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POETRY TO RAPSO: Localized Narrative in the Classroom

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This qualitative research paper explores the experiences and perspectives of two long-standing teachers and poetry enthusiasts who use poetry and Rapso in their classrooms. The researchers use self-study of teaching and narrative analysis to share their stories and explore the ways in which personal and localized materials inform their teaching. They employ a "critical friend" to facilitate verification of the narratives and findings. The emergent themes, while identifying challenges, portray Rapso in the Poetry and the Poetry in the Rapso as rich in relevance and opportunities for nurturing a joy for learning and teaching generally, and reading and cultural identity more specifically.

"West Indian children live poetry," asserts the Caribbean Examinations Council (2011, p. 8), yet they are deficient in their appreciation and understanding of this very creative expression. Teachers are encouraged to address this inadequacy by placing the learners' knowledge, aesthetics, and individual sensitivities centre stage. In Trinidad and Tobago, the emphasis on the Secondary Entrance Assessment (SEA) at the primary level—and further high-stakes assessments to come—leaves poetry, as in similar contexts elsewhere, at risk of being marginalized (Hughes, 2007). Many teachers who may have used poetry in their pedagogy are inclined to yield to the pressure of time and resistance from colleagues and parents.

There is a need to encourage such teachers to continue their use of poetry, while practising cultural modelling and student-centred pedagogy that incorporates popular oral literary and communicative styles. We assert that rather than continue the emphasis on Eurocentric poetry, still common in many former colonies, this love and use of poetry can also be used to explore and embrace local art forms as well as problematize local sociocultural and socio-economic issues.

Poetry to Rapso: The Context

Education has for a long time been espoused as the most effective tool for the future development and progress of nation states. Given this assumption, the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago has committed itself to ensuring that all of its citizens, regardless of their gender, class, culture, and ethnic origin, are given the opportunity to access positive learning opportunities (Trinidad and Tobago. Ministry of Education [MOE], 2008). To this end, it has invested heavily in its education system, and has ambitious plans for improving quality as it seeks to achieve developed nation status by the year 2020. However, an analysis of National Test results for 2005–2009 showed that 53% of Standard 1 and 57% of Standard 3 students performed below the standard in Language (De Lisle, Smith, & Jules, 2010). This approach to the selection of students for secondary education and that of its forerunner, the Common Entrance Examination, follow the College Exhibition model of the colonial period. De Lisle (2012) contends that despite concerns inherent with high-stakes models, high societal legitimacy, expectations, and values continue to be associated with these tests. As such, there is an overarching emphasis on test scores for secondary school entrance, which compromises reform initiatives, including more student-centred and culturally responsive pedagogy.

Literacy

One critical reform initiative is in the area of literacy, which is central to facilitating national, community, and personal growth. Students facing significant challenges with reading, or those who have been disaffected based on their experiences, are subsequently at a higher risk of reading underachievement in secondary schools (Stanovich, 2000). In Trinidad and Tobago, as elsewhere, this group is largely comprised of boys from low-income families (Allington, 2006; Miller, 1994). One important approach to addressing this literacy challenge has been the shift in pedagogical style from teacher as "dispenser of knowledge" to more constructivist or interactive roles. This incorporates the learners' sociocultural background, prior knowledge, skills, and abilities within a more relationally engaging classroom context that facilitates cultural modelling, student centred pedagogy, and the use of oral traditions (Accioly de Amorim, 2009; Freire, 2000).

Using poetry for literacy development. Poetry offers an approach to literacy development that incorporates performance, self-reflection, culturally and socially relevant curricula, accessible resources, and

opportunities for enhanced relationships within the schools (Hughes, 2007). Poetry can also encourage learners to share thoughts and feelings, which would not otherwise be expressed, in a non-threatening way (Lynch, 2009). Learners can feel safe to express anger, fear, hostility, and other negative emotions, which facilitates learning and creates space to focus on positive liberating emotions.

Poetry can be used effectively to engage all genders, interests, and microcultures. Tompkins (1998) notes that poetry has broadened its identity to include songs and raps, word pictures, memories, riddles, observations, questions, odes, and rhymes. Poetry can include actions like clapping, dancing, rapping, and tapping rhythms that embrace diverse learning styles. One observes how quickly children learn the jingles of advertisements, an indication of language awareness and a prerequisite for literacy. Rhymes have been used in education as an aid to memorization, and after several years many still remember, "Can a pig dance a jig for a fig?" and "Dan is the man in the van" (Mighty Sparrow, 1963). Furthermore, poetry reflects the sound patterns of the language we use, reinforcing phonics and spelling. This can be used to enhance the skills needed to become good readers, writers, and speakers. Poetry can also enrich learners by offering new experiences and worldviews, while embracing a variety of learning styles (Weaver, 2007).

Why consider local forms of poetry? The majority of Trinidadians and Tobagonians (Trinbagonians), regardless of socio-economic status, use the vernacular when speaking with peers or in informal situations. Language and dialect are the direct voice of the people and can facilitate unique connections:

> A group's sacred history is told in the vernacular not only to give each member of the group an understanding of where they come from but also to impart to them proper behavior and the ways in which they maintain group cohesion through ritualism and ceremony. (Holm, Pearson, & Chavis, 2003, p. 14)

Working against social inequalities and towards enhanced and improved learning environments, we must make classroom material relevant to the student's daily experiences and understandings (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Failure to value the local, along with the interpretations and perspectives our students bring to the classroom, means *othering* ourselves. At the very least, we should provide equal forums for the exploration of local art forms. We may indeed encounter significant resistance both to and through Rapso, but the educational value of the art

form in history, social studies, and literature classes, and beyond, is worth any challenges we may face as educators.

