

Lessons from Sports and the Arts

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It had been a very stressful month. One in which many tasks had to be accomplished simultaneously (multitasking); in which there seemed to be insufficient support services; and in which the many criticisms inevitably surfaced. Then in the midst of the chaos and confusion, within a two-week period, there were the lessons that emerged from sports and the arts.

First, there was the history-making record: 400 not out! No one can forget the adversity that His Excellency B.C. Lara has had to face, and the questions and doubts about his leadership. Yet, like a phoenix, he arose from the ashes. And so we celebrated his success.

Second, the Gayelle television station replayed a 1990 interview in which Mr. Peter Minshall shared his story about the struggles that he has to face as he creates his works. Using the metaphor of a bird soaring to great heights, he said that there were occasions when he tried to soar, but he felt that there were hands, as it were, pulling at his feet to keep him from rising.

Then another day on the same Gayelle station, I heard the performance of “Still I rise” written by Maya Angelou. Finally, to end the week, I attended a concert produced by Dr. Phaedra Pierre and the TAGS (Trinity All Generation School for the Arts), where I heard Ms. Gail Brown perform a gospel song that she had written:

I am destined to win
Destined to be
Destined to win
That’s the way God made me
One man’s opinion
Though negatively
Could never change my destiny

In the day-to-day hustle and bustle of life, parents are often too busy earning a living, and teachers are often too busy teaching subject matter content to talk to children about the challenges that we all inevitably face as we journey through life, and to help them to find ways of facing and dealing with these challenges. And that week it seemed that only the artists and sportsmen work deliberately—make it their duty—to give the message that life is full of challenges but that challenges can be turned into triumphs with confidence, a positive attitude, and positive self-talk as described explicitly by Ms. Brown.

There can be no doubt that the mathematicians, scientists, historians, etc., who created the knowledge that students study in the classroom, displayed some or all of these attitudes and behaviours. Yet, we can probably count on the fingers of one hand the number of lessons at school that gives insights into the lives of scientists and mathematicians as they

engaged in the process of creation and the challenges and frustrations that they undoubtedly faced.

Admittedly, there were some attempts by some science textbook writers to show scientists as persons. In lower secondary science texts that were written by people of the Caribbean (Durgadeen, McClenan, West, and Williams), there was an attempt to introduce and showcase the works of Caribbean scientists. This attempt was a good start, but an analysis of these biographies shows that the reader is not made aware of the challenges that these scientists faced, perhaps from their own community of scientists or when projects did not proceed as smoothly or as quickly as they might have wished. Also, there is no reference to their failures and how the scientists responded to these failures.

And, unfortunately, with the introduction of lower secondary science texts from Singapore, many Trinbagonian children are no longer exposed to Caribbean scientists, unless the teacher sets out deliberately to do so. A study of lower secondary science by June George (2003) shows that of the 71 of the 115 schools with lower secondary classes from which responses were obtained (a response rate of 61.7%), 53.5% of the schools used the text by Hoong and Leng compared with 21.1% that used the text by Durgadeen and others. The motivation to be a scientist that can come from recognising self in the scientist, and from the idea of locating the scientist within the place where one resides, is being slowly eroded.

In addition to the absence of exposure to the human side of persons who are associated with disciplines of study, Cynthia James (2003) reveals that “a large majority of school leavers are going out into society without the socializing benefits of exposure to literature.” She suggests that “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.”

With the formal school curricula (and the associated examinations) so focused on the products of endeavours, and with no or little attention to the process of creation and to the human persons who create knowledge and who strive for excellence, it seems that the informal lessons from the sportsmen and artists are invaluable. Richard Pring reminds us that “education is primarily concerned with the development of knowledge and that knowledge is an achievement, frequently to be gained only after continued struggle and risk of failure. And, as with the mastery of anything, it requires all too often a disciplined approach and an openness to constant correction and redirection.” As stakeholders continue to define the path on which we travel in the field of education, we may want to place greater emphasis on the affective domain (values, attitudes, and emotion) than was done in the past by careful selection of disciplines of study and strategies for enactment in the classroom.

It seems that we have little choice but to correct the mistakes of the past by creating more people-centred schools/institutions. The choice of strategies and texts that teachers and

teacher educators use to deliver their lessons will go a long way towards making the school more student-friendly and more contextualised, and should help the students to develop the attributes that are required for successful living within the Caribbean region, as members of the global community.

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