THE STATUS OF LITERATURE IN SIX TYPES OF TRINIDAD SECONDARY SCHOOLS
ISSUES, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Cynthia James

A survey of teachers' perspectives on the status of literature in Trinidadian secondary schools suggests that the subject is dying. Teachers cite problems with reading, critical thinking, and students' lack of interest, singling out poetry as an area of little competence. Current deficiencies in teaching strategies suggest that teachers need to approach the language arts, on the whole, as a field of knowledge, amenable to and requiring scientific methods of approach, which teachers must perfect. A comparative survey of students suggests that teachers need to take into consideration the allure that technology holds for young people in planning their lessons. They also need to be aware that the secondary school population of Trinidad and Tobago is not homogenous, and requires varied strategies and teaching approaches to woo its varied cultures. Further recommendations of this paper include: (a) the training of secondary school teachers of English in the teaching of reading and remedial reading strategies, and (b) a focus on literature in all its genres, including non-fiction, especially for the upper levels of public secondary schools, and particularly to attract boys. It is felt that these policies, together, will promote a culture that will offset the literacy problems that affect schools, as well as enhance the preparation for adulthood that schooling offers.

Introduction

The teaching of literature in one sector of the Trinidadian public secondary system (senior comprehensive) is not unfamiliar to this researcher, who has been a secondary school teacher of English for 33 years. However, the opportunity to study the ramifications of teaching the subject alongside a cross-section of secondary school teachers of English had never presented itself before. The opportunity came with her involvement with 21 English teachers of the Postgraduate Diploma in Education (Dip. Ed.) programme at the School of Education, The University of the West Indies (UWI), St. Augustine during the academic year 2002-2003.[1]

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The Dip. Ed. programme is a one-year postgraduate, in-service, teacher training programme funded by the Ministry of Education of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago. Teachers must have a first degree to be eligible, and since places are limited, preference is given to the longest serving untrained applicants. Additional selection criteria include balanced geographic spread, and representation of the widest variety of school types that make up the secondary school system.[2] In 2002-2003, 21 teachers were enrolled in the English curriculum of the programme—18 female and 3 male. There are no students from Tobago.

This paper arises, therefore, from an ongoing consultation with a small sample of English teachers from secondary schools, and the data presented were collected from them in the initial stages of contact from August 1-15, 2002 (during the early weeks of their teacher education programme). At these initial sessions, the aim was to get teachers to express their perceptions and identify their practices. Additionally, the intention was to get them to rationalize the syllabuses from which they taught.

Preliminary contact generated information of a conflicting nature. For example, in response to a stimulus task, requiring each teacher to describe in detail any extended experience he or she might have had with teaching literature, some teachers said that they would not be able to answer the question because they did not teach literature. An alternative question was added, which asked teachers who did not teach literature to describe their earliest experiences as consumers of literary material. Five students opted for this question.

Teachers also tended to be accusatory towards their students, expressing dissatisfaction with their performance levels in the subject. The majority of them also felt that Caribbean authors should write material that would hold the interest of Caribbean adolescents. When questioned about their responsibility to write some of this literature, the overwhelming response was that they were not authors. Overall, the responses tended to blame outside forces in a scenario where, although it was recognized that literature in the form of excerpts was, at minimum, the core of the compulsory English A (English language) that they taught, there was ambivalence about the relationship between the study of those excerpts and the study of literature in the language arts or English curriculum.

In the interest of generating a clearer picture of scenarios surrounding literature and literature teaching in secondary schools, therefore, three research questions were identified:

1. What is the current status of literature in secondary schools?

2. What problems do teachers face in the teaching of the subject and what strategies do they use in dealing with these problems?

3. Do students' responses correlate with teachers' perspectives?

In light of the fact that the Dip. Ed. enrolment reflects a broad cross-section of the secondary teaching population, it was thought that a survey of the attitudes and practices of both teachers and their students would be informative.

Literature Review

The centrality of literature, not only to English programmes in secondary schools but also to secondary curricula as a whole, is widely endorsed in developed countries like Britain. Yet, even there, implementation of such an ideal is fraught with inconsistencies. In "The Centrality of Literature," Alastair West (1994) examines these inconsistencies with regard to the British education system, citing, nonetheless, the fundamental role literature plays in adolescent development:

> Some views on English need not detain us long, for example the skills version, because they see no role for literature at all. Ever since the mid-nineteenth century, there have been those who would restrict mass educational provision to a basic or functional literacy and subordinate full individual development to the narrow requirements of the workplace. Such a view has little to commend it in terms of either children's language development or economic efficiency, let alone social justice. It is the cultural heritage, personal growth and cultural analysis versions of the subject with which we are concerned here, all of which reject the instrumentalism of the skills approach. (p. 125)

American scholars, Purves, Rogers, and Soter (1995) corroborate the alleged benefits of cultural awareness, analytical skill, and human development imputed to the study of literature: "Language and literacy

do not make any sense without literature. . . . As a nation we are what we read, watch, listen to, and do. Literature is functional in our lives; it supports and sustains us as individuals and groups" (pp. 45-46). Purves et al. also draw attention to ways in which habits of reading and writing, accrued from the study of literature, can enhance the developing mind:

> [A] part of literature education is the development of what one might call preference, which is to say habits of mind in reading and writing. Reading and writing anything is an act of attention, an act of scrutiny, and an act of play. Literature in school helps encourage such a set of habits. (p. 55)

In the conceptualization of the literature of which this paper speaks, it is necessary to cite the multiplicity of genres in which it is found, including non-fiction, picture books, poetry and verse, folklore, fantasy, science fiction, realistic fiction, historical fiction, and biography (Galda & Cullinan, 2002, p. 8). It is also necessary to remind of the breadth and depth of literature because of the tendency to place emphasis on canonicity and the traditional hierarchical trinity of poetry, prose fiction, and drama, the three best known genres.

