

# **BREAKING THE SILENCE**

## **Using Journals to Stimulate Self-Evaluation Toward Change in the Trinidad Primary School System**

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Attempts at Caribbean education reform have traditionally suffered from lack of implementation and resistance to change. This paper argues that in Trinidad and Tobago, the slow march of education reform is compounded by the culture of silence that is institutionalized in the teaching profession. It posits that unless teachers become articulate about themselves, their students, and their practice in the classroom, recurrent top-down reforms are destined to fail. Against the background of a discussion of the cultural contexts of education in Trinidad and Tobago, and the fact that primary school teachers are subjecting themselves to repeated training with little apparent effect on the system, the paper evaluates the journals and the responses to journaling of 14 teachers enrolled in a Language Arts teacher education programme. The paper suggests that breaking the code of teacher silence could stimulate empowerment from within. With support, this empowerment could propel a tradition of documented Caribbean best practice toward building a base of regional educational research, generated by insights from the people in the trenches.

### **Introduction**

The subject of education reform in Trinidad and Tobago usually generates comment about the primary school teacher, one of the elements considered to be a large source of the “problem” or “crisis” in the education system. One criticism is that the entry qualification into the teaching service of 5 CXC passes is too low. Both Beddoe (2001) and Spence (2002) suggest a minimum entry qualification of a Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) degree for the teaching profession, regardless of secondary or primary teacher status. In fact, new job descriptions for principals in the primary school specify the requirement of the B.Ed. degree, and this will be implemented on a phased basis so that senior teachers currently working in the system would not be disadvantaged by the new stipulations (James, 2003).

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But low entry level is not the only charge against primary school teaching. The lack of visible impact of teacher training on the system and the downward spiral of public education have prompted questions about teacher training as well. Worrell (2003) raises not only questions about the quality of the teacher training received at training institutions, but like Jennings (2001) of Jamaica, she suggests that societal and economic debilitating factors, non-provision of necessary tools, and the larger culture of disempowerment in schools remain powerful factors influencing the inability of teachers to deliver, or their tendency to revert to ineffective pre-training modes of classroom practice.

None of the above voices is the voice of a rank-and-file teacher, and to all of these accusations and well-meaning remonstrations, the silence emanating from the teacher is profound.

Nevertheless, teachers in Trinidad and Tobago are preparing themselves for the proposed requirements for higher levels of academic qualifications and professional training. The new B.Ed. (Primary) at the School of Education, The University of the West Indies (UWI), St. Augustine, which was launched in the 2003-2004 academic year, has attracted copious enrolment.

This paper was born out of this teacher educator's observation that the majority of teachers she had taught previously in the Certificate in Education (Cert. Ed.) programme at the School of Education had signed up for the B.Ed. degree, for which they were accepted as Year 2 students. It did indeed make sense for them to sign up for the degree programme, since they were considered continuing degree students. All 16 of the teachers (15 female and 1 male) enrolled in her Level 2 course, the Teaching of Language Arts in the Primary School, had already done three years of teacher training in which they had been exposed to a variety of Language Arts courses.<sup>1</sup>

It was assumed that the majority of the 16 teachers would be actively engaged in teaching Language Arts, regardless of the reason for their training.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the primary aim of this teacher educator was to encourage the teachers to implement what they were being exposed to on the course, more so since language competence in the primary school as a feeder for the secondary school is of major concern.

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To aid with implementation and teacher accountability, a weekly journal requirement was designed as one component of the course. It was felt that the informal nature of journaling would be a good way to get teachers to evaluate both their product and their process. Journaling was also envisaged as a mode of teachers dialoguing with self and peers, since it was felt that lasting change would come from building a community of professionalism arising out of discussions of best practice. To offset the biases of reliability and validity—problems that are inherent in the mode of journal writing—anonymous pre- and post-questionnaires were used as crosschecks.

This paper presents an analysis of the Language Arts journals and the pre- and post-questionnaires of teachers enrolled in the course, *The Teaching of Language Arts in the Primary School*, on three fronts:

- The teachers and their work environments
- Insights into the teachers' teaching practices, especially with regard to the implementation of Language Arts strategies they were being exposed to on the course
- Teachers' attitudes to journaling and the reflective process.

Teachers' documented verbalizing of their thoughts and processes is important, since much of what they do is currently shrouded in silence.

#### **A Background to the Trinidadian Teachers' Code of Silence**

The well-known conservatism of Trinidadian teachers is rooted in a systemic attitude to the legacy of colonial authority and to the Victorian ethos of culture and decorum. Norrel London (2003) provides a context for these two phenomena. Examining the period 1938 to 1959 (the latter date being the run-up to British Caribbean Independence of the 1960s and 70s), London notes the stranglehold of the colonial inspectorate on primary education in the interest of the dissemination of the English language. This was done from the seat of the Ministry of Education. The altruistic, civilizing agenda of the British, coupled with a school inspection system that "struck fear into student and teacher alike" (p. 304), reinforced the silencing of indigenous practices. According to London, "reclaiming voices that may have been silenced, occluded, muffled, or submerged is therefore one of the objectives in the contemporary postcolonial debate" (p. 300).

