

Literature Education in the Service of Popular Culture

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THE PERCEPTION MANY HAVE OF THE ARTS IS THAT OF A SPACE which harnesses things of symbolic significance deemed aesthetically pleasing but not seen as economically viable. It is important that as a society, we begin to appreciate that the arts are not simply valuable because of what they produce, but also because of the skills individuals gain through particular processes of learning and experience provided through engagement with these areas. Wealth is not created simply by possessing qualifications but, more importantly, by having the necessary skill set to ensure social and economic success. Processes of teaching and learning in the arts consistently immerse students in creative thought and activity; transformative action; political action (which brings visibility to marginalised realities and groups); and futuristic strategies designed to provide avenues of growth for the country.

As an example, we can take a quick glance at the area of literature. This subject ought to be valued as a vital part of any democratic process, and yet between the twentieth and twenty-first century, the number of schools that now place this subject as a compulsory part of the school curriculum has decreased significantly. This occurs even while research continues to demonstrate that an encounter with literature in the classroom provides students with solid opportunities to develop self-awareness, build creative power, and become active citizens of their country.

Many schools are now only selecting particular students to sit English B in the CXC examination process based on the questionable judgement that those selected are 'intelligent' enough to perform well in the area. The purpose of

schooling, however, is not to privilege the gifted, but to enable open access to education for all students, from all backgrounds. What empowers a student to perform well is the quality of the educational process through which the student discovers knowledge and gains experience in that area. While natural predisposition matters, exposure to new educational content can help determine choices, especially where this exposure engages real-life experiences.

Represent Life

Literary texts represent life. They showcase the world and the responses of individuals to the various social, political, economic, and environmental contexts. They provide students with a safe space for critical reflection, negotiation of feelings, attitudes, ideas, and possible actions. More than anything else, the world of the literary text offers alternatives. Students learn that there is never one perspective, one road, or one solution.

In her thought-provoking keynote speech at the Inaugural Gabriel Coulthard-William Mailer Distinguished Lecture on April 12, 2017, at the UWI, Mona Campus, Dr. Elizabeth Wilson powerfully articulated the fact that the study of literature promotes understanding and dialogue. She observed that in helping to develop the imagination, literature becomes a strong vehicle to enable social change. This occurs not simply through the act of reading, but through the methodologies teachers utilise in helping students to navigate their way through a text.

Pedagogically, response-oriented frames surrounding the teaching and learning of literature support the notion that classroom moments ought to utilise students' experiences and help them to discover ways of 'reading' the outside world based on their reading of a text. When teachers apply a response-oriented approach to the teaching of literature, the focus shifts from feeding the student numerous pieces of literary knowledge to providing students with opportunities to use this knowledge to interrogate what Paulo Friere would refer to as "the world and the word". This develops critical literacy skills in students and offers them a tool through which to learn how to function emotionally and socially.

The processes of interpreting and responding to the various aspects of the world in a literary text offers countless opportunities for the youth of our country to question, evaluate, and critique characters, situations, and emotional states of being in any given text. Such experiences with literature help to transform students' thinking patterns, and subsequently, positively influence the way they act. Students gradually make choices based on the skills of negotiation, interrogation, and creativity learnt through their encounters with literature. These skills contribute greatly to building and sustaining a culture that is not based on a system of privilege and power. Literary exposure stimulates most students to construct sustainable avenues of progression and advancement for themselves and their society.

Literature and the arts encourage innovation, active participation, and transformation in our society. This is why the arts matter: not just as symbolic aspects of our culture, but also as a platform for change. Literary and other creative engagements offer individuals a sense of empowerment to become productive, prosperous, and successful citizens who can contribute to growth and development in our society.