora of fears and academic pressure

from various sources. Their experiences included a rollercoaster of feelings and emotions, a mock student support system, and a range of physical effects linked to the high levels of stress and anxiety. The students were very explicit about writing their experiences.

The students communicated their fears very openly. Some even used the word "frightened." Students also provided the reasons for their experienced fears. Eleven students expressed that they feared failing the exam. The following vignettes are two samples from the data:

> *"I am frightened for the SEA exam because I'm scared, I might forget." "the day of the exam will be frightening."*
>
> - *Male Student participant 3, Age 11*

> *"I feel I might not pass the SEA exam because I do feel frightened and I do not study 100%."*
>
> - *Male Student participant 2, Age 13*

In addition, four students wrote about how much they feared that they will not be able to live up to the expectations of their parents, teachers, and friends as evidenced by the following quote:

> *"I know my family and friends have high hopes for me. My dad says I will make him very proud. My mother says I can do better than anyone, but I feel I will never get my first choice which is Prestige High but my third choice, non-prestige. I feel like I always get B's but my mom says when she was little, she always got A's. I try my best in everything. I do, but somehow, all my results are always B's."*
>
> - *Female Student participant 12, Age 11*

Two other students feared what the exam meant for them. They feared that they were going to lose their friends and teachers because they knew that after the exam they would likely be

moving on to different schools. As such, they feared losing their friends and teachers as seen in the following excerpt:

> *"I'm afraid of the SEA exam because I'm going to lose all my friends and my teacher."*
>
> - *Female Student participant 11, Age 14*

In addition, three students expressed that they feared the day of results, fearing unfavourable results while three other students said that their fears stem from what people might think of them if they did not pass for a prestigious secondary school. Nine students were not concerned about passing the exam instead, they feared passing for a secondary school that was not perceived as prestigious which they described as "low," "bad," or "ain't good." The following are some excerpts from students' essays:

> *"I'm afraid of the school I might pass for."*
>
> - *Female Student participant 11, Age 14*

> *"When results come out, I really, really hope I get a very good school…I am scared if I get a 'low' school and when I am going home, people ask me what school you pass for?"*
>
> - *Male Student participant 7, Age 13*

> *"I hope I would succeed in my exams because I want to make my parents proud of me."*
>
> - *Male Student participant 6, Age 12*

Eleven students' fear stems from the possibility that they might not pass for the school that they have listed as their "first choice" school. Their second, third, and fourth choices of schools were not options that they were willing to accept. Here are some written expressions of a few student participants:

> *"If I don't pass for my first choice school, I will break down in tears."*

- *Male Student participant 3, Age 11*

"If I don't pass for my first choice, I would be mad at myself."

- *Female Student participant 15, Age 11*

"I expect to get good marks from my SEA exam so that I can pass for my first choice school, Prestige College."

- *Male Student participant 6, Age 12*

"When I get my results and it is good, I will feel happy but if I don't get my first choice I will get vex about it."

- *Male Student participant 5, Age 14*

These vignettes demonstrate students' preoccupation with the cardinal numbers rather than the schools themselves. Furthermore, three students said that they feared being teased by other students if they should have failed the exam. They feared the shame that they perceived might come their way. Eight students said that the very thought of the SEA exam and the subsequent result made them frightened while five students feared physical punishment from their parents if they did not pass for a prestigious secondary school as seen by the quotes below:

I am afraid that I would pass for my last choice and make my family, neighbours, and my teacher feel bad and lose faith and stop trust me……when the teacher 'buff'(chastise) me, my eyes full up with water. It makes me feel like she doesn't like me and doesn't believe in me."

- *Female Student participant 15, Age 11*

"I am also really scared because my parents have threatened me if I don't pass for my first choice, that I will get licks and that makes me feel scared that I might fail the SEA."

- *Male Student participant 3, Age 11*

Concerning the academic pressure, the students experienced, six students reported that they faced academic pressure from their parents to pass for a prestigious school. Eight students reported that such pressure came daily from their teachers to pass for a prestigious school as evidenced by the following selections:

"I will fail and I would have more pressure from my mother."

- *Male Student participant 1, Age 12*

"I am afraid I will blank out and forget everything…' Sometimes I think so much…I start to get nervous and I blank out. At home people always say that I will pass for a Life Centre because I cannot spell so good and I am not smart. Sometimes I feel like my teacher and my parents don't understand the pressure I feel."

- *Female Student participant 13, Age 12*

"I am a child who cries fast and worries about things, like when Miss …. Said… (that I would pass for a Life Centre."

- *Female Student participant 15, Age 11*

"I feel frightened to do the SEA because the teacher does talk about it and Miss try to tell me how I have to get more serious about my work."

- *Male Student participant 7, Age 13*

Besides the foregoing, two more students reported feeling overwhelmed by the vast amounts of commercial SEA practice test booklets they had to complete daily, in school, at afterschool extra-lesson centres, and home. Two students expressed that they felt uncertain about their prospects of success because of the workload. As such, the idea of extra lessons

for students preparing for the SEA exam has become a mainstay, being perceived as a panacea or solution for poor curriculum pacing and curriculum overload. Four more students reported their experience of feeling overwhelmed noting that they were struggling to cope as seen by the quotes below:

> *"My mother buys the Guardian's SEA practice test faithfully every Wednesday, but the way the newspaper is so long, I feel like it going to take forever."*
>
> - *Female Student participant 12, Age 11*

> *"When we reach to school…we start doing past papers. When they have us outside the class, they have us doing the SEA practice Test…that is what they call the booklets. We would do about 5 of those, every day. It wasn't a nice experience."*
>
> - *Vaughn, Pass Student participant 3,*

Apart from the pressures associated with exam preparation, students also reported a host of physical effects associated with stress and test anxiety. Some students wrote of physical shaking of their hands and body, nervousness, confusion, and mental paralysis as the exam neared. Others described a range of feelings they experienced. Two said they felt helpless about the situation they were in, having no control and wishing they did not have to do the exam. The quotes below are examples of their experiences:

> *"When I study for my ….test and is time to do it, it's like my brain gets erased and all the information disappears."*
>
> - *Male Student participant 1, Age 12*

> *"They try to teach me things that is not my level like in Math and Language……but my teacher does not understand that …. it is too much for my brain."*
>
> - *Male Student participant 1, Age 12*

"I have no rights…. Sometimes I wish I could reverse the time so I would not sit SEA, but I cannot get away from it. It is something we all have to face."

- *Male Student participant 1, Age 12*

"My parents are trying so hard for me to pass for my first-choice school and it does make me nervous."

- *Female Student participant 11, Age 14*

"I do get nervous when the examiner looking at me."

- *Male Student participant 5, Age 14*

"I am nervous about the SEA exam because I have to finish the exam in a certain space of time."

- *Male Student participant 8, Age 13*

Likewise, five students wrote that they experienced feelings of frustration and fright as the exam got closer. One student wrote that she wanted to die if she was unsuccessful at passing for a prestigious school. Another, inflicted harm to himself because he was unsuccessful at passing for a prestigious school. These experiences can be seen in the excerpts inserted below:

"I am feeling very frustrated because I keep getting the same things wrong. I keep on trying to put my best foot forward but I keep falling. My parents expect me to do my best but they don't know I feel so much pressure."

- *Male Student participant 1, Age 12*

"The day of the exam will be frightening…. If I don't pass for my first choice, I would like God to take me."

- *Female Student participant 15, Age 11*

> *"so when I asked him what happened he said he pass for "Compre..." and he didn't want to pass for that school because he didn't like the school so when he got his results he went to the class and started to beat up himself. He got real vex and tear up his shirt."*

- *Mark, Pass Student participant 2*

Thoughts of dying if unsuccessful can be described as having suicidal ideation which is defined as thinking about, considering, or planning suicide (Klonsky et al., 2016). Choon Wang's (2015) study on the effects of high-stakes testing on suicidal ideation of teenagers in South Korea, showed a relationship between the both and explained that when a student's rank in the high-stakes test falls below their expectation, there is a higher likelihood of having suicidal ideation. Choon Wang's (2015) findings shed light on the potentially adverse consequence of students feeling so disappointed in their performance at high-stakes tests, that this could lead to suicidal thoughts.

Despite the frustrations felt by students, twelve of them wrote explicitly about their desire to do well in the exam so they can please their parents and their teachers. For some students, it was made clear that passing for a prestigious school was more about pleasing others like their parents, teachers, and persons living within their community, than pleasing themselves. as seen in one of many expressions below:

> *"I hope I would succeed in my exams because I want to make my parents proud of me."*

- *Male Student participant 6, Age 12*

For further insights into the experiences codes identified, see the appendix for The Qualitative Data Reduction Matrix in the Appendix Table 0:1 – Qualitative Data Reduction Matrix for Experiences Codes and the Code Frequency Table Appendix Table 0:2 – Code Frequency Table on Experiences, developed from an

analysis of the data in response to question one. The findings to question one that was generated from my interview transcripts are now presented below.

Experiences Codes Generated from Analysing Interview Transcripts.

The findings from the analysis of the interview transcripts to learn about participants' experiences are reported based on the categories of participants.

An Interview with an Educational Psychologist

I interviewed an educational psychologist who reported that the students who came to her, experienced test anxiety as a result of pressure to perform well at the exam from their parents, teachers, and school. In one of her experiences, she recounted how test anxiety affected one of her clients. She said:

> *"I had a little fellow peaking before the exam at 99%. However, during the exam, he suffered an anxiety attack and he did not finish two of his papers. So, you could imagine when he went home and tell his parents, they were very concerned. When he came, I had to do a psychological evaluation on him and a lot of what he said is the day of the exam, he woke up feeling very flustered. The night before his family celebrated, and his parents reiterated that he could go to 'Prestige' College …. A good school. He woke up the day of the exam feeling out-of-breath, flustered …. he didn't want to tell his parents anything …. he was nauseous…. he started to panic…. and he did not perform during the exam."*
>
> - *Rita, Educational Psychologist*

She also shared her experience with students who inflicted harm upon themselves due to parental pressure, anxiety, and exam stress. She said:

> *"I have come across children who really don't want to do the exam when they talk about the fact that they will let down their parents. I've come across young people in standard 5, young girls especially, cutting themselves or doing self-harm because of the SEA exam and because their parents were pressuring them."*
>
> - *Rita, Educational Psychologist*

According to Whitlock (2010), self-harming or self-injury refers to a variety of behaviours in which persons intentionally inflict harm on themselves as a way of coping with overwhelming negative feelings and emotional pressures are the most common triggers. While self-harming may include scratching, burning, ripping, or pulling skin or hair, self-bruising, as ways to manage intolerable feelings, intentional cutting is one of the most common and well-documented behaviours (Whitlock, 2010).

An Interview with a Law Lecturer

Mathew described his experience with the eleven plus-exam which he would have done in the 1970s, as "a lot of pressure." He explained that both his parents were educators, a school principal, and a teacher both with very high expectations for him to pass for a prestigious elitist college. As such, his daily schedule was fully occupied with regular schooling followed by additional lessons in the evening which were administered by his parents to prepare for the exam.

Mathew noted that he did pass for a prestigious secondary college. However, amidst his cadre of experiences moving on to a secondary school, he noted the biggest negative impact on him came as a result of being placed in a streamed class named Lower 1A. He said it made him feel "*less than."* He recalled:

> *"The biggest impact 'Prestige' college had…I suppose the biggest negative impact was being placed in Lower 1A and being made to feel as though you were lower or inferior…. if we accept that these were some of the most intelligent people coming into the school what made that difference…what made us upper? What made us lower? And it changed my expectation of myself. I never thought I was bright enough to be in Upper 1A because…I thought that is where I belonged in terms of my common entrance results…but from the time you become 'lower' your expectations of yourself changed."*
>
> - *Mathew, Law Lecturer*

Mathew's experience revealed that even though he was a successful law lecturer, he remembered the feelings of inadequacy, feeling "less than," or of lesser value than those who were placed in a higher stream, a feeling that he remembered all too well in his later years. Even though he would have done the exam many years ago, his experience has shown that many years later, very little has changed concerning its impact.

Alfred Adler, a psychoanalyst coined the term "inferiority complex" in 1907 to explain why many persons seem to lack the motivation to act in their own best interest and pursue their goals in life which indicates that sense of feeling less than (Alberts, 2020). The American Psychological Association (n.d.) defines an inferiority complex as a basic feeling of inadequacy and insecurity, deriving from actual or imagined physical or psychological deficiency. According to Appel, Crusius, and Gerlach (2015), feelings of inferiority can result from negative social comparisons. Such feelings can be associated with fear of failure, worthlessness, a low sense of belonging, questioning of competence, low esteem, depressive symptoms, self-doubt, and feelings of not being accepted by society (Abramson, 2015; Appel et al., 2015). However, Adler (1956) adds that such feelings of inferiority can prove to be a positive motivating factor towards reaching their goals, as it was, in the case of Mathew who became a successful lecturer at law despite his negative experiences.

Interviews with three Post-SEA Students

All post-SEA students described their experiences as stressful with a lot of pressure from their teachers to pass for a prestigious school. They noted that they were bombarded daily with SEA past papers. Vaughn remembered that:

> *"It was plenty of pressure. It was nice preparing for the exam at first but when they start to take it seriously…like how the teachers will pressure you…the past papers were important but they would bombard you with the past papers… bombard you with preparation...Yes, when we reach school…we start doing past papers. When they have us outside the class, they have us doing the SEA practice Test…that is what they call the booklets. We would do about 5 of those, every day. It wasn't a nice experience."*
>
> - *Vaughn, Pass Student participant 3*

Mark's experience also involved a lot of pressure which came from his SEA teacher. He reported that his stress began in standard 4 with daily lectures from his teacher about the prestigious schools they ought to pass for. He also recalled how his SEA teacher would make him frightened by what she would say to his class. Mark said:

> *"Well, if by chance the class was behaving bad, she would say we can't be behaving like that if we want to pass for a certain school…. She would …punish us with words saying that we cannot pass for this school and we cannot accomplish certain things and that… use to get us frightened. She would say that the SEA is not an easy test…it is hard. She even told us that the principal was doing the SEA test from the year before and says the principal took all day to do it… to finish the paper…so we get frightened especially how it was going to be harder that year. It worried us."*
>
> - *Mark, Pass Student participant 2*

Mark also felt that he was victimized by his SEA teacher because his choice of school was not found among the prestigious school listing. Although being an A student he was removed from the A-class and placed in the B-class which he noted brought him much distress. He recounted his humiliating experience. The name of the school was changed based on their position of status to either prestige or non-prestige. Mark explained:

> *"Well, it was a day I came…. late and I had stayed home the day before…so she called me up to her table and asked why I stayed home… then she asked, "what school you want to pass for?" I said 'Non-Prestige Secondary' and she said "'Non-Prestige Secondary'! You want to pass for 'Non-Prestige Secondary'?" It was as if she was accusing me of wanting to pass for Non-Prestige Secondary because the point she wanted to make is if I wanted to pass for a prestigious school, I must come to school often…so when I told her I wanted to pass for 'Non-Prestige Secondary' she was like …you mad or something…why you want to pass for that school…. …so I got scolded and embarrassed in front of the class just because I want to pass for 'Non-Prestige' Secondary."*
>
> - *Mark, Pass Student participant 2*

Nina also reported on the academic pressure she experienced as a SEA student. She recalled that when she was in standard 4, the school's principal and the SEA teachers arranged for a field trip to a prestigious school for all eight SEA classes. She recounted:

> *"In standard 4 our teacher.... the principal organized for all the standard 4's and 5's to go Prestige Secondary. They carried us there on a field trip…after that everybody wanted to pass for there…even I wanted to pass for there even more, so I was saying to myself "make sure and get Prestige schools"*
>
> - *Nina, Pass Student participant 1*

Nina recounted that everyone was excited and aimed to pass for a prestigious school. However, when the results came out the reality differed. In reporting, she described her experience when she went to collect her SEA results:

> *"Well, I went into the office… the Vice-principal handed me my envelope…. I decided not to look at it until I came into my mom's car…but after I collected and went outside, I saw some children crying. One of my friends who was in the C class was upset, so I asked "what happened," she gave me her envelope and when she saw Non-Prestige Secondary, she starts to bawl and cry…. and tears were rolling down her face. She didn't want anybody to mark up her shirt when everybody else was doing it. She became depressed and sad and said she wanted to repeat because she got non-prestige secondary. Then my next friend…he got Non-Prestige secondary and started to cry too, but his parents insisted he go to non-prestige secondary …and all the other children in the D class whom the principal carried on the field trip to Prestige and raised their hopes…all started crying too because everybody wanted to go Prestige secondary… and the students who got Prestige secondary were boasting and asking you "what school you pass for, I get Prestige secondary you know" and making everybody else who didn't get Prestige secondary feel bad.*
>
> - *Nina, pass student participant 1*

Nina also described how she felt when she entered her mom's car and opened her envelope to realize that she didn't pass for Prestige secondary either. She reported:

> *"Well, I cried, I wanted to repeat, I wanted to do anything…I wanted to transfer."*
>
> - *Nina, pass student participant 1*

Nina's experiences paint a very sad picture of what occurred on the day of the SEA results. I now present the experiences of the parents of SEA students in the following section.

Interviews with the Parents

Alice experienced the effects of the eleven-plus exam multiple times because she is a mother of four. She explained having to cope with her children's disappointment, tears, sadness, and depression when they did not pass for any prestigious secondary school.

In one instance, she explained that her daughter was a bright student and she wanted her to pass for a prestigious school especially since other cousins were attending prestigious secondary schools. Alice recalled how she would put pressure on her daughter to pass for a prestigious school as evidenced by her words below.

> *"So, I would say "Monica, show them that you are good, you are bright, so you have to go to this prestige school" But when she didn't pass – well, that was it. I just wanted her to go, you know… I wanted her to go because I know my brother's children always getting this, and always doing that and everybody does be "Oh Mya and Myron, they good." I use to force …. her to let her know that "Hey, you can do it too." That is why I force her."*
>
> - *Alice, Parent of four SEA students*

Alice saw the SEA exam as an opportunity to fulfill the expectation of her family. She was very much concerned about how she and her daughter will be perceived or judged by others including extended family members who were competitive.

Cole, another parent, said that his son's preparation for the SEA exam involved taking extra lessons which he felt became a traumatic experience for his son. He noted that his son's SEA teacher appeared to move too quickly through the curriculum with students who can work at her pace while the "slow" students got left behind. Hence, he felt his son needed extra lessons to catch up. But then, he observed that even the "bright" students were also in the same "lesson class" which meant that his son was still disadvantaged. In describing his experience, he said:

> *"It was like a continuation of the day school…in term of who gets it...I saw that and I took him out of lessons and put him in private lessons…. I found that after a while he was beginning to get traumatized. It was as if the day just got longer for him. So, it wasn't a change. For him, it was like 'Oh Lord! It's just a continuation…. another hour of the same thing that happened for the last six or seven hours."*
>
> - *Cole, Parent of SEA student*

Cole's experience raises several issues concerning the extra-lesson arrangement and the teacher's delivery of the curriculum and the pacing of the curriculum. The findings from the interviews conducted with the participants who were SEA teachers are now presented.

Interview with the SEA Teachers

An analysis of the teachers' transcripts revealed that the teachers complained of the high levels of stress associated with the preparation of students for the SEA exam. Neema associated her source of stress with what she described as a "heavy workload in standards 4 and 5. However, she added that another source of her stress came from the students' parents who would often cast blame on her method of scoring students when their children's scores were not as high as they expected. She said that she was accused by the parents of scoring the students too hard, even though she used a rubric to guide her scoring of the creative writing essays. This occurred even though she observed that her students did not seem to be overly concerned with their marks when the SEA exam results came out. She noted they were more

concerned with whether they passed for their first-choice school or not. She commented that the aim for students was "passing for your first choice, and if you don't, you are a failure."

Betty as well, reported that she too felt stressed and pressured by some parents to help their children to pass for prestigious secondary schools. She spoke of one of her student's mothers, who insisted to her that her son must pass for a college saying "he has to lift my nose." Betty added that the mother's insistence came even though her son struggled through primary school and had repeated several classes. Not only were teachers blamed for students' inability to pass for prestigious schools but the entire primary school got a bad name and became branded as a "bad school." So much so, that parents would remove their children from the school and have them transferred to another primary school according to Betty. Betty recalled one of her student's parents saying:

> *"When we don't have children passing for prestige schools – you hear parents who pass around to hear children results – "I know all yuh ain't going to do anything good. I'll take out meh child from here" because they not hearing a prestige school in the results. "That school ain't no good."*
>
> - *Neema, Standard 5 teacher*

Also, Betty's school's context differed greatly from Neema's. While Neema's school is situated in a more affluent area, Betty's school is situated in a high-crime and poverty-stricken area. Betty described her school's appearance as depressing and rundown. Unlike the competitive nature of students in Neema's school to pass for prestigious secondary schools, Betty reported that one of the greatest challenges in her thirty-two years' experience of teaching at this primary school, much of it, spent teaching standards 4 and 5, was motivating the students to learn. She noted that her greatest challenge was not with her students' ability but it was to get her students "to want to be educated… to want to go further …to have a vision after primary school… to study at a higher level." Betty claimed that she sensed that her students were not extending themselves because they had accepted that despite their performance, they would be placed in a secondary school so they stopped trying, especially since students at the school were hardly ever placed in a prestigious secondary school. Betty sadly added that she felt very discouraged and experienced feelings of hopelessness because

she knew she had students in her class with the potential for good work but they were unwilling and disinterested in extending themselves to perform well at the SEA exam.

Caroline, a SEA teacher for over 18 years admitted that she too was challenged by the poverty-stricken area where her school was situated, she admitted that to motivate her students, she would instill that sense of competition among them by using their scores to let them know if they would qualify for a 2, 3 or 5-star hotel as an analogy. She would give her students practice test booklets that modelled the actual exam, six months in advance of the exam date, testing and scoring her students twice per week, and she would follow through by using the test results to reteach the topics that would come on the exam paper.

Caroline said that she loved "the thrill and adrenaline rush" of teaching the SEA class because of the excitement she experiences when her students pass for prestigious schools. However, she also experienced much frustration and tiredness having to prepare mixed ability SEA classes for the exam. She said she had difficulties working with students scoring as high as the 90% and above, and others below 30%. She blamed students' absenteeism and their lack of understanding of the basic concepts which ought to have been taught in earlier grades. For this reason, she said her

> *"Class comes in at 8:00 am …we work…they come in at 12:00… a shortened lunch and then I finish at 4:30 pm....a lot of repetition, a lot of extra work. Most times I didn't leave here until 5.30 pm."*
>
> - *Caroline, Standard 5 teacher*

Although Caroline, Betty, and Neema's situations and experiences differed, their challenges concerning the teaching of the SEA class were similar. They all experience high amounts of stress, frustration, and pressure to get their students into prestigious secondary schools. I now present the findings from the interviews conducted with primary school principals below.

Interviews with Primary School Principals

An analysis of the principals' transcripts describing their experiences not only substantiated some of the experiences shared by the other participants but also showed a perspective that many can glean from. Lyn spoke of the nature of stress upon students which

cause mental paralysis, forgetfulness, and fatigue due to lack of sleep as a result of the heavy workload. She also suggested that the heavy workload was counterproductive to students learning, especially if they were likely to forget what was being taught. She explained:

> *"When the children are under too much stress it prevents them from remembering what they do. Very often you… kind of experiencing diminishing returns – because you stressing out the child so much – when you are highly stressed you tend to forget. Sometimes these children don't even get enough sleep Miss. They come to school and they'll be sleeping in the classrooms – they set up all night and they try to do home lesson (homework) all night, and they come to school in the morning and they are tired. They haven't slept well."*
>
> - *Lyn, Primary school principal*

Lyn also spoke about the additional stress associated with the additional workload placed upon the SEA students because of extra lessons taken daily, which begin before the official start of school, after school, and on weekends. She expounded:

> *"In addition to after 2:00 lessons ...some of the teachers will take them from 7:30 am and then they'll have it after school too, with the class teacher. And when the vehicle picks them up at 4:30 pm they drop them off at another lesson centre. And the thing about these lessons, it is even on a Sunday."*
>
> - *Lyn, Primary school principal*

Sometimes the lesson classes are held at more than one location, with different teachers. Such a hectic schedule often leaves little or no time for students to engage in extracurricular activities. Lyn recounts:

> *"When they concentrate on first-choice schools the pressure is on the parent and the pressure is on the child. So, from the time they reached standard four, the parents would tell you "Okay my daughter was in this guide movement, she can't be there anymore – she can't dance anymore because that would prevent her from getting her first-choice school. So, there's a whole lot of stress placed on all parties concerned…. the child is pressured… So, they didn't monitor the child to see well "my daughter is not an A-student, she's trying but not an A-student." So when they come to sign up the child now they will tell you to put the top schools and then they would try to pressure the child and have the child go to lessons from the time school is over you letting the child take lessons*

> *from the teacher – a vehicle picks up the child – and the child has to be dropped off at another lesson centre and the child will be getting home-lessons from all the different people who gave her lessons in addition to what their class teacher is doing."*
>
> - *Lyn, Primary school principal*

Thus far, we have discovered a whole spectrum of fears SEA students experience. From a principal's perspective, Gwyneth tells us the SEA teachers also experienced much fear. They fear being judged by the SEA results of their students. Gwyneth said her teachers would shy away from being assigned a SEA class at the beginning of the academic school year. Gwyneth explained that:

> *"Everyone was afraid of standard 5 class. No teacher wanted to be put on display because you are being judged. When you take on a standard 5 class… people judge you by the results that you get…so people were afraid to put themselves in that position… they would sort of shirk away from it. They realized it was a lot of work. You could hide behind other classes but you can't hide behind a standard 5 class because of how your children perform people point fingers."*
>
> - *Gwyneth, Retired primary school principal and std. 5 teacher*

Lyn also spoke of pressure that came from parents of SEA students directed towards their SEA teachers, blaming them for the less-than-expected performances of their children. She observed that even the other teachers of the school who would have previously taught these students would cast blame on the SEA teachers if any of the SEA students fail to place in the top one hundred scores on the island. Lyn also spoke of a common phenomenon where parents too would experience shame, feeling their children were "less than" because other workers at the office would compare their children's performance and talk about who passed for prestigious schools and who did not.