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Scarcely a generation has elapsed since that century-old ingrained culture has passed into local hands. The current administrators of education in Trinidad and Tobago and the dwindling number of teachers born before 1962 are products of that colonial experience. The Ministry of Education retains the role of policy maker and issuer of teaching standards. Current syllabuses and regulations originate from this centralized institution, housed on the same premises. The inspectorate has crumbled and visits to schools have become less frequent, partly because of expansion in the system and inadequate numbers of curriculum supervisors. However, the ethos and the bureaucracy of the inspectorate, with control from the top, still prevail. This is very evident in some of the regulations governing the teaching service, particularly with regard to policy regarding the expression of views (Trinidad and Tobago. Laws, Statutes, etc., 2000). A teacher “shall not make any unauthorized disclosure” (Clause 66.1); “shall not respond to questions of public policy in a manner that may be reasonably construed as criticism” (Clause 67.1), unless the teacher is “acting in his capacity as a representative of an appropriate recognized association” (Clause 67.2).

One obvious challenge to these legal caveats is for teachers to form vibrant associations. However, this challenge has not been taken up. At the secondary school level, professional associations in subject areas such as Geography, English, History, and Science are either dormant, defunct, or functioning without the widest representation from their potential membership; and at primary school level there are no equivalent organizations.

The main organ of teachers is *TUTOR*, the quarterly newspaper of the teachers’ union, the Trinidad and Tobago Unified Teachers’ Association (TTUTA), which represents both primary and secondary levels. *TUTOR* updates teachers on the work of the union; informs on and interprets new requirements of the ministry; provides a forum for the opinions of teachers and union officials on current educational issues; informs on professional improvements, innovations, and achievements organized by the union; features the activities and successes of individual teachers and schools; and generally performs the role of a newspaper, bonding teachers and seeking their welfare. But the teaching fraternity functions like receptors, not generators of this information.

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Recently, however, TTUTA put out its first issue of an educational magazine, *The Professional Teacher*, a publication “for educators and the public” (Manning, 2003, p. 1). It is too early to determine what role teachers will play in this magazine, but in its inaugural issue important items missing include: policies of operation, when the next issue is due, how often issues will appear, its board of directors, and guidelines for submission of articles. Volume 1 of *The Professional Teacher* is a colourful feature magazine and does not pretend to be an academic journal. Research is not its guiding principle; three of its short articles are by male lecturers of the School of Education, UWI, and most of the other articles are by prominent figures in education such as a teacher educator from one of the teacher training colleges and the President of the National Parent Teachers’ Association (NPTA). The point is that a vacuum still exists, especially among primary school teachers, for voicing their opinions, making their practices known, and for articulating professionalism.

The academic journal and its less formal relation, journal writing, by their very nature of being written modes of ongoing conversation, encourage reflection and generate developmental change. On the one hand, academic journals, with the currency of their research and examination of trends and new ideas, are action oriented. They can be a ready database, a monitor, and a steady stream of on-the-pulse information that are vital to the forward movement of developing nations. On the other hand, although loose, open-ended journal writing has earned a bad name in teacher education (Maloney & Campbell-Evans, 2002), structured and supportive journal writing that gives feedback and stimulates higher-order reflection have been promoted as beneficial to teacher change (Kerka, 1996; Maloney & Campbell-Evans, 2002).

In embracing teacher change, however, developing nations need to be cautious. Johnson, Hodges, and Monk (2000), citing the case of post-apartheid South Africa, argue “that northern/western ideas about teacher change and development are poorly suited to modeling practices and challenges for those who were historically disadvantaged.” Examining in-service teacher education in a territory with several different and unequal educational systems, they note that classroom environments determine teachers’ choices of pedagogical practice to a large extent, and so they must be taken into consideration.

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Reflective journaling and, by extension, its formal counterpart the academic journal are well suited spaces of dialogue for filling the vacuum created by the movement from colonial silencing systems to autonomous systems. These spaces for dialogue need to be encouraged to link Caribbean teachers, the implementers of change, with Caribbean policy makers as they devise a culturally relevant way forward.

### **Methodology**

The Teaching of Language Arts in the Primary School was taught using four formats: lecture-discussion, educational videos, peer-group overhead projector presentation, and journal writing. Two methods of information gathering were used to inform the finding of this paper: 1) weekly journal entries tracked teachers' practice in the classroom and teachers' reflection on these practices, while 2) pre- and post-questionnaires evaluated attitudes to and outcomes of the journaling process.

Sixteen participants (15 female and 1 male) were enrolled in the course. Two were eliminated from this discussion, because one (the lone male) taught in the secondary school system and the other, a teacher facilitator, supervised teachers in remedial streams in secondary schools. The remaining 14 participants, all teachers in primary schools in Trinidad, formed the data pool for the analysis presented in this paper.