Additionally, the literature to which this review makes reference may be ubiquitously found in English language school textbooks, but it is far different from the comprehension uses to which it is put there. Perhaps the honour should be given to Louise Rosenblatt (1982), the well known reader-response exponent, who argues for the development of both efferent (factual) and aesthetic (consciously reflective) readings of texts, to put the literature of which this review speaks in perspective:

> Throughout the entire educational process, the child in our society seems to be receiving the same signal: adopt the efferent stance. What can be quantified — the most public of efferent modes — becomes often the guide to what is taught, tested, or researched. In the teaching of reading, and even of literature, failure to recognize the importance of the two stances [the efferent and the aesthetic] seems to me to be at the root of much of the plight of literature today. . . . Educators and psychologists investigating children's aesthetic activities and development reflect a similar tendency to focus on the efferent — a legacy, perhaps, from the hegemony of traditional behaviorist experimental research methodology. Investigations of children's

> use of metaphor seem often actually to be testing children's cognitive metalinguistic abilities. Students of the "grammar" of story tend also to eliminate the personal aesthetic event and to center on the cognitive ability to abstract out its narrative structure. Stories or poems can thus become as much a tool for studying the child's advance through the Piagetian stages of cognitive or analytic thinking as would a series of history texts or science texts. (p. 274)

By comparison with the copious research on literature in Britain and America, research on the state of literature in the education system in Trinidad and Tobago is scant. However, information gleaned from the work of Caribbean authors indicates that the subject was once one of the cornerstones of the secondary education system. Evidence of the premium placed on the discipline as a passport to grammar school secondary education and beyond (to Cambridge and Oxford) can be found in the writings of such illustrious Trinidadian writers as C. L. R. James and V. S. Naipaul. In *Beyond a Boundary*, for instance, it is evident that being West Indian meant not only striving to acquire cricket etiquette, but also striving to achieve literary prowess, measurable in the secondary school student's command of Victorian letters with an Arnoldian stamp. Further, James reports that it was his own secondary school, Queen's Royal College (QRC) that fed his "obsession" with literature (p. 37).

The fascination with literature acquired in secondary school later fed an indigenous West Indian literary tradition begun by grammar school scholars such as the very C. L. R. James and V. S. Naipaul. The result is that one can credit the study of literature in secondary schools in Trinidad from the early- to the mid-twentieth century, with both engendering literacy and producing an outstanding aesthetic tradition. The character-building influence of the British literary tradition on the Caribbean is usually downplayed, however, as memories of studying literature are often cited alongside accounts of teacher-inflicted sadism.

Checks with QRC in 2002 indicated that whereas literature had been compulsory for all students up to Form 5 level as late as the 1970s, the subject has now become a subject of choice in Forms 4 and 5. By contrast, the view that literature promotes literacy and critical thinking, and that it also develops cultural awareness and supports character development, has induced St. Joseph's Convent, St. Joseph, a "prestige"

denominational secondary school to retain literature as a compulsory subject across its curriculum. A similar view has led St. Francois Girls' College, a government 7-year secondary school, established in the 1970s, to make literature compulsory across the board since the year 2000.[3]

Despite its scantiness, some information on the status of literature in Trinidadian schools since the 1990s can be gleaned from a few studies. In her unpublished master's thesis, *The Teaching of Literature in the Primary School: Teachers' Perceptions and Practice*, for instance, Eunice Patrick's (1991) research leads her to conclude that although "teachers felt the teaching of literature should be central to the child's entire primary education, . . . [literature] seemed constrained to the periphery and appeared to be minimally taught (p. ii). This suggests that all is not well with literature at the primary level, which is the nursery for the secondary school.

With regard to the wide spectrum of secondary schools that have gradually come on stream in Trinidad and Tobago since free secondary education in 1962, information can be gleaned from various education policy documents such as the *Draft Plan for Educational Development in Trinidad and Tobago, 1968- 1983* (Trinidad and Tobago [T&T]. Government, 1974), which accompanied the establishment of junior secondary schools. In this plan, the study of literature in junior secondary schools was incorporated within the subject English (pp. 19, 29). This means that English language and literature were conceived as part of an integrated English programme. In the senior comprehensives, English language is compulsory across the curriculum, but English literature is listed as an elective only for the academic stream (p. 45). In other words, it was not envisaged that the entire student body in the comprehensives would study English literature.

Since the advent of the Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC) in 1978 and its integrated approach to the teaching of English language (English A) and literature (English B), however, it has been expected that all students of English would be exposed to some measure of literature. An appendix of suggested literature texts accompanies the syllabus, and a "General Note to the Teachers of English A" informs:

> The integrated approach to teaching language and literature is the fundamental strategy from which all others follow. This approach is far more flexible than a rigid separation of the

> English programme into two discrete subjects. Teachers are free to structure their teaching programme in accordance with the needs of their students rather than the demands of the time-table. They may concentrate on literature and use the literary texts to develop the student's language skills if they think that this is necessary, or they may prefer to use other strategies to produce the results they are seeking to achieve. (p. 8)

It is evident that ambiguities about the status of literature in secondary schools in Trinidad and Tobago arise from the slow incorporation into the system of new understandings about the place of literature in literacy and schooling. These new understandings have left government policies lagging behind. In this new scenario, it would seem that in the interest of educating students, the English teacher, the intermediary among all the stakeholders in language education, is the person best suited to synchronize the aims of both government policy and current research.

Predating the advent of literature as a school subject for literacy and examination purposes, though, there has always been an unofficial Creole tradition of letters in Trinidad, founded on non-Western oral traditions. This Creole tradition has gradually become integrated into the mainstream of the official literary tradition. Previously, its wisdom, aligned to the biblical tradition, remained outside the formal education system. Existing predominantly in the form of tales, rhymes, and proverbs, the Creole tradition has been a repository of cultural and moral values that has served to educate, entertain, and inform the population for cultural purposes. The widespread integration of this Creole tradition within the formal education system since the 1970s is most evident in the literature currently being studied in secondary schools. Where C. L. R. James (1963, p. 37) once read Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, Trinidadian secondary school students now read Earl Lovelace's (1982) *Wine of Astonishment* with its dialect rhythms, alongside texts from other cultures.

Despite wide acceptance of the importance of the Creole tradition, though, the challenge of the new Secondary Education Modernization Programme (SEMP), as evident in its Form 1 and Form 2 *Revised Draft, Secondary School Curriculum* in Language Arts (T&T. Ministry of Education, 2002a, 2002b) is that of promoting, among teachers of English, strategies for dealing with first language interference in the acquisition of Standard English in the classroom (pp. 2-4). In the SEMP English

curriculum, language and literature are integrated in a philosophical thrust that combines educating for literacy and for personal and intellectual development, with educating for Caribbean cultural relevance and the cultivation of moral values (pp. 1.6-10). Similarly, educating for aesthetic expression exists side by side with educating for "citizenship" within "local and global contexts" (p. 1.7).

Literature in this new dispensation emphasizes the student as creator as much as consumer of the word. It emphasizes the interdependence between reading and writing activities, in new teaching strategies such as portfolio writing, a process credited with the ability to generate learning for both teacher (Galley, 2000) and student (Sommers, 1997) through its reflective practices. Sommers' support for portfolio writing is founded in the idea that "writing is learning" (p. 220), which he quickly follows up with a call to attention of the "interactive nature of reading and writing" (p. 221). Portfolio writing has also been found to be effective in promoting language learning in second language situations (Channiam, 1998).

If implemented by teachers, these new thrusts should invigorate the status of literature in secondary schools in Trinidad and Tobago. Important to successful implementation, however, are teacher readiness, knowledge of existing systems, and continuous research. It is in this light that this paper examines the current status of literature in a sample of secondary schools, based on teachers' and students' responses to their experiences in the classroom.

