

Define “First”: In Defence of the Children

Phaedra Pierre

In the *Daily Express* of February 7, 2008, there was an article entitled “MacFarlane’s ‘Earth’ - First ‘green’ Carnival band.” Webster’s Online Dictionary defines “first,” used adjectivally, as: **Preceding all others in time or space or degree** [emphasis added]; "the first house on the right"; "the first day of spring"; "his first political race"; "her first baby"; "the first time"; "the first meetings of the new party"; "the first phase of his training."

Based on this definition, we in the education system must request an explanation of the word “first” used in the headline, because we have been celebrating “green” Carnivals for several years and in several ways.

Since Carnival became a part of the school system, teachers, students, and parents have used eco-friendly themes for individual portrayals, bands, and festival celebration themes. In fact, Carnival has been and continues to be used as a wonderful teaching tool, promoting not only the obvious art, music, dance, and drama, but also History, Mathematics, Economics, Science, Geography, and Ecology, among other areas. The interest and enthusiasm of imagining, creating, and producing songs and costumes fuel learning juices, which often remain stagnant in the regular “chalk and talk” classroom. Good teachers know that learning occurs in a number of ways and we seriously limit ourselves if we stick only to the traditional approaches. We also have the extraordinary opportunity, through the medium of Carnival, to appeal to students with very different learning styles—those who, for whatever reason, have not mastered the paper and pen/pencil routine, shine brightly when asked to compose, design, assemble, and even report in diverse ways.

If the argument is that school celebrations are more private than public affairs, what about when Junior Carnival hit the streets? Although I may be relatively young in the business (and I am sure that others could cite even more dated examples), I remember that as far back as the 1980s when Charlie appeared as a Solid Waste Management Company (SWMCOL) character, there were young “Charlies” on the streets of Port of Spain on Carnival Saturday. These Charlies were eager to clean up, recycle, and reuse what might have been thought of as garbage and to teach us the lessons that they had learnt on preserving our environment.

Mr. MacFarlane may have been the first to have the economic means to have eco-friendly dyes, special muds, and leaves flown in from around the world. However, school bands have been using recycled materials for years as well. Parents know full well about the multiple requests to send in plastic bottles, tins, cardboard, scraps of cloth, egg cartons, and all manner of used materials to be re-used in their children’s mas. Long before there was “pretty mas” with sequins and lamé, there were the multi-coloured fabric strips for the Pierrot Grenade and the cardboard hats for the Midnight Robbers, and the use of other recycled materials for standards, headpieces, and even entire costumes. Before we all had the means to purchase voile and satin, we used our ingenuity to utilize and decorate flour bags, papier maché, mud moulds, and cardboard sculptures, the most respected of which (some created by brilliant designers like Michael Sherriffe and Martin Soverall) are now displayed in the National Museum. In fact, one of the categories used in judging individuals and bands is Use of Local Material, which encourages and

applauds the creative use of resources like cocoyea, leaves, coconut husk, sea shells, and other indigenous flora and fauna. What better example of recycling!

Not only in mas, but our musical genius—the pan—is also an example of ecological astuteness. Our early musical innovators used whatever material they could gather (discarded oil drums) to create what has become our national instrument, and now our Junior Panorama rivals the seniors in terms of the number of bands, the level of creativity in arrangement, and in the passion of playing.

What is even more noteworthy for schools is that this phenomenon is not restricted to two days or two months of the year. Sometimes, schools adopt environmental themes for an entire term or an entire year and use all sorts of means (Carnival, concerts, essay competitions, debates, art competitions, to name a few) to deliver the message. This year, Fatima College even used green as the theme for their all-inclusive Carnival party, which was a part of a wider school initiative promoting “green-ness.”

We welcome Mr. MacFarlane to the green movement and thank him for bringing the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and National Geographic to the party.

School of Education, UWI, St. Augustine