A learning journal concept, involving feedback from the teacher educator on every entry, was used. The aim was to encourage teachers to reflect on the concepts, skills, or strategies that they had implemented each week. Since the prescribed text and the support videos used in the course were foreign and metropolitan based, the journal rubric sought to encourage teachers to evaluate the teaching idea that they had chosen to implement for each week within the context of their own classroom realities (Appendix A).

An online journal tutorial, designed by the teacher educator, was used to support classroom explanation of the learning journal and examples were provided. Teachers were able to access the online journal tutorial both on and off the university campus throughout the duration of the course. Although teachers could have submitted their weekly entries

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online, only two teachers did so and for purposes of beating the weekly deadline.

Twelve journals entries were originally envisaged. However, since the first week of explanation, a mid-term week for an in-class test, and the last week of closure were discounted, each teacher submitted nine journal entries, one per week.

The topics for two entries were specifically set by the teacher educator. The first journal entry was devoted to teacher self-introduction (Appendix B), while the seventh entry was a metacognitive exercise, requiring teachers to reflect on their processes as readers and writers. For the remaining seven entries, teachers were free to choose their own topics from those studied for the particular week.

Pre- and post-questionnaires, to which the teachers did not have to put their names, served both as evaluation and crosschecking devices (Appendixes C and D). One questionnaire was administered on the day that the first entry was submitted, and a post-questionnaire on the last day of the course. The pre-questionnaire sought information on teachers' prior familiarity with journal writing, their attitudes to keeping a journal, and the level of comfort or difficulty they experienced in writing their first entry. Teachers were also asked to evaluate the usefulness of the online tutorial and how it could be improved to serve their needs. Additionally, they were asked after their first entry to say what they had learnt about themselves and their students that they did not know before, in order to exemplify the type of analysis and critical thinking processes that would be required of them (see Appendix C).

The main element of the post-questionnaire was evaluation of the journaling process that teachers had undergone for the duration of the course. Here the teachers were asked to rate journaling in the context of the other modes of instruction of the course. Additionally, they were asked details about their weekly journaling routine and to state their views on journaling in light of their journaling experience. The post-questionnaire also sought to verify statistical information on teachers (see Appendix D).

All teachers referred to in the discussion that follows taught at Trinidadian public primary schools. The first names used in the

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discussion that follows are not the real names of the teachers enrolled in the course. Further, for purposes of anonymity, no name on the class list is used.

Although the discussion that follows refers specifically to the 14 primary school teachers enrolled in the Language Arts option of the B.Ed. Primary Programme at the St. Augustine Campus of UWI during 2003-2004, this discussion is of significance to teacher education and teacher change in primary schools in Trinidad and Tobago as a whole, especially since the B.Ed. degree is available on a large scale for the first time to teachers in Trinidad and Tobago, commencing in the 2003-2004 academic year.

Limitations of reliability usually attached to journal responses affect the findings of this paper. Another limitation is that what the teachers said is not corroborated by peer-evaluation nor by visits to schools, partly because primary school teachers in Trinidad and Tobago are responsible for their classes all day while school is in session, and partly because the after-school nature of the teacher training programme made visits to schools difficult.

## **Discussion**

### **What teachers said about themselves and their teaching environments**

All 14 teachers teach in the public school system, which is composed of denominational and government schools. All have had three years of training and none have taught for less than five years.

Under 5 years	0
5 to 9 years	5
10 to 19 years	6
20 years and over	3

Large class size is a problem for 6 of the 14 teachers. Among the 6 who reported small or adequate sized classes, only 1 indicated that her class of 14 Standard 3 students was "a bright, energetic and eager group of pupils who, for the most part are highly motivated and interested in their school work." Four of those with small classes complained that the

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students were way below the normal level for their age. This suggests that small classes are in the main remedial classes.

Because of the positive impact that one teacher's prior Cert. Ed. training has had on her school, the principal had given her a Standard 4 Special class, which she described in these terms:

Special! Yes, they all have special needs. There are fifteen pupils, ten boys and five girls. Their ages range from 11 to 15 years. Ten pupils are of average ability and five below average. Five pupils read at independent level, six at instructional level and four at frustration level. They are categorized as slow learners. The majority of these pupils come from broken homes, single parent families, low-income group and have suffered some type of abuse or the other. They come to school hungry, untidy and without essential school tools. Some of their parents don't show interest in them nor their education because most of them are of a low literacy level. They don't attend parents meeting nor come if you send to call them. If they do come, it is to embarrass their children or abuse a teacher. These students have also suffered neglect and have been branded as "dunce" by previous teachers, all because of their special needs. Would you like to walk in their shoes? I have been there.

Although this entry was the most extreme, many of the first entries focused on similar complaints. Poor facilities, elements of incompetence among administrators, and the fact that the secondary school entrance exam determined the status and the operation of primary schools were other complaints. But the main complaints were the low ability of their students and parents' apparent disinterest in their children's education.