Having presented a summary of participants' experiences and snippets of vignettes, I now present two diagrams below before proceeding to the findings of my second research question. The first diagram is a thematic map representing the themes that were generated in response to my first research question as seen in Figure 4:0:1. The second diagram presents the

codes that were identified in response to research question one. These which were then categorized into themes can be seen in Figure 4:0:2.

Research Question 1 Thematic Map

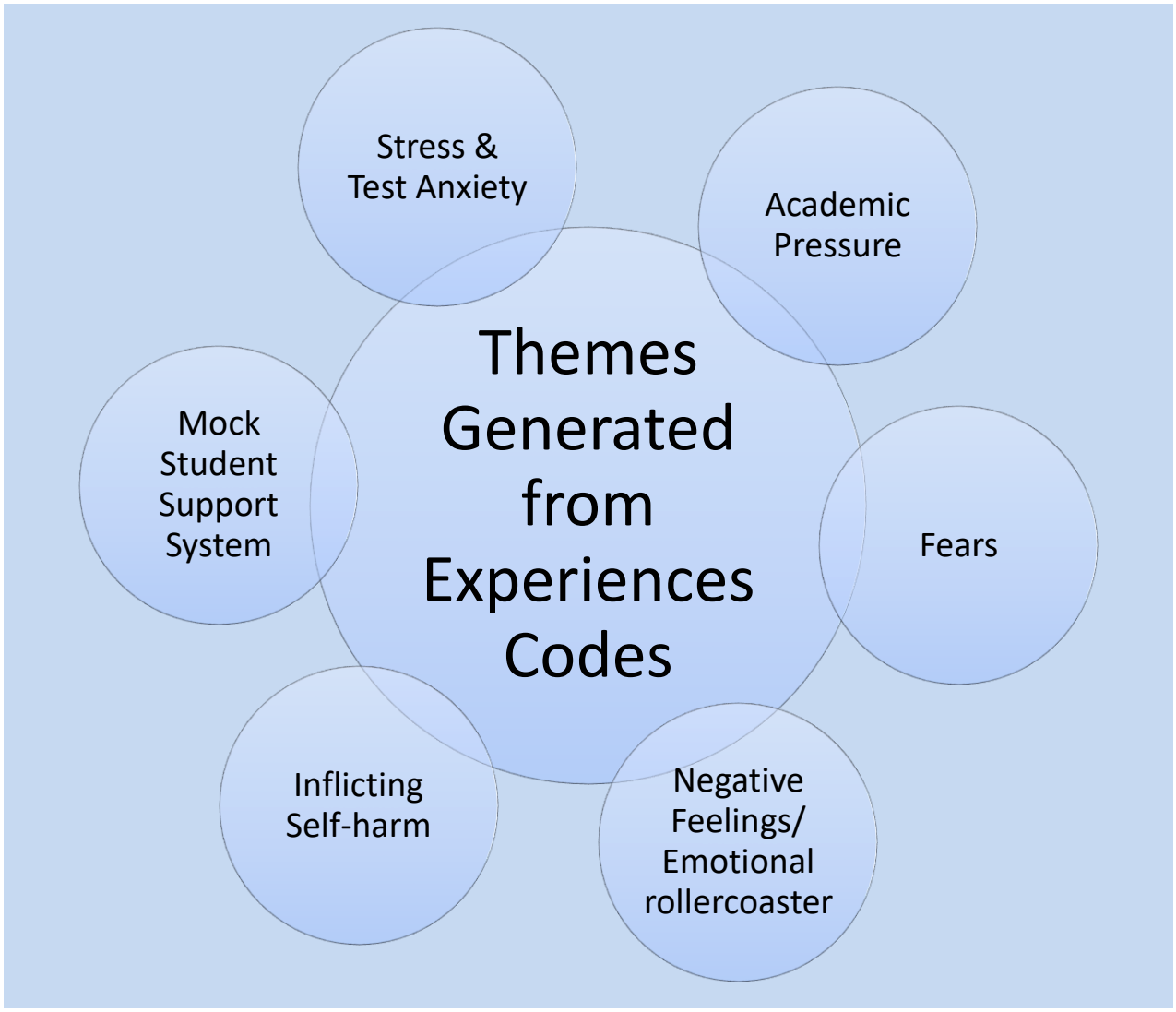

Figure 4:0:1 – Research Question 1 Thematic Map

Experience Themes and their Classification by Codes

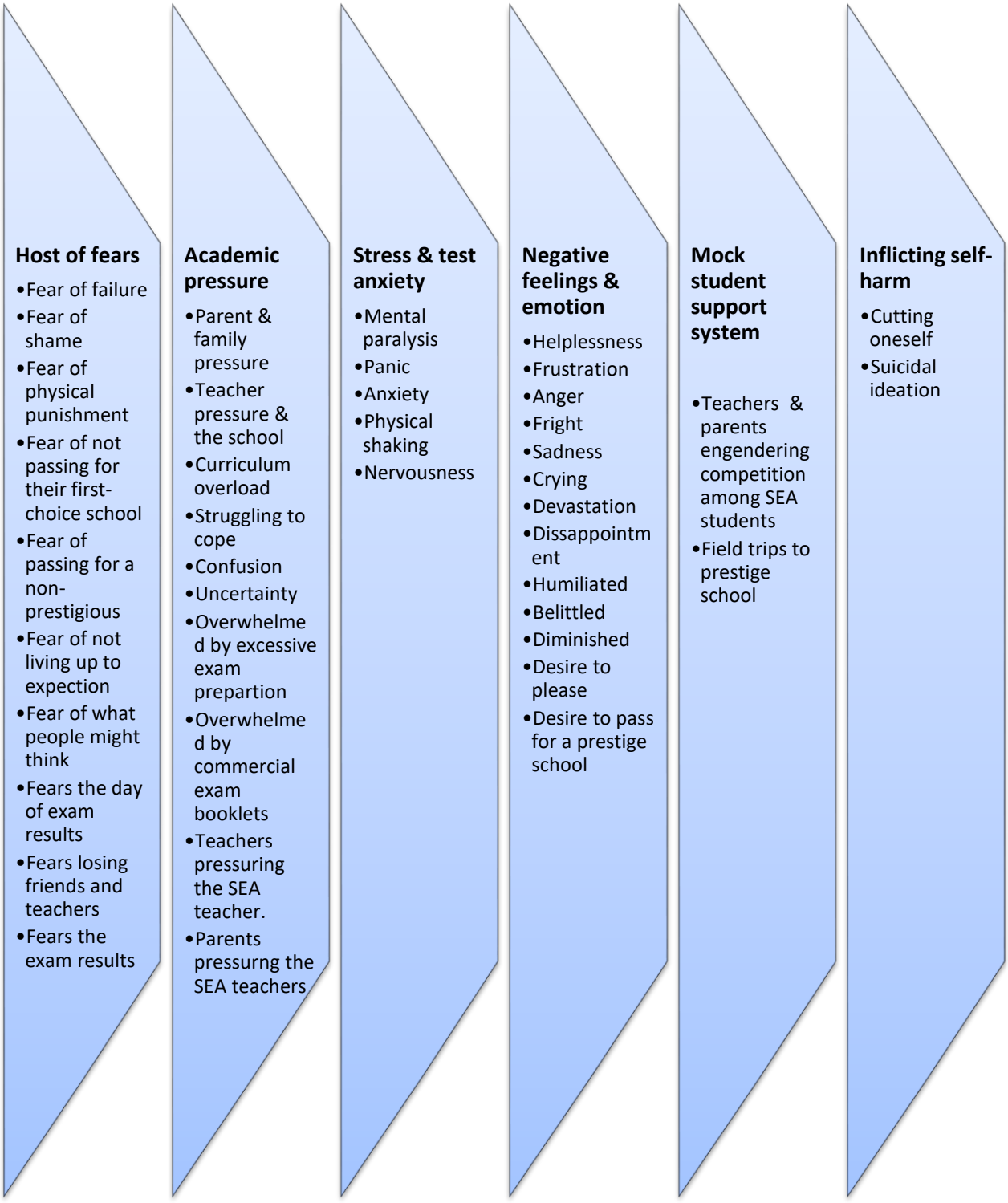

Figure 4:0:2 – Classification of Codes: Research Question 1

Findings to Research Question 2

What are the beliefs and values in the perspectives of participants associated with the high-stakes SEA exam?

Beliefs and Values identified from Students' Essays

An analysis of the students' writings revealed their beliefs and values regarding the SEA exam. The students' writings showed that they valued prestigious schools over government secondary schools. Concerning readiness, two students believed that they were not ready for the exam. As such, they felt that they would not be successful. Four students, on the other hand, shared the belief that they needed to "push" or exert themselves to be successful at passing for a prestigious school. Four believed that taking extra lessons was necessary if they were to pass for their first-choice schools while two students believed that after the exam the workload will be over. Three other students believed that play in earlier grades leading up to the SEA exam was an obstacle that would take up time that can be spent on exam preparation and interfere with their hopes of passing for a prestigious school. Three students believed that isolating themselves from their friends and classmates was necessary to help them avoid distractions and improve their performance in the exam.

In addition, three students believed that if they passed for an elite school, they would be able to please their friends and family and make them happy. Three students believed that gaining the approval of their parents and teachers would make them feel good about themselves. Eight students expressed the belief that the exam will help them get a good job and they will have a good future while two believed that passing for a prestigious school will help them earn a lot of money in the future. Four other students believed that if they passed for a prestigious secondary school, they will become good persons.

Beliefs and Values Codes from Analysing Interview Transcripts

Interview with an Educational Psychologist

An analysis of Rita's transcript revealed that she believed that the SEA exam had produced a lot of dysfunctional behaviours in children because of the anxiety they experience from the pressure on them to do well. She noted that pressure could hinder students' true performance during the exam. As such, she believed that seminars should be organized for parents so that they would know what could be done and how they could prepare their children for such an exam. She explained that she had been successfully involved in such activities to develop awareness among parents. In recounting her experience, she recommended that the exam be reformed to minimize the impact on students. She explained:

> *"These children don't have a life …. in some of these schools …. I think we really have to revisit how we prepare our children… I know people said that this is an exam that cannot be done away with unless a better alternative is put into place but even if we still have an exam like this, we should put things in place for parents and teachers so that it wouldn't affect the children as much because…. these things carry on with children"*
>
> - *Rita, Educational Psychologist*

However, Rita believed that the teachers were culpable for pressuring the children to pass for prestigious secondary schools by using much of their time to involve the students in extra lessons and depriving the students of time to engage in other non-academic activities. As such, she believes the SEA exam should be reformed to minimize the emotional and psychological impact on students.

Interview with a Law Lecturer

Mathew believed that his score on the eleven-plus exam meant that is where he belonged academically. This belief was perpetuated by the fact that he was never able to get into a higher stream. He noted:

> *"I was in Lower A, I thought that is where I belonged in terms of the common entrance results and however, they placed you inside of the school. And being in Lower all the time…. I suppose I would be*

> *pretty glad I didn't get demoted to Lower 1B or 1C but from the time you become Lower…you know…your expectations of yourself changed."*
>
> - *Mathew, Law Lecturer*

Mathew claimed that this belief influenced the opinions he formed of himself and his expectation of himself. He noted also, that even though he was a successful lecturer of law, he still grapples with those feelings of insecurity and insufficiency that started when he was a young man in secondary school post his eleven-plus exam. I now present the beliefs and values from my interviews with past SEA students.

Interview with Post SEA Students

Mark, Vaughn, and Nina said that they were all introduced to the idea of setting their hearts on passing for a prestigious school by their primary school teachers. They noted that they knew little about what made these schools better than others. They believed that it was the SEA teachers that were responsible for the stress, disappointment, and sadness students experienced when they do not get the school of their choice.

Mark said that he was content to pass and move on to a secondary school. However, it was at school the idea of prestige secondary school was introduced to him and he felt that if the teachers had not made such a big deal about prestige schools, students would have been spared the emotional trauma they experienced at their SEA results. He recounted:

> *"…no offense…but I would say the cause of them not being happy is the teachers' fault…because of the stress they put on the children to pass for this, pass for that school and after all of that, they didn't pass for a prestige school…they must be sad! Those teachers would talk so highly about these prestige schools, raising their hopes and stressing them. I wouldn't blame them for being sad. It's kind of the teacher's fault."*
>
> - *Mark, Pass student participant 2*

Vaughn believed that the pressure the school and teachers placed on students to pass for prestigious schools came from their quest to make themselves and their primary schools "look good" or be perceived as high-performing schools in the eyes of the public.

> *"Well, you will get to choose, but your choice is greatly influenced by your teachers, your friends… because everybody wants you to pass high at a certain level…they don't want you to put schools like Non-Prestige…they want you to put schools like…well for me I'm a boy so it's was… Prestige Colleges, and… At that time, I had no idea but now …thinking about it, I would just say that it is for the teachers …it is for the school…to see how much students can pass for Prestige College or how much students that teacher had that passed for Prestige Secondary and so on."*
>
> - *Vaughn, Pass Student participant 3*

Vaugh and Mark believe that it was at the primary schools they attended that the ideas of prestige secondary school were perpetuated. Their beliefs were founded upon their very own lived experiences. I now share my findings from the interviews conducted with the parents of SEA students below.

Interview with the Parents

Cole believed that his son's school which is considered a prestigious primary school situated in the heart of the capital city, perpetuated educational inequity through favouritism, and teacher bias. He said that from as early as standard three, students are streamed within their class. He claims that even though he was told that the school does not stream students, he noticed that students whom the teachers deemed to be quick, who can grasp the work easily, and whose parents can influence the teachers by providing them with gifts, seem to get the privilege of sitting in the first few rows of the class. He explained his observation as seen below:

> *"You begin to see where they (teachers)…either because of parents' participation, influence with sports days… or because of the child's so-called academic prowess... looking as if they bright You will see they start to favour. So, you would begin to see where they gradually begin to move…now they tell you that the whole class is moving up but they placing James and the good ones to the front. So, you see the class moving but then you see that segregation where those whom they figure are quick, picking up easy, parents' influence, by giving …. a bottle of non-alcoholic wine or these kinds of things…*

> *So, parents bringing in gifts and pulling teachers aside, waiting to talk to teachers."*
>
> - *Cole, Parent of SEA student*

Cole's story alluded to practices of educational inequity through favouritism, and teacher bias. I now present the beliefs and values identified from an analysis of the teachers' interviews.

Interview with the Teachers

An analysis of the teachers' interview transcripts revealed what their beliefs were concerning the impact of the SEA exam. Neema believed that the pressure associated with teaching the SEA classes was responsible for "a lot of standard 4 and 5 teachers getting sick, she said she "felt stressful 100% of the time" and was convinced that she could hear the stress in the voices of the other SEA teachers at her school.

Neema added that she believed that the teachers at her school who gave extra lessons to students for a fee, gave the children false hope of passing for a prestigious school when in fact their ongoing performance proved otherwise.

Caroline said she did not believe extra lessons were needed. She believed that if teachers did their work well, there was sufficient time to prepare students for the exam. She believed that her fellow teachers who give lessons on Saturdays did so for monetary gains. She added:

> *"I feel a lot of teachers …like in our school …do it for money. I came out one Saturday because I wanted them to sit one to a bench for a mock exam…you can't do that during normal school. But another group came in as well and she charged the children…20 dollars from each child."*
>
> - *Caroline, Standard 5 Teacher*

The teachers' beliefs pointed to several issues. Firstly, the stress and pressure upon SEA teachers could be a reason why many fall ill. Secondly, many teachers are focused on the extra lessons for monetary gain and thirdly, if SEA teachers

work well, there will be no need for extra lessons. I now present the beliefs and values identified from the interviews conducted with the principals.

Interview with the Principals

Lyn spoke of the academic pressure her SEA teachers would receive from parents and other teachers on staff to get their students to pass for prestigious secondary schools. She believed that pressure also stems from the Ministry of Education because of their policy and practice to celebrate nationally and yearly, students who score in the top one hundred across the country. She says when teachers aren't able to get their students into the top one hundred, they become a target of blame, criticism, and fault-finding from parents and other teachers of the school. Lyn shared the experience of one of her SEA teachers whose negative experience with the rest of the school staff and parents left her feeling judged, criticized, and hurt. This occurred because one particular year, no one from her SEA class had passed for a prestigious school. Lyn said that the experience left her teacher traumatized.

Lyn also believed that the extra lessons external to the school had become a commercial activity and claimed that what was done at these extra-lesson business ventures was counter-productive to what the school teacher would be doing at school, leaving students more confused and unproductive. Lyn also alludes to deceptive behaviour by some lessons teachers because they tell parents that their children are improving academically and raise their hope of their children passing for a prestigious school with the intent of maintaining numbers to keep as many students as possible which will ultimately amount to an increased income. She claims that the parents' eagerness to enrol their children in extra-lesson had been taken advantage of by many lesson teachers. She explained:

> *"There are parents that from the time they feel they are paying for something they automatically feel it is doing the child some good. There are times when you have to call in the parents and say to them "It is too much for your child because she cannot even do the homework, she is getting from her class teacher but you have her struggling with the lessons coming from the lesson's teacher." But the lesson's teacher very often makes the parents feel that the child is improving because they want the child to continue taking the lessons because it is about money Miss. It's about finances. So, then we have to tell the parent 'You know your daughter has been taking*

> *lessons so long but we are not seeing any improvement from the lessons for the child in the classroom.' The lesson's teacher will be having all these different ticks and comments in their book but the child in the classroom shows very little improvement. Of course, there are times when you have to plead with them on behalf of the child."*
>
> - *Lyn, Primary School Principal*

Sarah who has been a primary school principal for 6 years and had taught the standards 5 SEA class for 12 years before she became a principal, believes that the problem with students' poor performance was not the children's fault, but stems from a lack of support at the home level, and the burden of caring for responsibilities that were not theirs to carry. She expressed it this way as seen in the vignette below:

> *"Some of them though… the problem wasn't really them… it was very little support from at home. Parents aren't able to help them with their school work, absenteeism…. Not coming to school because their parents don't have enough money. There were some who had to stay away from school because they had to take care of a younger brother or sister. All those were reasons why some of them weren't able to achieve."*

Sarah felt that the lack of parental support transposed itself into parents' unrealistic expectations for their children. She believed that her parents were trying to fulfill their dreams of going to a prestigious secondary school. Sarah said the following to illustrate her point:

> *"Some parents…don't matter what you tell them…. it is their dream….and I think many parents fulfill their own dream in that "I wanted to go Prestige College when I was a boy, so I want my son to go Prestige College." The boy comes to me and when I look back at his report, he has been making 30%, 40%, 50%... let's say even 60% and this father want this boy to go to Prestige College which is a 90% school. There is only so much I can do in the period of time that I have with the child…and you tell them "no, he isn't ready…but they would insist on …choosing all the schools in the upper range wants."*

The foregoing presentation of the findings in response to research question two highlighted the beliefs these principals have based on their lived experiences. They point to the Ministry of Education as the one that sets the tone for the prestige school ideology and the parents, teachers and the community likewise follow; unrealistic expectations and lack of parental support. Another belief is that the extra lesson business ventures that are external to the school, may prove counterproductive to what is done at school. The findings in response to my second research question have been presented and can also be seen in the two diagrams below. The first diagram is a thematic map representing the beliefs and values themes that were generated in response to my second research question. This can be seen in

Figure 4:3.

The second diagram presents the codes that were identified during the data analysis process in response to research question two. These were categorized into the beliefs and values themes as seen in Figure 4:4. The findings to my third research question are presented after the diagrams.

Research Question 2 Thematic Map

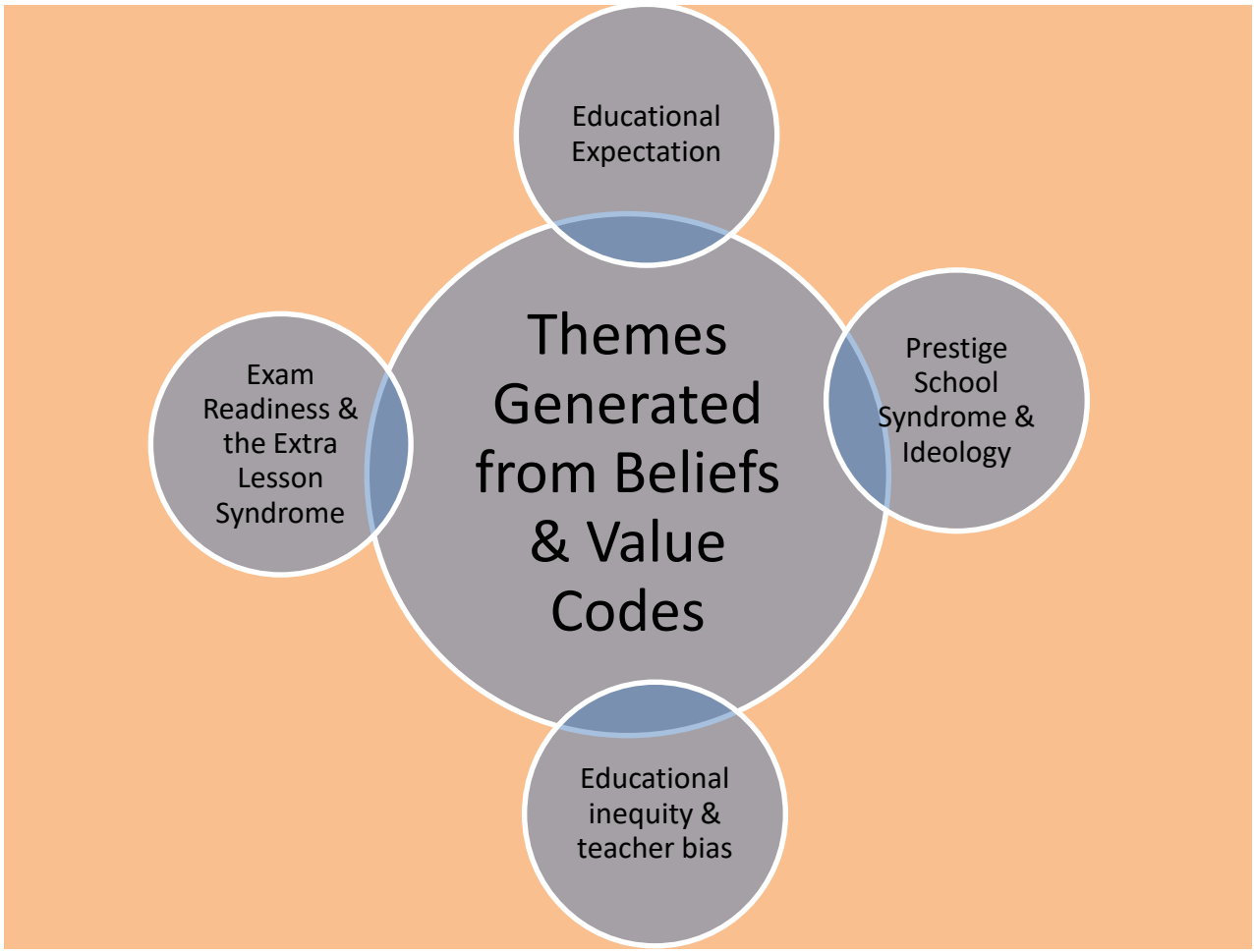

Figure 4:3 – Research Question 2 Thematic Map

Beliefs & Value Themes and their Classification by Codes Generated

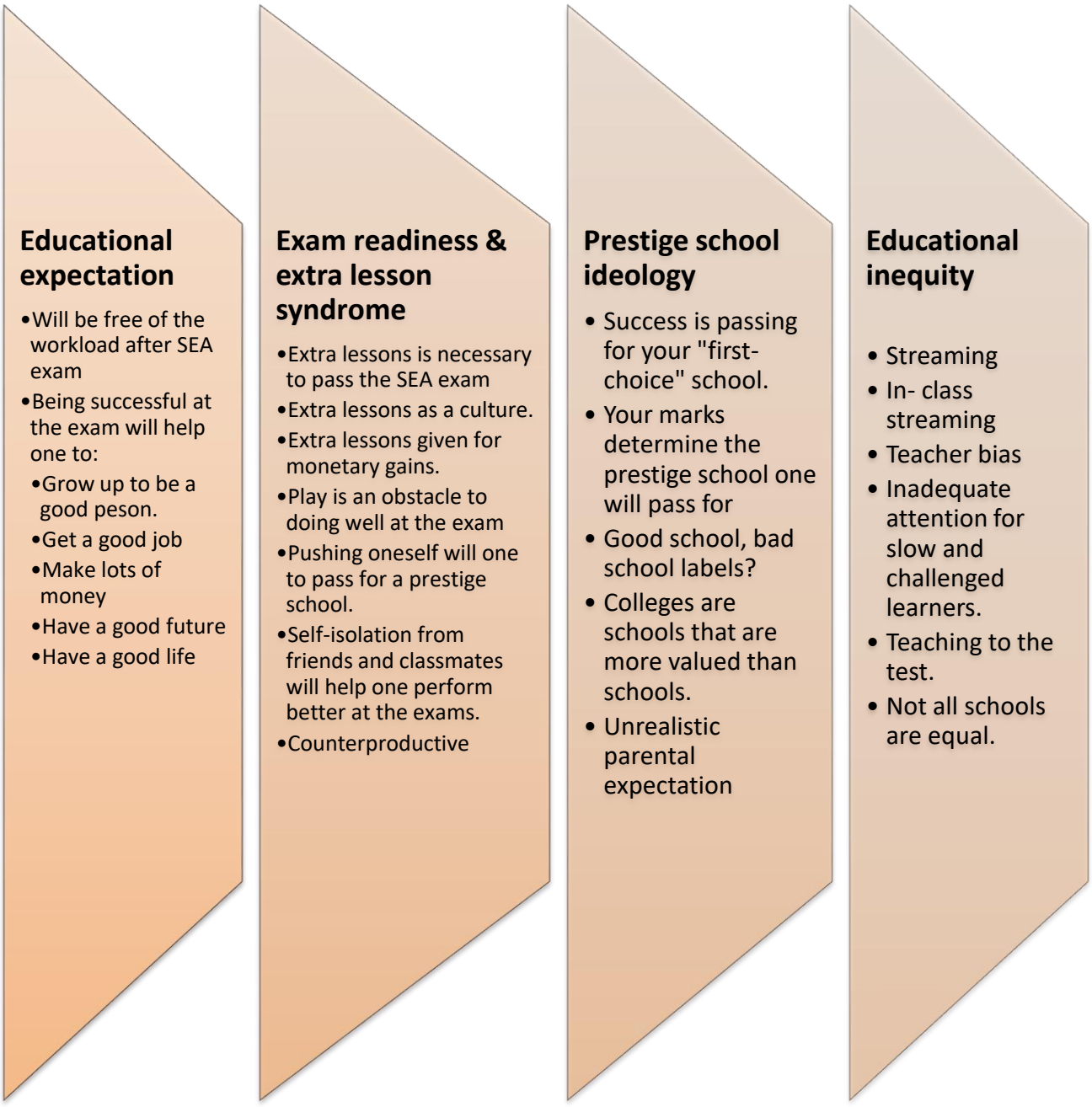

Figure 4:4 – Classification of Codes: Research Question 2

Findings to Question 3

What impact has the experiences with the SEA exam had on participants' lives?