Methodology

Description of sample

Respondents came from the six types of secondary schools at which the teachers involved in the survey taught—five teachers taught at comprehensives, five at junior secondaries, four at denominational or government-assisted schools, three at government secondaries, two at composites, and one at a new school built under SEMP. These six types of schools receive the majority of the secondary school population in Trinidad. Further, the distribution ratios of the types of schools within this study closely reflect school distribution ratios by type within the secondary sector in Trinidad as a whole. Figure 1 shows the six types of secondary schools in relative proportion.
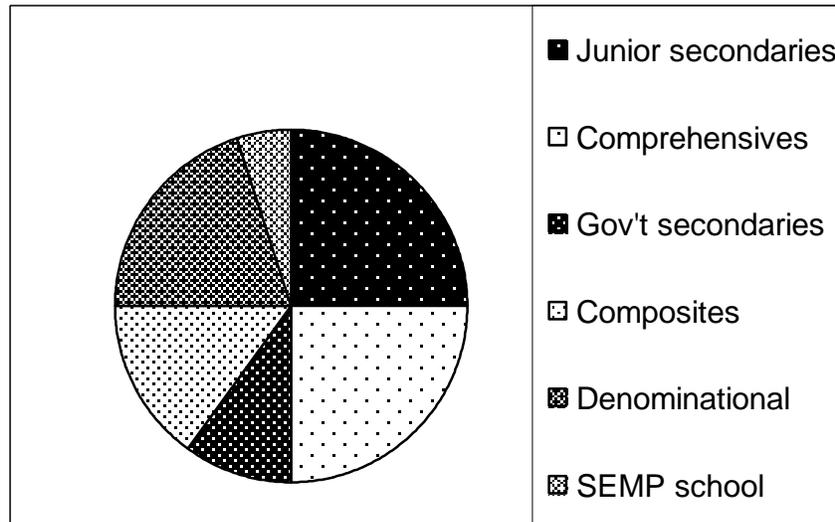
Figure 1. Secondary schools by type.

The rating of the six types of schools by educational standards in Trinidad is important to an understanding of the findings. Therefore, an explanation of the hierarchical arrangement of the Trinidad secondary school system is provided.

Within the secondary school system in Trinidad and Tobago, the denominational or government-assisted schools are first-choice schools and generally receive students with the highest marks, based on the Secondary Entrance Assessment (SEA) examination. They are often referred to as "prestige" schools. Government secondaries are the next preferred school type. With the advent of Universal Secondary Education, no accurate determination can be made about the distribution by academic ability of students who are placed in composites, junior secondaries, comprehensives, and the new SEMP schools. However, these schools receive the bulk of students who have not obtained their first or second choices at the SEA examination.

Research procedure

Teachers were one source of data for this study. A take-home questionnaire and an in-class task sheet were administered to the 21 English teachers on the Dip. Ed. programme. Since the responses were intended for the teachers to track their own developmental growth and to be included in their teaching portfolios, the questions took the form of reflective assignments, requiring short self- and school-evaluative responses. A combination of qualitative and quantitative methods was used.

The take-home questionnaire sought details on the status of literature as a subject in secondary schools from the teachers' perspective. Questions on both language and literature were asked because literature is taught both as an independent subject and under the umbrella "English" in language arts programmes in Trinidad secondary schools. Questions on English language were also asked because the CXC syllabus that is used in upper secondary schools is an integrated language and literature syllabus, which includes a list of suggested literature texts, in keeping with CXC's perspective of an integrated approach to the teaching of English.

The questionnaire sought information on the levels at which the 21 teachers taught, the types of secondary schools at which they taught, the texts they used for English language and English literature, and the reasons for those choices. Responses were also solicited on the numbers of students doing literature, out of possible totals, at each Form level, and on whether the numbers doing literature were increasing, decreasing, or constant. Teachers were asked what types of literature most appealed to their students and whether their students were involved in choosing texts for study. Finally, teachers were asked what they liked and disliked about teaching literature, to state what recommendations they would make to their English departments based on their experiences, and to state their experience with the portfolio—a method of teaching and assessing literature newly introduced on Caribbean syllabuses. Teachers of CXC English B (Literature) were further asked what recommendations they wished to make to the regional examining body. A copy of the take-home questionnaire is provided as Appendix A.

The in-class task sheet elicited information on problems the teachers faced in the teaching of literature and the strategies they used in dealing with these problems. A listing of their responses is presented as Appendix B.

Students were a second source of information for this study. After the teachers' responses to the in-class task sheet were collated, it was decided to screen a pilot poetry video that the teachers were involved in producing at the School of Education. The idea for the poetry video was conceived as a way of providing resource material that might help to counter the negative student responses to poetry about which the teachers had complained The video was used to test students' views on two problems areas—a lack of interest in literature and poor response to poetry—two recurrent teacher complaints.

The poetry video was composed of three interwoven yet discrete elements: (1) poetry readings, (2) visualized and dramatized poems, and (3) traditional teacher explication. The video targeted Forms 3 to 5 of the secondary school system and incorporated poems on the junior secondary and CXC syllabuses. A student questionnaire and modified KWL response sheet were administered to a sample size of 25 students from each of four schools (see Appendix C). The KWL response sheet, requiring students to say K= What I **Know**, W=What I **Want** to Know, and L=What I have **Learned**, pertained directly to one of the poems on the video.

It was intended to screen the poetry video at all six types of secondary schools, but end-of-term activities such as Mock Exams for the CXC made it possible to screen the video at only three of the six types of schools: (1) at a rural junior secondary school among third formers; (2) at an urban girls' 7-year denominational school traditionally perceived as "prestige," in the upper school (among fourth formers); and (3) at two government secondaries—one rural and one urban—in the upper school (among fourth and fifth formers). In other words, the video was screened within the three broad categories of the ranked secondary school system in Trinidad and Tobago—at "prestige," second choice, and third choice levels. One hundred students participated in the survey.

The procedure for administering the student questionnaire was as follows:

1. Students were asked to fill out the first four questions of the questionnaire, which dealt with their like/dislike for poetry, their understanding, their interest, and the adequacy of their teacher explications as aids to understanding.

2. The researcher then introduced the target poem with a reading and a 10-minute open-ended discussion, following which students were asked to fill in "What I Know" and "What I Want to Know" about the poem on the modified KWL sheet.

3. Following an explanation of the video and its three distinguishable elements of (a) straight poetry reading, (b) visualized and dramatized poem with voice-over reading, and (c) teacher discussion, the video was played.

4. Students were then asked to fill in what the video had clarified for them about the poem and to complete the rest of the questionnaire, which asked them about the impact the video had made on their understanding of and interest in the poem treated. Questions asked them also to state their preferred elements of the video with regard to their understanding of the poem.