With the exception of two teachers who refer to their schools as "prestige" schools,<sup>3</sup> teachers use other clichéd labels such as "from single-parent homes" to describe many of their students. Teachers use these labels, not so much in a derogatory as in a clichéd descriptive manner that bespeaks lack of thought about Caribbean family patterns and realities. However, the overall tone of all the 14 teachers is that they have become attached to their students, that they seek their students' best interest, and that they are coping, although they feel put upon. The following comment of a young teacher is very representative: "Of the two Standard Five classes, I possess the slower. They are willing and loving students, always calling me 'Mummy' or 'Ma.'"

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Teachers do not report a prevalence of disruptive students, but indicate that there is a measure of dysfunctional behaviour in their classrooms that affects the operations of entire groups. In addressing these challenges, teachers' journals indicate that they mix and match conventional methods with affective strategies, behaviourist strategies, and psychological devices of their own making. In her fourth journal entry, for instance, Janice, who has a C-streamed class of 28, whom she had previously described as "very energetic and vocal, but they have difficulty in reading and spelling," reports: "I am now flexible in terms of dealing with the varying special needs in my classroom. I am sourcing new information and strategies for dealing with Children with Special [sic] needs, so that I can create a structured and positive classroom environment for my students." Her most disruptive student already goes for counselling twice a month, so the strategies she has resorted to include:

- I pretend to ignore his disruptive behaviour. This works sometimes. When he realizes that no one is listening or laughing, the behaviour is discontinued. If at times, he continues, he is asked to write about such in his journal.
- He is monitored very closely and is rewarded or punished by myself, the principal and his parents.

Primary school teachers in Trinidad greatly need the support of special education, counselling, and psychiatric services, which are in short supply in the education system in the Caribbean as a whole. There is also a widespread need for carefully monitored and scientifically managed literacy programmes to deal with the large numbers of children that teachers' journals say are falling behind.

With regard to facilities at schools, journal entries portrayed an unevenness in rural as well as urban parts of the country. At one end of the scale a teacher reported:

Our school is a newly built one. We have spacious individual classrooms, single metal desks and chairs. There are: Science Laboratory, Library, Computer Room, Overhead Projectors, television and a VCR. There are many opportunities for using the multimedia equipment. However, I have not yet used these teaching aids in my classroom. I must admit that we have excellent resources for effective teaching at my school.

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At the other end of the scale another teacher reported:

The present physical conditions of my working environment (the \_\_\_ Community Centre) leave much to be desired. The situation is most challenging, (claustrophobia, noise, heat and humidity, nonexistent space for things like: library and furniture manipulation, few books, no multimedia facilities) but we rise to the circumstances, using the setbacks as motivating forces to prove that, environment is but a single factor in the education process. I certainly do not allow it to hinder the progress of my students.

A speedier upgrading of schools is urgently needed to minimize disadvantage and to give all students and teachers a fair chance at formal education.

With regard to technology, 9 of the 14 teachers reported that their schools had received an upgrade, indicating technological equipment available for classroom use such as computers, television sets, VCRs, and cassette players. Even among the 5 teachers whose schools had not received an upgrade, 3 reported that their schools were similarly equipped. Therefore, only 2 of the 14 teachers indicated that they had substandard technological equipment for use in their classrooms.

At the end of the course, 7 teachers reported greater use of this equipment, 5 reported that they were always using their equipment, while 2 of the 14 teachers reported no increased use. There are wide variations in teachers' abilities to use technology, although the technology may be available in their schools. There were confessions in journal entries, for instance, such as: "My weak point is that I am not a technology person, so I don't use much multi-media in my teaching. I need to strengthen this aspect." Lack of technological competence was also evident in teachers' explanations of their preparation of their weekly journal entries. It is not good enough merely to provide schools with multimedia equipment. Access to training, technical services, and repair networks is needed if technological equipment is to remain more than a white elephant in primary schools.

#### **Insights into teachers' teaching practices**

Journal entries reveal that all 14 teachers (who have three years training behind them) are very knowledgeable about pedagogy. However, there

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are three main approaches to their use of it: dependence, cynicism, and culturally relevant adaptation. The former two approaches are predominant among teachers with less years of experience. In the work of teachers with fewer years experience, Vygotsky, the ZPD, Howard Gardner's multiple intelligences, and cooperative learning are referred to with frequency. Teachers refer to their students as not coming from "print-rich" homes, not so much in a derogatory manner as in a clichéd descriptive manner that again bespeaks lack of thought about Caribbean realities.

