

To Kill a Mockingbird

By Cynthia James

A young teacher in training telephoned me twice recently in a panic. She had spent the past three months trying to come up with a strategy to deal with the bare-bones answers her teenaged students were giving to literature, and the disinterest they were displaying toward the subject on the whole.

Based on research, she had decided to try to evoke analysis for her new text, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, with a two-week experiment of dramatic approaches. Alongside this, she would try cooperative learning, since there is overwhelming evidence that role-playing and working in groups can make learning, simultaneously, productive and fun.

But she had only got to the second of her ten experimental lessons and, to her mind, disaster had struck. Ironically, three of her twenty teenaged darlings had decided to really kill the proverbial mockingbird. They were turning the role-playing sessions into entertainment for a ready-made audience of their peers. With a week and a half of her experiment to go she felt she had foundered. After all, didn't the books suggest that these strategies would work?

A number of issues are evoked in this episode but here I will treat only with three: culture and curriculum reform, the use of foreign research in teacher education, and the kind of personality needed for teaching in our system.

It takes a young teacher with guts not to revert to chalk and talk after such an experiment. Firm statistics are not available, but many secondary teachers revert after graduating from teacher training programmes. One issue here is the process of change. Our systems are rooted in a Victorian culture. Students who are accustomed to being taught all their lives in traditional ways do not always know how to respond to unorthodox teaching methods. To raise another issue, when would we be brave enough to teach literature based more on students' choice and less on prescribed, recurrent examination set books?

Parents and older heads do not readily appreciate these newfangled ways of learning either. Education in Trinidad and Tobago is a serious business of beating books and going to extra lessons to pass SEA and to win scholarships. In our traditional cultural patterns, learning is not to be mixed with liking, interest, or fun. Dramatic approaches and cooperative learning do not go down well in our institutions.

Worse yet, West Indians have imbibed a way of hiding feelings; avoiding baring their true emotions under a culture of laughter. The laughter emanating from the penumbra of our cinemas and theatres at scenes of poignant emotion has long been psychoanalysed. All the more difficult must role-playing be for the Trinidadian during the self-conscious teenage years in such a culture.

Other issues, of course, are the importation of educational strategies and their implementation in systems without support. Drama gone awry in any classroom full of teenagers can indeed be chaos. But in a school system and education culture supported by mentoring and counselling, a teacher's willingness to experiment may be less daunting. It should also be noted that not all strategies seen in books are likely to work. The jargon of metropolitan education has given us terms such as constructivist, the zone of proximal development, and multiple intelligences, which are by all means relevant, but these terms have to make sense within our West Indian cultural norms.

We have to be open to educational lore, but we have to develop our own lore. The only way to do this is through teacher experiment and teacher sharing of the results of such experimentation. Teachers should be given a meaningful say in the reforms that are occurring at policy level. Most noticeable about the current chat about the "crisis" in the education system is the silence of teachers, the very people at the centre of the storm. Their silence has more to do with an inbred culture of silence and the fear of contravening teaching regulations than with a lack of ideas about solutions. Yet pontification (mine included) goes on all around them while they exclude themselves from the fray and, in traditional manner, await the latest orders to come from above.

The last issue I will raise is the cultivation of teachers with the kind of personalities required to undertake the experimentation and indigenising of the Trinidad and Tobago education system, since teachers are at the frontline of our education reform.

My young teacher in training is one of a new breed, who is prepared to carry the torch. She is bright, young, and full of imagination. She is one of those who can think on her feet, with the full understanding that a teacher does not always have the backup of a second teacher for support in the classroom, and that braving the storm of ridicule by oneself is yet another way to learn. In time she will have gained the quick-wittedness and aplomb to sight the roadblock long before she hits it. As a secondary school teacher, she has come into teacher training from a different place than the many solid primary school teachers who come from the full-time existing training colleges.

In the final analysis, young teachers, like my teacher trainee, with well-articulated goals need to be encouraged to experiment. However, they need to know that new teaching styles are not panaceas, especially in situations where poor student performance and student disinterest emanate from factors that have little to do with the subject itself. In any event, introducing new styles of teaching involves introducing change and taking risks for all involved, and so must be done gradually.

The more teachers conference with their students, the more they get to know them, and the better they are able to diagnose and strategise. Few students do not respond to genuine effort and caring. Very much like Jem, Scout, and Dill in Harper Lee's novel, students cease to torment and to mock when they come to understand that many of their breaches of classroom etiquette are rooted in defensiveness, which come from prior bad experiences and from mistrust.

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