Rapso as Poetry

Among the localized art forms in Trinidad and Tobago, identified as the poetry of Calypso, is the musical form of Rapso. Described as the power of the word in the rhythm of the word, the consciousness of Soca, and as street poetry (Côté, 2012), Rapso, with anthropological connections to the chantwell or West African griot (from which the Calypso was also born; Aiyejina, 2005), continues to grow in popularity nationally and internationally. The term *griot/griotte* refers to the oral historian and commentator—the archivist of the people's tradition. The roles of the griot(te) are manifested through song as historian, storyteller, poet, philosopher, genealogist, advisor, social commentator, and advocate (Hale, 2007). Griots/griottes need to be able to wittily extemporize and maintain the traditional message without error (Oliver, 1970). The terms *griot* and *griotte* have been increasingly used to represent artistes in the oral tradition.

Rapso reflects the biting lyrical mastery of the Midnight Robber and the Pierrot Grenade—traditional Carnival characters—and is identified as more than just art; it is viewed as a nationalist, anti-colonial movement with roots in the Black Power movement of Trinidad and Tobago in the 1970s (Boyce-Davies, 2008). The main advocates and artistes associated with Rapso are committed to placing localized music centre stage and making a statement against neo-colonial elements (Sadre-Orafi, 2005). The blending of the poetic style with skin- and/or steelband-drumming is called Rapso *riddum* [rhythm] (Boyce-Davies, 2008), which historically evolved simultaneously with Jamaica's dub and the US's rap music forms. As this street poetry stands at the doorway of the classroom, Rapso artistes threaten to "boom up" his-story (and her-story) and to retell the story, demystify the truths, and set us free (3 Canal, 2008). These elements of Rapso, combined with those of more traditional poetry, offer a means of bringing literacy to the students in ways that offer increased engagement and learning.

The Challenges

There has been some resistance to the time and energy invested in the use of poetry in primary and secondary classrooms, as well as concerns about classroom management. Some educators and parents might contend that incorporating or increasing poetry holds more challenges than advantages, given the hangar-type school designs and student

dispositions in many high-needs primary and secondary schools. London (2003) posits that one of the problems in the education system is its predilection for teaching to the test to prepare students for the next level. Indeed, in our experience, many teachers view student behaviour as a central issue and so consider such activities as being more potentially disruptive than engaging. For such teachers, the priorities remain the completion of the syllabus and helping students to develop the test skills necessary for gaining admission to a secondary school or institute of higher education in a competitive environment. They may be more inclined towards teacher-centred pedagogy and more traditional approaches to classroom management (George, Mohammed, & Quamina-Aiyejina, 2003).

As the focus on education continues to be on testing, more highly esteemed subjects like science, technology, and mathematics compete with poetry (De Lisle et al., 2010). Learners conceptualize, then, that poetry is not important, or at least not as important as reading comprehension, essay writing, and mathematics. How do we then frame and support the case of the teacher who recognizes student knowledge as the centre of pedagogy and practice, the power of the localized language and literature in helping our learners develop the language to talk about language, and the importance of recognizing and communicating nuances of feeling, tone, and meaning to citizenship education?

Specific to Rapso as a form of poetic spoken word, the use of the vernacular in academic settings has created much contention and is often deemed inappropriate in these situations (MacIntosh, 1999; Siegel, 2007). Since 1975, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago has acknowledged Trinbagonian Creole as a language in its own right (Youssef, 2004); however, it is rarely utilized purposefully in classrooms and is primarily considered a transitional concession for students in the primary grades (MacIntosh, 1999). It is within these contexts that we seek to share the perspectives and lessons of two teachers who utilize poetry in their classrooms and their journeys to the use of the localized poetic form—Rapso.

The Researchers

Neither Beulah nor Dennis had teaching as their first choice for careers; they both wanted to be writers of poems . . . of stories. Beulah's father, a labourer in government service, wanted her to become a public servant and thereby achieve upward mobility. She chose teaching due to the affordability and access of teacher education programmes. Coming from an urban setting in northwestern Trinidad, Beulah has been teaching in

the primary school sector for about 40 years in both urban and suburban settings. She has always written poems and has had a willing audience of her fellow teachers through the years. She obtained her master's degree in Educational Studies from the University of Sheffield, with special emphasis in Caribbean Studies. She is currently a doctoral student and has a special interest in investigating how our historical and cultural heritage shapes our educational plans and policies.

For Dennis, there was no plan. It was essentially a journey of opportunity. He believes that everything got in the way of writing as a career. First there was a question of funding and the fact that writing was not seen as part of any realistic expectation; his parents expected him to pursue a more grounded career. He was guided toward a career in teaching by an employer. While having a love for poetry, Dennis has not shared his mini-excursions into poetry writing. Over the years he has occasionally been moved to write a poem that primarily reflects his perspectives on various events. He teaches courses in Diversity Studies, Inclusive Education, and Special Education in rural New York.

Jointly reflecting on our journeys of teaching and learning, we have found the path exciting, harrowing, frustrating, rewarding, and rich. Our interest in this research began during a conversation that occurred after we [Beulah and Dennis] had been out of touch for many years. We had met some 38 years ago when we were colleagues at an urban elementary school. We began to reminisce about our experiences in and out of school, especially related to poetry and spoken word.