Student Essays

The students' essays revealed how their experiences with the SEA exam can impact their lives. The essays repeatedly exposed students' desire to obtain others' approval which meant passing for a prestigious school would be a contingency for approval from their parents, teachers, and members of the community. Self-recrimination, ascribing blame to oneself for not achieving the goal of passing for their first-choice school was another way students were impacted by the SEA experience as seen by the responses from Rita, an educational psychologist.

An Interview with an Educational Psychologist

The Educational Psychologist explained that children who experienced feelings of inadequacy, feeling "less than" others because they were placed in secondary schools they had not chosen or having not gotten their first choice, could develop issues with self-esteem. She explained that such an experience can have:

> *"a terrible blow to their self-esteem….and these children can continue to feel as if they didn't make it and they didn't please their parents and their self-esteem becomes really diminished. Such a devastating blow on children, if not addressed continues to affect their relationships and their whole sense of self. So as adolescence in secondary school, some of them give up, even though they have the ability to do really well."*
>
> - *Rita, Educational Psychologist*

She also noted that emotional and mental support for SEA students from parents were severely lacking. She said:

> *"where this is lacking and unfortunately you are talking about many families, parents do not pay attention to the development of self with*

> *their children…. they are more concerned with providing for them materially and financially and not mentally or emotionally."*
>
> - *Rita, Educational Psychologist*

She added that the excess examination preparation and the pressure to perform academically engulf children as early as ages 8, 9, and 10. She claimed that these children were being seriously affected, deprived, and cheated from childhood experiences because of the vast amounts of time spent in school with afterschool lessons, followed by vast amounts of homework.

An Interview with a Law Lecturer

He noted that the negative impact the eleven-plus exam had on him was the feelings of inadequacy which made him feel less valued than other students who were placed in a higher academic stream. He claimed that the impact contributed to a diminished sense of self-worth based on his academic standing at his prestigious school. He recalled:

> *"The biggest impact Prestige College had…I suppose the biggest negative impact was being placed in Lower 1A and being made to feel as though you were lower or inferior."*
>
> - *Mathew, Law Lecturer*

Mathew's experience of insufficiency, though successful at his secular employment seemed to have been indelibly marked in his memories, for he never forgot how he was made to feel years later on his way to retirement.

Interview with the Parents

Alice believed that if her daughter were to pass for a prestigious school this would in some way add value to their lives. For Alice, having her children pass for a prestigious school

was like reliving her childhood experience with her parents who had the same expectation of her, but she too was not able to live up to her parent's expectations. She lamented:

> *"The first time, I passed for Non-Prestige Junior Secondary. Although my father was teaching there my mother did not want me to go there at all. So she made me write it over, so I wrote it over (repeat the exam the following year). When I wrote it over I passed for Central. But when I passed for Central, I felt alright, I felt good. It wasn't the prestige school I wanted to go to but I still went to a school. I think that the idea of wanting a prestigious school really goes way back, even from my childhood days. That's a revelation."*
>
> - *Alice, Parent of four SEA students*

During her interview, Alice voiced regrets over the pressure she placed on her children. She cried for a moment, voicing how proud she was of their accomplishments even though they didn't pass for any prestigious secondary schools. She said that if she had realized earlier how the pressure could harm her children she would have acted differently and been more supportive of them throughout the SEA process. She believed that this desire to pass for a prestigious school came from her very own exam experience with her parents, which she relived with her own children. She had found herself within a *perpetual cycle of generational academic indoctrination.*

Cole, also felt that his relationship with his son was strained because of the pressure he placed on him to pass for Prestige College. He explained:

> *"So even our relationship …father and son was beginning to be stretched and strained and I had to draw back because I realized that…my expectation of him…even though he may have wanted it ...how I was going about it wasn't right. So it was affecting our relationship as father and son…. I felt that he locked off in his mind…he locked off. It's as if I felt… as a parent…that he was being isolated in the class and now he is being ostracized and pressured by daddy outside of the class… I think I was shutting him down and he was shutting himself down."*
>
> - *Cole, Parent of SEA student*

The impact of the strained parent-child relationship was highlighted in the above experiences which the parents candidly shared, as the teachers did in their interview responses as seen in the following interview findings.

Interview with the SEA Teachers

One teacher expressed that the impact of her experiences with the SEA exam made her feel unsafe in her classroom because she was afraid of those parents who felt angry with her when their children did not receive high scores during exam preparation. She added that the school had to make adjustments to the class visitation arrangements by parents by "putting something in place that parents couldn't just come up" to the class anymore." For this reason, she said that requested the principal to be removed as a SEA teacher. She reported that she knew of other teachers who also shy away from that responsibility, except for those who saw the teaching of standards 4 and 5 as an opportunity to give extra lessons as a source of extra income.

During the interview, Neema was reminded of her own experience with the 11-plus exam in 1990. She felt cheated because she scored in the '90s but yet she was not placed in a prestigious secondary school but rather in a junior secondary school. Neema said:

> "*I felt like a loser. And I went back again. My parents made me go back again at the recommendation of the teacher. My parents never pushed me, it was me. I used to push myself and the teacher Ms. Higgan. And I passed for Non-Prestige Junior Secondary again."*
>
> - *Neema, Standard 5 teacher*

Eventually, her parents decided to pay for her to attend a private school because her father believed that Junior secondary was for "dunsy" children. She observed that what she had experienced in 1990 as a child, was now unknowingly being perpetuated in her class because she would tell her students that the goal was passing for a prestigious secondary school and not for a non-prestigious school.

The abovementioned experiences from my participants, communicate well the impact their experiences with the SEA exam have had on their lives. Two additional diagrams are

presented below. The first diagram is a thematic map representing the life impact themes that were generated in response to my third research question as seen in Figure 4:0:5.

The second diagram presents the codes that were identified in response to research question three that were categorized into themes. These codes and their corresponding themes can be seen in Figure 4:0:6.

Research Question 3 Thematic Map

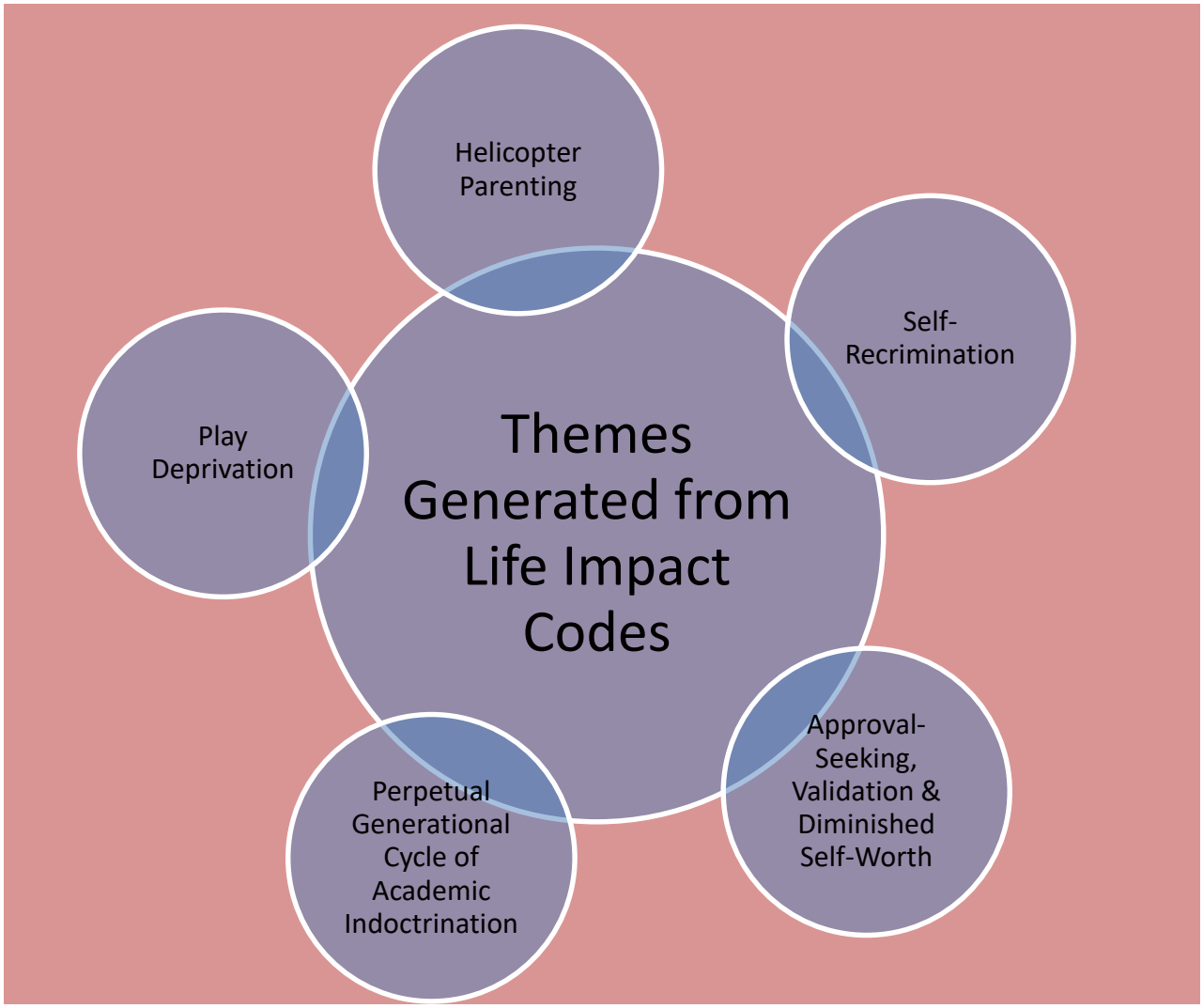

Figure 4:0:5 – Research Question 3 Thematic Map

Life Impact Themes and their Classification by Codes Generated

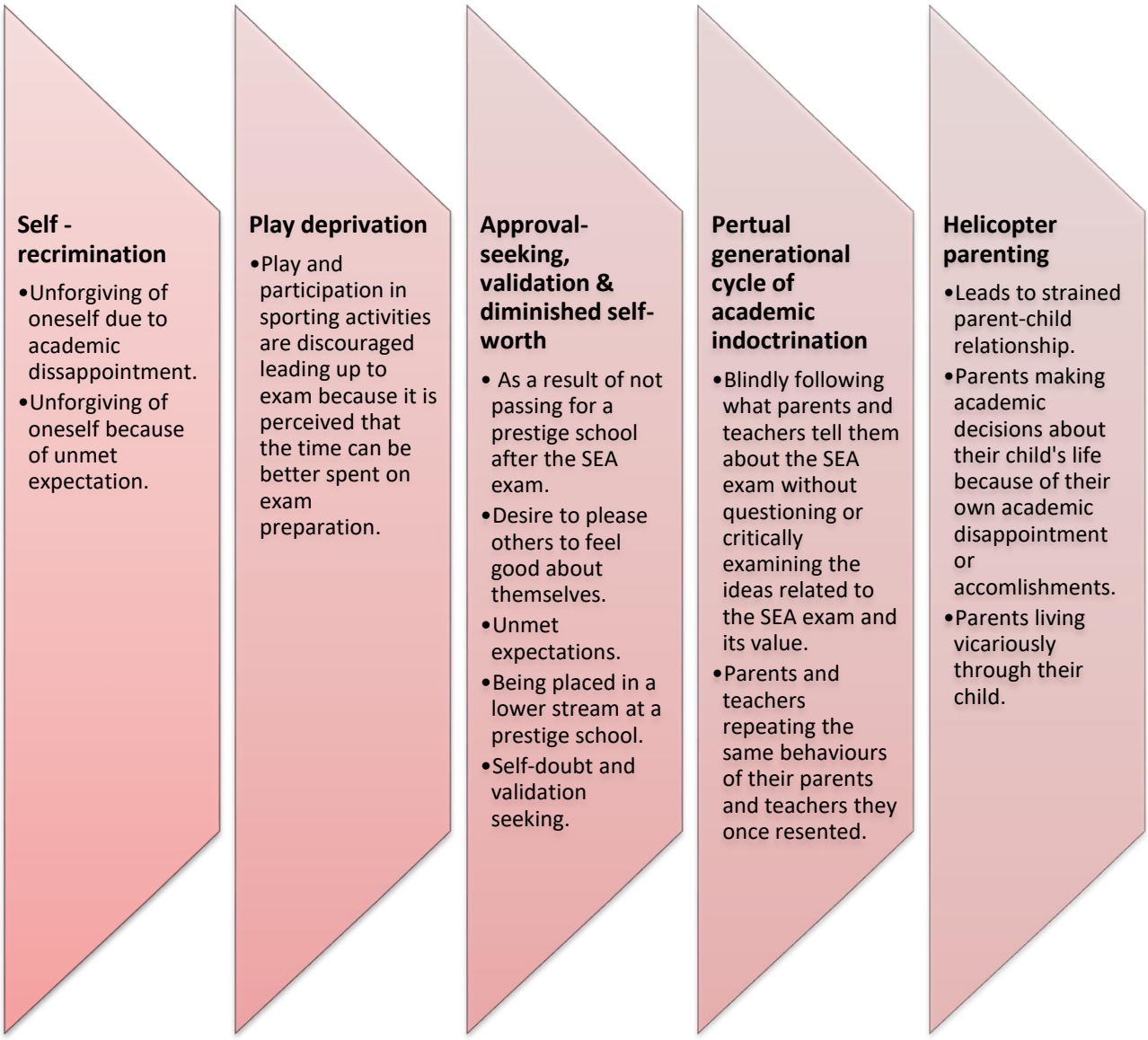

Figure 4:0:6 – Classification of Codes: Research Question 3

Chapter 4 Conclusion

This chapter presented the findings from an analysis of my two raw data sets, the interview transcripts, and students' written essays using thematic analysis. The findings were presented according to research questions and categories of participants. Data from in-depth interviews and documentary analysis of pre-SEA students' writings were used to learn about my participants' experiences with the high-stakes SEA exam in Trinidad and Tobago; their beliefs and values regarding the SEA exam and the impact these experiences have had on their lives. Characteristic of qualitative research, findings were reported in narrative format with a wide array of excerpts and vignettes from my participants' verbal or written words. These excerpts were used to build the readers' confidence in the findings by conveying to them the accuracy of the findings as represented in the reality of participants' experiences.

Six themes were generated from the data in response to my first research question to learn about participants' experiences with the SEA exam. The data revealed that they experienced *fear* for a host of reasons. These reasons include fear of failure, shame, physical punishment for failure, fear of not passing for their first choice or one of the prestigious schools, fear of disappointing others, and fear of what others might think of them if they did not pass for a prestigious secondary school, and fear of losing friends. The data also revealed that participants experienced much *stress and test anxiety* evidenced by physical effects such as mental paralysis, panic attacks, physical shaking, nervousness, and crying. In addition, the data showed that participants experienced an array of *negative feelings and emotions* from the time they enter the 4th standard leading up to the exam, during, and after the exam. These include feelings of helplessness, frustration, anger, fright, sadness, devastation, disappointment, humiliation, desire to please, and a diminished sense of self-worth. The data revealed that some students inflicted *self-harm* by cutting themselves while others experienced suicidal ideation. Another finding that stood out with almost all participants is the *academic pressure* they experienced. These include parental and family pressure upon their children and their SEA teachers, and the pressure from the SEA teachers upon their students. Such pressures were seen as some participants were struggling to cope with the workload pointing to curriculum overload, the overwhelming administration of commercial examination preparation test booklets to students, and the extra lesson classes administered in the early hours before school begins, lunchtime, after school, and on weekends. What is more, is that the data also exposed a *mock student support system* present in some schools as revealed by the stories of the student participant. This was evident by yearly arranged field

trips to prestige secondary schools and the stirring of competition among students as a means of motivation. This arrangement was counterproductive based on the negative reports of student participants.

An analysis of the data generated four themes in response to my second research question which aimed at learning about the beliefs and values participants held concerning the SEA exam. The data revealed that most participants highly valued the *prestige school ideology*. This was seen by their "good school" and "bad school" labels concerning prestigious and non-prestigious schools; their beliefs that success meant passing for their "first choice" school, that their scores will determine which school they will be placed in and that colleges had greater value than other schools. Another finding revealed participants' beliefs regarding *exam readiness and the extra lesson syndrome*. This was identified by participants' beliefs that extra lessons are necessary for children if they are to pass the exam, that children needed to push themselves if they are to pass for a prestige school, that it is part of our culture, that it is given for monetary gains, that external lessons are counterproductive to the school, and isolation from having friends and play will help them perform better at the exam. Yet another finding discovered, pointed to *educational expectation*. This was seen in pre-SEA students' writings that they believed that after the SEA, they will be free of the workload; that if they are successful at passing for a prestigious school, they will grow up to be good people, get a good job, make lots of money, and have a good life. The last finding to question two points to *educational inequity*. This was inferred by claims of streaming and in-class streaming, teacher bias, inadequate attention to slow and challenged learners, teaching to the test, and inequality in schools.

In response to research question 3, the data highlighted five themes that were generated and pointed to the impact participants' experiences with the SEA exam have had. *Helicopter parenting* style was identified in the data which showed the over-involvement of some parents in their children's lives, making academic decisions at the cost of strained parent-child relationships, even *depriving their children of play* in favour of extra lesson schedules after school, on weekend and during school vacation. The data revealed also that some parents were living vicariously through their children, pressuring their children and wanting for them what they could not achieve for themselves.

The finding also pointed to other ways participants were impacted. They spoke of behaviours such as *self-recrimination, approval seeking and validation, diminished self-*

worth, and *a perpetual cycle of generational academic indoctrination*. The findings from the documentary analysis of pre-SEA student writing corroborated the findings from the in-depth interviews. A discussion of the themes identified in response to each research question would be discussed in chapter 5 the Discussion chapter.

Chapter 5: Discussion of Findings

Introduction

In chapter 4, the findings from the analysis of various data sets were presented with the inclusion of quotations from the interview transcripts, and students' writings. However, this chapter focuses mainly on discussions of these findings and seeks to eliminate the needless repetition of quotations from chapter 4. The discussion herein is based on my interpretations of the findings guided by the literature. However, I do acknowledge that there are multiple ways of interpreting my findings, and I remain open to other possible interpretations.

Using Lunenburg and Irby's (2008) format for writing the discussion, this chapter begins with a summary of the study, which includes a restating of the research questions, followed by a summary of the key findings, as they relate to each research question. Further on, I will interpret and discuss the findings presented in chapter four, in response to my research questions, using a thematic approach. The findings will be assessed and discussed, linking the findings from my literature review in chapter two, and my theoretical framework in chapter one. As I discuss the findings, I expect that my position as a mother of three children will aid in my understanding from a parental perspective, the issues around preparing children to sit the high-stake SEA exam. I also expect that my experiences as an educator for over 28 years, would help me understand the perspectives of teachers and principals as I discuss the research findings. Finally, the chapter ends with a summary that precedes the conclusion chapter.

Summary of the Study

The purpose of this study was to learn about the impact the high-stakes SEA exam has had on students, parents, and educators associated with the exam, by analysing the experiences of participants in Trinidad and Tobago, using a qualitative research methodology. Using in-depth interviews as the primary data collection method, the intent is to describe and interpret participants' experiences, explore their beliefs and values and learn of ways their experiences have impacted their lives. Thirteen participants were interviewed and asked to share their stories which were recorded, transcribed, and analysed for

discussion. The participants included three teenagers, three SEA teachers, three Primary school principals, an educational psychologist, a law lecturer, and two parents. All were purposeful samples that varied in age, gender, and occupation. They held different perspectives and experience the exam differently. Documentary analysis of pre-SEA students' essays was used to gather additional data for analysis, triangulation of data, and to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings. The study asked the following research questions.

1. What are the experiences of educators, students, and parents associated with the high-stakes SEA exam?
2. What are the beliefs and values in the perspectives of participants associated with the high-stakes SEA exam?
3. What impact has the experiences with the SEA exam had on participants' lives?
4. What are the implications of the study's findings?

The first three questions were answered qualitatively from a thematic analysis of the interview transcripts and the written essays. The data was coded and themes were identified in response to each research question. The following section discusses in detail the findings of each research question.

Discussion of the Findings

Analytical Category 1: Research Question One

1. What are the experiences of educators, students, and parents associated with the high-stakes SEA exam?

The first research question sought to learn about the experiences educators, students, and parents had with the SEA exam. As evidenced by participants' responses reported in Chapter 4, the key findings from participants' experiences with the SEA phenomenon by themes, revealed experiences of fear, academic pressure, stress, test anxiety, disappointment, and a host of negative emotions, with some students inflicting self-harm, and a few experiences of suicidal ideation. My research study confirms that these findings associated with the high-stakes testing were confirmed also by other researchers discussed in my literature review (Javed & Khan, 2011; Pittman & Karle, 2015; Steimer, 2015; Brown et al., 2004; Paris & McEvoy, 2000; Flores & Clark, 2003; Madaus, 2009; Barksdale-Ladd &

Thomas, 2000; Linsambarth et al. 2017; Simic et al., 2021; Banks & Smyth, 2015; Putwain, 2008).

Fear, Stress, Anxiety, and Negative Emotions

The findings suggest that the extreme focus on high test scores in the SEA exam created a climate and a learning environment characterized by fear, anxiety, negative emotions, and stress for my participants. Although these are normal human experiences, they move beyond the realm of normal becoming a problem for children, schools, and society, when they begin to interfere with one's ability to perform well, and when they prevent children from learning, even robbing them of their capacity to fully engage in life's activities (Pittman & Karle, 2015). As noted by Brown (2014 p. 10) "You can't run from a lion and read a book at the same time". This illustration highlights the need for students to feel safe for them to truly learn, which involves processing, storing, and retrieving new information. When students experience fear, anxiety, stress, and negative emotions, the amygdala, the part of the brain known as the fear centre, which is designed to identify physical and emotional danger of any kind, whether real or perceived, goes into a protective mode of flight, fight or freeze (LeDoux & Daw, 2018; Simic et al., 2021; Linsambarth et al., 2017). When that happens with students prepping for the SEA exam, their ability to learn is not only stunted but their ability to recall, comprehend, and think with clarity during an exam with high stakes, is compromised (Brown, 2014). This occurs because anxiety reduces working memory capacity, and impedes cognitive capacity and abilities, all of which students need to prepare and perform well in an exam (Guy-Evans, 2021; Hembree, 1988). This finding not only confirms the research done by Cassady and Johnson (2001) which found that higher levels of cognitive test anxiety were associated with significantly lower test scores, but reiterates that test anxiety can interfere with academic performance measures of SEA students. For those who are unable to manage their fears, emotions, stress, and anxiety, their performance may not be reflective of their true potential and unfortunately may become victims of life-changing decisions regarding school placements. Therefore, strategies for coping with amygdala-based anxiety may need to be considered, and implemented for SEA students.