Another common response among teachers with less years of experience can be seen as a mixture of frustration and cynicism on analyzing their own classrooms in the context of pedagogical practices found in their foreign course texts. The following statement from Karen (not her real name), a teacher with 7 years experience, is typical, indicating the gap that she feels exists between what she is exposed to in teacher education courses and the limitations of her Trinidadian situation:

As I read Chapter 2 in the 'Tompkins' I am attracted to the fact that in my Standard 5 class I do not have publishing centers, author's chairs and computer banks with word-processing. I do, however, have a library filled with books, which the student read. So far, in all the schools I have taught, none has the above necessities. In other words, if someone were to show me the list found on pages 46 and 47 [Tompkins, 1998] and ask me if I have ever seen a language rich classroom in Trinidad and Tobago, the answer would be, "Nope, not even in the Infants' Department." Oh how I wish classrooms could be set up like the third grade classroom (p. 51). It is very student-centered but can only be done here, if the Government rebuilds or renovates schools and solves our over-crowding in schools.

Teachers had to be reminded often that resourcefulness and creativity were important targets of the project and not complaint. Karen had not come to terms with the fact that the ideal classrooms depicted in textbooks are presented as models, and are not always available even in the rich foreign countries in which the texts are produced.

Both positions—that of parroting educational jargon, and that of adopting a tone of cynicism—can immobilize teachers for imaginative teaching. Since most of the material used in education courses in the Caribbean emanate from metropolitan cultures, teacher educators need to be very sensitive about their use.

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By contrast, Adriana, a teacher of 22 years standing, began her sixth journal entry entitled "Fostering Children's Interest in Reading and Writing" in the following way:

This week I decided to engage my pupils in poster making. I asked them to go to the café and ask Ms. Glenda for the cost of certain items. They did not know why they were sent on this mission. They were provided with pencil and paper and were told to spend about ten minutes in the café. On their return I allowed each child to either pin her information on the board or write out the information.

Adriana's journal entry continued with an explanation of how she conducted her interdisciplinary lesson "Mathematics, Grammar and Art," teaching students to "categorize," "spell," "how to write statements for problems," and how she "guid[ed] them during the poster making activity."

Teachers' journals also reported on the teaching practices of their colleagues, most often finding those practices lacking by comparison with their own. All the same, they indicated that some of their colleagues were open-minded, that some encouraged them, and that some were willing to learn. One teacher commented on sharing with her colleagues at school in this way:

The approaches I am using are new to my pupils because the school has some very traditional teachers who are comfortable with their teaching methods. These pupils were taught by these traditional teachers. However, there are some who are pleased with my lessons and they often borrow my resources and try to implement new ideas into their lessons.

None of the 14 teachers reported resistance from their administrations to their experimentation. On the contrary, the fact that they were undergoing or had undergone additional teacher training made them valued, and in some cases singled out for more challenging classes. In other cases, doing the B. Ed. influenced their principals to give them more freedom to experiment. Adriana, for instance, got her wish to be assigned to the library where she teaches a wide variety of classes and feels unfettered by the examination requirements of the traditional classroom. In her self-introduction she reported:

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I taught a Standard Two last year. This year I was placed in the library. This decision was made by the principal, based on what she had observed in my classroom over the years. [Named School] has a library, which is fairly equipped with books, television, videocassette and games. It was not utilized properly over the years. Thus, the principal thought it best to assign me the job. I welcomed it because I had my eyes on it and was hoping that one day I would be given an opportunity to implement certain teaching strategies that I have been exposed to in the area of Language Arts.

Again, it needs to be noted that technology remains underused in schools because of teachers' lack of training. Additionally, policies about assigning teachers to classes seem to vary, with teachers in certain schools being given challenging classes in spite of their little teaching experience. Overall, length of teaching experience was the biggest factor influencing teachers' competence at implementation of strategies in the classroom.

With regard to language policy, a varying mix of approaches exists. Teachers' comments about their students' use of Creole in the classroom, for example, indicate that the situations in which their students use the first language (L1) are complex, thus frustrating teaching agendas. There is considerable ambiguity about what to do. One teacher of nine years experience, who teaches a First Year class wrote:

I try to use Standard English when I am speaking to the pupils. At times, I see the need to adjust my speech to operate within the pupils' Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) according to 'Vygotsky'. This is a form of scaffolding that facilitates language development and communication. This is seen in the example which follows.  
One day I asked a pupil, "Who brought you to school this morning?" He said, "Miss whey yuh say?" I rephrased the question to, "Who bring you, this morning?" and he responded.

No sequel is given to the episode, but from her own reporting, the teacher decided to make a linguistic compromise, retreating after the gratification of comprehension and response. Noteworthy, too, is that the teacher chose to reference Vygotsky's ZPD in a context in which a reference to Dennis Craig, the Caribbean linguistics scholar, for example, on teaching English as a second language (1999) (to which she was exposed), might have been more appropriate. The point is that the teacher's prefatory explanation and her manner of dealing with the

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situation exemplify the ambiguous approaches to dealing with language in the primary school.

On the same subject of the teaching of Standard English as a second language, one of her more experienced counterparts reported:

As a class teacher, I use the following activities to help my students differentiate between both languages: One involves allowing students to speak the language they know and use games, such as hear and tell to identify the differences. Also, students are encouraged to practise the correct usage by repetition. Two, I try to model proper language usage in my classroom and at the same time grasp at every opportunity to improve my speech habits.