As teachers and partners in a collaborative community of learners, we invited a much younger colleague, Dyanis, also in education, to share her perspectives as our critical friend (Samaras, 2010). Dyanis, too, has a special interest in poetry, as its catharsis guided her through adolescence. She is currently a doctoral student in Virginia doing research in multicultural education, critical pedagogy, and the teaching of English as a Second Language. Dyanis, also from Trinidad and Tobago, has known us both since childhood, and although she has not interacted with Beulah since that time, felt comfortable offering critiques and lending her voice to the discourse.

The Inquiry

We began this exploration of the ways in which our shared experiences have brought us to the intersection of Rapso and pedagogy in our diverse learning and teaching contexts with a self-study approach. We chose this approach due to our belief that it would best help us to reflectively move toward truly understanding our teaching (Loughran, 2004), and to

navigate the resistance and joys of teaching as it relates to poetry and indeed personal, professional, and cultural identity.

Self-study research is an emerging methodology with borrowed methods, and is both praised and criticized for its mongrel form (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001). Hamilton and Pinnegar (1998) define self-study as:

> The study of one's self, one's actions, one's ideas, as well as the 'not self'. It is autobiographical, historical, cultural, and political . . . [and] also involves a thoughtful look at texts read, experiences had, people known, and ideas considered. (p. 236)

To truly be considered research, however, self-study must connect biology and history to context and ethos (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001). LaBoskey's (2004) five elements of self-study guided our research to be self-initiated, focused, aimed at enhancing our practice, and collaborative; to use multiple, mainly qualitative methods of data collection; and to define validity in terms of trustworthiness.

We began our self-study through the composition of autoethnographic narratives addressing our experiences with and of poetry through three naturally emerging general lines of inquiry: poetry and ourselves, poetry and our teaching, poetry and student achievement. Narrative is central to the methods used in self-study research (Craig, 2009), and our use of an autoethnographic lens provided the space to explore all the issues we identify as crucial to answering the key questions (Feldman, 2003), including how our evolving selves affect pedagogy (Coia & Taylor, 2006). Our initial narratives responded to:

- What are our memories of poetry as students?
- How did we become teachers and lovers of poetry?
- How have we used poetry in our teaching?
- How have we used localized/local art forms?
- What are/were some of the challenges we faced?
- How might we use this inquiry to improve our teaching?

These early autoethnographic narratives allowed us to focus on the influences of culture on our [the authors'] lives, as well as to make connections to our cultural contexts and learning communities (Reed-Danahay, 1997); and to critique our *situatedness* in relation to others (Starr, 2010).

In addition to these narratives, we also used memory-work (Hamilton, Smith, & Worthington, 2008; Samaras & Freese, 2009) to reflect on past observations and to recall evocative pieces to be used as evidence. We

took notes during analysis of each other's initial narratives and used them to facilitate additional reflection, the development of new questions, and the expansion of our ideas as we connected poetry in practice to Rapso in the classroom, local and global social contexts, and the general educational context.

Collaboration, as one of the defining characteristics of self-study (Berry & Crowe, 2006; LaBoskey, 2004), guided our entire process from conception to final edits. Like Berry and Crowe, our distance necessitated that we conduct our collaborative enquiry primarily through email, which allowed each researcher to thoughtfully investigate each other's narratives and perspectives around the broad framework offered by self-study: How do we improve both our practice and the learning of our students? Our email exchanges allowed us to be both reflective and responsive about our classroom philosophies, practices, and objectives. As well, they aided us in streamlining the project as our discussion grew from poetry, into Rapso, and their numerous possibilities and intersections: "Reflective teaching [and researching] is effective when teachers have ownership of their learning process and when they are able to construct their own questions, use their own teaching examples, and theorize for themselves" (Coia & Taylor, 2006, p. 59). In this instance, we are at once the objects of the inquiry while at the same time conducting the inquiry.

Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) lend additional guidance to self-studies conducted using correspondence and/or email. They note that scholarly self-studies which rely on correspondence should provide the reader with a view of the inner thoughts and feelings of the participants; be coherent, structured, and provide convincing evidence; demonstrate wholeness; reveal and interrogate truths and contradictions; and provide engaging exchanges. We intended to go beyond the auto*biographical* self-study described by Bullough and Pinnegar, and to approach our data collection and presentation auto*ethnographically,* as detailed above, connecting our initial discussions and findings to the social context.

It is at this stage and with this intent that our critical friend Dyanis joined the conversation. The role of critical friend is significant as she is a trusted participant who:

> asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critique. . . . takes the time to fully understand the context of the work presented; the outcomes that a person or group is working toward [and] is an advocate for the success of that work. (Costa & Kallick, 1993, p. 50)

In this role, Dyanis had to navigate the depth and breadth of *constructive* criticism, focusing on the goals and objectives of the self-study. Our critical friend helps to address the concerns for verifiability/validity in self-study methodology, and enhances the development of trustworthiness in the narratives, challenging or seeking clarification to the assumptions and responses of the primary participants (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001). Much of this interaction also took place via email, though Dennis and Dyanis spoke several times by phone as they were both in the same country during that period. With our critical friend, we created space as mutual co-researchers to repeatedly review, reflect, reconsider, and revise until our central themes became clear.

Throughout all stages of this process, we employed aspects of narrative analysis, and were guided by Clandinin, Pushor, and Orr's (2007) eight design elements of narrative analysis. Representing the first two elements, our initial narratives addressed the personal, practical, and social justifications for our study, and in so doing named the phenomenon. Additionally, we were careful and intentional when considering the methods used to collect data, our analyses and interpretation processes, our positioning relative to other research, the style of our study, ethical issues, and the way in which we chose to represent both our process and our findings. We considered the contextual and the relational, examined and described the *commonplaces* in our data and analyses, and continued to think of our writing and research as a narrative act.