The findings to question one also suggests that students' motivation to learn may be hindered in an environment characterized by negative emotions, fear, stress, and anxiety. While positive emotions are correlated to motivation-related constructs, the negative impact

of strong emotions hinders students' motivation to learn (MacIntyre & Vincze, 2017). If students lack the motivation to learn, the learning process will likely break down. Maslow's hierarchy of needs helps us to appreciate that until certain lower needs are met, like the need to feel safe and secure in the learning environment, students are hardly likely to be motivated to reach the point of self-actualization, where they seek new knowledge, being in a frame of mind and emotional state ready to learn.

Furthermore, Roger's research asserts that students have a built-in motivation, and learning is a process that is initiated by learners, with teachers acting as facilitators. If students are overwhelmed by fear, stress, and anxiety, their ability to self-motivate will not only be difficult, but the opportunities for teachers to facilitate student learning would be lacking. This would mean that the secure environment needed for learning would be absent. As a result, effective student learning will be hindered (Rogers et al., 1994).

To alleviate the negative impact of students' negative physical and emotional distress that is associated with high-stakes testing on student learning, both Maslow and Rogers recommend that educators create a safe and secure learning environment for students by developing a positive relationship with students, which in turn, will influence academic performance and foster an emotionally safe classroom environment. This would demand that educators and parents discontinue the use of fear appeals which are messages used to pressure students by repeatedly reminding them of the importance of passing exams and the consequences of failure. In this case, failure to score in the 90s to earn a place at a prestigious secondary school. While the intent may appear noble, these messages are counterproductive because fear appeals only serve to instill fear, making students feel anxious and threatened, ultimately lowering their performance (Putwain & Best, 2012). Instead "efficacy appeals are recommended because their messages are non-threatening and encourage more positive performance outcomes (von der Embse, 2015).

Self-Harming

As noted by Rogers and Maslow, the need to build students' self-esteem is invaluable. Rogers contends that persons with a high sense of worth, tend to cope better with challenges in life and go on to develop into fully functioning persons, while Maslow contends that when children feel safe and secure, they better position themselves to learn. Since low self-esteem is linked to deliberate self-harming, the need for building students' self-esteem very early on, cannot be underestimated (Kilroy-Findley, 2015). Self-harming is also linked with a state of

high emotional distress, and unbearable inner turmoil, as some SEA students were found cutting themselves as a way to express deep emotional feelings, and deep distress, and to cope with painful or difficult feelings (Kilroy-Findley, 2015). This finding which was reported by an educational psychologist presents a real and concerning issue that exists among SEA students. The highly stressed examination-focused environment coupled with low-esteem-related issues has not only driven some to resort to self-harming practices but also driven a few to thoughts of suicide as seen by a few expressions of suicidal ideation from students' writings. Kilroy-Findley (2015) explains that the psychological drivers of deliberate self-harming may occur as an emotional release valve, self-punishment for perceived guilt, when one is deeply distressed, or an attempt to gain some control of life. This finding revealed a need for intervention to minimize risks of examination stress on children, if not eliminate them altogether. It also demonstrates a need for planned intervention for students with esteem issues, to help them cope with feelings of disappointment, and to mitigate any self-harming tendencies. McDougall et al. (2010) recommend that all young people who have self-harmed should undergo a risk assessment for self-harming and suicidal intent, and the data collected should be used by professionals to ascertain the best possible solutions. They recommend that school-based professionals are in a key position to laisse and coordinate efforts that will involve the school, families, and communities in developing intervention strategies that promote emotional health and well-being and allow for early intervention. Planned professional intervention far outweighs the risk of non-intervention.

Student Support System

In response to research question one, this study revealed that the student support system was also found wanting. SEA teachers, principals, and parents resorted to actions that were likely intended to motivate students to better perform in the exam but turned out to be more stressful for students. Such actions included the organization of field trips to prestigious secondary schools, the use of fear appeals, and engendering competition not just among their peers but among teachers, parents, and schools as strategies to provoke high exam scores in the 90s. Even after the exam, no support systems were present for students who must face the most feared and dreaded "what school you pass for" question, which would be repeatedly asked by many, before they begin to experience judgment, blame, shame, tears, and disappointment, as reported on by my participants.

Consequently, to help students cope with ensuing SEA challenging experiences, students need a support system informed by sound evidence-based practices, that will not harm students emotionally, and psychologically. Maslow's hierarchy of needs suggests that getting students into a state of academic readiness is a process, with each stage needing to be attended to, even if the process is not linear as some have argued. The process includes a series of cohesive factors that must be present for optimum learning to take place. Any student support system developed for schools needs to include strategic actions designed to meet these needs. Such strategic actions must not harm students, but demonstrate care for their physical, emotional, and psychological needs from all fronts, from the classroom teacher, the school administrators, the parents, the community, and the Ministry of Education. Banks and Smyth (2015) confirm that academic pressure and stressors are constructed within the context of a school, from the impact of teacher-student relations, peer relations, and the curriculum. As such, 'lion-like' situations which instill fear, stress, and anxiety, aptly portray a picture that illustrates students' inability to function cognitively in the face of lions within their learning environment, whether at home or school. This highlights the responsibility of educators and parents to not focus solely on student academic achievement, but to give attention to identifying the lions in their children's learning environment, and implement research-based strategies to mitigate their impact. Such strategies can be planned and implemented on a school-by-school, class-by-class, and home-by-home basis towards the creation of a safe and secure environment free from lions, that addresses the children's psychosocial and socio-emotional states. When this is achieved, student learning and achievement will likely ensue.

Research Question Two

What are the beliefs and values in the perspectives of participants associated with the high-stakes SEA exam?

Analytical Category 2: Research Question Two

The second research question sought to learn about the beliefs and values educators, students, and parents had about the high-stakes SEA exam. Participants reported a host of beliefs and values which are now presented and discussed. The themes are exam readiness

and the extra lesson syndrome, a prestige school ideology, participants' educational expectations, and the beliefs of educational inequity and teacher bias.

Exam Readiness and Extra-Lesson Syndrome

Participants of this study expressed that they believed that the students needed extra lessons because they were not ready for the exam. It was a belief that was valued by most participants, inclusive of parents, teachers, and school principals. As such, extra lessons were seen as the solution. To facilitate the extra lessons, participants believed that play was an obstacle to doing well in the exam, and if students isolated themselves from their peers, they would have more time to focus and perform better at the SEA exam. Extra-lessons, which refer to all teaching and learning activities conducted outside the normal school's timetable, at a cost to parents, had become so ingrained in our society in Trinidad and Tobago, that one participant commented that it was part of the country's culture (Lochan & Barrow, 2008; Bray & Silova, 2006). This demand for extra lessons or patterns of practice at both primary and secondary levels was fuelled by our examination-driven school system, which was inherited from colonial rule (Lochan & Barrow, 2008). However, this extra-lesson phenomenon is not unique to Trinidad and Tobago. In Zimbabwe, the extra-lesson phenomenon which emerged after their independence was meant for examination classes, with parents paying to increase their children's chances of passing public exams (Edson et al., 2017). In Jamaica, the extra-lesson phenomenon was also identified as a "historical pattern of social stratification and the lasting impact of an inherited examination system", which was fuelled by unsatisfactory learning conditions in less-resourced schools, and by parents wanting to provide an advantage for their children in elite schools (Stewart, 2015 p. 25).

There have been several justifications for, and charges against the extra-lesson phenomenon. For instance, some have argued that extra lessons were designed to assist special needs students, to provide individual tuition for a minority of students who were having problems grasping concepts during normal school hours, and to help struggling students catch up with others (Simbarashe & Edlight, 2011). Yet others claim that because students learn at different rates and have different levels of understanding, extra time would be needed by some to master content (Santhi, 2011). Although such reasoning may appear sound, the experiences shared by my participants refuted such claims. For them, the extra lessons were like an extension of the school day with a continuation of the same thing. It is

not surprising therefore that my participants believed that the extra lesson practice on the islands has become an entrepreneurial activity. This belief was supported by Masuku (2009) who commented that the extra-lesson phenomenon had "become a mixture of entrepreneurship and exploitation," providing lucrative extra employment opportunities for teachers while placing a financial burden on some parents (p. 26).

One principal participant reported on the conflict that existed between what was done by the lessons teacher external to the school, and the classroom teacher. She maintained that the extra-lessons teachers would often make the parents feel that their children were improving, by giving lots of ticks and favourable comments in their books, while the school teacher is not seeing any improvement. She believed this was done because the lessons teacher wanted the children to continue paying for extra lessons. She reiterated that she believed that the giving of extra lessons was fuelled by economic gains which were confirmed by Simbarashe and Edlight (2011) who found in their study that extra lessons targeted students who could pay. This report highlighted the issue of unsupervised teaching and exploitation which is an area that requires further research in Trinidad and Tobago.

One SEA teacher said she believes that there is sufficient time within the school hours to prepare students for the exam. However, she notes that this can only happen if teachers work well with their children. This could suggest shoddy teaching during normal hours. Ndleal's (2009) research, confirms that some teachers gave students the impression that the syllabi could not be covered during normal teaching time. As such, classroom teachers were accused of holding back in their teaching during school hours because they wanted extra time to complete the syllabus to focus on recall of facts, instead of reinforcing conceptual understandings. This no doubt would have created a lot of stress and tension for students who must come early in the morning for extra lessons, and stay late in the evening with heavy paperwork (Santhi, 2011).

Another worrying issue is the location where extra lessons were being administered and when they were given. One can only imagine the possible issues of overcrowding, and safety and security, especially since these extra lesson entities are not regularized or supervised. These are certainly issues for further investigation. Simbarashe & Edlight (2011) noted that extra lessons were given during normal school hours, during the lunch hour, after school, and on weekends. They added that extra lessons were not only given at teachers' homes which were converted to mini-classrooms but promoted elitism and unequal access to

a proper education. The issues associated with the extra-lesson syndrome suggest that this problem is not just an educational issue but is also an economic and social one that needs to be addressed. This finding suggests that if educators and parents work at reducing the level of stress and burden associated with extra lessons, they will foster a more equitable education system. It also means that there is a need for extra-lesson providers to be monitored by the Ministry of Education to ensure practices are congruent with national educational policies and practices.

Taking a critical view of this extra-lesson syndrome, we can begin to question whether such a taken-for-granted historical practice is adding value to children's lives. As highlighted in my theoretical framework on critical pedagogy, the situation begs that certain questions be pondered on for solutions. With a focus on test preparations as reported by my participants, would teachers be interested in engaging students meaningfully in learning? Would they seek out strategies to enhance critical thinking, instilling values that can bring about positive social changes? Would they take time to build a classroom atmosphere that is dialogical in nature to enhance students' critical awareness? Shouldn't schools be a place to initiate social change, and empower students by helping them to understand and become an advocate for social justice? Is education all about transferring knowledge using teacher-centred approaches and not creating new knowledge by using learner-centred approaches? Is education about keeping students passively silent, giving them no voice and no choice but to memorize and regurgitate what their teachers transferred to them? Does memorization of facts bring about meaningful learning outcomes for students? Freire defined this teacher-centred approach that is dominating our examination system as the "Banking Concept of Education", a system in which teachers just deposit their knowledge in the heads of their students (Freire, 2016 p. 73). If we take a critical pedagogical approach, we can begin to address the problems of education at the very heart of the system itself by pondering on the questions asked, to allow for an evaluation of established educational structures that perpetuate inequalities. Giroux (2011) reminds us of the need to become critical agents if we are to attempt to reform schools. In so doing he stressed the value of actively questioning and negotiating the relationship between theory and practice, between critical analysis and common sense, and between learning and social change. In other words, we must not just sit by without questioning the value of educational structures and their ensuing practices. For by doing so, we fail to become agents of change that can benefit our society, and we become

parties to the problem rather than an advocate for change. The next subheading discusses the prestige-school ideology, a trigger for the extra-lesson syndrome.

Prestige-School Ideology

The findings of this study revealed that participants valued the prestige school ideology. They believed definitively that there are "good schools" and "bad schools" but gave no sound reasoning for such labels; the foremost reason being what they heard from their children's primary school teachers and from persons within the community. They valued those schools that had the word "college" attached to their name. The word prestige which is often used interchangeably with other terms such as status, esteem, and respect, is defined as the influence, reputation, or popular esteem derived from characteristics, achievements, and associations (Hargreaves, 2009). The prestige-school ideology which is a subjective concept based on individual perceptions of prestige appears to have been compounded by the Ministry of Education's meritocratic arrangement (Turner, 1988). This arrangement requires parents of SEA students to choose the names of four secondary schools, they would like their children to attend.

School meritocracy or meritocratic ideology is widespread in Western societal systems, where success is seen as an indicator of personal deservingness, and individuals are rewarded by that system for their ability and efforts (Young, 1961; Jost et al., 2003). The meritocratic education system in Trinidad and Tobago, adheres to this practice, performing a dual function; an educational and selection function to determine one's future position (Darnon et al., 2009). The selection function performs the role of assigning students to various schools that differ in terms of position, rank, status, power, and prestige (Duru-Bellat & Tenret, 2009). It is this ideology that influenced the historical undercurrent of the prestige-school ideology held by nationals in Trinidad and Tobago, which subsequently led to the commonly used "first-choice school" phrase by all my participants. Passing for a first-choice school, unfortunately, represented the mark of success and prestige for students, teachers, parents, and community members associated with the SEA exam. What is more, passing for the second, third, and fourth choice schools, unfortunately, became objects of dread and despair for some of my participants. According to Raymond S. Hackett, teacher educator and lecturer at the St. Augustine Campus of School of Education, University of the West Indies, many parents have struggled to have their children placed into prestigious or first-choice

schools run by denominational boards because they perceive that they were more effective than government-run schools (Hackett, n.d. UWI). He commented that there was no significant difference in teacher performance in schools run by denominational boards or government schools. However, he did note, that a significant difference was seen in the culture of these schools, and the support the schools received from parents and other stakeholders.

Li-Ching Ho (2021) describes meritocracy as a transparent and just system that provides equal opportunities for all to succeed based on merit; one's effort and ability, instead of privileges or connections. She acknowledges that it serves as a social leveller, a motivator by rewarding abilities and hard work; allowing for social mobility, and does not indiscriminately exclude any group. However, her study on teachers' perspectives revealed that while teachers believed in the principle of meritocracy to promote educational and social equality, they highlighted its limitations by promoting structural inequities that could impact students' academic achievement. Her teachers claimed that the meritocratic system lacked a level playing field for students who came from different socio-economic backgrounds. The participants of this study who are teachers confirm this point. They commented on the challenges they had with less privileged SEA students who had less access to resources and fewer opportunities than more privileged students with access to private tuition and other forms of social capital. Consequently, the perpetuation of the prestige-school ideology which triggered the extra-lesson syndrome continues the divide between the privileged and the less privileged in Trinidad and Tobago. The meritocratic education system with the entrenched SEA high-stakes exam at its core has yet to ensure that students from different socio-economic backgrounds receive equal opportunities to succeed in its schools.

Educational Expectation

Another finding of my second research question speaks to the educational expectation of my participants. They believed that being successful at the exam will help students secure good jobs; make lots of money; have a good life, have a good future; and become good people. Such expectations stem from instrumental reasoning, a means to an end rationalization, where knowledge is seen basically as a means to pass a test; where test scores mean better schools and universities, which in turn, could mean higher paying jobs (Seehwa, 2012). While it is natural to have expectations to look forward to the likely occurrence or

appearance of something, critical pedagogy objects to such rationality, because it leads to dehumanizing and oppressive education practices, rather than social change or the building of a better society (Seehwa, 2012). For instance, teachers' expectations of students, which refers to their inference about their student's future academic achievement, can either be negative or positive with a significant impact on student outcomes (Cooper & Good, 1983).

The Pygmalion study by Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) which looked at the impact of teachers' expectations on students' outcomes, concluded that students' intellectual development was influenced by what teachers expected of them, and how their expectations were communicated to them. Inflated expectations were accompanied by behaviours that aligned with their beliefs. Accordingly, their actions towards their students influenced their accelerated intellectual growth. Conversely, the opposite occurred when teachers had low expectations for students, they communicated differential treatment to students, which in turn, negatively impacted student outcomes. This self-fulfilling prophecy as described by Merton (1948) can occur when a false definition of a situation evokes a new behaviour, and unfortunately, makes the original false conception, appear to be true. In other words, the teachers' educational expectations with their accompanying behaviours, may inadvertently be contributing to students' poor educational outcomes. Good and Brophy (1980) confirm that very early, teachers form differential expectations for student behaviour and achievement, as such, they behave differently towards these students. Unfortunately, when such differential teacher behaviours and treatment of students are communicated over a consistent period, their self-concept, achievement, motivation, levels of aspiration, classroom conduct, and interactions with the teacher are likely to change as well (Cotton, 1989).

Parental expectation as well has been found to influence their children's expectations and achievement in several ways (Entwisle et al., 2005). When the parent-child relationship is characterized by closeness and warmth, they are more likely to have increased communication about schooling; more out-of-school learning opportunities and are likely to perform better academically (Moore et al., 2009; Entwisle, et al., 2005). One cannot underestimate the value of appropriate pressure and expectation to encourage a child to work harder, but inappropriate and undue parental pressure, coupled with escalated high expectations can inhibit a child's confidence and sense of self, which in turn, can result in poor academic performance (Moore et al., 2009; Entwisle, et al., 2005).

Several student participants in this study had unrealistic expectations for placement within prestige schools, even though their written pieces indicated they had issues expressing themselves in writing and spelling. I have made such a conclusion based on my expertise as a Reading Specialist with a Masters of Education in Reading from the University of the West Indies. Even some of the parent participants had unrealistic and exaggerated expectations for their children, who had issues with orthography, as seen in their writings. Stinson and Zhao (2008) describe this phenomenon as an unrealistic optimism about examination outcomes and suggests that there may be several reasons for such belief. Unrealistic optimism theory suggests that people tend to be unrealistically optimistic that positive events will happen while negative events will not (Weinstein, 1980). One explanation for my participants' unrealistic optimism can be the theory of overestimation; the tendency to overestimate one's abilities or the "better-than-average effect", where persons tend to believe that they are more intelligent, ethical, logical, interesting, fair-minded, healthy, or even more attractive than the average person (Dunning et al., 1989). Another can be the theory of incompetence which suggests that persons may lack the meta-cognitive capacity to evaluate their competence, and because they "don't know what they don't know" they are unable to recognize their true level of competence (Stinson & Zhao, 2008 p. 34; Kruger & Dunning, 1999; Kennedy et al., 2002). Whatever the reason for students' and parents' unrealistic expectations, there may be negative consequences when these escalated expectations are unmet. Stinson and Zhao (2008) warn that unmet expectations may drive persons to frustration, and make them disinterested in schooling with an eventual high attrition rate. They also warn that they may experience disappointment, shame, and fear of chastisement, all of which were experienced by my participants.

To manage unrealistic expectations by both students and parents, they must be informed that academic success is not just about passing for a prestigious school, but it's a continuous process that needs to be worked on and does not end after the SEA exam. Freire's pedagogy of hope (2004) and Giroux's (2011) educated hope foster an approach to teaching and learning that focuses on unveiling for participants, opportunities for hope that are grounded in the realities of their context despite of obstacles. Since hope has a profound influence on how persons assess their expectations, an educated hope in teaching and learning can not only negate the ideas of individualism and competition to just get ahead but can assist participants in their assessment of their expectations, thereby avoiding the tendency to be caught in the web of unrealistic educational expectations. This can be achieved by employing

different pedagogical strategies that are associated with various modes of hope that can be transformative in nature (Webb, 2013). Hence, this finding suggests that a strategic effort is needed to educate parents about appropriate ways to support their children's learning journey, so they can understand how appropriate parental expectations can avoid any negative impact on their children's academic performance and well-being.

Educational Inequity and Teacher Bias

Participants of this study expressed several beliefs. They believed that not all schools are equal; that schools are still engaging in inequitable practices such as streaming, and teaching only those topics and subjects from the curriculum that were tested at the SEA exam. They believed that some SEA teachers were biased, giving inadequate attention to slow and challenged learners, as opposed to the attention and effort they gave to high-performing students. One principal participant argued that the very existence of prestigious schools in Trinidad and Tobago, suggests that the education system supports between-school streaming. She cited the yearly national recognition event for SEA students, their teachers, and their schools whose scores placed them in the island's top 100, as evidence.

The belief that schools are unequal stems from participants' observed differences in the availability of adequate school facilities, resources, and external support schools receive, all of which are likely to influence students' academic performance (Britto, 1987). According to Oppedisano and Turati (2011), an educational system is characterized by inequalities if students with different socioeconomic statuses are branded by different outcomes. While schools are responsible for developing the cognitive and social skills children need to participate in the civic and economic activity of society through mixed-ability teaching, the sorting, selection, and streaming practices within schools undermine that responsibility, because of their intent on differentiating children for varied futures (Gamoran, 2009). Streaming exacerbates inequalities with little or no contribution to the overall productivity of achievement across schools and increases the gap between high achievers and low achievers over time (Gamoran 2009; Kerckhoff, 1993).

To address inequities of diverse students in schools, educational leaders may need to have a greater appreciation of social justice issues that may contribute to disparities in students' academic outcomes (Jean-Marie, 2008). Plank and Condliffe (2013) in their article

discuss the quality of classrooms in a high-stakes testing environment and found that the quality was lower when they were under pressure to increase test performance. The differences in the ways teachers interact with students might also have a significant impact on student's academic and social development (Hamre & Pianta, 2005; O'Connor et al., 2011). Plank and Condliffe (2013) further argue that the quality of classrooms and student outcomes could be improved, if teachers considered classroom organization along with emotional and instructional support.

To achieve more equitable educational practices would require that streaming practices of any kind are not carried out to facilitate the emotional support needed for quality classrooms. Streaming refers to the grouping of students based on academic achievement in an attempt to create more homogenous groupings (Chmielewski, Dumont & Trautwein, 2013). Some participants in this study believed that streaming allowed teachers to be better able to cater to the individual needs of their students. Oakes (1992) confirms that this age-old belief that students' differing abilities required schools to be structured to address such differences, had posed a challenge to change. A further challenge concerns the support for streaming from parents of high-achievers, from teachers who enjoy teaching high-performing students, and the lack of teachers' ability to teach mixed-ability classes (Oakes, 1992).

In contrast, other participants believe that the practice of within-school streaming of students into ability grouping, labelled as the "A-Class, B-Class, C-Class, and D-Class" from the very early grades leading up to the SEA, is in direct contradiction to equitable pedagogical practices, and has harmed diverse children. Some participants also spoke of within-class streaming practices that they observed claiming that some teachers gave more attention to those clusters of students whom they believed had a shot at passing for a prestigious school. According to Chmielewski et al. (2013) streaming affects students' academic self-concept which is shaped by social comparison with those in their immediate class or streamed environment. Academic self-concept could be described as how persons perceived their academic capabilities (Chmielewski et al, 2013). Self-concept development theory suggests two ways persons were affected when using their frame of reference to make a social comparison; the contrast effect and the assimilation effect (Marsh, et al., 1995).

When making a social comparison based on the contrast effect, students compare and contrast their achievement with the average of their group. As such, they are likely to have a lower self-concept when others around them have higher achievement averages or a high

self-concept if the group's average is lower (Chmielewski et al, 2013). This theory seems to explain why my participant's self-concept was low, saying he always felt like he was not good enough even though he had passed for a prestigious secondary but was placed in the B-stream, remaining there for five years. It appears that he was using his frame of reference, his placement in the B-Stream in comparison to the students who were placed in the A-Stream, the class to which he never got promoted. Conversely, when making social comparisons based on the assimilation effect, students' academic self-concept becomes high because of the glory of the association with high-achievers and upward mobility. As such, students are likely to feel confident about their capabilities which in turn, improves their self-concept (Chmielewski et al, 2013). Therefore, even though educators may hold differing views, streaming practices are not aligned with equitable pedagogical practices. It could harm the development of students' academic self-concept because of the degree of comparison with the achievement of others, and it puts them at risk for overall low examination performance (Ford, 2017).