5. A repeat of the video was shown.

Limitations of the Study

One of the limitations of the student survey was that in the three co-educational schools, it was difficult to find boys to participate in the study. In one rural secondary school, however, where 15 boys filled out questionnaires in a random group of 36 respondents, all the boys' responses were used. In retrospect, too, the researcher feels that an attempt should have been made to solicit students' views about the texts they study in school. This might have added insights about interest levels, and provided the basis for comparison with teachers' stated methods of text selection, and teachers' views on students' preferences of literary genres.

With regard to data from teachers, one teacher from a 7-year government secondary was unable to complete her questionnaire in time for the results to be included. Therefore, that sector is not represented, and so, the analysis is based on data from 20 teachers. Additionally, two teachers taught at the same comprehensive school. Their responses were counted as separate responses (two responses), because counting them separately helped to maintain the ratio of comprehensives to other types of

secondary schools, thus making the survey more representative of the secondary school sector in Trinidad.

With regard to denominational schools (government-assisted schools), boys' schools were not surveyed, because there was no teacher from an all-boys school in the 2002-2003 English Dip. Ed. programme. It needs to be mentioned also that the Postgraduate Dip. Ed. is sponsored by the Ministry of Education primarily for teachers in public schools, and there were no teachers from private secondary schools in the 2002-2003English programme.

Findings

Research Question #1: What is the status of literature in secondary schools?

Comparison of numbers doing literature at different types of schools

Of the 20 teachers who responded to the questionnaire, 5 teach English language only, while 15 teach both language and literature. In 16 of the schools, all students do literature up to at least Form 3 level (lower school). One of the comprehensives has no lower school (Forms 1-3). In two comprehensives, literature is not offered from Forms 1 to 3, but it is offered in Forms 4 and 5 at CXC level; and in one of the composite schools, literature is not done at all. All the same, it can be said that, generally, literature is done by most students in the lower secondary school.

In two of the four denominational schools in the sample, literature is compulsory throughout the school up to Form 5, while in the other two, it is compulsory from Forms 1 to 3. In the latter two schools, approximately 50% of the students of Forms 4 and 5 do literature (approximately 243 out of 487).

In the five senior secondary comprehensives, approximately 689 students out of 5,390 were doing literature in Forms 4 and 5. This figure represented 12.8% of the entire student body of Forms 4 and 5. In the two government secondaries, 71 out of 450 were doing literature in Forms 4 and 5. This figure represents 15.7% of the total. In the three composites, 180 out of a total of 1,440 were doing literature in Forms 4

and 5. This represents 12.5%. One of the three composite schools does no literature at any level.

It is evident, then, that while in the upper forms of the denominational schools the literature culture ranges from very good to average, in the upper forms of the public secondary sector, the literature culture is poor, with less than 16% overall doing literature.

To compound the issue, of the 20 schools in the sample, only one school, a comprehensive school, uses a literature text alongside its prescribed English Language text in its preparation of students for the CXC English A (English language). This means that 19 of the 20 schools in this survey do not reflect CXC's integrated language-and-literature perspective in the preparation of their students for the compulsory English A (Language) examination. This also means that in the composites, government secondaries, and comprehensives, which are public sector secondary schools, the vast majority of the school population is not exposed to the study of literature after the age of 14+, except as excerpts in efferent contexts in English language textbooks.

Figure 2 shows the percentage of students doing literature in the four types of secondary schools that offer the subject in Forms 4 and 5.

Analysis of selection trends

Figure 3 shows the selection trends for literature in the six types of secondary schools with regard to three variables: One (1) designates increasing levels of subject selection; zero (0), constant levels; and minus one (-1), decreasing levels.

It must be noted, however, that "constant" for various schools does not reflect the same percentages. For both the government secondaries and the composites, "constant" means less than 16%, whereas "constant" for junior secondaries and, in some cases, denominational schools means 100%. The most frequent reason given for "constant" and "increasing" selection of the subject is that the subject is compulsory. Other reasons cited in government secondaries and composites are lack of student interest, poor examination results, and insufficient staff.

	2 D	2 D	2 G	3 CO	5 CR
▣ %	100	50	15.7	12.5	12.8

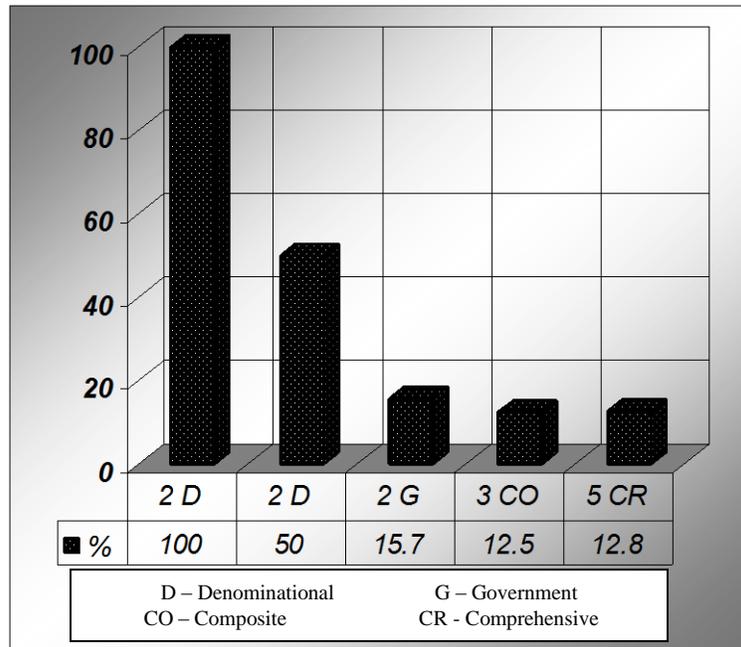| D – Denominational	G – Government
CO – Composite	CR - Comprehensive

Figure 2. Literature in Forms 4 and 5 in four types of secondary schools.

In the case of the comprehensives, where the numbers are decreasing, the reasons given in the order of greatest frequency are: (1) lack of student interest, (2) reading deficiencies, and (3) teachers' preference not to teach literature. The fact that these three responses cluster together suggests that students' reading problems and lack of interest correlate directly with teachers' reluctance to teach the subject in comprehensives.

The numbers of students doing literature in the newly built SEMP school is reported to be increasing. The teacher at this school also stated that literature would most likely become compulsory in Forms 4 and 5.