This process led us through our memories of poetry to unexpected explorations of the local, and specifically of Rapso. Through sharing this journey, we hope to contribute to the discussions of poetry use in the classroom, the appreciation of local art forms and cultural representations, and the application of these art forms to literacy education, affective education, and social justice.

The subsequent excerpts and analysis provide value for the construction, interpretation, and appreciation of the primary researchers as learners and teachers, while we [all the co-researchers] share, reflect, and learn from each other (Poirier, 1992). Trotman and Kerr (2001) remind us that personal reflection is critical to knowledge construction and related generalized insights. We purposefully use the combined *we/our* in order to distinguish individual narrative excerpts from notes resulting from joint analysis; our conclusions include the voice of our critical friend. Through this self-study we co-construct our narratives, and open up ourselves and our experiences to our critical friend and the community of readers, intending that the lessons learned and shared will primarily improve our teaching and learning. Far from being an exercise

in scholarly narcissism (Kaplan, 2006), we also hope that our findings and stories will inform school curricula, policy, and subsequent reform in the interest of the students.

Insights and Applications: The Lessons Learned

This study is the beginning of a social and pedagogical exploration; one on which we hope to be joined by other poets, Rapso artistes, and educators. As we moved through the cycle of review, reflection, reconsideration, and revision, we grouped our responses into five areas/themes. These comprise: remembering poetry, Rapso as spoken word, perspectives on poetry in pedagogy, resistance, and wider applications in education and beyond. We share with you a glimpse of our journey through excerpts from our autoethnographic narratives and poems; and hope, through our shared perspectives and developing analyses, to contribute to the conversation around the social and pedagogical possibilities of using poetry and Rapso in the classroom.

Remembering Poetry

Our memories of poetry [Beulah and Dennis] include an exciting blend of teacher voices and words like "elocution", "enunciate!", "t.h.a.t. That not 'dat' Dennis. Say the 'th'!" It included walks to the Savannah, passing cedar trees, mini field trips, and sitting or standing in circles for recitation or choral speaking. We both share early positive experiences of poetry. Beulah asserts that her early colonial pre-independence education in Trinidad and Tobago was "highly flavoured" with J. O. Cutteridge's (1986) *Nelson's West Indian Readers*. This also provided her first introduction to poetry.

> *These poems, after nursery rhymes which were predominantly English featured, of course, the English poets. Thus, the Beggar Maid by Tennyson telling the story of African King Cophetua's acquisition of a bride and Elizabeth Turner's "How to Write a Letter" and the poignant tale of Mary's drowning painted in vivid language in the "Sands O' Dee" by Charles Kingsley were among my earliest exciting journeys into poetic language.* [Beulah]

Beulah adds that British poets wrote even those poems dubbed West Indian. These included "Sonnet" by J. C. Squire (De La Mare, 1923, p. 369), which highlighted the terror of the localized person's first encounter with Columbus' ships and crew, along with "Trinidad: Iere

Land of the Humming-Bird" and "El Dorado" by Allister MacMillan (1922, pp. 9, 53).

For Dennis, also, poetry was a major part of his primary school experience. He submits that one of his earliest remembered poems, "The Seed," evokes rich memories of enunciation, and pausing, and even drama:

> *My elementary days were filled with poetry from West Indian Readers. Other poems that stay with me include "My Shadow," "The Spider and the Fly," "Dirty Jim," "The Last Buccaneer," "The Beggar Maid" [I still can visualize the drawing from the reading book] and "The Burial of Sir John Moore.*" [Dennis]

He associates poetry reading with short field trips and microteaching sessions on history or geography. For him, it was an exciting time of the school day, which was replicated in other classes. He describes another teacher's style:

> *She would wear pants [which was a big thing then] and had a bamboo mat that she would spread on the ground. We all would form a semi-circle around her. She would read a poem very expressively and we would start the process of exploring words, enunciation, meanings, and synonyms. It would be both as a choral /group reading and individual reading . . . but many associations would be made to history*. [Dennis]

However, poetry during those years was not limited to the classroom; he can still easily recall both the lines of a poem memorized for a village competition and of "Apodocca," which he associated with his father's Saturday morning list of chores in particular.

We contend that it was not until much later that we encountered poetry written by West Indian poets. Beulah encountered Martin Carter and Slade Hopkinson, both Guyanese, as an adult; and for Dennis, it wasn't until teachers' college that he reconnected to poetry and even more slowly to a recognition and appreciation of *Caribbean* poetry.

These recollections were echoed in our conversations with our critical friend who is more than 20 years our junior. Poetry, mostly based on Eurocentric norms, had played a very important part in Dyanis' life as well. Our notes and conversations highlight the role of poetry in the lives of children and the pedagogical possibilities of tapping into that prior knowledge. They also bring to the forefront the continued emphasis on European-authored classical and contemporary literature, which, directly or indirectly, devalues the work of Caribbean authors. Although Caribbean poetry and literature are more visible in contemporary

Caribbean classrooms and society in general, we still have far to go to change the perception of the local in the minds of many educators (Carrington, 1999; Dowdy, 1999).

Perspectives on Poetry in Pedagogy

We both consider poetry to be one of the richest and most fulfilling experiences that a child can have:

> *The Trinbagonian child especially seems to be born with a knack for rhythm as can be seen whenever we see a baby at a function where music is being played. That child would move and sway as to the manner born*. [Beulah]

While celebrating the varied benefits of poetry, Beulah advises that educators using poetry to encourage students should also project poetry as performance and not just as written words to be analysed. For her, written words sometimes need the assistance of the voice to make meaning and feelings come alive. Poetry is best enjoyed and remembered when it is spoken with all the emotions in play, thus appealing to all the senses with its use of figurative language and its rhymes, rhythms, and reasons.