Another issue that contributed to the inequity in the classroom is the teachers' focus on teaching those subjects and topics tested in the exam; spending more time on topics and test items that appear on the earlier test, and engaging in repetitious instruction and excessive test preparation, all of which were confirmed by my research (Nichols & Berliner, 2008; Au, 2007; Hamilton, et al., 2007). These practices speak to the narrowing of the curriculum and were identified in the literature as "teaching to the test" (Au, 2007). So instead of engaging in curriculum-teaching which is directed toward teaching the curricular content knowledge and skills, some teachers engaged in item-teaching where the teacher focused directly on test items or items similar to test items (Popham, 2001). Since test items are merely samples prepared from a body of content knowledge and skills within the curriculum, when teachers engage in item-teaching by photocopying and administering test booklets using drill and practice methods of teaching, they rob students of content skills and knowledge. Moreover, the scores become invalid since score-based inferences become impossible. In short, item-teaching or teaching to the test is reprehensible because it does not adhere to learning standards; does not promote learning, and undermines the quality of instruction. Giroux (2016) describes the obsession with high-stakes testing and teaching to the test as a pedagogy of the repressed, because they camouflage the role education is supposed to play, limit students' imagination, promote conformity, and silence the voices of those less privileged, thereby weakening the relationship between learning and social change. This finding suggests

that education should be seen as more than training, more than credentialing, or simply a pathway to a job, but an opportunity for educators to embrace the role of education, which is to shape identities, desires, values, and the ideas of agency (Giroux, 2016). However, there is a need for further inquiry into educational inequities and teachers' bias from a Trinidad and Tobago context.

Research Question Three

What impact has the experiences with the SEA exam had on participants' lives?

Analytical Category 3: Research Question Three

The third research question sought to learn about the ways participants' experiences with the SEA exam impact their lives. The findings are now presented and discussed thematically. The themes are helicopter parenting; self-recrimination; diminished self-worth; play deprivation; and the academic cycle of indoctrination.

Helicopter Parenting

The findings of this study highlighted several aspects of parenting behaviours that could identify parents as helicopter parenting. As discussed in my literature review, helicopter parenting is characterized by behaviours that are inappropriately high on control, and low on granting autonomy. Such parents are over-involved in their children's lives, over-protective, interfering, overindulgent, and concerned about showing off their children's success and reaping the rewards for themselves (Schiffrin et al., 2019; Moilanen & Manuel, 2019). The literature maintains that helicopter parenting has been linked to the development of maladaptive outcomes for children, such as poor self-regulation, anxiety-related problems, social withdrawal, shyness, and peer difficulties in younger children (Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2012; Bayer, et al., 2006).

Helicopter parents are not exempt from the negative impact of their behaviour. According to Schiffrin et al. (2019), these parents are so anxious about their children's success at school, they will complete school-related tasks, assignments, homework, and projects for them, which in turn sends the message to their children, that failure must be

avoided at all cost, even if it requires cheating. The parent participants of this study explained that they registered their children for extra lessons at different locations, on different days, at different times throughout the week, and on weekends. Consequently, in a given week, parents would schedule and take their children for extra lessons by several different extra-lesson providers. They did not allow their children to have leisure time because this was seen as time-wasting. They reported helping their children with their homework which they described as being heavy. They admitted to completing school projects and assignments for their children and explained that they received much satisfaction when their children received high scores. Some expressed that they felt as if they were back in school having to assist their children in preparation for the SEA exam.

Helicopter parenting prevents children from developing a good sense of independence, by undermining their basic psychological needs, which according to Maslow and Rogers, can hinder their development into fully functioning persons. Such parenting style has also been found to have adverse effects on the social and emotional well-being of persons even into adulthood (LeMoyne & Buchanan, 2011). There is also a likely long-term impact where children exposed to this parenting style, can perpetuate this cycle of helicopter parenting with their children when they become adults. This phenomenon was confirmed by some of my participants who reported that they acted towards their children the very same way their parents acted towards them when they were children preparing for the eleven-plus exam.

While it is normal for parents to be concerned about their children and to be actively engaged in helping them to be successful and achieve in life, problems arise when parents constantly intervene and try to solve their children's problems (LeMoyne & Buchanan, 2011). For instance, one parent participant spoke of the damaged relationship between himself and his son as a result of the rigorous schedule, and unrealistic and unmet expectations he had for his son in preparation for the SEA exam. The other parent expressed regret and self-recrimination, blaming herself for the hurt her daughter felt as a result of her negative reaction when she did not pass for a prestigious school.

Not only are children critically affected but the teachers of students with helicopter parents, have also been affected. The teacher participants in this study expressed concern, and some were fearful of their students' parents, especially those who were scoring poorly leading up to the SEA exam. Whether attention was given to the incumbent challenges SEA

teachers encounter in their dealing with helicopter parents is unclear, and may require further research to ascertain such. However, this finding suggests that this is an area of need that ought not to be overlooked and taken for granted because the children, their teachers, and the helicopter parents themselves are being negatively impacted by the likelihood of long-term effects.

Therefore, it is recommended that schools reach out and work with parents to mitigate the negative consequences of helicopter parenting. In an online article on 'how to bring helicopter parents back down to earth,' several strategies were given to help teachers manage helicopter parents (AICPA, 2022). Teachers were encouraged to understand their parents' motivation, whether they are acting out of a personal need to control, or because they truly believe that their actions are helping to give their children an advantage in life. SEA teachers can set clear boundaries, communicate with clarity, and educate their students about the damaging effects of helicopter parenting. One of the recommendations that are supported by my theoretical framework is the use of critical pedagogy to nurture students' independence by empowering them to not sit idly by, and become the spectator, while the parent takes on the tasks that students should be performing. Instead, SEA teachers can build their student confidence, hold them accountable, and encourage critical dialogue using Freire's problem-posing pedagogical approaches to allow students to share their opinions, solve problems, and become aware of the oppressive behaviours that can stifle their growth.

Approval-Seeking, Validation, and Diminished Self-Worth

This research study found that several participants exhibited approval-seeking and validation desires. Validation is defined as communicating to others that their feelings, thoughts, and actions make sense (Rathus & Miller, 2015). It is the recognition and acceptance of someone's experience as valid or worthwhile (Hall, 2012). Approval-seeking which is a need for social approval is a normal component of human motivation. Maslow (1954) explains that love, belonging and esteem needs are normal components of human motivation. Not only are children expected to seek validation and approval from others whom they value, but they benefit by developing positive views of themselves, their self-esteem, or their sense of self-concept (Rogers, 1961). Such external affirmation and reassurance have the potential to help students cope with stressful situations, foster social interaction with others, lower negative mood and aggression, and build their self-worth (Cutrona & Russell,

1990; Kim & Kim, 2013). However, if children are dependent on what others say or think about them to feel good about themselves, their ability to regulate their emotions, and develop into healthy, well-adjusted adults become at risk (Wei et al., 2005). As such, this finding suggests that intervention may be required to assist students whose need for external validation, escalates to the point where their main objective is to please others without critical analysis, even when doing so conflicts with their feelings. This means that if students' self-worth is dependent on obtaining others' approval, they may likely have difficulty growing into fully functioning adults, often second-guessing themselves and lacking in confidence.

According to Lopez (2001), there is a positive link between the need for social approval and attachment anxiety. The theory of attachment suggests that children develop internal models of self and others based on the responsiveness of their caregivers (Bartholomew, 1990). Therefore, if caregivers such as parents, teachers, and others were inconsistent in the way they respond to students, by creating examination environments characterized by pressure and fear appeals, students could be at risk of developing a negative working model of self. Such a situation can affect students into adulthood, where they could begin to see themselves as unworthy of care from others, experience fear of abandonment, attachment anxiety, and seeking approval fearing negative social evaluation as a way of avoiding social disapproval (Neave, Tzemou & Fatoso, 2020; Brennan et al.).

Children participants believed that scoring high in the SEA exam and passing for a prestigious secondary school would provide them with the validation or reassurance they sought from others, their peers, their parents, and members of their home community. As a result of not passing for the prestige school, living with unmet expectations, and being placed in a lower stream, they experienced self-doubt and validation-seeking behaviours.

This realization suggests that a greater portion of the population of SEA students, parents, teachers, and other nationals of Trinidad and Tobago who had invested much time, effort, and money and failed in their pursuit of a placement in one of the few prestigious schools, could be at risk for diminished self-worth, depression and their ensuing consequences.

Play Deprivation

Several participants in this study saw playtime as a time-wasting phenomenon with little value to children's overall development. As such, playing was discouraged and little room was made for it within the busy schedules of students preparing for the SEA exam. Many students, had extra lessons before the official hour for school to begin. They had shortened lunchtime and extra lessons after school. On weekends students were again scheduled for extra lessons at different locations, leaving no time for SEA students to play.

From a psychological perspective, play is characterized by several factors. It must be intrinsically motivating, self-chosen, self-directed, pleasurable, guided by rules, and actively engaging, and players must feel free to choose, and free to stop (Rubin et al., 1983; Gray, 2008; Lauer, 2011). Singer et al. (2010) in their article highlighted that play equal learning and has tremendous value to its players' cognitive and social-emotional development. They explained that play can provide emotional value such as enjoyment, fun, love of life, relaxation, an avenue for energy and tension release, and facilitate self-expression. It also supports cognitive development by encouraging creativity, abstract thinking, imagination, problem-solving social cognition, empathy, perspective-taking, and the mastering of new ideas. In addition to the development of gross and fine motor skills, play also builds the affective domain by providing opportunities to build the players' self-confidence and self-esteem along with social skills by fostering cooperation, sharing, turn-taking, conflict resolution, and leadership skills (Singer et al., 2010).

On the other hand, when children are deprived of opportunities to play, their health, fitness, and development are hindered resulting in fitness levels decline, expanding waistlines, obesity heart disease, and an increase in emotional and social disorders (Lauer, 2011). It was also found that children deprived of play experiences could become violent, antisocial, and demonstrate aggressive behaviours, and depression (Hughes, 2003). Since the personality structure, well-being, and life satisfaction of adults are influenced by their childhood experiences or lack thereof, it seems to suggest that this finding of play deprivation of SEA students be investigated further to find ways to mitigate any long-term negative impact on citizens (Strauman, 1992; Widom & Morris, 1997).

Play has long been recognized as an avenue for children to learn because in play children are relaxed, engaged, and challenged (Dewey, 1944; Vygotsky, 1978; LEGO Learning Institute, 2013). Children try out ideas, test theories, experiment with symbols,

explore social relationships, take risks, and reimagine the world offering a pathway for intellectual, social, emotional, and physical development (Mardell, et al., 2016). Children can be motivated to follow rules and pay attention. They learn self-regulation skills and positive self-worth. They learn to manipulate, recognize and act on opportunities, set agendas, construct and deconstruct rules, and agency (Mardell, et al., 2016). With such value attached to children play, depriving SEA students of play in favour of curriculum coverage because it appears silly and off-task, can work against sound educational practices, and undermine the very thing educators and parents are seeking to improve, student learning and achievement.

Academic Indoctrination

The findings of this study revealed that participants uncritically believed in the prestige school ideology, and perpetuated actions that are synonymous with it. At the home, community, and school, participants blindly perpetuated this ideology. This kind of action can be classified as indoctrination, which involves teachings that produce closed-minded individuals who are unable or unwilling to give due regard to reasons for revising their current beliefs or being concerned with truth (Callan & Arena, 2009). In this complex system of teaching the actors with authority, the parents and teachers contribute to the production or reinforcement of the prestige-school ideology, with students not questioning their beliefs. (Taylor, 2017).

There is a difference between indoctrination and education. While indoctrination is to teach to accept a system of thought uncritically; to seek to inculcate belief, which may or may not be true, education is focused on providing knowledge or training objectively and dispassionately, hearing alternative views to believe in proven truth, with evidence that supports despite the opinions of others (Hocutt, 2005). Hocutt (2005) explained how one can determine if what is being taught is indoctrination or education. He said indoctrination involves being told to believe one side of a story while ignoring, suppressing, and distorting contrary evidence; being made to feel that you should believe and not doubt because others believed; being emotional rather than rational; agreeing by threat or force or fraud, rather than by citation or fact.

Indoctrination of children on the prestige school ideology allowed the belief to prosper but did not help the students as seen in this research study. The unshakable prestige

school ideology prospered because the perpetrators were likely convinced that what they were teaching was indeed true and there were no alternative paths. As such, their idea of what was true was not only misplaced but harmful to students. My participants were being taught to believe that their whole life depended upon passing the SEA exam for a prestigious school, and if they were not placed within such a school, they were considered failures, and unworthy, which in turn generated a host of negative feelings and reactions that could have a life-long impact, diminishing their sense of worth, way into adulthood. This finding suggests that SEA students were not taught to open-mindedly and critically see the possibilities that were available to them, nor were they allowed to have input in their educational pathways by their teachers and parents.

Chapter 5 Summary

The focus of this chapter was to interpret and discuss the findings of this research using the research literature. First, a summary of the study was presented and the research questions were reiterated. The discussion of the findings was then presented according to the analytical categories aligned to each research question. The first research question sought to learn about the experiences of students, parents, and educators who were closely associated with the high-stakes SEA exam in Trinidad and Tobago. Participants' experiences included a series of physical, emotional, and psychological distress. The findings confirmed what much of the literature had recorded, that of high academic pressure on both students and teachers; a host of fears; high stress and test anxiety; negative feeling and emotions; self-harming behaviours, and an in-school support system that could be doing more harm to students, than good.

The finding of my second research question revealed that participants had several educational expectations which they valued. They believed in the extra lesson syndrome, the prestige school ideology, and made claims of inequitable educational practices. The findings of my third research question revealed that my participants were impacted in several ways by their experiences with the exam. They were engaged in self-recrimination and self-blaming practices, students became victims of play deprivation, demonstrated approval-seeking and validation behaviours, and a diminished sense of self-worth. There was a perpetuation of the academic indoctrination of the prestige school ideology and extra-lesson syndrome. Parents

were perpetrators of the helicopter parenting styles. Based on these discussions, I now present my conclusions and actionable recommendations drawn from the findings and interpretations of this research.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Introduction

This chapter reminds readers of what this thesis aimed to achieve. It describes the research process, highlights the merits of the research findings, and demonstrates the importance of the research work and its scholarly worthiness (Trafford & Leshem, 2008; Wisker, 2005). The chapter summarises what has been done and discovered, as well as highlights the significance by discussing the implications and recommendations for future educational research (Trafford, Leshem & Bitzer, 2014). This chapter also provides a response to my fourth research question.

The chapter begins with an introduction that reiterates the study's aims and research questions followed by a summary of the qualitative methodology, thematic analysis procedure, and my findings. Since my study's research questions form the backbone of this research, my findings, interpretations, conclusions, and recommendations are aligned to ensure that my conclusions are sound and the recommendations would be actionable (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018).

The purpose of this qualitative study was to learn about the impact the high-stakes SEA exam has had on teachers, students, parents, and principals who were associated with the exam in Trinidad and Tobago. The intent was to describe and interpret participants' experiences, explore their beliefs and values about the exam and learn of ways their experiences have impacted their lives. The first research question sought to find out the experiences educators, students, and parents have had with the SEA exam. The second research question aimed at discovering what participants' perspectives, beliefs, and values were concerning the SEA exam. The third question sought to learn about the impact the experiences with the SEA exam had on participants' lives. The fourth research question focused on learning about the implication of my study's findings.

To gain answers to these research questions a qualitative methodological design was used to guide the process of inquiry. Two qualitative methods were used for data collection, the in-depth interview and documentary analysis. All research samples were purposeful samples. Thirteen participants who differed in age, gender, and occupational status with first-hand experience with the exam, were interviewed. The participants included three teenagers,

three SEA teachers, three Primary school principals, an educational psychologist, a law lecturer, and two parents of SEA students, all of whom experienced the exam differently. Digitally recorded interviews were transcribed and prepared for analysis. For the documentary analysis, a standard 5 class of pre-SEA students age 11 to 14 years were asked to each write an essay documenting their experiences with the high-stakes exam. Written essays provided insight into students' thinking about the exam.

After the data was prepared, I used a thematic analysis procedure on each data set. The data analysis procedure began with reading and rereading the data sets to become familiar with the text. Thereafter, I made notes next to each code identified. Different coloured markers were used to mark codes and classify them which led to the themes. The findings were presented in chapter 4 and discussed thematically in chapter 5.

The structure of this chapter involves restating the research questions. After each question, a summary of the findings, and conclusions would be presented along with actionable recommendations. Thereafter, the major limitations of the study and recommendations for future research would be presented.

Research Question 1 - Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations

- What are the experiences of educators, students, and parents associated with the high-stakes SEA exam?

To this question, the research revealed that participants experienced fear, academic pressure, stress, test anxiety, a host of negative feelings and emotions, self-harming behaviours, suicidal ideation, and an inefficient school support system. Participants expressed that they feared failing the exam or not passing for the prestigious school of their choice. They feared that they would not be able to live up to other persons' expectations and they would feel ashamed if they were unsuccessful. Some feared what other people might think of them, thinking they were failures while others feared physical punishment from their parents. This fear brought much anxiety to my participants who reported symptoms of stress and test anxiety such as mental paralysis, panic, physical shaking, and nervousness. Others expressed a host of negative emotions which included helplessness, frustration, uncertainty, confusion, anger, fright, sadness, devastation, disappointment, and humiliation. Other participants reported on students cutting themselves while others experienced suicidal ideation or

thoughts of committing suicide if they were unsuccessful at the exam. The participants attributed these experiences to the high amounts of academic pressure brought upon them by their parents and classroom teachers. They also felt pressured by the excessive use of commercial exam booklets.

These findings suggest that the preparation of students for the SEA exam was inadequate because it focused on the cognitive and failed to prepare students for the emotional and psychological fallouts. Instead, they were harmed by the very phenomenon for which they were preparing. When one is expected to go to battle or to do a job that threatens their physical safety, not only do they need protective gear but they also need the appropriate tools and equipment necessary to fully accomplish their task while guarding their physical well-being. As such, thousands of students are sent to battle yearly to do the SEA exam without the emotional and psychological armour to protect them.

The findings suggest that SEA students need help. As such, parents, educators, and others associated with the exam need to be made aware of the impact the exam can have on children and others. In addition, those charged with the education of our children have a responsibility to create a safe and secure school environment, implement strategies to help children cope with amygdala-based anxiety, strategies to motivate, and build positive relationships, replace the use of fear appeals with efficacy appeals, and engage esteem-building and anxiety-reducing strategies.

In conclusion, preparing for the yearly SEA exam is tantamount to putting the psychological and emotional stability and safety of our students at risk. This was especially so when participants were not prepared with the psychological and emotional armour. Teachers, students, and parents were left to fend for themselves without the ammunition and tools needed to cope with the ensuing onslaught of “blows” upon the psyche of our young nationals. This is especially so for the thousands of post-SEA students, who remained dissatisfied with themselves and their perceived failure. It is not because their performance was unworthy but that they were taught to believe in a notion that an exam done in one moment in time, at the tender age of 11, assessing limited content, could determine how they thought and felt about themselves. It is unfortunate that many students who were not placed in a prestigious school could see themselves as failures.

It is also unfortunate that the colonial ideology which was falsely generated by those who went ahead of us still resonates in the psyche of our nationals. Once this situation remains, it is my recommendation that schools arm themselves with the psychological and emotional armour needed to protect their clients from potential harm from their experiences

with the high-stakes SEA exam. While physical harm could heal, the psycho-emotional harm runs deep and could interfere with students' personality development and their ability to develop into fully functional persons (Maslow 1943; Rogers, 1959).

Research Question 2 - Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations

- What are the beliefs and values in the perspectives of participants associated with the high-stakes SEA exam?

The research data identified what participants' perspectives, beliefs, and values were with concerning the high-stakes SEA exam. The research showed that they held unrealistic educational expectations, held on to a prestigious school ideology, and believed that passing for one of these schools would make them feel worthy and approved by others. They believed that extra lessons were needed to be successful. They also believed that educational inequity existed within the primary school system. This was highlighted by the research findings that showed the narrowing of the school's curricula, and the claims of teachers' bias.

The research found that participants believed that success was marked by passing for a prestigious secondary school. As such, they believed extra lessons were the way to be successful at passing for such a school. I believe that the extra-lesson syndrome led many to set up extra-lesson business ventures around the country, even in unsupervised private homes and public spaces. These extra-lesson centres have become entrepreneurial ventures operated without oversight, regulations, standardisations, and monitoring by the Education and Finance Ministries. Little is known and documented about what goes on within the walls of these extra-lesson centres, the qualifications of teachers, and the delivery of the curriculum; whether the content, teaching methodology, strategies, and forms of assessments are all aligned to support the national curriculum delivered at the primary schools.

Since there is no accountability for what goes on at the extra-lesson centres, I have concluded that without such data much harm could occur at these centres that continue to go unnoticed and undocumented. I also conclude that there seems to be a lack of confidence among nationals in the school system to adequately prepare students for the exam. I recommend that those entrusted with the educational responsibilities and safety of students, proactively act to hold all educational providers accountable including the private extra-lesson centres. I also recommend that further research need to be done to examine the

curriculum delivery within the primary school system, particularly at the standard 4 and 5 levels.

Educational inequity was identified by the research data. This was highlighted by the unsound educational practices of inter-class streaming and within-class streaming. The teachers teaching to the test or teaching only what is being tested was also identified as an inequitable practice. The research also identified teachers' bias in favour of high-performing students, as opposed to the treatment and inadequate attention given to slower and challenged learners.

According to the book Inequality in Education (2008 p. 401), Holsinger and Jacobs highlighted that a measure of equal educational opportunity involved equality of educational participation within the schools. They underscored that underprivileged, and minority children bring cultural and social class disadvantages with them to school. This suggests that such students could be further discouraged from gaining equal educational advantage as a result of the practices of curriculum narrowing, teaching to the test, streaming, and other similar practices designed to ensure that some students are successful while others fail (Holsinger & Jacobs, 2008).

Another measure of educational equity speaks to educational results, or the effects on life chances which has to do with the opportunities for students after they have left school (Holsinger & Jacobs, 2009). While I believe that many nationals have benefitted greatly from education in Trinidad and Tobago, one cannot deny that for many students, success was not facilitated.

I conclude that the education system in Trinidad and Tobago still holds colonial ideologies that reinforce a status quo, which favours some at the expense of others. I recommend therefore that the Education Ministry revisits the educational philosophies that informed our colonial exam-driven education system many decades ago, to draft a new educational philosophy, that will inform a *new restructured education system for 21st-century teaching and learning in Trinidad and Tobago*. A new design:

- That is not focused on the ideologies of meritocracy, selection, competition, success, and failures but a system that could motivate its client to be what they could while feeling satisfied and accomplished.
- Where students' choices are not determined by historical and archaic philosophies but motivated by concepts of promise, recognition, and celebration with 21st-century perspectives.

- That helps its clients to feel good about their levels of abilities, educational interests, and accomplishments.
- That aligns itself with our national watchwords to provide a place for every creed and race with varying levels of abilities and interests.
- That does not focus on first, second, and third, but one that is inclusive and sees education not only through an academic lens as the only path to success but sees vocational and the arts as choice disciplines of equal importance.
- That no longer uses the prestige school ideology as a marker of success used to judge students' worth, based on a single SEA score early in their lives, but one that sees students as valued clients with a promise of a place and a role within society.
- That the prestige school ideology would be shaken off its pedestal and replaced with new pathways.

Research Question 3 - Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations

- What impact has the experiences with the SEA exam had on participants' lives?

The impact of the experiences with the exam on the lives of participants was many. Parents displayed unwholesome parenting behaviours referred to in the literature as helicopter parenting. Parents engaged in self-recriminating actions. They not only blamed themselves for their children's level of stress and anxiety, they sadly felt responsible for the strained relationships they had with their children. Parents also reported that they couldn't forgive themselves for their own "academic failures" which they believed were not passing for a prestigious school. The impact included a diminished sense of self-worth in adulthood, self-doubt, and validation-seeking behaviours.

The research also found that many children were deprived of the opportunities to experience play during the standard 4 and 5 classes, two years before the exam. Playtime was seen as a waste of time that could be better spent on exam preparation. The research also exposed a perpetual cycle of academic indoctrination where children blindly follow what had been told to them and are led to believe by their parents and teachers. When they became adults, they perpetuated the very same behaviours and put pressure on their own children without critically examining the impact their own experiences with the exam had on them.

These findings suggest that the Ministry of Education and their schools are unprepared to assist their clients, both students and parents to deal with the social, emotional, and psychological fallouts of the high-stakes SEA exam. Their focus has been so narrowed over the decades, to believe that school success is equated with passing for a prestigious secondary school. As such, it is my recommendation that attention is given to the impact identified in this research study and measures be put in place to address the fallouts of the SEA exam.

Research Question 4

- What are the implications of the study's findings?

The findings and conclusions of this study have implications for a change in practices. The opportunity is presented for the Ministry of Education, educators, parents, and the national community to reflect on the value of the historical educational philosophies, and ideologies that generated the high-stakes SEA exam. Then take a step forward in a way that will guard the psyche of our nationals, to ensure that educational practices are consistent with a 21st-century education. In answer to this final research question, the following actionable recommendations for changes and improvements could be considered.

