A Study of Student Stress at the Senior Level at an All Girls Secondary School—A Case Study

Abstract: This study examined stress in senior students at a high achieving all girls school (School T) in Trinidad and Tobago. Separate focus group interviews with students and teachers guided the questionnaire administered to 63 final year students of the school. Closed and open-ended questions were used. Data were analyzed both quantitatively with descriptive statistics, and qualitatively to highlight the students’ voices. The findings show that whereas some students are able to manage their home and school commitments, the majority found a combination of school and home to be the cause of their stress. Most students speak with girlfriends, pray, and listen to music to cope with their stress. Many suggestions were offered to the school, and to family for easing their stress.

Introduction and background

Student stress is undeniably a concern for all educators especially as it sometimes culminates without prior manifestation to the unsuspecting observer. Much of the research done on human stress is logically approached from either a psychological, psycho-social, or bio-psychological standpoint. Human stress is directly related to the mind, the body and in many cases, the environment. Chronic stress in adults has received much attention in the medical field and recently, according to Little Flower et al. (2011), it is proposed that stress research should involve environmental factors and individual processes of perception and coping with stress. The interest that Little Flower et al. (2011) had in chronic stress and its resultant physical outcomes in adults led them to conduct their research on stress in adolescent students, with the belief that early intervention may bring about impactful corrective measures.

This study is situated in a social context where historically, education has been a key contributory factor in social mobility. The setting is post-colonial and post-Independence Trinidad where prior to Independence in 1962, the mainstream Christian Churches, through education and the establishment of schools, sought to evangelize the slaves, ex-slaves, and indentured workers. There eventually ensued a competition for government subventions for running schools with the introduction of a dual provision in education—government and Church. The Churches eventually gained governmental financial support. Citizens, up to this time, have the right to select which school they attend, and especially in the secondary sector, there is much competition for places. Since education is seen by most of the population to be the major determinant of their “success”, there is rife competition to attend what are perceived to be the best schools.

The school under study is considered a “first choice school” in Trinidad due to its track record of high academic achievement and students’ involvement in extra and co-curricular activities. “First choice” is determined by the number of students selecting it as their first choice of placement in the Secondary Entrance Assessment (SEA). It was established in 1912 by missionaries whose standards and values, through the school’s continued affiliation with the local Church, still undergird the school’s mission. The school places a high value on its traditions and is supported by a vibrant network of alumnae. The religious quality