Overall, findings related to subject selection indicate that throughout the five years of free secondary schooling available to all students, the literary culture is continuous in the denominational schools, which generally enrol the students regarded as having the highest reading ability. By contrast, in the public sector schools, where the reading ability of students is most challenged, a literary culture is not sustained.
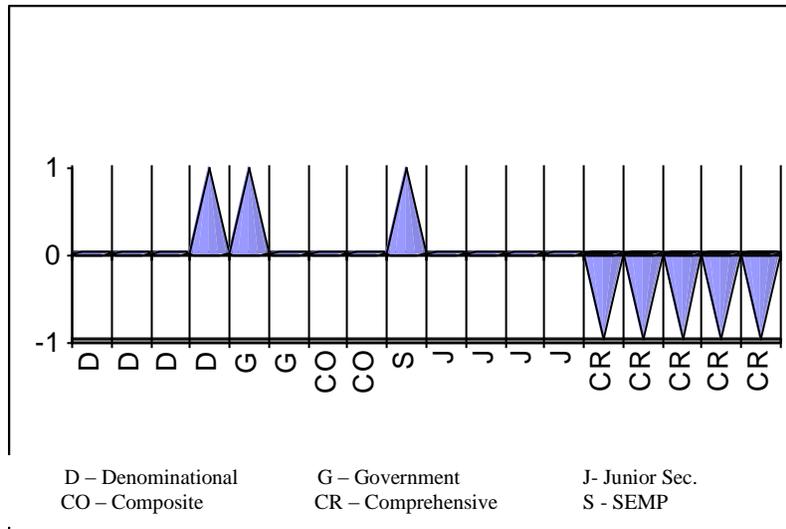
Figure 3. Selection trends for literature in six types of secondary schools.

Research Question #2: What problems do the teachers face in the teaching of literature, and what strategies do they use in dealing with these problems?

Teachers' likes and dislikes about teaching literature

Both the take-home questionnaire and the in-class task sheet were used to determine teachers' likes and dislikes, problems faced in the teaching of literature, and strategies for dealing with them.

Responses to questions 9 and 10 on the questionnaire revealed that what the teachers like most about teaching literature are its affective aspects—aspects that relate to sharing literature and bringing it alive for and with their students. These aspects accounted for 10 out of the 13 responses. The two other responses in the area of likes were the study of literary elements and the variety of teaching techniques that the subject offers. Meanwhile, teachers' overwhelming dislike was students' lack of interest. This was followed by reading problems, teachers' dislike for time-consuming paperwork, and problems with poor poetry skills displayed by students.

<u>Teachers' perspectives on their problems and the strategies that they use</u>

The in-class task sheet gave a detailed breakdown of teachers' perceptions of the problems they face with teaching literature. The most pervasive problem that teachers reported was reading and decoding deficiencies, which polled 6 out of the 26 responses listed. Students' deficiencies with regard to critical thinking came next, followed by difficulties with poetry. Students' lack of interest and limitations of school infrastructure were each mentioned three times, while the relevance of the texts studied and students' deficiencies in essay writing skills each polled two responses. Students' lack of textbooks was the least cited problem.

With regard to strategies that teachers use to deal with their problems, an inadequacy of methodology is very apparent. Responses indicate that teacher explanation and the giving of traditional assignments are favoured approaches (see Appendix C). In three cases, task organization methods such as group work are cited as strategies. For the problem, "students do not know how to organize an essay," the strategy applied is "teach the structure of an essay," which begs the question rather than offers a teaching plan. The implication is that traditional methods continue to be tried in spite of their apparent ineffectiveness, and that overall, the teaching of topics is done in an imprecise manner. Knowledge of the various components of a topic, how to break down a topic in sequential parts (unit planning), and how to prepare the various elements for teaching seem a puzzle for the teachers. Holistic methods seem to predominate in their strategies.

The initial view of teachers was that the teaching problems were located in students' deficiencies. While working on the task sheet, however, it occurred to some of them that many of the problems they cited were not student problems, but teacher problems related to their own teaching deficiencies. This raises some doubts about the adequacy of a one-year in-service Dip. Ed. programme to transmit the variety of skills required by teachers.

All the same, responses indicate that teachers are aware of the impact that cultural and technological instruments bring to the learning process. Responses indicate an awareness of the importance of including affective strategies such as role-playing, and a willingness to harness elements of

student interest in teaching strategies. However, in terms of preparedness to implement new approaches to literature teaching contained in recent syllabi such as the SEMP syllabi, teachers seem deficient. Questions 14 and 15 of the take-home questionnaire, designed to assess teachers' competence to implement portfolio writing, for instance, showed that 15 of the 20 teachers had never attempted writing portfolios with their students. Eighteen teachers felt, though, that student portfolios would be a good idea, while one did not give an opinion, and one questioned its practicality in terms of time constraints. Extended comments among the 18 who felt it would be a good idea revealed that most were not clear about what portfolio writing entailed.

Teachers' recommendations

Among the recommendations to English departments and to CXC, 7 of the 20 teacher responses were related in some way to students' reading and language deficiencies, and their lack of competence in expression of ideas both orally and in writing. These deficiencies were stated in terms such as:

- "We need an action plan to help remedial cases."
- "Don't discredit children for the way they may speak."
- "Allocate greater time to literature; do not combine language and literature; introduce structured reading periods."

The recommendation that ranked second on the list, accounting for six responses, dealt with student interest. Responses included:

- "The need to develop new techniques and methods to maintain student interest."
- "More texts should be chosen based on students' interest, especially those that contain short stories."

In the admission of their need for "techniques" and "methods," teachers' responses imply that the students' deficiencies that they cite lie more in their own inability to make literature interesting, than in any innate or perverse disinterest on the part of the teenagers they teach. The same indirect admission underlies statements about reading problems couched mainly in terms of students' deficiencies.

The need for infrastructural, administrative, and collegial support was cited in 3 of the 21 responses, and grouped together in one instance: "Have team teaching; get a photocopier; have smaller classes." Other recommendations in this area dealt with the need for professional help such as workshops "to upgrade skills in the teaching of English," with more timetabling for literature, and with making the subject compulsory.

Two responses singled out poetry, one recommending that more poems be used "so that students can develop an appreciation and become more analytical in CXC Paper A and B," and the other recommending that students be made to write poetry. Of the three traditional genres, poetry attracted the most complaints. In these complaints, teachers seemed to be stating indirectly that they did not have necessary teaching skills in these areas

The influence of the external exam, the CXC, on teachers' perspectives of their problems was not as great as was anticipated. In the question asking for recommendations that they would make to CXC, teachers tended to focus on the examination texts rather than on the structure of the examination itself. This implies that teachers either have no problem with the aims of the prescribed syllabus, or that their problems with literature are overwhelmingly internal, that is, within their own educational systems.

Research Question #3: How far do students' responses correlate with teachers' responses on perceptions of literature and literature teaching?

Poetry was the only literary genre for which responses were solicited. The stimulus material for student responses included a pilot poetry video that their teachers were involved in producing at the School of Education.

Of the 100 students surveyed in four schools, 73 were girls and 27 were boys. The schools surveyed were: one urban 7-year denominational girls' school, one rural junior secondary, and two government secondaries—one rural and the other urban. All 27 boys were from the government secondary schools (15 - rural and 12 - urban). Over 90% of the students of the rural government secondary were of East Indian descent, while over 90% of the urban government secondary were of African descent.