Recommendations

1. Consultations with relevant experts, and inclusive of educational psychologists to develop and implement strategies that can help manage students' fears and emotions, and reduce the amount of stress, anxiety, and academic pressure teachers, parents, and their children are placed under during the preparation for the high-stakes SEA exam.
2. An exploration of alternative testing approaches and systems that fosters mastery of skills and competencies rather than competitive and individualistic exams.
3. Ascribe equal value and status to varying educational pathways to change mindsets and break the cycle of academic indoctrination, to minimize the socio-emotional and psycho-social impact on students.

4. Develop and implement a “Self-Esteem Development and Enhancement Programme” at primary schools for all students, very early on entry.
5. Develop and establish a suitably qualified “Professional Intervention Team” that will be responsible for conducting risk assessments of students to identify, support, and treat those students who might be at risk of self-harming and those with suicidal ideation.
6. Investigate and monitor the support systems in schools to ensure their policies and practices are supported by evidence-based research practices.
7. Strengthen the curriculum tracking and monitoring systems within schools.
8. Establish a school-by-school support structure and system to support students from disadvantaged homes.
9. Mandatory, and termly Professional Development for teachers and principals through discussions, workshops, presentations, and demonstrations aimed specifically at strengthening and informing of evidence-based Pedagogical and Curriculum Delivery Practices.
10. Educate and advocate through public marketing strategies and initiatives to sensitize nationals on the genesis of the prestige school ideology, and its cyclical national impact and advise on how we can break the cycle to change for the better.
11. Regulate and monitor the extra-lesson providers to avoid exploitation of parents and students. This is to ensure that they adhere to the Ministry of Education policies and practices; to ensure lesson providers are aptly qualified and licensed to teach children; to ensure the curriculum content and delivery are aligned with the national primary school curriculum; to ensure students’ physical safety on the premises of lesson providers with regards to overcrowding and security, and to ensure students’ socio-emotional and psycho-social safety are cared for.
12. Develop and implement a “Parents Educational Support Programme” at all primary schools, to teach parents how to provide the appropriate level of educational support throughout their children’s educational journey.

Suggestions for Future Research

Building upon the finding from this research, the following suggestions could be considered but not limited to, for future research.

1. Further research needs to look into the curriculum-based practices of principals and teachers of SEA students at primary schools.
2. Research can be conducted to learn more about the extra-lesson sector in Trinidad and Tobago, and to ascertain its value to educational development.
3. Further research may also look at how students from disadvantaged homes and communities can be provided with better access to equal educational opportunities.
4. Research to look into the impact of helicopter parenting on teachers and schools.

Limitations of the Study

This section acknowledges the limitations I encountered in my methodology, analysis, reporting, and discussion phases. The limitations of a study acknowledge its possible weaknesses, by identifying characteristics of the research beyond my control, that may have influenced the interpretation of the research findings (Rallis & Rossman, 2003; Price & Murnan, 2004). The limitation also signals opportunities for future research (Price & Murnan, 2004).

One of my limitations was inherent in the ethical challenges of conducting research in small island states (Schembri & Sciberras, 2020). The narrow territory in Trinidad and Tobago with a population of fewer than 1.5 million people, made it difficult to maintain the anonymity, and confidentiality of schools mentioned in the interview sessions. While ascribing pseudonyms to research participants effectively maintained their anonymity and confidentiality, it would not be surprising if persons guessed the identities of the prestigious schools mentioned in this study, because they are so very well known on the island. In other words, applying the pseudonyms of ‘Prestige College’ and ‘Non-Prestige Secondary School’ might have been insufficient in concealing their identities. Even so, much care was taken to maintain anonymity and confidentiality by desisting from mentioning the geographical areas of the schools, along with pseudonyms.

A second limitation of this research concerns the scope of my discussion. I say this because it is the first time I have conducted research of such a large size. In other words, I lack years of experience in conducting and producing academic work of such magnitude. As

such, the scope and depth of my discussion may not reflect the scope and depth of work done by experienced researchers with years of experience.

I am mindful also that another limitation to this study may be connected with my interview participants. As participants shared their stories, the possibility of backward and forward telescoping could have occurred when they recalled an experience but reported it happened earlier than it did, or reported an old experience as a recent one (Gaskel et al., 2000). The limitation of attribution was also possible where participants attributed negative events and experiences to others, rather than themselves (Morewedge & Norton, 2009).

Yet another possible limitation involves my use of in-depth interviewing as a data collection method. Using this method meant that I was the research instrument, gathering the data, analysing it, and then reporting the finding. Therefore, my positionality concerning to my beliefs, values, and experiences would influence how I perceived the data, and ultimately, how I reported the findings and made my recommendations. As a mother, I experienced the SEA phenomenon along with my three children on three separate occasions. As a result, I was able to identify with the data collected from the students and the parents. The experience of conducting this piece of research was intrinsically rewarding and beneficial to me. I easily identified with the issues. However, I do admit that my educational experiences may have impacted my reporting because I am inclined to see the harmful impact of the SEA phenomenon upon students and parents above any perceived value others may see in keeping the high-stakes SEA exam. As an educator for more than 28 years and functioning in varying capacities as a Curriculum Specialist and Manager of the Curriculum department, a Reading Specialist, an Educational Consultant, and someone keen on voluntary work, I am inclined to see how the SEA phenomenon has impacted the delivery of the curriculum and the inequity it has created for young people. Thus, it is my firm belief that the harmful impact of the SEA exam far supersedes any possible benefits there may be.

Chapter 6 Summary

This chapter began by providing a justification for a conclusion chapter, after reiterating the research questions, a summary of the research aims, methodology, and analysis procedure was given. Thereafter, the findings for each research question were provided along

with my conclusions, and recommendations for improved practice. The limitations of the study were discussed briefly along with recommendations for future research.

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Appendices

INFORMATION SHEETS - Research Information Sheet for Parent Participants

My Research Project Title - The Impact of High Stakes Testing: The Experiences of Educators, Students and Parents of Trinidad and Tobago

I am inviting you to participate in my research project which aims to find out about the experiences you have had with your child who did the SEA exam. You may read the following information and freely ask questions about anything that may be unclear.

Much work and effort go into helping children to do well at the exam. However, failure to pass for their school of choice can likely have a negative social and emotional impact on those associated with the exam. I would like to hear about your experiences as well as those of other participants and report my findings within the next two years. Please note that your participation is voluntary and you can withdraw at any time without any obligation.

If you agree to take part, you would be involved in three interview sessions for about an hour each over the next few months. You can speak freely and honestly because your participation is confidential. You will be given a pseudonym to maintain your privacy and anonymity. The interviews will be audio recorded so I can remember our conversations for the purpose of analysis. However, the recordings will be disposed of at the completion of my project.

While there are no immediate benefits, the findings from the interviews can be beneficial for informing the assessment policies and practices in our country. The project is being conducted solely by me. It has been ethically approved by the University's ethics committee via the School of Education Department at the University of Sheffield, England and is being supervised by Professor Pat Sikes.

My name is Victoria Cunningham and I live at #14 Santa Rosa Springs, off Richard Trace, Tumpuna Road, Arima. My telephone number is 351-1805 and my email address is victoriabuchun@yahoo.com. My Supervisor, Pat Sikes, can be reached via email at p.j.sikes@sheffield.ac.uk for further verification. A signed copy of this information will be yours for your record. I want to thank you for your interest and for participating in this research.

Participant _____ Date _____

Student Researcher _____ Date _____

Research Information Sheet for Parents of Student Participants

<u>My Research Project Title</u> - The Impact of High Stakes Testing: The Experiences of Educators, Students and Parents of Trinidad and Tobago

I am inviting your child to participate in my research project which aims to find out about his/her experiences with the SEA exam. You may read the following information and freely ask questions about anything that may be unclear.

Much work and effort go into helping children to do well at the exam. However, failure to pass for their school of choice can likely have a negative social and emotional impact on those associated with the exam. I would like to hear about these experiences, as well as those of other participants and report my findings within the next two years. Please note that participation is voluntary and participants can withdraw at any time without any obligation.

If you agree for your child/ward to take part, he/she would be involved in three interview sessions for about 45 minutes each over the next few months. Your child will be asked to speak freely and honestly about his/her experiences because what is said will be kept confidential. A pseudonym will be given to maintain his/ her privacy and anonymity. The interviews will be audio recorded so I can remember the conversations for the purpose of analysis. However, the recordings will be disposed of at the completion of my project.

While there are no immediate benefits, the findings from the interviews can be beneficial for informing the assessment policies and practices in our country. The project is being conducted solely by me. It has been ethically approved by the University's ethics committee via the School of Education Department at the University of Sheffield, England and is being supervised by Professor Pat Sikes.

My name is Victoria Cunningham and I live at #14 Santa Rosa Springs, off Richard Trace, Tumpuna Road Arima. My telephone number is 351-1805 and my email address is victoriabuchun@yahoo.com. My Supervisor, Pat Sikes, can be reached via email at p.j.sikes@sheffield.ac.uk for further verification. A signed copy of this information will be yours for your record. I want to thank you for your interest and for participating in this research.

Parent of Student Participant _____ Date _____

Student Researcher _____ Date _____

Research Information Sheet

<u>My Research Project Title</u> - The Impact of High Stakes Testing: The Experiences of Educators, Students and Parents of Trinidad and Tobago

I am inviting you to participate in my research project which aims to find out about the experiences that participants have with the high-stakes Secondary Entrance Assessment (SEA) exam in Trinidad and Tobago. Please read the following information carefully and feel free to ask any questions about anything that may be unclear.

The drive and competition for high student-scores at the SEA exam are equated and rewarded with placement into the few schools that are deemed prestigious by society. Failure to obtain a place at elite schools can likely have a negative social and emotional impact on those associated with the exam. My project seeks to find out about the experiences of nine participants and report my findings within the next two years. Your participation is voluntary and should you wish to withdraw at any time, you are free to do so without any obligation.

Should you decide to take part, you would be involved in a maximum of three interviews for about an hour each over a short period of time. Please note that your participation is confidential and a pseudonym will be assigned to you to maintain privacy and anonymity. The interviews will be audio recorded for the purpose of analysis. However, the recordings will be disposed of at the completion of my dissertation.

While there are no immediate benefits, the findings from the interviews can be beneficial for informing the assessment policies and practices in our country. The project is being conducted solely by me. It has been ethically approved by the University's ethics committee via the School of Education Department at the University of Sheffield, England and is being supervised by Professor Pat Sikes.

My name is Victoria Cunningham. I live at # 14 Santa Rosa Springs, off Richard Trace, Tumpuna Road, Arima. My telephone number is 351-1805 and my email address is victoriabuchun@yahoo.com. My Supervisor, Professor Sikes, can be reached via email at p.j.sikes@sheffield.ac.uk for further verification. A signed copy of this information sheet will be yours for your own record. I want to thank you for your interest in participating in my research.

Participant _____ Date _____

Student Researcher _____ Date _____

Research Information Sheet for Students

My Research Project Title - The Impact of High Stakes Testing: The Experiences of Educators, Students and Parents of Trinidad and Tobago

I will like you to be part of my research project. Your teacher suggested that I speak to you. I will also be asking others about their experiences. I will like to hear the experiences you have had with the SEA exam. Let us read the information on this sheet together. If anything is unclear you can stop me at any time and ask questions.

Students often work hard because they want to do well at the SEA exam. However, when students do not pass for their secondary school of choice, they can feel badly. My project is to learn about persons' experiences and re-present these in written form within the next two years. You do not have to take part if you do not wish. Your participation is voluntary. If you would like to stop and withdraw from the project, it will be okay to do so at any time.

If you agree to talk with me, I will request permission from your parents to speak to you. You will then be part of three interview sessions each lasting about 45 minutes over the next few months. You can speak freely and truthfully about your experiences because your participation is confidential. A pseudonym will be given to you to maintain privacy and anonymity. Our conversations will be audio-recorded to help me to remember what was said at a later date. However, the recordings will be destroyed at the end of my project.

The findings from the interviews can encourage educators to improve testing practices in our country. The project is being conducted solely by me. It has been ethically approved by the University's ethics committee via the School of Education Department at the University of Sheffield, England. My project is being supervised by Professor Pat Sikes.

My full name is Victoria Cunningham and I live at #14 Santa Rosa Springs, off Richard Trace, Tumpuna Road Arima. My telephone number is 351-1805 and my email address is victoriabuchun@yahoo.com. My Supervisor, Professor Sikes, can be reached via email at p.j.sikes@sheffield.ac.uk for further verification. A signed copy of this information sheet will be given to you. I want to thank you for your interest and for participating in this research project.

Student Participant _____ Date_____

Student Researcher _____ Date _____-_____

CONSENT FORMS

Parent of Student Participant Consent Form

Title of Research Project: The Impact of High Stakes Testing: The Experiences of Educators, Students and Parents of Trinidad and Tobago

Name of Researcher: **Victoria Cunningham**

Participant Identification Number for this project: _____ **Please initial box**

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated _____ explaining the above research project and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project. ☐
2. I understand that participation is voluntary and that my child is free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences. In addition, should he/she not wish to answer any particular question or questions, he/she is free to decline. (Contact number is 351-1805). ☐
3. I understand that his/her responses will be kept strictly confidential (only if true). I give permission for members of the research team to have access to his/her anonymised responses. I understand that his/her name will not be linked with the research materials, and he/she will not be identified or identifiable in the report or reports that result from the research. ☐
4. I agree for the data collected from him/her to be used in future research ☐
5. I agree for him/her to take part in the above research project. ☐

_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant's Parent (*or legal representative*)	Date	Signature
_____	_____	_____
Name of person taking consent (*if different from lead researcher*)	Date	Signature
_____	_____	_____
Lead Researcher	Date	Signature

To be signed and dated in presence of the participant

To be signed and dated in presence of the participant

Copies: 3

Once this has been signed by all parties the participant should receive a copy of the signed and dated participant consent form, the information sheet and any other written information provided to the participants. A copy of the signed and dated consent form should be placed in the project's main record (e.g. a site file), which must be kept in a secure location.

Participant's Consent Form

Title of Research Project: The Impact of High Stakes Testing: The Experiences of Educators, Students and Parents of Trinidad and Tobago

Name of Researcher: **Victoria Cunningham**

Participant Identification Number for this project: _____ **Please initial box**

4. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated _____ explaining the above research p and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project. ☐

5. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline. (Contact number is 351-1805). ☐

6. I understand that my responses will be kept strictly confidential (only if true). I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my anonymised responses. I understand that my name will not be linked with the research materials, and I will not be identified or identifiable in the report or reports that result from the research. ☐ ☐

4. I agree for the data collected from me to be used in future research

5. I agree to take part in the above research project. ☐

_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant (*or legal representative*)	Date	Signature
_____	_____	_____
Name of person taking consent (*if different from lead researcher*)	Date	Signature

To be signed and dated in presence of the participant

_____	_____	_____
Lead Researcher	Date	Signature

To be signed and dated in presence of the participant

Copies: 3

Once this has been signed by all parties the participant should receive a copy of the signed and dated participant consent form, the information sheet and any other written information provided to the participants. A copy of the signed and dated consent form should be placed in the project's main record (e.g. a site file), which must be kept in a secure location.

Student Participant Consent Form

Title of Research Project: The Impact of High Stakes Testing: The Experiences of Educators, Students and Parents of Trinidad and Tobago

Name of Researcher: **Victoria Cunningham**

Participant Identification Number for this project: _____ Please initial box

7. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated _____ explaining the above research p and I had the chance to ask questions about the project. ☐

8. I understand that my participation is voluntary and I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences. I also understand that if I do not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I can refuse to do so. (Contact number is 351-1805). ☐

9. I understand that my responses will be kept strictly confidential (only if true). I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my anonymised responses. I understand that my name will not be linked with the research materials, and I will not be identified or identifiable in the report or reports that result from the research. ☐ ☐

4. I agree for the information collected from me to be used in future research

5. I agree to take part in the above research project. ☐

_____	_____	_____
Name of Student Participant (*or legal representative*)	Date	Signature
_____	_____	_____
Name of person taking consent (*if different from lead researcher*) *To be signed and dated in presence of the participant*	Date	Signature
_____	_____	_____
Lead Researcher *To be signed and dated in presence of the participant*	Date	Signature

Copies: 3

Once this has been signed by all parties the participant should receive a copy of the signed and dated participant consent form, the information sheet and any other written information provided to the participants. A copy of the signed and dated consent form should be placed in the project's main record (e.g. a site file), which must be kept in a secure location.

ETHICS APPROVAL LETTER

The University Of Sheffield.

Downloaded: 18/06/2021
Approved: 07/10/2014

Victoria Cunningham
Registration number: 110273699
School of Education
Programme: EdD Caribbean

Dear Victoria

PROJECT TITLE: EDUR29 The Impact of High Stakes Testing: The Experiences of Educators, Students and Parents of Trinidad and Tobago
APPLICATION: Reference Number 001784

On behalf of the University ethics reviewers who reviewed your project, I am pleased to inform you that on 07/10/2014 the above-named project was **approved** on ethics grounds, on the basis that you will adhere to the following documentation that you submitted for ethics review:

- University research ethics application form 001784 (form submission date: 18/09/2014); (expected project end date: 15/07/2016).
- Participant information sheet 002806 version 1 (18/09/2014).
- Participant information sheet 002807 version 1 (18/09/2014).
- Participant information sheet 002808 version 1 (18/09/2014).
- Participant consent form 002566 version 1 (21/08/2014).

The following optional amendments were suggested:

Pat's point about different sheets and the punctuation errors which need correcting. Rachael's point in section 3

If during the course of the project you need to deviate significantly from the above-approved documentation please inform me since written approval will be required.

Your responsibilities in delivering this research project are set out at the end of this letter.

Yours sincerely

David Hyatt
Ethics Administrator
School of Education

Please note the following responsibilities of the researcher in delivering the research project:

- The project must abide by the University's Research Ethics Policy: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/ethicsandintegrity/ethicspolicy/approval-procedure
- The project must abide by the University's Good Research & Innovation Practices Policy: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.671066!/file/GRIPPolicy.pdf
- The researcher must inform their supervisor (in the case of a student) or Ethics Administrator (in the case of a member of staff) of any significant changes to the project or the approved documentation.
- The researcher must comply with the requirements of the law and relevant guidelines relating to security and confidentiality of personal data.
- The researcher is responsible for effectively managing the data collected both during and after the end of the project in line with best practice, and any relevant legislative, regulatory or contractual requirements.

DATA COLLECTION TOOLS AND GUIDE

Unstructured Interview Guide

Research Topic: The Impact of High Stakes Testing: The Experiences of Educators, Students and Parents of Trinidad and Tobago

Research Questions

1. What are the experiences of educators, students, and parents associated with the high-stakes SEA exam?
2. What are the beliefs and values in the perspectives of participants associated with the high-stakes SEA exam?
3. What impact has the experiences with the SEA exam had on participants' lives?

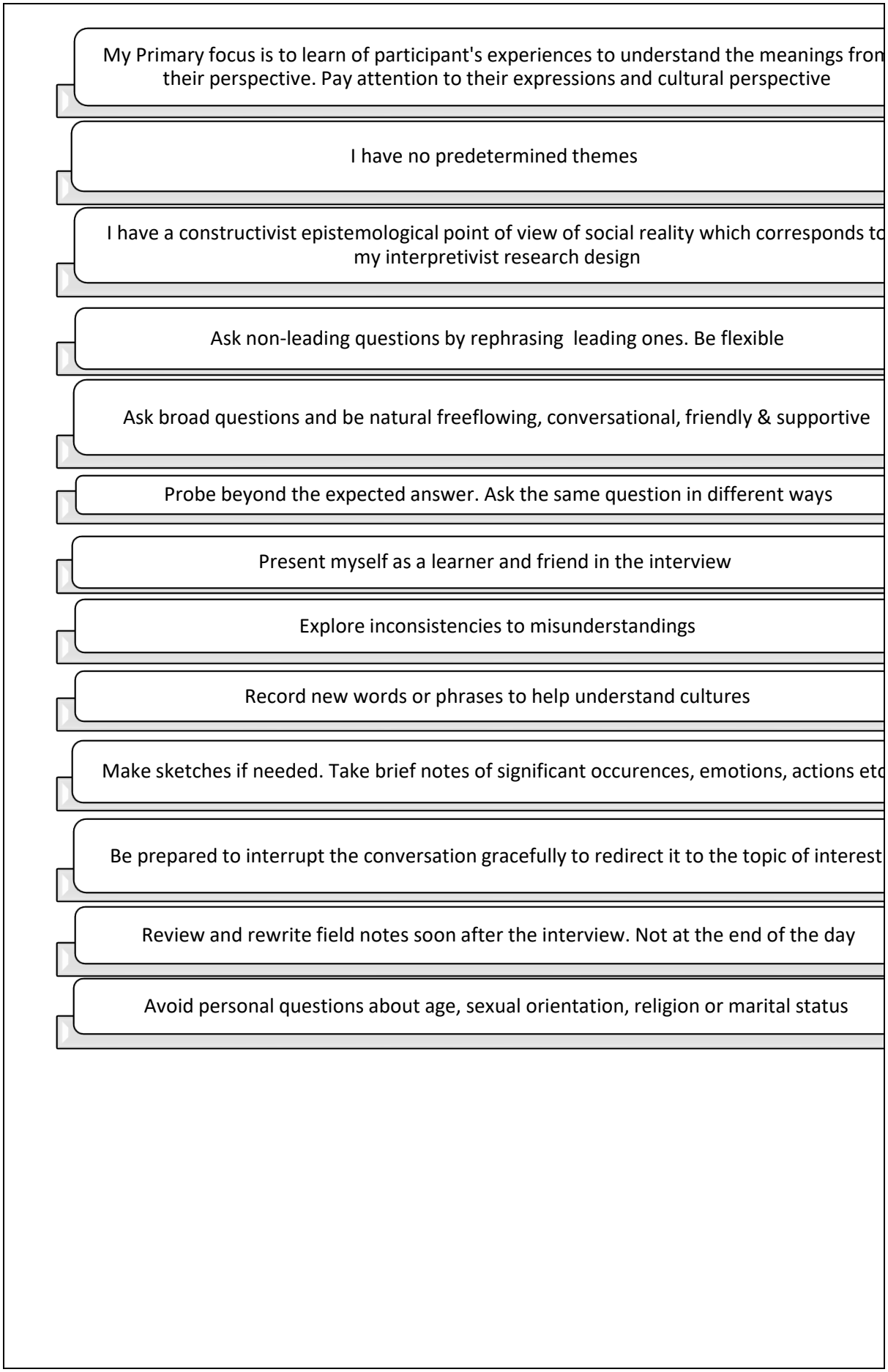
Procedure for Interview session

Part A

1. Engage in introductions and pleasantries
2. Share information sheet with participants, answering all questions in a calm and sensitive manner. Convey the value of their contribution.
3. Help participants to feel comfortable.
4. Seek to build rapport and gain trust.
5. Present participants with consent forms.
6. Asks participants to sign 3 copies of information sheets and 3 copies of the consent forms

Part B

1. Set up 2 digital recorders to record the interview after getting their permission
2. Have at hand a ruled up book for taking field notes, if necessary.
3. Have at hand, unstructured interview guide containing broad questions to elicit participants' experiences with the SEA exam
4. At the beginning of the recording, identify the participant's ID, date, time and interview.
5. Remember:



Broad Interview Questions

Preamble –

As a/an:

Recently retired primary school principal _____

Primary school Principal _____

Teacher of SEA exam _____

Parent of a child/children who did the SEA exam _____

Student who did the SEA exam _____

Educational psychologist _____

1. When you hear "SEA" exam, what thoughts does that bring to your mind?
2. Can you describe some of these experiences? (Your own. Possibly with the teachers, parents and children or others). When did they occur?
3. How do these experiences make you feel?
4. What do you think/believe……...?
5. Why do you say that/think……?
6. Can you explain further?.....?

My Research Questions		Possible Interview Questions	Data Analysis Questions
1.	What are the experiences of educators, students and family members associated with the high-stakes SEA exam?	• What are the experiences of participants *prior* to the SEA exam? • What are the experiences of participants *at the time* of the SEA exam? • What are the experiences of participants *after* the SEA exam?	• How do participants describe their experiences with the high-stakes SEA exam? • How do participants describe their feeling and emotions associated with the high-stakes SEA exam? • What are the categories of participants' experiences?

		• PROBES – When did this happen? Who was with you? Can you tell me more about the experience? Can you explain? What do you mean by….? Can you elaborate on how you felt?	
2.	What are the beliefs and values in the perspectives of educators, students and family members associated with the high-stakes SEA exam?	• In your perspective, what is the value of the SEA exam? • How do you know whether the SEA exam is valuable or not? • What are the biggest challenges of the SEA exam?	• What are the interests and values that inform participants' perspectives of SEA? • Whose interests are served with these values? • How can current views be changed? • What is required to facilitate change?
3.	What impact has the experiences with the SEA exam had on participant's lives	• How do participants' experiences with the high-stakes SEA exam transform their lives?	• What is the nature of participant's experiences that led to change? • In what ways did their experiences change their lives?

Student Essay Template with Instruction and Prompt for Documentary Analysis

Dear SEA Student

My name is Victoria Cunningham and I am a Student Researcher. I am interested in reading about your experiences as you prepare for the SEA exam in May. There is no need to write your name on the paper, so you can feel free to *write about your experiences and tell me how you feel about the SEA exam*. What you write will be confidential. Simply state your gender and your age.