The use of the words “correct” and “proper” above suggest that traditional views about the Creole still obtain. This teacher also admits indirectly to using Creole spontaneously in the teaching process. The reports of both teachers suggest their own ambivalent use of Standard English in the classroom. Teachers need more than the comfort zone approach to language teaching and language use indicated in these examples. Competence in Standard English is one of the targets of Language Arts programmes in Caribbean schools. Journals suggest that a clear language policy is lacking and that teachers need defined strategies, especially for teaching students in the formative years.

#### **Attitudes to the reflective process and to journaling**

The pre-journaling questionnaire revealed that all 14 teachers had theoretical familiarity with the structure and the function of journaling either as a method of reflection, or as a method of stimulating students’ writing, but only 4 had prior personal experience of writing journals. Of these four, one had kept a teacher journal previously that “dealt mostly with reflections from [her] lectures, not so much with [her] teaching or observation of pupils as they worked.” In other words, although all the teachers knew about the benefits of journal writing and a few had implemented them with their students, most had not kept a journal before in the context of their own teaching. All the same, half of the teachers found writing the first entry of the teaching-learning journal easy.

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Responses to what they had learned about their teaching that they did not know before they did their first journal entry suggests that only 3 of the 14 teachers were consciously in the habit of critically evaluating their practice. While some reported findings about their students, the majority spoke of teaching failings such as not putting theoretical knowledge into practice. One teacher expressed this failing in these terms: "Although I know what to do in the constructivist approach, most of the times I am still using the traditional approach to teaching." After their first journal entry, all 14 teachers felt that keeping a teaching-learning journal would be beneficial, but 2 felt that it would be burdensome.

It was evident that, generally, the teachers with 10 years and more experience had thought about their strategies and prepared them before implementing them. Their evaluations indicated that they were satisfied with outcomes. They gave examples of what they had done or appended their students' work to their journal entries. However, their post-mortems were mainly in the order of projections and improvements that they would make if they tried the strategies again. Their treatments were well judged and well supported, but controlled by the limitations of their respective competencies and school environments. The result was a tendency to self-satisfaction rather than to imaginative experimentation among these experienced teachers.

On the other hand, the entries of teachers with the least years of experience tended to be more descriptive than reflective and, in some cases, to be dependent on promise and good intentions. For instance, Deborah's willingness to reflect on best practice seemed awakened by keeping a journal. This can be inferred from the closing remarks of her first journal entry: "I am in the process of looking for other strategies to facilitate language development. Now that I have to reflect on the teaching and learning of language in the classroom, I will monitor the impact [that] the strategies have on the learning outcomes."

Being faced with a class level to which she was not accustomed may have contributed to her lack of preparedness and lack of adequate resources at the beginning of the journal. However, inadequate self-evaluation recurs in her work. In her seventh journal entry, she cites a scenario, which shows knowledge of strategy and methodology, but indicates a recurring tendency to inadequate preparation. Deborah reports:

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I have read Red Riding Hood to the pupils but I decided to reread it again. I used a different approach. This time I asked pupils to role-play parts and say the dialogue conversation in the manner they think the characters would have said it. During the reading of the story, I realized that it was a different version from the one I read before. None of the pupils said anything . . . I could have seen the puzzled look on some of their faces when they realized that it was a different story, from the one they had heard before. . . . The pupils agreed that one author could not write both stories and they said that if there are other stories with different versions, they would want to hear them. So I promised that I am going to get the different version of the Three Little Pigs. These pupils' interest has sparked somewhat and I want the interest.

The account suggests limitations in Deborah's ability to pinpoint her strengths and weaknesses. Poor preparation is deflected by the gloss of student interest.

The entry in which teachers used their reflective powers at the highest level was the metacognitive assignment on their reading and writing processes. For most of them it was the first time that they were examining their own behaviour. Five of the 14 teachers made connections with their students' reading and writing processes in light of their review of their own experiences, realizing that whereas previously they engaged these literacy activities in the classroom taking much for granted, they would need now to consider factors such as defining a purpose and creating a mental set in preparing their students. The metacognitive assignment prompted one teacher to question the effectiveness of the manner in which she conducted the Silent Sustained Reading period in her school. Another felt she understood her students' "rituals" much better:

Looking at yourself is a good way to consider what children as young writers go through. Many times a child sits in class and fights with an ink pen to complete an assignment . . . [At] their rituals as a teacher sometimes I become impatient. Understanding myself as a reader and writer has made me more sensitive to my students.

The teachers seemed to take their journaling very seriously. Although they were only required to turn in two sides of a quarto-sized sheet, double-spaced, once per week, most teachers exceeded the requirement, submitting at least twice the amount with appendages of students' work. Attaching support to their entries suggested that they felt either that

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their efforts would be better understood, that they could prove that they did try a strategy, or that they were proud of their achievements. The logical outcomes could be perceived to be “better” feedback and a better mark overall at the mid-term and end-of-term points when the journals were graded. However, a better gauge of their attitude to journaling can perhaps be gleaned from their anonymous post-questionnaire responses to what they liked and disliked most and least about keeping the weekly journal.