Dennis takes a more personal perspective in sharing his views of poetry as pedagogy, relating it first to his experiences as a student:

> *I think from since my earliest experiences of learning and teaching, poetry was recognized as pedagogy. I associate it with learning as edutainment. Focused, purposeful fun*. [Dennis]

Poetry remains for him the strongest source of this energy and a means of engaging students, and he infuses poems through many of the courses he teaches at graduate school:

> *I celebrate the reality and the escapes that could be afforded through the use of poetry in class. My students laugh, they argue, they get angry, they are offended, and they deconstruct and reconstruct meanings and perspectives. It brings emotion and rhythm to the classroom and to learning*. [Dennis]

When teacher-candidates utilize poetry as forms of representation, expression, and engagement, their appreciation of poetry is enhanced. They are more likely to utilize it in their future classrooms to the benefit of their students, including those with exceptionalities. Benefits include increased comprehension, appreciation, social skills, and a sense of community (National Reading Panel, 2000; Westgate Pesola, 2008).

One of Dennis's greatest challenges as a lecturer, like so many others in our experience, is time:

> *For so many of my students they want to get it over with - the book chapter, the content mastery, or the exam. It becomes an ongoing struggle semester after semester to share with them that college is not just training for an occupation; it is preparation for a better way of life and appreciation of life and those who live. I strive to blend poetry into the curriculum so that my students can recognize poetry as medium and that they might "see' the multilingualism of poetry. I teach courses on inclusive pedagogy, leadership, and advocacy leadership*. [Dennis]

Including the Localized: Rapso as Spoken Word

Embracing the localized was somewhat of an issue for Dennis. Associating with steelband enthusiasts, calypsonians, and the like was generally frowned upon. He had however developed a love for theatre and then, while in teachers' college, educational drama. Much of his initial appreciation of the localized art forms was due to the extraordinary commitment of Freddie Kissoon and the drama group, The Strolling Players. Dennis recalls that while he was at teachers' college, he was exposed to what might have been Rapso:

> *I identified with the message but never got into it; nor did I see it as poetry in the sense that I see it now. My early impression was that it was a form of social protest dialect poetry, accompanied with drumming. It was a time when I was shifting my creative energy from poetry to drama. That era was characterized by a lot of protest; I saw Black Power as really anti-White and anti-establishment protest. Then, too, poetry to me was mostly something shared in Standard English even if addressing local issues*. [Dennis]

A deepening appreciation of calypso and the lyrics of calypso as social commentary, along with his first teaching of a Caribbean Studies class on Resistance, brought Dennis to calypso for use with his New York graduate students, and by extension to calypso as poetry. The class readings of calypsoes as poetry helped his American students to navigate accent and musical rhythm. This in turn brought him face to face with Rapso. He would use it to engage his students, to have them construct poetry and link it to calypso or Rapso rhythms. It is through the performance that the students actually connected to the narrative, Dennis notes:

> *That was easy since I hold the view that Rapso is really calypso as the spoken work in Trinidadianese with the drum and performance as core aspects. Any poem restructured into a local style [Trinbagonian] of speaking and performed using drumming as a vehicle might become a Rapso. While it might have roots in the African experience, the transformative Trinbagonianizing of it as ours allows the adding of a chutney or parang rhythm or a dholak or a sitar or a mandolin or a cello for that matter*. [Dennis]

It is the performance that makes Rapso so intriguing, Beulah contends. Yet while acknowledging the role of performance and its artistry, she shares that she did not always support the idea of Rapso as pedagogy:

> *At first, I thought that at best it could be used for enjoyment . . . the 'riddum' of the word as opposed to the power of the word. However, during the academic year 2009–2010, I observed that our children were not as enthusiastic about reading and literature as former pupils*. [Beulah]

We both felt the need to employ the use of poetry to ignite or reignite their passion for learning. Language was so much more than reading and writing. It was about articulation, joy, confidence building, enhanced communication, collaboration, and friendship. Poetry was not simply passages to test comprehension found in examinations. It was "us," something living and vital; something to be enjoyed that made one feel alive:

> *We read and analyzed yes, but we also created our own poems and performed them along with others' works. Pupils were exposed to a variety of genres. It was an easy transition into Rap and Rapso and Calypso*. [Beulah]

Resistance to and through Rapso. Unlike Dennis with the freedom to negotiate the curriculum at university level, Beulah has to deal with resistance that could include some educators and parents:

> *When I introduced Rapso to pupils, it was at first a hard sell. I found that it was not at all known. These [Trinidadian] pupils were more aware of American and Jamaican art forms and preferred the rap that we were previously practising. Nor was it an easy sell to the adults—myself included—it is not easy to sell the idea of using local art forms as a teaching tool; the use of the vernacular being one reason for this reluctance. As a matter of*

> *fact, I was not always keen on Rapso as poetry at all until I really listened and then the rhythm in the word 'caught' me*. [Beulah]

Educators and parents alike react to the evidence from the National Test scores, contends Beulah. Having spent so many years in the classroom, Beulah can attest to the fact that Trinbagonian children are experiencing tremendous difficulty in switching from their native vernacular to the standard form of English. Standard English is the language of the books and the language of the examinations. Beulah, however, questions whether the answer to this dilemma is to be found in denying students the only form of expression some have:

> *I think not. If we are going to ask our children to express themselves orally or through writing in their own context we are automatically entering the realm of the vernacular, the language of the home, the village, the community. Children are inundated with this language at various times and especially at Carnival. It is the language of the oral tradition; the folk tales, the robber talk, the calypsos, the soca and chutney soca, and the Rapso. They sing it, they dance to it, and they enjoy it. It is communication and not something of which to be ashamed. It is the language of our Caribbean ancestors*. [Beulah]

Rapso as deficit pedagogy. Beulah's narratives highlighted a concern that the emphasis on Standard English, and the perception of the vernacular as an inferior language, might foster disrespect and the misunderstanding of local art forms and the elders that communicate them, "*especially in a time when respect is so greatly needed*":

> *I believe that what we ought to do instead is to better communicate to our students that we have two languages and that they may be appropriate to use in differing circumstances. The Standard English is important not because it is better but because it is universally understood and accepted. Thus we must become proficient enough to make the switch easily from one to the other.* [Beulah]

Beulah suggests that localized art forms should not be negated because some educators and parents might fear that utilizing them in the classroom would be counterproductive in efforts at achieving success in teaching Standard English:

> *These forms belong to us and even if we neglect them at school, children will still be exposed to them in their daily lives. So let us*

> *use poetry in our teaching/learning and let us proudly embrace and include our art forms as part of our heritage*. [Beulah]

This position is supported by Sontag (1992), who argues that native dialects are not inferior but, rather, should be celebrated as a second language that serves as a bridge to students' personal and professional development. Siegel (2008) contends that a positive use of dialects serves to motivate students and provide many critical literacy opportunities. More recently, George and Lewis (2011) asserted the need for educators to bring localized knowledge, including language use, into the classroom. This, they contend, is critical if we are to really understand the role of knowledge in our education. Seunarinesingh (2010) has identified the use of authentic texts that reflect localized knowledge as an important element in teaching language arts using Trinidad Creole as a first dialect.

Beyond the concern about using local dialect(s), there are other challenges and considerations when we begin to conceive of Rapso as pedagogy. Trinidad and Tobago, as a twin-island state of just about 1.3 million people, proudly celebrates its multi-ethnic and multi-religious society. In addition to religious objections, Beulah expresses concern about how some educators from the East Indian diaspora might respond to Rapso, with its roots in African rhythms, drumology, and artifacts: "*especially when some [members of the East Indian diaspora] seem to be having difficulties with accepting the steelband, which is the nation's national musical instrument*."

Then there is the religious element. We wonder about the readiness of fellow educators, parents, and other stakeholders to accept Rapso as a positive pedagogical tool for all:

> *Bear in mind, that there are those who still associate calypso, pan, Carnival, Chutney, Eid, Divali as belonging to the* ***other****. We still have some journeying before we embrace all that makes us Trinbagonian. And this is not limited to religion or ethnicity*. [Dennis]

Beulah reflects on the challenge of encouraging educators and parent stakeholders to recognize Rapso as another form of social consciousness on the part of the community:

> . . . *awakening consciousness to universal human condition . . . humans everywhere oppressed, dispossessed, downtrodden; not simply a black rebellion thing strengthened by the 1970 Black Power Movement*. [Beulah]

Further, Beulah adds: "*Rapso is not just about protest. It is about expressing hopes and dreams for a brighter, more just society where everyone has the right to equality and happiness*." Rapso as poetry with rhythm can be used to raise the consciousness levels of students as future citizens, many of whom function in a "*culture of silence*." She also acknowledges the possibility that some educators might see Rapso as a course in rebellion, and that it would take those educators who have broken through the silence to feel free enough to encourage others to use Rapso.

While recognizing the differing contexts that impact Beulah's use of Rapso as poetry, Dennis offered a different perspective:

> *Should we have to be given the ok to use Rapso? It's ours. It's our core feelings! The nation's core feelings. While I know there are some that might have issues with the local language or dialect as some might prefer to describe it, this is just a colonial vestige. We need to move beyond Trinbagonianese [Trinidad or Tobago Creole] as "bad English" not appropriate for school contexts*. [Dennis]

Dennis suggests that the real challenge is the attitude of the *same* people, including educators, who frown at the use of the pan in schools or churches, and the use of shirt-jacs and Nehru-cut shirts or dashikis:

> *I remember when theatre as performed by the Strolling Players which used local 'dialect' was not considered as representative of the educated theatre goers. That has certainly changed. This is not just a class issue: there is also a race issue and a potential church issue. Nevertheless this is Trinidad and Tobago and using Rapso should be no less accepted as ours. It should be welcomed along with Parang . . . and Chutney . . . .* [Dennis]

We as educators need to respond to contemporary challenges to address social inequalities, transform lives, and address diversity in education. We need to be more conscious of the role of culturally responsive teaching and citizenship education in a multicultural society:

> *Certainly to make Rapso acceptable, and in the interest of our anthem's insistence and determination that every creed and race should find an equal place, there must also be a readiness to embrace and infuse into our education other art forms which embrace our cultural diversity*. [Beulah]

One solution to the problem of failure in Standard English could be found in giving more exercises in code-mixing, a form of code-switching

(Cheng & Butler, 1989), to support what Youssef (1996, 2004) terms our cultural *varilingualism*; or, more specifically, our communicative competence on the continuum of basilectal, masolectal, and acrolectal Creole, and Standard English in specific and appropriate social situations. A strategy she uses is to sometimes ask students to translate a piece of writing from the vernacular to the standard, and vice versa. For example, students can be asked to rewrite this piece of Rapso into Standard English:

> I come to drink from yuh horn ah plenty
> For right now ah say meh belly empty
> I come to drink from yuh horn ah plenty
> For right now ah say meh belly empty
> They belly full but we hungry
> An right about now we angry
> An the reason that we angry
> Is because we belly hungry
> A hungry man, is a angry man
> Ah just want yuh to understand
> Yuh know they say empty bag can't stand
> A hungry man is a angry man (3 Canal, 2009)

Similarly, Beulah notes:

> *This moves a poetry lesson into the realm of grammar lesson. These types of activities are practical examples in curriculum integration and can generate lots of enjoyment especially if they are done in groups and pupils are afforded the opportunity for sharing with their peers*. [Beulah]

Going even further in this exploration, Dennis has used 3 Canal's "Boom up History," Shadow's "Poverty is Hell," and Ella Andall's "Missing Generation" for critical analysis, and as Rap and Rapso [without the accent] with his graduate course "Diversity and Advocacy in Education":

> *Once we paraphrase the lyrics to ensure that they understand the terms and explore the contexts, I find my students to be most engrossed and engaged. They have volunteered the lyrics of popular rap and American pop songs and we have found it to be a powerful means of mobilizing class community and a sense of advocacy and appreciation for the importance of social change*. [Dennis]

Influence on Pedagogy

Beulah shares her perspective, after decades of teaching, that many teachers who are faced with open, overcrowded classes focus on completing the syllabus and successful completion of the exam. Discipline and productivity are the overall goals, and as such the key pedagogical tools are control and power. Her concern is that with the emphasis on discipline and productivity, we run the risk of "silencing" the student and stunting his/her growth. As part of the responsive process, she shares:

> Cut out the tongue
> So that he cannot speak
> Cut off the hands
> So that he can no longer write
> Cut off the feet
> So that he cannot walk the distance
> It takes to complete the journey
> To freedom.
> Squeeze him into submission
> Then press him into the mould
> Of the acceptable child
> Chain his mind
> Let him not explore nor analyze
> Or think higher thoughts
> Tell him to shut up
> Keep him even as you are
> Silent in the face of ills
> Rejoice that you have made him
> Into the image of yourself. [Beulah]

It is this concern that pushed Beulah from her poetry being personal to her readiness to use poetry, choral speaking, Rapso, and any other pedagogical tools to harness the creativity of the students she interacts with.

For Dennis, his concern is that there are increasing numbers of persons becoming teachers, even special education teachers, who have no *hunger* for learning, and no *fire* to become advocates or to empower marginalized students. Dennis sees this attitude that "*It's just a job*" as a threat to quality education. He is inclined to challenge his teacher-education candidates to review their philosophical bases, their understandings of the purpose of education, and their readiness to see the "other" as partners. He pushes for their recognition of their privilege;

even challenging them to be experts of their own learning. Here, Dennis too shares a poem:

> *Differing Perspectives on Teaching and Learning*
>
> I came to this place to teach teachers
> to help with their liberation
> to inspire towards a position
> where students are not subjects but partners
> I travelled across the sea, over mountains
> from a multi-coloured to a white world
> from the heat to a cold
> to share that learning is not a cup but a fountain
> yet you like the forest I flew from
> want me to be Papa Bois protector . . . invigilator
> assuming that you the learner
> must learn the rhythm without beating the drum [Dennis]

Our concern for our students goes beyond that of their schooling, toward a broader concept of education. These two reflective and responsive pieces of poetry offer insight into how, as researchers, we each connect our practice and our personal perspectives, while always holding the concerns and interests of our students at the forefront of our lesson planning and instructional strategies. Poetry and Rapso, as poetry in the classroom, have not only diversified our classroom activities, but have also enriched our understanding of effective and meaningful teaching and learning.

Wider Applications: Citizenship Education and Social Justice

The inspiration to use localized poetic expressions is also a manifestation of concern, and even anger, about the role of education in personal and academic liberation. We both, coming from working-class homes and being first generation university-educated, have a strong sense of the role of educators and education in providing hope to students in depressed or socio-economically disadvantaged communities.

We strive to give voice to our students, so that they might illustrate their own need for social justice. Here, Beulah shares a poem from one of her students as an example of this type of expression. She was a Standard 4 [Grade 5] student who felt keenly that one comment to a friend should not merit the wrath of her former teacher and the embarrassment of being made to stand out. One of the sad things about

this poem was that ‘sir’ [the teacher] died later that year and the students of the class were very distraught. Beulah adds: “*I don’t know how she coped with his death. I did ask the class to express their feelings in writing but she did not turn in any*.”

A Sad Day

I spoke in class to my friend today,
It was something simple that I had to say,
Sir saw me,
Called me, and made me stand up,
I felt like a little wet pup.
Facing the wall, I wanted to cry
I felt so sad; I just wished I could fly,
Away to you Lord, who see everything,
And can understand why I did such a thing.
I hated sir then, did not like him at all,
Because all my friends saw me there by the wall
I felt tired and ashamed all by myself
And I really wished Lord that you would send sir away.
But you don’t want us to hate anyone,
You want us to obey and love everyone,
Especially Sir, who Mummy says loves me,
So I forgive him, Lord,
That I may be happy ©*MW*

Using Rapso in the classroom as more than a musical interlude is only the first step in the exploration of its potential to be the voice of a new generation. As students find lyricism within challenging life experiences and understand *the power of the word,* they can become both powerful orators and actors for social change. We find Rapso to be a dynamic means of presenting, expressing, engaging with, and constructing transformative knowledge. We expect that our initial analysis will bring critical perspectives to the discussion table, and believe that in sharing our experiences and voices as educators, other teachers will be motivated to utilize Rapso and other local and localized poetic approaches to engage and empower learners. This conversation can extend beyond the Caribbean into any community discussing the use of the vernacular, or other localized expressions and art forms, in education.