Age _____ Gender _____

My Experiences in Preparing for the SEA Exam in May

Sample of an Interview Transcript

Transcription of Interview with Research Participant MPS0102

Victoria Good evening Mark. Thank you for being willing to share your very recent experience with the SEA exam with me. When you hear the word SEA what do you think of and how do you feel?

Mark Stress…you know… Stress. The stress teachers and maybe sometimes even students and the principal put me through.

Victoria Can you tell what was your experience?

Mark Well…that stress started in standard 4….

Victoria What class, were you in?

Mark I was in the A class… at first…well as usual… the stress started in standard 4 and because of SEA teachers were like forcing us…not forcing us but very strict with work. They are always saying if you want to pass for a certain school, you must do this, you must do that, you must study, you must behave …you know. Well in standard 5, I was moved to the B class and like…standard 5 was even more stress than standard 4.

Victoria Let's talk about standard 4 some more. In what way did the teacher communicate to you about what schools you should pass for? How do you know what schools you should go to?

Mark In standard 4…what my teacher use to do…is like sometimes before we get started with the day's work she would give us a lecture. She told us she likes to talk and when she begins talking she would talk about the schools to pass for if you work well.

Victoria How often would you all have this talk given?

Mark Almost every day for the starting of the school day after assembly and when we go into class…before we start work. Sometimes it isn't long…it might be short.

Victoria Can you remember some of the things she would say?

Mark Well if by chance the class was behaving bad she would say we can't be behaving like that if we want to pass for a certain school as I said earlier. She would punish us like….how to put it…she would like… punish us with words saying that we cannot we cannot pass for this school and we cannot accomplish certain things and that …in a kind of way …always use to get us frightened. She would say that SEA is not an easy test…it is hard. She even told us that the principal was doing the SEA test from the year before and says the principal took all day to do it… to finish the paper…so we get frightened

especially how it was going to be harder that year. It worried us. We say we have to do real work.

Victoria What year you did SEA?

Mark In 2014 …last year.

Victoria So what class, are you in now?

Mark I am in form 1

Victoria What school, are you at?

Mark I attend Non-Prestige Secondary school

Victoria Lets return to when you were in standard 4. When were you moved to the B class?

Mark It was after standard 4 when we were going into standard 5 I was moved to the B class because you see the idea was that for standard 4 and 5 we will have the same class and the same teacher. So instead of I staying in the same class and having the same teacher I was moved to another class with a different teacher.

Victoria Why do you think you were moved?

Mark I think it is because I told my teacher in the A class that I wanted to pass for Non-Prestige secondary because I heard about it and it was close to my home and it seemed rather interesting. I could actually walk to and from school.

Victoria When you told her that, what was her response?

Mark Well I assume she didn't like it because. In a kind a way you could say I got scolded in front the class. I was embarrassed and she made me feel like I was the bad person because I say I wanted to pass for a school like that.

Victoria Could you remember what she said and how she said it to make you feel that way?

Mark Well it was a day I came to school a bit late and I had stayed home the day before…so she called me up to her table and asked why I stayed home…I think it's because I was sick or something. So then she asked "what school you want to pass for?" I said Non-Prestige and she said "Non-Prestige! You want to pass for Non-Prestige?" It was as if she was accusing me of wanting to pass for Non-Prestige because the point she wanted to make is if I wanted to pass for a prestige school I must come to school often…so when I told her I wanted to pass for Non-Prestige secondary and she was like …you mad or something…why you want to pass for that school? I doubt she even knew the school because at the time that school was kind a new compared to other schools. It started in 2000 and she since she might not have heard about it before she might think that it is not a good school. Just because it is not a popular she thinks it is not a good school …so I got scolded and embarrassed in front he class just because I want to pass for Non-Prestige Secondary…and its close to my home, that is why I like it you know.

Victoria What school did she wanted you to go to?.... What schools was she suggesting that you go to?

Mark Well, she didn't really suggest a school to me but in a kind a way you can say she was forcing me to choose a different school…a prestige school. So later on during the same term, she will keep asking if I changed my choice of school from Non-Prestige. So just to save myself some more embarrassment I said Prestige East Secondary…a prestige school… she said "alright, that's a good thing, I like how you change your choice"

Victoria did you get pressure from you parents?

Mark No. Actually it was my parents who supported me in going to Malabar Secondary. Actually I remember when my teacher was embarrassing me she asked about my mother. She asked "your mother is a teacher?" I said "yes" and she said "she's a teacher and she wants you to pass for a school like that?" and she watched me funny. I said yes and she told me to go and sit down. I was confused and wondering what was really going on.

Victoria How did that make you feel?

Mark Well embarrassed…no doubt about that.

Victoria Did she act that way with any other student I your class?

Mark No…no

Victoria Why do you think she did not act that way with them?

Mark Because some of them …first of all…some of them weren't sure what school they wanted to pass for and others wanted to pass for prestige schools. So she was kind of happy with them and she was strict.

Victoria Were you the only one that did not have a prestige school as their goal or were there others?

Mark Well as far as I can remember it had one person and he was my friend…it's not like he didn't want to pass for a prestige school, he wanted a prestige school but he thought that it doesn't matter if you pass for a prestige school or an unpopular school…he always thought that is the same knowledge you getting, is the same test at CXC O' level you have to do. He thought it may not make a difference but the only reason he wanted a prestige school is because he always hearing people talking about it and that is why he would have accepted it but really and truly I don't think he felt so strong about going to a prestige school although he still wanted it because he wanted to look good because that is what everybody expected.

Victoria But what if you all didn't have the knowledge of what was prestige and what was not?

Mark Uhmm..

Victoria How many schools do you know as prestige …what did you hear?

Mark Is only the popular ones I've heard of like the Prestige Secondary schools.

Victoria Who told you that those schools were prestige schools?

Mark Some teachers and children…I was always hearing children talking about it…during those days when we had to write down our choices on paper, plenty people would be talking about those schools. Even in standard 4 when the teacher used to give us plenty work, they used to bring up the topic of passing for a good school. Every time…when it comes to plenty work and children not doing it…because it was so much work they were giving us, it's like we had no time to ourselves… and the stress they would bring on us too. It wasn't a good thing.

Victoria So now you are in secondary school and you are in form 1 at Non-Prestige Secondary, how is it there?

Mark Its interesting…I am kind of …on top of the class. It's not bad …because I know all schools have their little problems. All school have cursing and disrespect…you can't really get away from that.

Victoria Can you see yourself going on to do your O' level subjects and passing?

Mark Yes.

Victoria What do you hope to do one day?

Mark Well…I'm kind of still deciding. I don't mind being a medical doctor or probably an astronaut or meteorologist. I mean I'm still thinking about it. I'm not specifically sure as yet. I don't have like on specific objective yet but there are choices in my head.

Victoria When you think of SEA exams what do you think should be done about it?

Mark Well…I think they should remove it…but they could still have it but not be so stressful to children…not make such a big deal…as if it is so hard that if you don't study you would never pass it….I understand that the teacher need to know if you qualified enough to go to a secondary school … you must have some test so you don't have to remove it completely but don't make it such a big deal…like rocket science…because really and truly the more important test is at CXC level …because you do not need SEA results to get a job, you need good CXC O'level results.

Victoria When you went back to school to get your SEA results, how was it? What was your experience like and how did you feel?

Mark I went in the office to get my results and I wasn't happy nor sad…actually I was a bit happy when I found out I passed for Non-Prestige because at that time the only school I wanted to go to was Non-Prestige because it was so close to home and convenient. It would make my life much easier to and from school. So I was happy but some of the children who were still there in school were sad…you can see tears in their eyes. Some were happy. Some wasn't.

Victoria Why do you think they felt like that?

Mark Is because …no offence…but I would say the cause of them not being happy is the teachers fault…because the stress they put on the children to pass for this, pass for that school and after all of that, they didn't pass for a prestige school…they must be sad. Those teachers would talk so highly about these prestige schools, raising their hopes and stressing them I wouldn't blame them for being sad. It's kind of the teacher's fault.

Victoria What about your friends? How did they fare?

Mark There was this boy…his name was Anton…when I saw him he looked as if he was just fighting a lion. His shirt was rumpled and ragged. So I went to him and asked "Anton, what happened" he said he passed for Non-Prestige Comprehensive. He thinks it's a bad school but I heard it is a good school. I hear children "biggin up Compre..." so when I asked him what happened he said he pass for "Compre.." and he didn't want to pass for that school because he didn't like the school so when he got his results he went to the class and start to beat up himself. He get real vex and tear up his shirt.

Victoria What do you mean when you say he star to beat up? Did you see him do it?

Mark No, he told me…when I saw him he was real vex. You could have seen by the condition he was in as if he was fighting with a lion.

Victoria His physical condition?

Mark Yes his physical condition. some of the buttons on his shirt was out as if he was fighting with somebody.

Victoria What are some of the things he was saying?

Mark Well he was crying and he said he was going to repeat. I told him that nothing wrong with the school…you will waste a whole year. He didn't go to the school and he still end up repeating in another primary school. Right now he could have been going into form 2 but right now he'll be going into form 1.

Victoria Right now he waiting on results again since he repeated?

Mark Yes. To me that is a whole year wasted and you want to know who kind of made him waste that year? The same A class teacher because of the pressure she would put on us.

Victoria Do you think experiences like this can affect students later on?

Mark Yes. Look at the child who committed suicide. He was supposed to do exam the same time I did it last year when we all heard in the news… on the morning of the exam he committed suicide.

Victoria Your primary school heard of it? What kind of discussions you and your friends had about it?

Mark I don't think we ever talked it really … some teachers... I would believe that some teachers tried to avoid that conversation

Victoria So it wasn't discussed with you all?

Mark I don't think so …I don't remember that being discussed. I think I remember talking about it to my friends and I remember all of us agreeing that it is the teacher's fault that something like that can happen… I say he do that because of the stress he was getting from not only the teachers but probably from his relatives or friends…you know. They could've been stressing him out... he could have been depressed for all who knows.

Victoria That was indeed very sad.

Mark And let's say…as you said before…he didn't know about prestigious schools, that boy would have never done that…if they made such a big deal about SEA…if they never did that I believe that child would not have committed suicide.

Victoria It was so unfortunate. I heard that same boy …both he and his sister was doing exam on the same day and he was repeating. It appears that he couldn't deal with the experience again. What about you mark…are you glad you've passed that stage in your life?

Mark I am glad I got over that

Victoria Do you think CXC exam would be as stressful?

Mark Well now I can't really say but …I doubt …at least the work itself might not be as stressful but the teachers themselves might stress you out.

Victoria Is that your fear?

Mark Yes but I will accept that more because…knowing that CXC is kind of more important… I would be more worried and attentive that but SEA… what is the abbreviation for SEA? Isn't Secondary entrance assessment? So that is just a test to see if you ready to enter secondary school or not…so the more important exam is CXC not SEA.

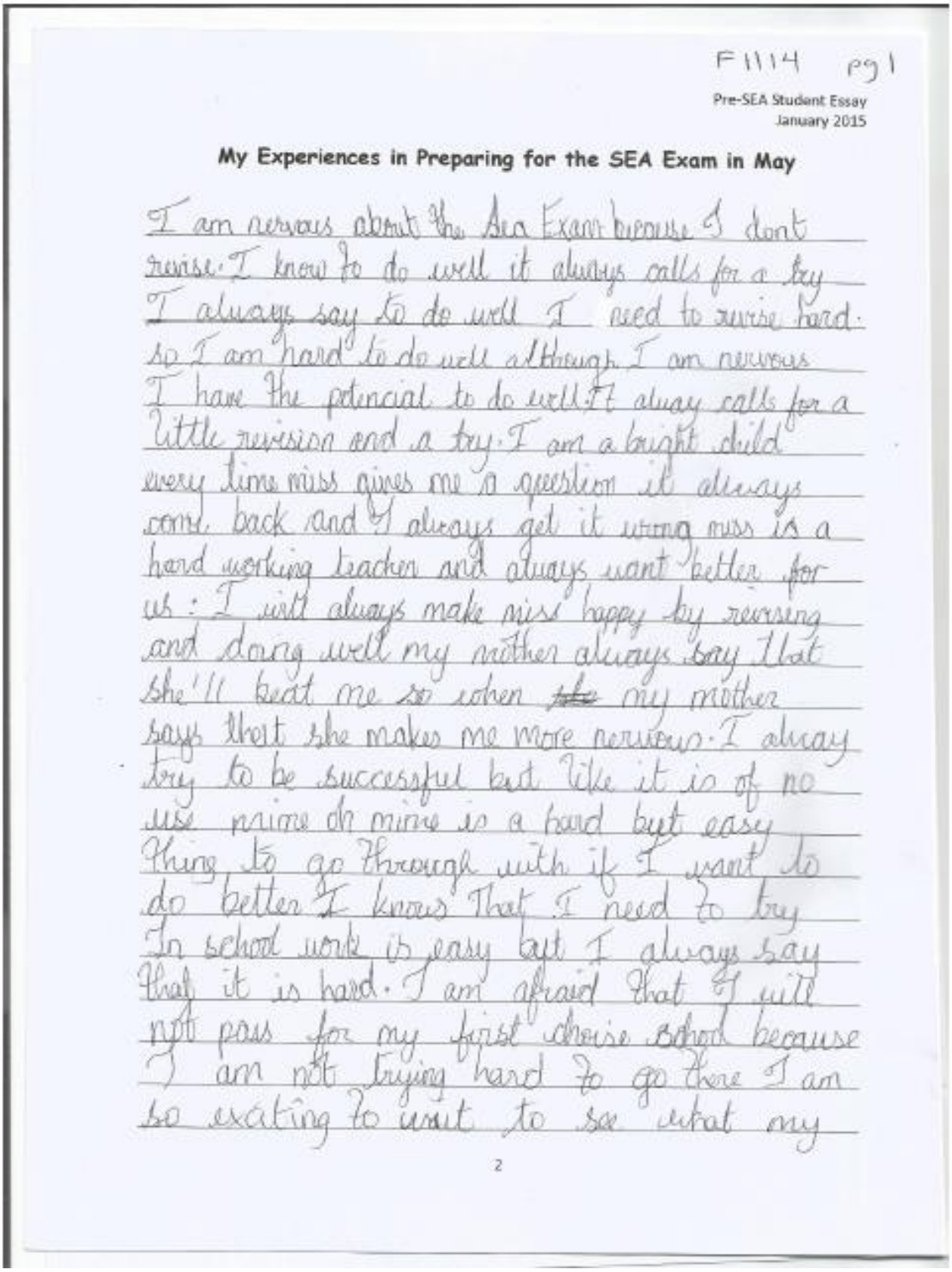
Victoria I am happy I spoke with you. I give me an insight of some of your views and some of the pressure you faced. Thank you very much. If you have anything else to add feel free to comment, especially with respect to the atmosphere of that day.

Mark Well I can say one thing…when I did finish the test…actually it wasn't that bad…the teachers were over-doing-it with that SEA and I'm glad I am done with one set of stress.

Victoria I thank you for talking with me.

The End

Sample of Student Essay



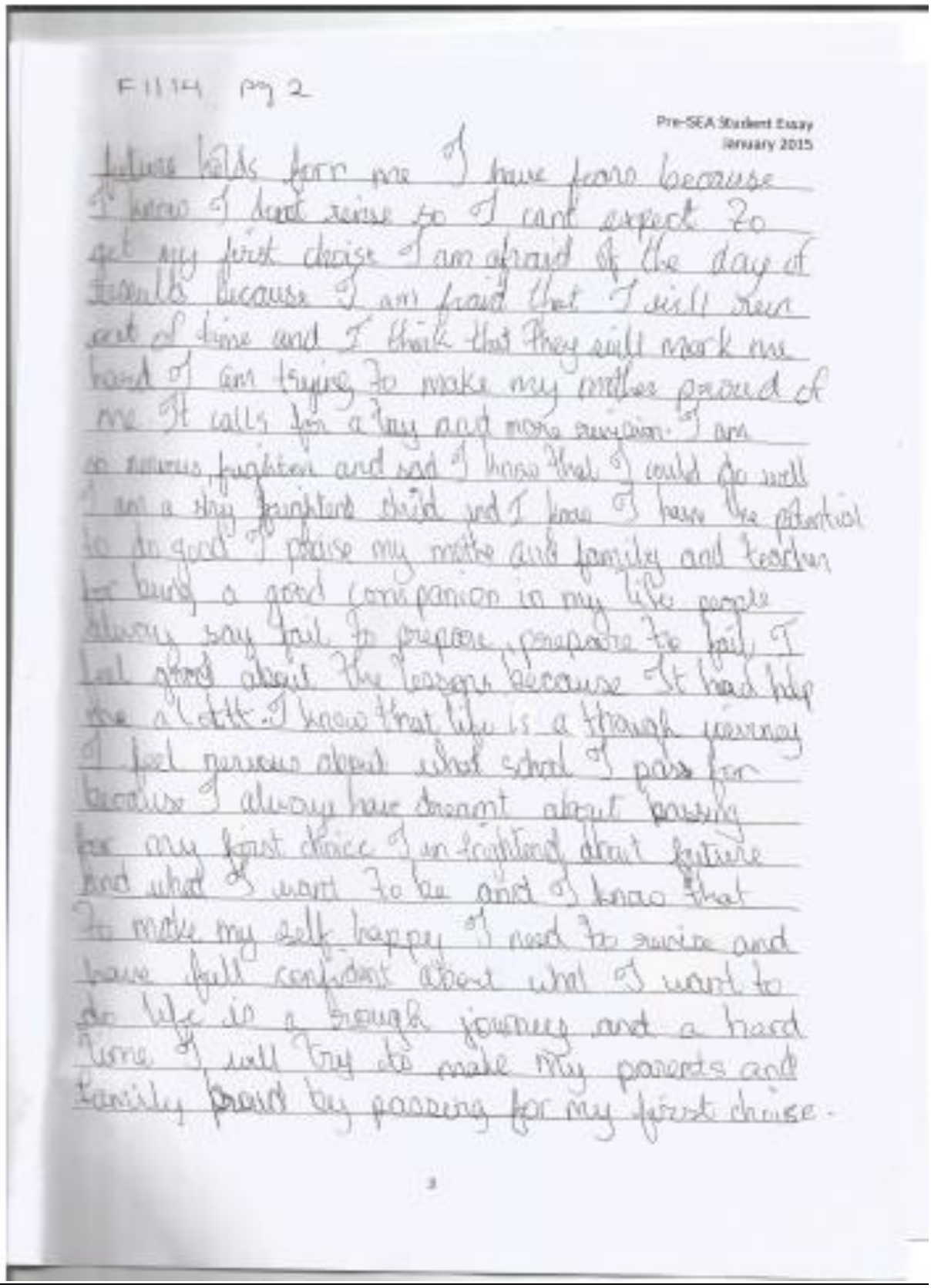
F1114 pg 1

Pre-SEA Student Essay
January 2015

My Experiences in Preparing for the SEA Exam in May

I am nervous about the Sea Exam because I dont revise. I know to do well it always calls for a try I always say to do well I need to revise hard. so I am hard to do well although I am nervous I have the potencial to do well. It alway calls for a little revision and a try. I am a bright child every time miss gives me a question it always come back and I always get it wrong miss is a hard working teacher and always want better for us : I will always make miss happy by revising and doing well my mother always say that she'll beat me so when ~~the~~ my mother says that she makes me more nervous. I alway try to be successful but like it is of no use prime oh mine is a hard but easy thing to go through with if I want to do better I knows that I need to try In school work is easy but I always say that it is hard. I am afraid that I will not pass for my first choise school because I am not trying hard to go there I am so exating to visit to see what my

2



Pre-SEA Student Essay
January 2015

Filth pg 2

future holds for me I have fears because I know I have to I can't expect to get my first choice I am afraid of the day of results because I am afraid that I will run out of time and I think that they will mark me hard I am trying to make my mother proud of me It calls for a lot and more revision. I am so nervous frightened and sad I know that I could do well I am a shy frightened child and I know I have the potential to do good I praise my mother and family and teacher for being a good companion in my life people always say fail to prepare, prepare to fail I feel good about the lessons because It has help me a little. I know that life is a rough journey I feel nervous about what school I pass for because I always have dreamt about passing for my first choice I am frightened about future and what I want to be and I know that to make my self happy I need to survive and have full confident about what I want to do life is a rough journey and a hard time I will try to make My parents and family proud by passing for my first choice.

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Appendix Figure 0:1 – Sample of Pre-SEA Student Essay

Qualitative Data Reduction Matrix for "Experience Codes"

Qualitative Data Reduction Matrix for "Experience Codes"		
Experience Codes	**Quotes/Vignettes**	**Data Source and ID**
Mental paralysis	"When I study for my ….test and its time to do it, it's like my brain gets erased and all the information disappears."	Essay M1201
Frustration	"They try to teach me thing that is not my level like in Maths and Language……but my teacher does not understand that …. it is too much for my brain" "I am feeling very frustrated because I keep getting the same things wrong. I keep on trying to put my best foot forward but I keep falling. My parents expect me to do my best but they don't know I feel so much pressure"	Essay M1201
Helplessness	"I have no rights" "Sometimes I wish I could reverse the time so I would not sit SEA, but I cannot get away from it. It is something we all have to face."	Essay M1201 Essay F1213
Parental and family pressure	"I will fail and I would have more pressure from my mother" "I am afraid I will blank out and forget everything because my mother always tells me 'you are only as good as your last performance.' Sometimes I think so much…I start to get nervous and I blank out. At home people always say that I will pass for a Life Centre because I cannot spell so good and I am not smart. Sometimes I feel like my teacher and my parents don't understand the pressure I feel"	Essay M1201 Essay F1213
Fear of failure	"I feel I might not pass the SEA exam	Essay M1302
Fright	"I feel I might not pass the SEA exam because I do feel frightened and I do not study 100%" "I am frightened for the SEA exam because I'm scared I might forget." " the day of the exam will be frightening"	Essay M1302 Essay F1115

Parental encouragement	"My parents always encouraging me to revise." "I am influenced by my mother and father to do my best"	Essay M1302 M1308 Parents interview transcripts,
Struggling student	" I try my best to fight for an A+ but I never got it….I do get my grade R on several occasions"	Essay M1302
Fear of physical punishment	"I am also really scared because my parents have threatened me if I don't pass for my first choice, that I will get licks and makes me feel scared that I might fail the SEA" "She, was devastated. She was in long tears because of what I had told her "if she ain't pass for a good school, I would "cut her tail" (a beating). She was in real tears. She was hiding. She didn't even want to come out when I came to the school to find out. She didn't want to come out by me at all, at all, at all. So I had to go where she was and calm her down and tell her she still passed for a good school."	Essay M1103 SEA Parent Interview Transcript
Fear of shame	"feel scared that I might fail the SEA. I am also scared to go to school with a bad reputation because of all the fight I have been in because of people troubling me"	Essay M1103
Physical shaking	"I'm thinking of the day of the exam and I am just shaking of what might happen if I fail"	Essay M1103
Fear of not passing for his first choice school	" If I don't pass for my *first choice school,* I will break down in tears"	Essay M1103
Confusion	"I am confused	Essay M1204
Nervousness	"I do get nervous when the examiner looking at me" "I am nervous about the SEA exam because I have to finish the exam in a certain space of time"	Essay M1405 Essay M1308 F1411

	"My parents are trying so hard for me to pass for my first choice school and it does make me nervous"	
Anger	"When I get my results and it is good I will feel happy but if I don't get my first choice I will get vex about it." "If I don't pass for my first choice I would be mad at myself"	Essay M1405 Essay F1115
Desire to please others	"I hope I would succeed in my exams because I want to make my parents proud of me"	Essay M1206
Desire to pass for a first-choice school	"I expect to get good marks from my SEA exam so that I can pass for my first-choice school, Prestige College"	Essay M1206
Uncertainty	"Ever since I each Std. 5 my parents have been pushing me all along. I told them I am not sure that I will succeed in my exams." "I sometimes feel so anxious about SEA and think I will do extremely well and sometimes I feel stressed and overwhelmed and want to cry."	Essay M1206 Essay F1112
Teacher pressure on students	"I feel frightened to do the SEA because the teacher does talk about it and Miss try to tell me how I have to get more serious about my work," "I am a child who cries fast and worries about things, like when Miss …. Said… (that I would pass for a Life Centre), I am afraid that I would pass for my last-choice and make my family, neighbours and my teacher feel bad and lose faith and stop trust me…...when the teacher 'buff'(chastise) me, my eyes full up with water. It makes me feel like she doesn't like me and doesn't believe in me"	Essay M1307 Essay F1213 Essay F1115
Fear of passing for a "low school" "bad school" (non-	"When results come out, I really, really hope I get a very good school…I am scared if I get a 'low' school and when I am going home, people ask me what school you pass for?" "I'm afraid of the school I'm might pass for"	Essay M1307 F1411

prestigious school)		
Fear of what people might think of him	"When results come out, I really hope I get a very good school….I am scared if I get a low school because when I am going home, people will ask what school you pass for?"	Essay M1307
Fears the day of results	"I'm afraid of the day of results because I am afraid of the school I am going to pass for and without my (O' level) passes I can't get a good job"	Essay F1411
Fear of losing friends and teacher after SEA exam	"I'm afraid of the SEA exam because I'm going to lose all my friends and my teacher"	Essay F1411
Fear of not living up to expectation	"I know my family and friends have high hopes for me. My dad says I will make him very proud. My mother says I can do better than anyone, but I feel I will never get my first choice which is Bishops but my third choice, Providence. I feel like I always get B's but my mom says when she was little she always got A's. I try my best in everything. I do, but somehow, all my results are always B's.	Essay F1112
Overwhelmed by commercial exam reparation booklets	"My mother buys the Guardian's SEA practice test faithfully every Wednesday, but the way the newspaper is so long, I feel like it going to take forever"	F1112 Essay
Humiliated, Belittled, diminished.	"The teacher Miss…who was in my class always use to say 'you will pass for a Life Centre." "At home people always say that I will pass for a Life Centre because I cannot spell so good and I am not smart. Sometimes I feel like my teacher and my parents don't understand the pressure I feel"	F1115 F1213
Suicidal thought/	"The day of the exam will be frightening….If I don't pass for my first choice, I would like God to take me."	F1115

