

Teaching Language Arts With *Vice-Y Verse-Y Love*

by
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Exams have gone and results are out. Rude boys have gone and other rude boys have been promoted to Form 5. What does this mean for the teaching of Language Arts in the public secondary school? A year of torture for the teacher and one of boredom for 5 AC? More CXC Threes than Twos? More Fours and Fives than Ones?

For many a student, school is okay. A chance to leave “boring” home to show the “brands” and the gold tooth acquired over the August vacation. And after these novelties have made their mark, the ride in the maxi taxi might be the best part of the whole school humdrum. Craft class might be okay. But English? Downright boring! Even when Miss tries to bring in what those old fogeys call Caribbean and CXC relevance: Excerpts from *The Emigrants* by Barbadian Kamau Brathwaite, and eulogy in jumbie talk from *Sometimes in the Middle of the Story* by Edward Baugh.

School is not a fun-job and the classroom is not a maxi taxi. But in the meantime, educators (and I mean parents, too) may have to mix and match.

And not because some theorist said so, but because we know that learning happens most and best when it is less a struggle of wills. Learning is more discovery through fun and play and sound and song. With particular regard to teenagers, sometimes this means honing into the propensities of their adolescent hormones to channel, for the good of education, their interest in the cult of love.

Which brings us to Barrington Levy’s *Vice Versa Love*.

The charms of voiceprint have long been with us. Many teachers can boast of transcribing Sparrow’s *Education*, and Rudder’s *Haiti* for use in their classrooms. But today’s teenagers are not “into” calypso. This is the simple truth. And I can clearly hear the plaints of “Trini-culture sabotage.”

To find strategies to teach literary appreciation to rude boys and rude girls one has to start from where they are. Many a turned-off student is into ghetto music, rap, dub, and talk of guns and fight and street war. Alternatively, the hormones, both his and hers, beg for the soothing peace of unconditional love.

All the same, to find a piece of dub that the parent or the Ministry of Education (MOE) would not want a teacher fired for, the teacher’s ears would have to burn for hours, or her heart could go into arrest from thumping palpitations of assaulting booms and drums. At the end of all of it, one could find oneself merely with a tape of blips and bleeps marking unmentionable erasures.

No too long ago, however, weary of the inattentiveness that attends teaching rhythm from traditional set texts, I asked some fourth formers to bring their CDs. It was Carnival time

and school was loose. We booked the Music room, which is partially soundproofed, so that there would not be much complaint about the levels of our “noise.”

And we spent all of 80 minutes running CDs, with me trying after each song (which all sounded the same) to have them distinguish different rhythms and moods and tones. They laughed at my descriptions: “galloping” and “strident” and “staccato” for Bunji and the clan; “soothing” and “pensive” and “lethargic” for some of the dub and rap.

“Miss, it only have three kind of rhythm: Conscious, Dancehall, and Dub.”

We agreed, however, to suspend their labels until CXC consulted with them and the maxi man on such serious matters. Never mind they were the youth culture for which we people of the dark ages set our exams.

By and by, they felt I had been shocked enough. The double period was ending and we were down to the “slows.” There were Eddie Grant and Bob Marley lovers among them too, I found. Just when the bell was about to ring, a rudegirl said, “Miss, you like Barrington Levy?”

Poor me! I didn’t know if that was a trap. So I went for the best defense: “Put him on, nuh, and let me hear.” And just so the mood changed.

Marvel of marvels! The girl had led me to sheer gold. The bell rang on my “conscious” class singing:

**To all the rude bo...ys
put down all your guns
the only ammunition we nee...d is love
love for e..veryone
mothers tell your daughters
fathers, please tell your sons
just warn them! teach them! tell them! show them!
that what we nee....d**

**Everybody:
we want vice versu love**

Lent did come and Bunji’s *Ghetto* fury died. By then I had my lesson planned. Armed with my transcribed selection, I intended to make a poetry appreciation class out of Levy’s *Vice Versa Love*.

And what a breathtaking class we had. My rude boys and rude girls explored in metaphor the “ragamuffin soldiers.” We talked of ominous mood and concerned tone and lilting wailing rhythms of lament; of prayerful theme and warning message for the angry and rejected youth to show, instead of hate for one another, love.

And Carlene said it was such a sad song about how many youthmen had died and she was feeling as if she was in a funeral. And that her belly boiled at the way Levy stretched out “Waaaarn,” as if he was ready to be a soldier too, and start a fight to stop the hate and war he was warning about. And with that, we moved to talk of pun and irony and onomatopoeia and repetition.

And Marvin said the part he liked was the wake up “hello” wailing call before the song, and the “Extra extra” like a newspaper vendor reeling out the headline. And how that was what told him that Levy was dead serious--that mothers and fathers and sons and daughters must pay attention to the message of his song. Exhortation!

Same literary appreciation, same exam poetry words. But the rude boys and girls I fought day in day out were ready to explain and learn and write and teach. More than that, we had made a bond.

Reflection 1: Would *Vice Versa Love* ever appear on a CXC English exam?

Reflection 2: Neither would the dry old poems I customarily taught anyway. Better off to reciprocate and, from time to time, meet the ragamuffin soldiers half way with Vice-y Verse-y love.