Nine of the 14 teachers said they disliked the writing-related process, citing elements such as “time consuming” and “the obligation to write it up.” Although the requirement was only one entry per week, one teacher cited “frequency” as her greatest dislike. Four teachers did not respond. However, 12 of the 14 teachers cited benefits such as “experimentation,” being able to practice what was done in class,” developing awareness,” and “reflection.” One teacher responded with “I am yet to like it” and another did not respond.

Eight teachers feel that they need time during the school day to reflect on their teaching. This expressed need is important since primary school teachers in Trinidad and Tobago are on duty for the entire teaching day and do not have free periods. Although, they were encouraged to share their journals with a colleague either on or off the programme, only half of the teachers said they did so. This 50% reported peer-interaction is encouraging since Trinidadian teachers have such few fora outside of their individual schools for talking about professional matters.

One of the limitations of this study is that no reliable verification of the positive effect of journaling on teaching and learning is possible. However, by the end of the learning/reflective journal experience, all 14 teachers felt that their teaching had improved, and would recommend the practice of reflective journaling as one method of improving teacher professionalism in Trinidad and Tobago. Of the five methods of teaching used in the delivery of the course—journal writing, lectures, whole class discussion, educational videos, and peer group overhead projector presentations—journal writing polled the highest response as the method that teachers found most beneficial. All the same, only five teachers chose it as number one, while the traditional lecture format ran a close second with 4 responses as number two.

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### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Educational platforms in Trinidad are traditionally talking spaces for the academic élite who see the societal outcomes of schooling, but have little real knowledge of what goes on in the classroom. As present, teachers are little more than functionaries locked into a system in which they are told what to do and in which there is a lot of blame heaped on them when the system fails. The 14 teachers in this study indicate that there has been improvement in the Trinidad and Tobago education system in terms of physical facilities, and in the educational knowledge that teachers have acquired from years of training. The gap between theory and implementation can be narrowed if teachers are given the encouragement and confidence to create a critical practice out of the many strands of knowledge, both universal and indigenous, that they possess.

The aim of this paper has not been to promote journaling or any specific method of teacher reflection. The paper uses journaling as an articulation and reflective device to gain an understanding of the primary school teacher—her students, needs, teaching practices, her implementation of strategies from theory to practice, and the factors that affect her response to positive change.

As is evident from the comparative wealth of Trinidad and Tobago, it is a fallacy to think that the problems of Caribbean education are largely economic. Even if such were the case, it is unlikely that the region will have enough money in the near future to cure its social ills. The Caribbean education system must be modernized, but for modernization to mean more than computers and foreign structures, teacher input must provide the ingredients for culturally relevant innovation and problem solution. Ideas from the academic élite, teacher training, curriculum reform, and infrastructural social work must all be parts of a multi-pronged approach to systemic change. However, in order to dismantle negative aspects of historical acculturation, policymakers need to work alongside teachers. One by-product of such harmonization would be a body of professional doctrine and best practice—educational resources that can be truly called Caribbean.

In light of the above the following recommendations are made:

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- Teacher education programmes in the region should help primary school teachers to initiate ways of talking to each other. One method could be through promoting teacher confidence through support for professional journals refereed by their peers. Helping teachers to set up talking spaces would signal to teachers that they have a stake in the education of the region. This is one of the quickest ways of promoting teacher change among a body of specialists who have acquired quite a bit of universal educational lore, but none of their own Caribbean making. In this regard the professional magazine published by TTUTA is welcomed. But it must not fall into the hands of those who have the loudest voices and are removed from the classroom where the education happens, thus silencing teachers' voices in their own domain.
- Some attempt must be made to establish linkages among the different sectors involved in formal schooling from kindergarten to age 12, such as private schools, public schools, early childhood centres, and special schools for the challenged. At present, it is difficult to understand how these disparate sectors are related to one another or even how they feed into each other, especially in terms of the early childhood sector. Above all, the linkages between the early childhood sector and the primary school system must be clarified or documented, in the interest of monitoring the continuous growth of children from toddler stage to their entry into secondary school.
- There is an urgent need for donors of technology, including the Ministry of Education, to realize that technical support must come with technological packages. Teachers need to be trained in the use of multimedia if these media are to become useful in strategies for improving literacy in Caribbean education systems.

#### **Notes**

1. Two of these years of training were done either at Valsayn Teachers' College or at Corinth Teachers' College—training colleges of the Ministry of Education. The other year was done on evenings after school in the Certificate programme at the School of Education, UWI, St. Augustine.