Suicidal ideation		
Excessive Test preparation	"When we reach to school…we start doing past papers. When they have us outside the class they have us doing the SEA practice Test…that is what they call the booklets. We would do about 5 of those, every day. It wasn't a nice experience."	Post SEA Interview Transcript MPS0103
Inflicting self-harm	"so when I asked him what happened he said he pass for "Compre.." and he didn't want to pass for that school because he didn't like the school so when he got his results he went to the class and started to beat up himself. He got real vex and tear up his shirt."	Post SEA Interview Transcript MPS0102. Interview Transcript Ed, Psychologist.
Sadness, Crying, and devastation.	"She was totally devastated. She was in long tears…when results came out ….that weekend she was… depressed	Parents interview transcripts. Post SEA student's Transcripts
Curriculum pacing/ Curriculum overload	"But the teacher in her haste, to probably get the curriculum done, which is an excuse I've gotten from some teachers… to fulfill the curriculum which is the mandate from the Ministry of Education, they go with those who are moving at their pace. So you find they would not have the time to sit down and deal with the ones…let's just say for want of a better word…slow. So they say now what they do to compensate for that is have lessons in the evening."	SEA parent interview transcript
The teacher expressed disappointment	" He went and show miss "I pass for Non-Prestige secondary" and she says "yes you get good marks, a little more again and…" and I like "don't say that" but I was at the back of the class."	Parents interview transcript.

with student' results		
Engendering Competition	So I put that pressure on him with another cousin, who …up until recently I had to tell "boy I sorry" because we were all in the same church and sometimes I would tell him "look at Rhea." It took a while for me to realize that …that cousin's child…is an impressionist."	Parents Interview transcripts.
Teachers fear being judged	"Everyone was afraid of standard 5 class. No teacher wanted to be put on display because you are being judged. When you take on a standard 5 class… and exam class people judge you by the results that you get…so people were afraid to put themselves in that position …you know…so they would sort of shirk away from it. They realized it was a lot of work. You could hide behind other classes but you can't hide behind a standard 5 class because of how children perform, people point fingers"	Principal interview transcript FC&RP01,
Pressure on SEA teachers from parents	"The teacher faced pressure from the parents. Remember the teacher too would like to – for want of a better word – look good, where results are concerned, because – the thing about it is when she does well she knows that people will also select the school. That's another thing – parents select schools – primary schools based on the performance of the school at SEA." …. "you have to plead with them to let them know that the other teacher is just as good. And they would tell you 'well miss, we look at the results and is only when Miss is teaching… that the results are good."	Principal Interview transcript FPR011.
Pressure from other teachers on the SEA	"Sometimes the teachers in the school, whose class the children were in before – will say well 'when that child was by me she used to work so well I thought she was going to go to Prestige Secondary and they begin to speak	Principal Interview transcript FPR011.

teacher at the school	in such a way as if the SEA teacher didn't do sufficiently with the child. And then you even hear it among the parents "this year wasn't a good year; who was the teacher."	
Pressure on the school from the education system (Ministry of Education practice)	"Because the ministry makes a whole fuss about this thing—plus it is published in the newspaper – children are invited to a special prize-giving and all of that – it is the emphasis placed on that by the Ministry of Education you know. So it's not the school. They make you feel – even when you go to a principal's conference they call out all the schools where the children came in the first 100 and they praise the teachers and the principals – that sort of thing happens." "their parents concentrate on their first-choice schools, the teacher. And of course, when they concentrate on first choice-schools – the pressure is on– the pressure is on the parent and the pressure is on the child."	Principals Interview transcripts FPR011, FPR021,
Pressure on parents from their workplace colleagues	"When you work in a particular environment – a particular office and you hear this person in the office daughter went to Prestige secondary; her son went to Prestige College – you want when you go back to the office … that you can say 'my child went to Prestige Secondary.' There are many factors involved in why parents pressure their children. It's a societal thing, something with … in families – "My sister children all went to Prestige Secondary or all went to prestige schools, my children must go to prestige school too." So that when the family gathers together we can all talk about our children in prestige schools.	FRP011 Interview Transcript.
Conflict of interest between the classroom	Well, there are parents that from the time they feel they are paying for something they automatically feel it is doing the child some good. There are times when you have to	

teacher and the extra-lesson teacher.	call in the parents and say to them 'It is too much for your child because she cannot even do the homework she is getting from her class teacher but you have trying to struggle with the lesson's coming from the lessons teacher.' But the lesson's teacher very often makes the parents feel that the child is improving because they want the child to continue taking the lessons because it is about money Miss. It's about finances. So then we have to tell the parent 'you know, your daughter has been taking lessons so long but we are not seeing any improvement from the lessons for the child in the classroom.' The lesson's teacher will be having all these different ticks and comments in the book but the child in the classroom show very little improvement. Of course, there are times when you have to plead with them on behalf of the child."	

Appendix Table 0:1 – Qualitative Data Reduction Matrix for Experiences Codes

Code Frequency Table for Codes on Experiences

Code Frequency Table for Codes on Experiences			
Experiences Codes	**Brief Definitions**	**No. of Participants with codes**	**Data Sources**
Mental paralysis	Freezes up in the exam room and forgets the content needed to respond correctly to exam questions.	5, 1, 1	Student Essay. Interview Transcript Edu. Psycho. Principal Interview transcript.
Frustration	The workload for exam preparation is too much	5, 1, 1	Student Essay. Teachers' Transcripts
Helplessness	Having no control over the situation	1, 1	Student Essays
Parental and family pressure to perform	Pressure from parents to pass for a prestigious school in Trinidad and Tobago.	5, 1, 1, 1	Student Essays. Interview Transcript Edu. Psycho. Law lecturer. Parents interview transcripts.
Fear of failure	Afraid of the consequences of failing the exam	5, 5, 1	Student Essay Interview Transcript Edu. Psycho.
Fright	The feeling experienced when they think of the SEA exam and the implications of the exam results	5, 1, 1, 1	Student Essay. Post SEA student transcript MPS0102.
Parental encouragement	Parents encourage the student to do their best.	5	Student Essays. Parents interview transcripts.
Struggling to cope	The workload is too heavy	5, 1, 1, 1	Student Essay. Interview Transcript Edu. Psycho.

			Teachers' Transcripts
Fear of physical punishment	Afraid of the physical punishment that would be administered by a parent if she/he fails the exam or passes for a non-prestigious school	5, 1	Student Essay. Parents interview transcript.
Fear of shame	Afraid of being teased for failing the SEA exam.	1, 1, 1, 1	Student Essay. Parents interview transcript. Teacher's Transcript
Panic attack, anxiety & Physical shaking	Physical shaking of hands and body in fear of doing the SEA exam. I saw children…they were so frightened of the exam. On the day of the exam, they couldn't perform…. There was a child …who use to unplait her whole hair. I use to have to call the mother. She uses to get panic attacks...that one day of sitting down and doing that exam …. use to just floor them and they recognize that they couldn't make…	5, 1, 1, 1, 1	Student Essay. Interview Transcript Edu. Psycho. Principal Interview Transcript Teachers' Transcripts
Fear of not passing for his first choice school	Students choose 4 secondary schools they would like to go to after passing the SEA exam. The top choice is the prestigious elite colleges in the country.	5, 5, 1, 1, 1, 1	Student Essay. Interview Transcript Edu. Psycho. Post SEA Interview transcript MPS0103. Parents interview transcript. Teachers' Transcripts
Confusion	Confused and insecure about how best to study and prepare for the exam	1	Student Essay

Nervousness	A feeling that occurs when the body is stressed.	5, 5	Student Essay. Parents interview transcripts.
Anger	Strong hostile feeling towards a provoking situation, someone causing an uncomfortable situation, or against oneself	5	Student Essay. Parents Interview transcript.
Desire to please others	Wanting to do well in the exam so parents, friends, and neighbours will be pleased.	5, 5, 1, 1, 1, 1	Student Essay. Parents interview transcript. Teachers' Transcripts
Desire to pass for a first-choice school	Desire to pass for one of the prestigious secondary schools in Trinidad and Tobago, the first of four choices allowed by the Ministry of Education.	5, 5, 1, 1, 1	Student Essay. Parents interview transcript. Teachers' Transcripts
Uncertainty	Unsure about the prospects of his success in the exam	1, 1,	Student Essay,
Teacher pressure on students	The teacher's, talk of the exam makes the student feel pressured.	5, 5, 1, 1, 1, 1	Student Essays. Post-SEA Student Transcripts MPS0102, MPS0103, MPS0101. Parents interview transcript. Principal Interview transcripts. Teachers' Transcripts
Fear of passing for a "low school" "bad school" (non-	A *low school* is perceived to be one of the schools that are perceived as non-prestigious and one that was previously a Junior Secondary School.	5, 5, 1, 1	Student Essay. Post-SEA Student Transcripts MPS0102, MPS0103, MPS0101

prestigious school)			Teachers' Transcripts
Fear of what people might think of him	Afraid that people might view him as not worthy if he passes for a non-prestigious school	1, 1, 1, 1	Student Essay Parents interview transcripts. Teachers' Transcripts
Fears the day of results	This is the day when students learn of the secondary school they are assigned	1, 1, 1, 1	Student Essay Parents Interview transcripts.
Fear of losing friends and teacher after SEA exam	The realization that the change of school after SEA means she will no longer be with the same friends and teachers.	1, 1,	Student Essay
Fear of not living up to expectation	Fears that she is not able to live up to the high expectation her parents and friends have for her	1, 1, 1, 1	Student Essay. Interview Transcript Edu. Psycho. Law lecturer. Parents interview Transcript.
Overwhelmed by excessive test preparation using commercial exam booklets	- Students are expected to complete practice test booklets sold at the bookstores in school and the practice test published in the various newspaper at home. - Daily use of the SEA practice test booklets for students	5, 1, 1	Student Essay Post SEA Interview Transcript MPS0103, MPS0102, Teachers' Transcripts
Humiliated, Belittled, diminished.	Making someone feel bad about their situation	5, 5, 1,	Student Essay. Interview Transcript Edu. Psycho. Post-SEA Student transcripts

Suicidal thought/ Suicidal ideation	Wanting to die if unsuccessful at the SEA exam	1	Student Essay
Inflicting self-harm	Physically harming oneself due to disappointment	1, 1	Interview with Ed Psychologist. Post SEA transcript MPS0102.
Sadness, Crying, Devastation	The body's reaction at the moment of disappointing news from their exam results.	5, 5, 1, 1, 1	Parents interview transcripts. Post SEA student's Transcripts. Teachers' Transcripts
Curriculum pacing/ Curriculum overload	Curriculum overload as a result of an expanding curriculum and impending assessment. Hence, the increased pace to complete the content at the risk of leaving students behind.	5	Students' essays. Parents interview transcript. Teachers' Transcripts
Teachers & Parents' disappointment with student' results	The case where students were satisfied with their results but their teachers conveyed disappointment, telling them if they had scored higher saying "a little more again and you could have…" "Yes, because I know they were going well in school. They had the understanding and everything with their work so my expectations were higher with them. Keegan especially, I felt disappointed when they sent him Arima North …. because I thought he would have made it to Trinity College.	5, 1	Parents interview transcript. Teachers' Transcripts

Engendering Competition	Stirring competition by comparing the child to other children who appear to be high-performers.	1, 1, 1, 1	Parent Interview Transcripts. Teachers' Transcripts
Teachers fear being judged.	Teachers fear being judged by the number of students in their class who passed for a prestigious secondary school.	5, 1	Principal interview transcript FC&RP01 Teachers' Transcripts
Pressure on SEA teachers from parents.	Parents pressuring their children's teachers to get their children to pass for a prestigious school.	1, 1, 1, 1	Principal Interview transcripts. Teachers' Transcripts
Pressure from other teachers on the SEA teacher.	Teachers of the school pressuring the SEA teachers to get their children to pass for a prestigious school to paint a good image of the school.	1, 1, 1, 1	Principal Interview transcripts. Teachers' Transcripts
Pressure on the school from the education system (Ministry of Education)	The situation where the persons at the school feel judged by their performance if they do not get students to achieve scores that fall within the top one hundred scores which are yearly celebrated and publicized nationally by the MOE.	5	Principal Interview transcripts. Teachers' Transcripts.
The conflict of interest between the classroom teacher and the teacher of lessons.	The conflict between what the classroom teachers think and what the teacher of lessons thinks about a child's performance.	1, 1	Principal Interview transcript Teachers' Transcripts

Appendix Table 0:2 – Code Frequency Table on Experiences

Qualitative Data Reduction Matrix for Beliefs and Values Codes

Qualitative Data Reduction Matrix for <u>Beliefs and Values Codes</u>		
Beliefs and Values Codes	**Quotes/Vignettes**	**Data Source and ID**
Readiness	"I do not think I'm ready to do the SEA exam"	Essays M1201, M1302
Play is an obstacle to doing well in the exam	"I try my best to fight for an A+ but I never got it. I have to put more work in ….and forget play for the while"	Essay M1302, M1103
The SEA Exam will help him grow up as a good person	"You must have a good education to be a good person and work in a good job" "Is to try to do good in my work so I can become something good in my life and get a very good job and to pass for a good school to make my friends and my family happy so I can make money for my mother and my father"	Essay M1307
Approval from others is needed to feel good about himself	"On the day of results, I must be smiling and getting lots of kisses and hugs."	Essay M1302
He will feel free after exam results	"to see a future after results, I must feel free"	Essay M1302
Extra lessons will help him pass for his first choice school	"I feel excited about lessons because it can help you pass for your first choice school"	Essay M1302

False hope to students	"I felt that the lesson's teacher gave that child false hope. Like she was telling him that he was going to pass for his first choice but when he didn't, he felt shattered"	Interview Transcript FT021
Self-isolation by forgetting friends will help him focus on his exam	"It's the first time am going to do the exam so I try to keep to myself. I know it's hard to keep to yourself in an exam class because you have to work with others"	Essay M1204
The exam will determine a good job and future for him	"Without the SEA exam, there is no future" "I expect to get all my marks in my SEA exam so I will come out with all my passes and get a good job….I don't want to sell drugs with people shooting at me, I want to have a good life.	Essay M1204, M1405; M1307
Pushing himself will help him pass for a "good school"	"I have to push myself to reach ……"	Essay M1103
Passing for a "good school" will help make him a lot of money	Is to try to do good in my work so I can become something good in my life and get a very good job and to pass for a good school to make my friends and my family happy so I can make money for my mother and my father"	Essay M1307
"Marks determine the school of our choice"	"I think the mark you make is better than the school because the marks are sending you to the school of your choice."	Essay M1308
The exam will get a "good education"	"The exam can make me get a good education and I can get to go to another school"	Essay M1308

The pressure on students to pass for first-choice schools is to make teachers and the school look good.	"Well you will get to choose, but your choice is greatly influenced by your teachers, your friends because everybody wants you to pass high at a certain level…they don't want you to put schools like El Dorado or Five Rivers…they want you to put schools like…well for me I'm a boy so it's was… Hill View, Trinity College, and… At that time, I had no idea but now …thinking about it, I would just say that it is for the teachers …it is for the school…to see how much students pass for Queens Royal College or how much students that teacher had passed for Trinity and so on."	Post SEA Student Transcript MPS0103
Educational inequity and teacher bias	"Somehow or the other from about standard 3 you begin to see that tension starting to mount …in that they start to pay more attention to those whom they (teachers) figure will excel… more than those who won't…. There were many nights when we were both stressed because I saw where he has the aptitude to do it but because of …again those that the teachers favoured in the class… those that they knew would excel that they favoured, he felt as if there were a strain and a stress to meet that standard." "The teachers again from standard one… where you begin to see where they…either because of parents' participation, influence with sports days and all that or because of the child's so-called academic prowess you know …watching…looking as if they bright …that kind of thing. You will see they start to favour. So you would begin to see where they gradually begin to move…now they tell you that the whole class is moving up but they placing James and	Parent interview transcripts.

	the good ones to the front. So you see the class moving but then you see that segregation, where those who they figure are quick, picking up easy, parents' influence you know by giving or coming in with a bottle of non-alcoholic wine or these kinds of things.	
Inadequate attention for challenged learners	"Some children need individual attention – in the at the teacher in the whole class may not be able to give that child the kind of attention the child needs – because children work at different speeds. The child may need somebody to sit down and go over the thing – go over what is being taught. You have the child who would pick it up right away – so the slow children sometimes suffer because they cannot go with that speed that the teacher operates with."	Interview Transcript FPR011

Appendix Table 0:3 – Qualitative Data Reduction Matrix for Beliefs and Values Codes

Code Frequency Table for Codes on Beliefs and Values

Code Frequency Table for Codes on Beliefs and Values			
Beliefs and Values Codes	**Brief Definitions/ Explanation**	**No. of Participants with codes**	**Data Source**
Readiness	Unprepared to be successful at the exam	5	Student Essay Teachers' Transcripts
Play is an obstacle to doing well in the exam	Playing with friends takes up time that could be spent on exam preparation	1, 1, 1, 1	Student Essay Teacher Transcript
The SEA Exam will help him grow up as a good person	Equates passing for a prestigious secondary school will help him become a good person	1	Student Essay
Approval from others is needed to feel good about himself	Students' belief that if they pass for a good school they would make their friends and family happy with them	1, 1, 1, 1	Student Essay Teacher Transcript
He will feel free after exam results	Believes that after the SEA exam the workload will be over	1, 1	Student Essay
Extra lessons will help him pass for his first choice school	Extra work was done after school either in the same school or an external location by another teacher that may be external to the school	1, 1, 1, 1	Student Essay
False hope to students	The idea that they are capable of performing better than they really can	1, 1	Interview Transcript FT021
Self-isolation by forgetting friends will help him focus on his exam	If he isolates himself from other students he will be less distracted and perform better at the exam	1, 1, 1	Student Essay

The exam will determine a good job and future for him	Passing the exam will help him get a good job and have a good life and be a good citizen of Trinidad and Tobago	5, 5, 1	Student Essay Teachers' Transcripts
Pushing himself will help him pass for a good school	The belief that exerting himself will help him pass for a prestigious school.	5, 1, 1	Student Essay Teachers' Transcripts
Passing to a "good school" will help make him a lot of money	Passing for a prestigious school will help him get a prestigious job that earns him a lot of money.	1, 1, 1	Student Essay Teacher Transcript
"Marks determine their placement in the school of our choice"	The number of marks gained will determine the secondary school to which he is placed.	5	Student Essay Teachers' Transcripts
Schools with the word "College" as part of their name are more valued than those without.		1, 1, 1 Cheering Crowd	Student essays. Teachers' Transcripts
Religious-run Board Schools are believed to be prestigious schools and are more valued by participants than government-run secondary schools.		5,	Teachers' Transcripts
Prestige School ideology	Passing for a prestigious school is the mark of success.	5, 5, 5, 5, 5, 1, 1, 1	Student Essays. Teachers' Transcripts
Educational inequity and teacher bias	The perception that the teachers gave more attention and favoured students who can work at the teacher's pace, whose parents are part of the PTA, and can contribute well to the school.	5	Parents Interview Transcripts. Teachers' Transcripts

Inadequate attention for challenged learners	Lack of individual attention for challenged learners.	1, 1, 1, 1	Principal interview transcript. Teachers' Transcripts

Appendix Table 0:4 – Code Frequency Table on Beliefs and Values

Qualitative Data Reduction Matrix for Life Impact Codes

Qualitative Data Reduction Matrix for <u>Life Impact Codes</u>		
Life Impact Codes	**Quotes/Vignettes**	**Data Source and ID**
Approval seeking/ Diminished self-worth	"I want everyone….to talk good things, not bad things…to make my grandparent, siblings, parents, teachers, and elders watch me and smile	Essay M1302
Unforgiving of self - "self - recrimination"	"If I don't get the school of my choice, I will never forgive myself because I know that I can do it. I just have to show it"	Essay F1213
Play deprivation	"These children don't have a life…at an age where children should see life as an adventure…be able to play, be able to enjoy their childhood, they are being pressured to perform academically." "So when they come to sign up the child now they will tell you to put the top schools and then they would try to pressure the child and have the child go to lessons from the time school is over you letting the child take lessons from the teacher – a vehicle picks up the child – and the child has to be dropped off at another lesson centre and another lesson centre and the child will be getting home-lesson from all the different people who giving her lessons in addition to what their class teacher is doing."	Educational Psychologist Interview transcript. Principal Interview transcript FPR011
Diminished Self-worth based on academic performance	"The biggest impact St. Mary's had…I suppose the biggest negative impact was being placed in Lower 1A and being made to feel as though you were lower or inferior." He asked "if we accept that these were some of the most intelligent people coming into the school what made that difference…what made us upper? What made us lower? And it changed my	Law Lecturer interview transcript

	expectation of myself. I never thought I was bright enough to be in Upper 1A because…I thought that is where I belonged in terms of my common entrance results…but from the time you become 'lower' your expectations of yourself changed"	
Perpetual Generational Cycle of Academic Indoctrination	"I think that the idea of wanting a prestige school really goes way back, even from my childhood days. That's a revelation."	Parents Interview Transcript
Parents living vicariously through their child.	Parent passed for Five Rivers secondary, a non-prestigious school and her mother uttered "you not going there, you are going to do it over." The parent felt like she didn't do good enough.	Parents Interview Transcript
Strained parent-child relationship.	"So even our relationship …father and son was beginning to be stretched and strained and I had to draw back because I realized that… in my expectation of him….how I was going about it, wasn't right….	
Feeling Unsafe	"The ministry put us in a position that was not safe because we had to put something in place that parents couldn't just come up to see us anymore"	Teacher's Transcript FT021

Appendix Table 0:5 – Qualitative Data Reduction Matrix for Life Impact Codes

Code Frequency Table for Codes on Life Impact

Code Frequency Table for Codes on Life Impact			
Life Impact Codes	**Brief Definitions**	**No. of Participants with codes**	**Data Source**
Approval Seeking/Diminished Self-worth	Feeling worthy is contingent upon getting approval and validation from others.	1, 1, 1, 1	Student Essay Teacher Transcript
Unforgiving of self - "self - recrimination"	Beating up oneself over and over for what was said or what was done.	1, 1, 1, 1	Student Essay
Play deprivation	Due to the vast amount of time involved in SEA exam preparation of children as young as 8 years onwards are unable to play.	5, 1	Student Essay. Ed. Psycho. Interview transcript. Principal interview transcripts. Teachers' Transcripts
Diminished Self-worth based on academic performance	Feeling less valued or important than others because others are streamed in a higher class.	5, 1, 1	Law lecturer, Post SEA students' Interview Transcript. Principal interview transcript FPR021. Teachers' Transcripts
Perpetual Generational Cycle of Academic Indoctrination	Teaching children to uncritically accept the idea that academic success is dependent on success at passing for a prestigious school; a cycle that is perpetuated and	5, 5, 1, 1, 1, 1	Interviewees transcript. Teachers' Transcripts

	repeated through generations by parents and teachers.		
Parents living vicariously through their children.	Parents wanting their children to accomplish what they failed to accomplish at the eleven plus exam.	1, 1, 1	Parents Interview transcript. Teacher Transcript.
Strained parent-child relationship.	As a result of the parental pressure on their children to pass for a prestigious school.	1, 1	Parents Interview transcript
Feeling Unsafe	Teachers feeling unsafe in the classroom because they fear confrontation by parents who are not pleased with the children's scores.	1, 1	Teachers' Transcripts

Appendix Table 0:6 – Code Frequency Table for Codes on Life Impact

The Anatomy of my Thesis

Thesis Sections	Number of Words
1. Cover page	86
2. Title Page	54
3. Table of Content	874
4. Dedication	134
5. Acknowledgments	139
6. Abstract	293
Chapter 1 – Introduction	13,593
Chapter 2 – Review of the Related Literature	7,402
Chapter 3 – Methodology of the Study	11,359
Chapter 4 – Findings	12,771
Chapter 5 – Discussion of Findings	9,012
Chapter 6 - Conclusion	3,625
References	7,856
Appendices	12,174
Total words	79,372
Total Words from Chapters 1-6	**57,762**

Appendix Table 0:7 – Thesis Anatomy