Overall, 78% of girls and 62% of boys said that they liked poetry. Of the 15 boys from the rural government secondary, 12 said they liked poetry, compared to 5 of the 12 boys from the urban government secondary. In other words, far more boys in the rural government secondary expressed a love for poetry. Like for poetry seemed directly related to interesting classes, and adequacy of teacher explication and class discussion, since among both the urban and rural boys surveyed, numbers of responses for each of these questions were close (see Figure 4).
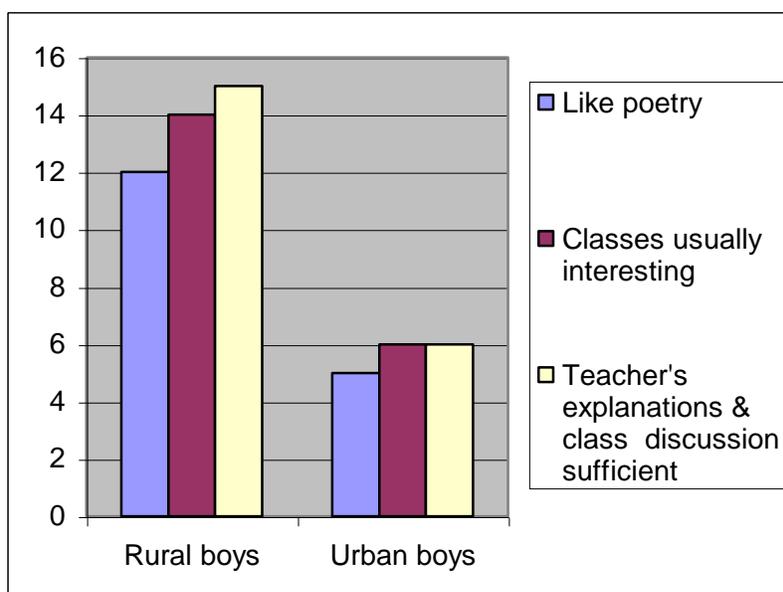

Figure 4. Comparison of like for poetry, interesting classes, and adequacy of teacher explanation and class discussion.

There was an overwhelmingly positive response to the effect of the video on interest (85 responses) and understanding (91 responses) among both boys and girls. In terms of the effect of the video on their understanding, 70 students ranked the visualized and dramatic readings as the element of the video that had the most effect; 16 ranked teacher discussion in second place, 5 ranked the unembellished poetry readings third, and 9 did not respond to the question (see Figure 5). With respect to the effect on their interest, the view that a poetry video would lead to more discussion polled the highest response, followed by the view that a poetry video would make students more active. Therefore, overall,

student response to the poetry video with regard to interest and understanding was overwhelmingly positive.
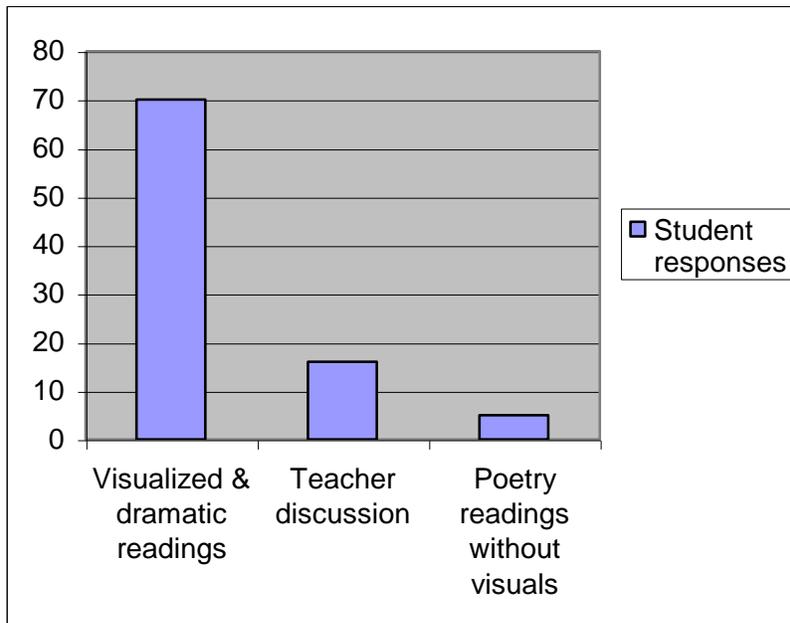

Figure 5. Contribution of three video elements to understanding of poem.

However, among rural males within the government secondary school sector, teacher discussion, poetry reading without visuals, and visualized and dramatic poetry readings were ranked equally as "most useful," with four responses each (12 out of 15). By comparison, urban males from the same type of school ranked visualized and dramatic readings as number 1, with 9 out of 12 responses. Among rural girls of the government secondary, too, teacher discussion, and visualized and dramatic readings polled almost equal responses as "most useful," whereas urban girls of the same type of school ranked visualized and dramatic readings overwhelmingly as number 1. Of significance also is the fact that only 7 out of 15 rural boys felt that using video in the classroom would lead to more discussion, while 5 felt that it would lead to less discussion. An entirely opposite picture obtains for boys in the urban equivalent school, where 9 out of 12 boys felt that using video in the classroom would lead to more discussion and only 2 felt it would lead to less discussion. These differences between rural and urban

students with regard to visualized material need further investigation, since they appear to suggest that clientele from different cultures require different teaching-learning approaches.

Additionally, stimulated interest and understanding from the poetry video did not correlate with enhanced critical appreciation for poetry. For, although all students claimed overwhelming interest and understanding, their responses on the KWL sheet contained minimal evidence that they were aware of basic literary elements of critical appreciation such as theme, mood, and elements of figurative language. Rather, understanding and interest tended to generate human interest and efferent responses, even after the video with its teacher discussion element was played twice. It is well accepted that although interest and understanding are the building blocks of critical response, they constitute basal levels of the learning-teaching taxonomy. Students' responses on the KWL sheet tended to corroborate this.

However, the glaring lack of critical terminology usually associated with poetry in the students' KWL responses, in spite of the prominence of this terminology as written section headings of the poetry video teacher discussion, suggests a number of scenarios requiring investigation:

- Perhaps teachers are correct in their claim of students' lack of interest in literature in so far as interest pertains to critical appreciation.
- Perhaps after years of exposure to teacher discussion, students have learned to ignore it.
- Perhaps visualized and dramatic elements of the video form are associated with television entertainment and act as distractions to serious learning.
- Perhaps the unusualness of poetry being presented in video form was a distraction.
- Perhaps the unusualness of the KWL response sheet and the presence of the researcher affected students' responses.

