Cultural Studies: A Space for Education
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"The work that cultural studies has to do is to mobilize everything that it can find in terms of intellectual resources in order to understand what keeps making the life we live, and the societies we live in, profoundly and deeply anti-humane." (Stuart Hall, 1992, p.11)

The Conference on Cross-Culturalism and the Caribbean Canon which opens at The University of the West Indies (UWI) on Wednesday, January 7th will bring together people from different countries of the world to present issues and practices related to the culture of the Caribbean. One possible area of discussion that holds tremendous promise is the importance of Cultural Studies to education in the Caribbean.

Major aims of Cultural Studies include the interpretation of cultural phenomena and making interventions of various kinds so as to positively transform the lives of persons within different cultural groups who, historically, have been silenced and disempowered in the societies of which they form a part. According to Hytten (1998), those aims are supported by a commitment to disempowered populations, and by the belief that academic work should have tangible and meaningful real-world impacts.

The most cursory examination of educational issues facing Trinidad and Tobago and, indeed, the wider Caribbean, will make it clear that the majority of our primary and secondary school students are among those persons who can make the greatest claim to being silenced and disempowered in Caribbean societies. Consequently, Cultural Studies has a significant role to play in helping educators to understand more clearly some of the cultural phenomena that have helped to silence our students and make their school experience "inhumane," and also in proposing models of education that might address the urgent problems we have identified so often, the solutions for which still seem so far beyond our reach.

The emergence of Cultural Studies in education can partly be attributed to the need for educators to provide students—and their teachers—with better opportunities to relate what has traditionally been presented as "schooled knowledge" to their own situations and experience.

Thus, Cultural Studies should expose stakeholders to ideas about the circumstances and social institutions that have formed the context for the development of various cultural practices, including the practice of education. It may require, for instance, that rigorous questions be asked about the reasons for the continued insistence by curriculum policy makers and developers in Trinidad and Tobago on organizing the curriculum almost entirely around traditional structures of the disciplines. This approach is utilized even when it is clear that a different mode of curriculum organization may meet their needs more effectively, since with the coming of universal primary and secondary education the profile of our students has changed drastically.

It proposes that we should begin to make cogent inquiries about how unequal relations of power in the society are perpetuated through the structure of knowledge within the existing curriculum, and how, by representing students' actual cultural capital as somehow inadequate, and by convincing students of this "reality," we help to develop self-fulfilling prophecies of academic failure.

Another important related educational issue that a Cultural Studies in education programme must address is the issue of the kinds of bias operating within our society that cause us to continue to classify some students as operating from a deficit—the assumption that is so often manifested, even in discussions among trained professionals in the field of education, that students come into our schools from cultures that are somehow inferior. We assume, for instance, that their language is not good enough; that their understanding of canonical curriculum genres is inadequate; or that the knowledge and practices they bring from their communities of origin are "odd" at best, and, at worst, may corrupt other children whose cultural capital is more acceptable to us.

Work in Cultural Studies in education must substitute, for perceptions of deficit, a more determined attempt to understand, for example, the actual language and literacy development practices of the communities from which our students come, and to decide how our understandings about such practices might inform our attempts to develop pedagogies and programmes to foster academic literacy.

In doing so, we should also try to understand what issues of identity become important when we insist that proficiency in English be developed in classrooms where both students and teachers are members of a range of cultural sub-groupings, and are also speakers of Caribbean English Creoles. We must attempt to learn how such identity issues help to shape our students' responses to existing programmes of language and literacy development, and to shape the understandings about literacy that they construct.

In fact, we may need to redefine concepts such as "proficiency in English" in a way that will reflect a clearer appreciation of the complexity of language use in a range of Caribbean Creole contexts, so as to acknowledge the subtler communications issues that our students effectively deal with every day. Research projects on possible intersections between popular culture and language and literacy development need to be established that will shed further light on these issues.

Cultural Studies in education should also guide the appraisal of attempts being made to develop pedagogical approaches that may more effectively create bridges between the knowledge students develop within their communities and the academic knowledge that they are expected to develop in school. For instance, what sort of spaces are we creating for popular culture and folk culture in the curriculum? And when we do create such spaces, how do our students respond?

Finally, Cultural Studies in education will need to focus on projects in education that take place outside of programmes for formal schooling. Since we acknowledge the need for

lifelong learning, it is vital that we understand what happens at other sites where effective learning takes place, and that we determine what sorts of provisions we can make to maintain continuity between the learning process as it occurs at these sites and the learning experiences that we propose when we plan formal education.

Some projects such as these are already being conducted by individual researchers, at the School of Education in St. Augustine and elsewhere. However, opportunities need to be created for these researchers to work collaboratively with each other, and with researchers in other disciplines, so as to extend knowledge and develop theories that will inform our educational practice. This is the promise of Cultural Studies. The Conference that begins tomorrow should contribute significantly to the dialogue that must ensue.

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