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2. Telephone interviews with teachers signed up for the B. Ed. (Primary) in Language Arts, Level 2 revealed that their reasons for signing up for the Language Arts option included: (1) wanting more expertise in the Language Arts; (2) long-term plans for promotion as curriculum officers and teaching facilitators; (3) eventual movement out of the primary school system into the secondary school after doing required additional courses; (4) preparation for possible raising of professional requirements by the Ministry of Education; (5) not getting into the Educational Administration option; and (6) the intention to migrate.
3. In the Trinidad and Tobago primary education system, “prestige” refers to schools whose students attain the highest marks in the secondary school entrance examinations. Many “prestige” primary schools are denominational and serve as feeder schools for “prestige” secondary schools.

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### **Appendix A**

#### **Rubric for Learning Journal**

During this course you will be expected to keep a journal to chart your teaching and learning development. Your journal will account for 20% of your overall mark in this course. Entries should not be longer than 2 sides of a quarto-sized page, unless your discussion will really suffer from the omission of important detail. Even in these circumstances of burning compulsion, you should aim at conciseness and not exceed 3 quarto sides. In other words, focus on your learning experience is more important than the narrative detail. You should have 12 entries by the end of the course one for each week.

You may use any of the formats outlined in the journal tutorial (double entry, single entry, dialogue); that means you may use more than one style over the 12-week period. With respect to the dialogue format you may share your journal with another teacher from your school or on the course.

Your weekly journal entry will be collected on Mondays, when you will receive feedback for the previous week. A loose-leaf ring binder or folder will be appropriate to allow you to write while your weekly submissions are being reviewed. I will make brief comments and give a mark out of 10 at mid-term and at the end of the course (20% according to the following rubric).

#### **Journal Rubric**

(Use sentence and paragraph format, except for charts, diagrams, graphic organizers, etc. You may use bullets to help you with organization, conciseness and focus. Diagrams should carry labels and explanations. Put your name, ID, and date on each entry.)

**Out of our discussions on the topic for the week or the multimedia material presented, identify one idea, theory, concept or teacherly moment that has made its impact on you. (1 mark)**

**For the theory, idea, concept or teacherly moment you have chosen, identify at least one skill and one strategy that you intend to**

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**implement in your classroom. Say why the skill and strategy are important. (2 marks)**

**Identify and discuss at least 3 steps, procedures, or processes in the application of your chosen idea with your students during the week. (3 marks)**

**Evaluate your experiment by highlighting 3 outcomes—benefits, problems etc, as they relate to your students. Say what you have learned, how beneficial it was for your students, and project for the future by commenting on whether you would try the strategy again, abandon it, or repeat with modifications. (3 marks)**

**Organization of ideas, neatness, presentation. (1 mark) (Total = 10 marks)**

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**Appendix B**

**Journal Entry for Week 1**

- Introduction and self-appraisal of teacher as a professional
- Assessing structures; classroom analysis; evaluating classroom practices; organizing tools

Introduce yourself as a professional. What class do you teach? Describe your pupils. How would you categorize your learners? What would you say are their needs?

Male and female ratios; feelings about class; disruptive? social/home backgrounds; prestige? aura of the class; competitive? eager to learn?

How often do you see their parents and for what reasons?

What text/s do you use? Say how you have been using text/s in your Language Arts programme.

Describe your classroom; opportunities for multimedia. How often do you use multimedia?

Describe 5 aspects of your teaching situation that you like. Describe aspects that you do not like and what you are doing or are prepared to do to remedy the condition. In what ways would your students benefit from the changes that you intend to implement?

How is Language Arts structured into your timetable?

Do you follow that emphasis strictly? i.e. how much of classroom time is spent on Language Arts?

Layout of your classroom, showing position of teacher's desk, blackboard, the class library and what is on the walls.

Seating arrangement and how many children are in your class.

## **Appendix C**

### **Teacher Questionnaire**

1. What did you know about journal writing before doing the online tutorial?
2. Have you kept a teaching-learning journal before? Y/N
3. Did you find the tutorial helpful? Y/N
4. What areas did you find most helpful?
5. What areas do you find could be improved?
6. How do you feel about keeping a learning journal?
7. Was writing your first entry easy or difficult?
8. Explain your response to Question 7 above.
9. Did you find out anything about yourself as a teacher that you did not know before (for example, how you think, how you learn, how you teach etc.) after your first week of writing in this journal? Explain your response.
10. Did you find out anything about your students that you did not know before?  
Explain your response.





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What I liked most about journal writing for ED21D.....

17. Which journal format did you use most and why?.....

18. Complete as many as apply:

I shared my journal entries with another teacher because.....

Journal writing is a waste of time because.....

I need time during the school day to reflect on my teaching because.....

The journal writing was beneficial to me because.....

The journal writing was not beneficial to me because.....

19. Compare your teaching before and after using the reflective journal. Circle one:

I think my teaching after reflective journaling was:      the  
same    worse                    better

20. I would recommend reflective journaling as one strategy for improving teacher professionalism in Trinidad and Tobago:

Yes                    No