Nevertheless, as their closing response to the questionnaire, 98% of both boys and girls felt that video should be used in poetry classes. Fifty responses stated that it would lead to more understanding, while 24 stated it would stimulate greater interest. Twenty-eight responses were positive in a general way, with comments such as:

- "I support and promote."

- "It will lead to more young poets."
- "I think it will benefit slow learners."
- "Powerful Stuff People!"

A recognizable limitation of video presentations, however, is that they are merely single interpretations of given scenarios and, unless well handled by teachers as resource material, may produce cloned imaginations among students. Also, the usefulness of teacher discussion in resource material needs be analyzed with regard to elements such as presenter's pace and diction, the interspersing of visuals, and the use of section headings and captions.

The overall findings are:

1. Student responses corroborate teachers' responses of poor response to poetry and poor critical appreciation.
2. Teacher discussion is not the most stimulating or effective way to teach poetry appreciation, since students ignored teacher discussion even though the video was played twice, and contained comprehensive literary and poetic information in section headings.
3. Because of differences between rural and urban student responses to elements of the video, and between male and female responses, teachers need to consider a variety of methods in their teaching and presentation of literature.

Discussion

The teacher information presented suggests that literature is waning in comprehensive schools. In Trinidad and Tobago, comprehensives have one of the largest intakes of adolescents in the upper school-leaving age group. The implication of this finding is that a large majority of school leavers are going out into society without the socializing benefits of exposure to literature. This does not augur well for the well-being of Trinidadian society in terms of youth adjustment to social mores, gender and family issues, self-awareness, and the inculcation of character attributes such as empathy and tolerance that the study of literature is said to promote. Literature should at least form part of the English A (Language) curriculum in keeping with CXC's concept of an integrated English language-and-literature programme.

In the composites and government secondaries, literature also seems an endangered subject. In one of the composite schools, no literature is done at any level. Of concern, too, must be the fact that in two of the five comprehensives in the sample, literature is not offered in the lower school. Ironically, in both of them it is offered for examination in Forms 4 and 5. In this context, it is not difficult to understand, as one teacher reports, that the number of students opting for the subject is small and the pass rate is poor.

On the other hand, in the junior secondary schools, literature is compulsory and this is commendable. The data show that the 11 to 14+ age group fares better at the junior secondary than at the comprehensive schools in terms of its exposure to literature.

These findings point to the need for a strategy to put literature back into the government public schools, which cater to the bulk of students with limited family support and resources. It must be noted that in the denominational schools, which receive the students with the highest marks from the primary schools, literature is compulsory and the literary culture is positive. It seems an irony that those deemed to have an advantage with regard to Trinidadian Standard English, are given sustained literary exposure, while those who have difficulties with reading and writing are given less literary exposure as they progress through school. Of concern as well, must be the implication that for the older adolescent, reading operates in proportion to the student's ability to read, with a downward spiral for the most reading challenged.

It may be argued that literature is an optional subject in the upper school, as are physics, chemistry, or additional mathematics, and that, as such, the figures revealed in this paper are comparable to the figures for any other optional subject. However, since language is the medium of communication for all school subjects, and it is well accepted that a poor student is generally one who has difficulties with language, it follows that the academic performance of many students in the public sector will be negatively affected by the absence of sustained reading within the curriculum. Reading in contexts other than the efferent (for facts) needs to be encouraged among adolescents to promote the multifarious literacy that is required in today's world.

When the literature statistics presented by the teachers are seen in this light, one understands the importance of establishing a literary culture in

schools. The decline in the status of literature as a discipline of study has perhaps gone unperceived for too long, and steps should be taken to prevent the total disappearance of the subject, particularly in public schools. In this regard, it is encouraging to note that in the school recently built under SEMP, it is reported that literature is increasing and that the subject is most likely to become a compulsory subject across the curriculum.

Only 1 of the 20 schools in the sample uses a literature text alongside its English language text in Forms 4 and 5. This suggests that CXC's idea of an integrated English language-and-literature syllabus is not being implemented. Students doing literature as an examination subject may not be affected by this lack of exposure to sustained literary material. But among the 20 schools, these are in the minority, and "prestige" schools at that. The fact is that the majority of secondary students seem to be entering society without exposure to sustained reading, which does not augur well either for the critical literacy or the cultural literacy and personal growth that literature is well known to promote.

Traditionally, literature has been almost synonymous with reading. But student responses in this study suggest that in an age when both reading and literature make much use of digitalized media, teachers should revolutionize their strategies, not only to maintain the interest of students, but also to effect understanding. Alternative media should also be used to expose students to the variety of forms other than the printed book in which literature is found. In this regard, attention needs to be placed on attracting boys.

Finally, the large-scale reading problem that many teachers report cannot be ignored because, undoubtedly, it affects not only literature, but all subjects. It needs to be noted that secondary school teachers are not trained teachers of reading. The scenarios they report need more help than can be provided by the retired primary school teacher cohort that has recently been drafted to teach remedial reading in secondary schools. Therefore, in light of the problems outlined, the following recommendations are made:

Recommendations:

1. There is need for widespread training of secondary school teachers in reading, remedial reading, and critical thinking, if students are to make maximum benefit of their free secondary schooling.

2. There is need for a literature policy, especially for the upper levels of the public secondary schools in Trinidad, to include some element of sustained reading, if not for examination purposes, at least, as recommended by CXC, to accompany the English A syllabus.

3. A broadened view of literature should be adopted to include genres such as non-fiction, science fiction, biographies, and historical fiction in an attempt to attract wider student interest, especially among boys. Alternative media presentations should also be drafted as valid literary material in the cause.

4. Cognizance needs to be taken of the many different cultures and ethnicities among student populations in Trinidad, if the creation of learning experiences and the selection of teaching materials are to be successful. The secondary school population is not by any means homogenous, and this fact needs to be reflected in curricular and teaching strategies. Training programmes such as the Postgraduate Dip. Ed. need to sensitize teachers to cultural differences among their student clientele, and prepare them to deal with varied teaching-learning encounters.

5. Secondary school teachers of language and literature need to be taught the basic content of their subject area, as well as methods of teaching such content, before they are assigned to schools. Most secondary school teachers of English have become competent users of Standard English and producers of literary work through reinforced practice, but have never been officially taught how to sequentially plan or to teach components of language and literature in preparation for teaching in the classroom.

6. In light of the fact that the Dip. Ed. enrolment reflects a broad cross-section of the secondary teaching population, periodic

surveys can be of mutual benefit to teacher educators and teachers themselves, for purposes of structuring curricula and obtaining feedback on the status of literature in schools in an ongoing framework of mediation based on research.

Notes

1. I wish to acknowledge my indebtedness to the teachers of the English Postgraduate Dip. Ed. Programme 2002-2003 for their participation in this study and for the access they allowed me to their students and their schools.