Conclusion

We see Rapso as a Trinbagonian representation of spoken word. It is performance poetry that simultaneously builds on and enriches the art form. For many of us, the traditional sonnets of English class seemed so far removed from our realities, that a chance to explore multiple forms of poetry would have provided a more well-rounded literary experience; Rapso is a form of poetry that bridges the classical and the cultural.

Using Rapso in the classroom should not be any more complicated than selecting any other content for the class. Institutional support is welcome but not a necessary part of the successful classroom application of Rapso. The way that Rapso can be used in the classroom depends on the objectives for the course, but once these objectives are set, it is not difficult to find ways to use multiple poetic forms to achieve them. It can be used if the desire to do so is there. Teachers may not be able to use it in their classes every week, but they can include it as a form of the written art when considering individual pieces for inclusion. Due to some of the uniquely cultural messages in Rapso, its relevance in Caribbean classrooms is clear. Once we discard the perception that foreign authors and literature are more important, Rapso and other local literary forms would no longer be relegated to Carnival time but would be infused throughout our curriculum as a unique art form.

Education is more than just about the content students need to gain certification for employment or further study; it can also be a form of personal and political commentary for disenfranchised youth, and a space of openness and freedom. Rapso, in turn, can be used for far more than just the exploration of the artistry of the written form; it has both the potential as an art form to foster space for teaching and learning and for unpacking social practice. Teachers and learners can investigate knowledge construction, and how and why knowledge is legitimized by the dominant culture of the European ideal. Rapso is the voice of social justice spoken in the language of the common man. Making the use of Rapso in the classroom inclusive of all macro and micro cultural groups can be instrumental in fostering the types of intellectual resistance needed for the continued development of a united, just, and equitable society.

The narratives reveal poetry and Rapso as poetry as very much alive in popular culture. We acknowledge that some stakeholders might be resistant to Rapso as a curriculum initiative because of its association with “resistance,” as this could prove to be a distracting element when students should be fully engaged in academic activities. These distractions, though, can be monitored and directed by teachers as they

focus on the objectives of the activity. Another perspective sees Rapso as a dynamic means of presenting, expressing, engaging with, and constructing transformative knowledge. It is not just rooted in African culture; it is Trinbagonian. Rapso continues to evolve, blending different rhythms and representations, while essentially maintaining its mission for advocacy and social change. We want to extend this to citizenship education.

Self-study was particularly helpful toward this goal as it encouraged us to investigate the self and how it relates to our pedagogy:

> It is only when you change the lens through which you view student learning—or your own practice—that you discover whether a new focus is better or worse. But if you never change the lens, you limit your vision. (Costa & Kallick, 1993, p. 49)

Using an autoethnographic lens to look at our professional practice and personal values within an educational context created the space for us to expand this exploration within the broader context of local and even global society. Like Loughran (2004), we find that the use of self-study created:

> a focal point for those pursuing a better knowledge of their particular practice setting and the work of those with a concern for teaching and learning in parallel fields (such as reflection, action research, teacher research, participant research and practitioner research). (p. 9)

Without the addition of our personal experiences we would have been unable to examine the ways in which Rapso is (and can be) manifested and utilized beyond our classrooms and comfort zones. This combination was in fact vital to our ability to explore Rapso's potential as more than artistic representation.

We all [Beulah, Dennis, and Dyanis] share our pleasure with having the opportunity to reflect collaboratively as co-researchers, friends, poetry lovers, and teachers committed to student-centred, culturally responsive pedagogy. The experience facilitated much reflective practice, celebration, and opportunity for change and renewal. In sharing our stories and discussing the implications of the use of poetry and Rapso in our teaching contexts, we have found an element of motivation and sustenance. We propose to continue using Rapso as a pedagogical tool that facilitates greater levels of engagement by students, a dynamic interactive approach to presenting content to students, and a means by which students can memorize key information, demonstrate their learning, and advocate on behalf of themselves and others.

We anticipate that this self-study could be used to further explore the relevance of and challenges to culturally responsive pedagogy, bringing needed focus to the role of citizenship education and social justice teaching and learning in multiculturally rich countries like Trinidad and Tobago. Further, we believe that in sharing the experiences and voices of these educators, we will be expanding and sharing knowledge (Trotman & Kerr, 2001), and that other teachers will be motivated to utilize Rapso and other localized poetic approaches to engage learners. Reflections should always bring positive change:

> *Looking back at the pleasure that poetry has always brought to my life inspires me to want to share more of that love and to encourage other teachers to do so. We who have had such a rich exposure should, if we are in place to do so, try to promote poetry as a great teaching tool. So come let's read to them a poem.* [Beulah]

We conclude with a collaborative piece:

> Learned and still learning friends
> and companions
> This is a son and two daughters
> of the notorious rambunctious
> scurrilous mischievous
> Papa Lexicon
> King of the Pleasure Readers
> or so yesterday he called himself.
> Please do not confuse us
> with our cousin
> Peirrot Grenade or further
> Forest keeper, Uncle Papa Bois.
> We're not here for scaring
> Nor despairing
> but for sharing
> how this paper
> through collaborating
> strengthened us!
> We rediscovered hope
> lost in 'plantation' schooling,
> Respect for the 'Other'
> diverse learners *inclusive*.
> Using emails and texts
> We remembered
> Our role to inspire

young citizens with joy of reading.
Time was scarce . . . and there was
no shortage of
Frustrations on finding
Emergent themes that improve teaching
Collective narratives exploring
Cultural ties
as our Nation sighs . . .
'Signs of the Times'.

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