2. Information on the selection process was obtained from personnel at the School of Education, UWI, St. Augustine.

3. Information on the current status of literature at Queen's Royal College, St. Francois Girls' College, and St. Joseph's Convent, St. Joseph was obtained from telephone interviews with Heads of English departments at the respective schools on November 18, 2002.

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Appendix A

DIPLOMA IN EDUCATION 2002-2003 (ENGLISH CURRICULUM)
Questionnaire for English teachers of Forms 1 to 5.
Answer ALL relevant questions

1. Type of Secondary School (Tick one):
a. Junior Secondary (3 year)
b. Senior Secondary Comprehensive (4 year)
c. Senior Secondary Comprehensive (7 year)
d. Government Assisted Denominational (7 year)
e. Government Secondary (5year)
f. Composite (5 year)
g. Newly built High School (SEMP)
h. Other (Please state type)

2. Subjects I teach and classes:
   a. English Language   Class/es _____
   b. English Literature   Class/es _____

3. Approx. number of students doing Literature at each level in my school:
   a. Form 1 _____   out of an approx total of _____
   b. Form 2_____
_____
   c. Form 3_____
_____
   d. Form 4_____
_____
   e. Form 5_____
_____

4. Texts used in the teaching of English Language at each level and reason for choice

Class/level	Text/s	Reason/s for choice
Form 1		
Form 2		
Form 3		
Form 4		
Form 5		

5. Texts used in the teaching of English Literature at each level and reason for choice:

Class/level	Text/s	Reason/s for choice
Form 1		
Form 2		
Form 3		
Form 4		
Form 5		

6. Tick one. The number of students doing literature in my school is:
     (a) Increasing   (b) Decreasing
     (c) Constant

Give reason/s.

7. Tick as many as are relevant. In my school literature texts are chosen by:
     (a) Teachers   (b) Students have a say in the choice

8. The texts that appeal most to my students are those that deal with:

_____

9. What I like about teaching Literature:

10. What I dislike about teaching Literature:

_____

11. Recommendations to my English Department based on my experiences:

12. For teachers of Form Four and Five English A:

Recommendations I would make to CXC based on my teaching experiences:

13. For teachers of Form Four and Five English B

Recommendations I would make to CXC based on my experiences:
_____

14. In my teaching of English over the last academic year (2001-2002) my students have developed portfolios/done portfolio writing.

      Tick one: (a)Yes   (b) No

      If your answer is yes, name the subject of a portfolio your students developed during the last academic year (2001-2002) and name some of the items your students developed in this portfolio.

      Subject of Portfolio   Sample of Item Headings
      (i.e book, theme, poetry etc.)

      _____   _____

      _____   _____

      _____   _____

15. What are your views on making student portfolios a necessary component of English teaching?

Cynthia James

Appendix B

*List problems your students have with literature and the strategies you use to deal with each:

Problems	Strategies
• Students not willing nor motivated to read • Low or no interest in reading	• Vary reading material • Allow students to bring in material that interest them • Provide material suited to them • Set assignments in which they have to read • Read to students
Poor comprehension skills of students	• Practice • Use dictionary • Tackle paragraphs first
Students unable to read	• Teacher reads to/with students • Refer to remedial classes • Use of audio-visual material and video cassettes
No or low critical thinking and analytical skills on the part of students	• Deal with pertinent issues in the text—conflict resolution approach • Reference to hypothetical situations
Students have problems with interpretation of language: (a) Shakespearean, (b) Creole, (c) figurative	• Teacher explanation • For problems with the figurative, introduce poetry through calypso
Students unable to think critically because of being spoon-fed by teachers	• Give question for groups to work on • Go in opposite direction of students' opinions to get them to argue their position
Students cannot relate to characters in a novel	• Role-playing by students
Students' concept of literature is limited to words on the page	• Use practical exercises which stimulate their imagination through creativity to bring literature to life, e.g., construction of a model farm the teaching of *Animal Farm*
Students' inability to read fluently and understand text because of limited	• Give a vocabulary list to students based on the text

Status of Literature in Six Types of Trinidad Secondary Schools

vocabulary	
Student' inability to understand and appreciate poetry	• Read poems to students • Relate poem to students' life experience • Allow students to develop songs/rap that capture the themes of particular poems
Students do not have/buy literature texts	• Use photocopied material • Rental system • Group work
Students do not know how to organize an essay	• Teach the structure of an essay
Students do not provide examples or evidence to support their point of view	• Direct evidence to students and bring to their attention that evidence is lacking
Students' poor attitude or mental block specifically with regard to poetry	• Reorient students' thinking • Use material suited to their experiences, e.g., calypso and rap
Lack of support systems such as library or audio-visual facilities	• Sensitize administration to needs—prioritize funding
Students' inability to fully grasp the complexity of different language structures in diverse texts and so unable to fully grasp meaning	• Break work into simple, smaller modules, pre-teach vocabulary
Inadequate time allotted to literature classes	• Review timetable with [timetable] committee
Large class size	• Group work—rotating and alternating
Students are averse to drama	• Expose students to dramatic experiences through everyday class experiences
Students show very little enjoyment	• Present simple literary pieces • Fun pieces—comic (material), cartoons
Students do not relate themes to life	• Use literature that reflects their experience, giving guided discourses, e.g., *Miguel Street* • Talk about personal experiences and try to relate to text
Students' superficial analysis of poetry	• Use lyrics from popular songs to teach skills

Students turned off by size and length of text	• Begin with short stories
Students' inability to recognize concepts	• Teach concepts
Students' inability to understand what they read	• Group work
Students' inability to recognize and interpret figurative language	• Provide examples they can identify with • Show and examine how they are used in text

*As they worked on this in-class assignment, some teachers expressed that feeling that many of the problems they cited were not student-problems, but teacher-problems related to their own teaching deficiencies.

Appendix C

Student Questionnaire

Age   Sex: Form Class:

Poem	What I Know	What I Want to Know	What the Video Clarified
Background information about the author			
What the poem is about			
Theme or message of the poem			
Who is speaking in the poem			
Feelings and Moods			
Language/Words			
What the poem means to me			

Circle one:

1. I like poetry: Yes   No

2. My poetry classes are usually interesting: Yes   No

3. I usually understand the poems that we study in class: Yes   No

4. My teacher's explanations and class discussion give me sufficient understanding:

           Yes   No

5. The video made me understand the poem better than I usually do:

35

Yes   No

6. The video has made the poem more interesting than poetry usually is
   for me:

Yes   No

7. Rank the following aspects of the video in order of most useful to you
   (1, 2, 3):

the teachers' discussion
the poetry readings without visuals
the visualized and dramatic readings of the poems

8. Which of the aspects above contributed most to your understanding of
   the poem:

……………………………………………………………………………

9. I think using video in the classroom will lead to:

less discussion   more discussion
make me passive   make me active

10. My views about using video in poetry classes:

……………………………………………………………………………