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An Evaluation of the Need for Increased Cultural Literacy in Trinidad and Tobago

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Abstract

This thesis explores the value in E.D. Hirsch's ideas on Cultural Literacy, from the widening of literacy definitions to including Cultural Literacy in national curriculum. His theories are applied to a Caribbean context by using Trinidad and Tobago as a case study of a culturally diverse nation with a colonial past. This Caribbean context is explored to flesh out the validity of the concept of Cultural Literacy while using underperformance of students in reading comprehension criteria as justification of including Cultural Literacy into national curricula. By engaging in discourse analysis and forming linkages between literacy data sets, expert evaluations, and theory, this thesis establishes the need for increasing Cultural Literacy in Trinidad and Tobago.

Key terms: cultural literacy, literacy, education, educational reform, post-colonial context

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Introduction

Rationale

Cultural Literacy is a term coined by E. D. Hirsch in 1987, referring to the aptitude to understand and participate fluently in a certain culture. He used the term to infer that just as literate persons are fluent in reading and writing, culturally literate persons should be fluent in their cultural heritages, histories, literature, art, politics and so on. He viewed the purpose of Cultural Literacy as arming citizens of a nation with contextual background knowledge necessary for deeper communication skills, needed for modern life (Hirsch 1). But more recently, within the field of cultural and literary studies, Cultural literacy is defined as an approach to or understanding of the social and cultural phenomena that shape one's existence - bodies of knowledge, arenas of social action, individuals or groups, and of course cultural artefacts, including texts. It is a manner of looking at social and cultural issues, particularly issues of mobility and power dynamics, through the lens of critical thinking. It is a way of discovering and establishing sense, by looking at the textuality, fictionality, rhetoricity and historicity of things. It is part of the general movement of interdisciplinarity within humanities and between humanities and other disciplines, but it is a unique activity within that larger movement (Segal 68). In other words, Cultural Literacy is a precise way of engaging in critical thinking; in a manner which is grounded in cultural knowledge, specifically its socio-historical contexts.

Historicity, as a component of Cultural Literacy, has particular importance and relevance in the Caribbean context; the Caribbean being a place born of past slavery and indentureship under colonization and hewn from contemporary economic migration under globalization, having had its histories corrupted and warped by the colonial gaze. Historicity refers to the historical context of socio-cultural phenomena; having its narratives scrutinized and analysed

within the context of contribution and influence towards current trends and circumstances in society (Stewart 2).

Unravelling aspects of historicity and its uses, are pertinent to its use in cultural problem-solving. Trinidad and Tobago is plagued with many ills, namely racism, violence, corruption, crime, economic strife, lack of investment in creative industries and the perpetuation of value systems that do not serve all. It can be said that to begin solving these problems cultural change must be undertaken. This thesis proposes that Cultural Literacy must be part of the discourse of development and an essential device for implementing positive cultural change to this effect.

According to Frantz Fanon, “Man is what brings society into being. The prognosis is in the hands of those who are willing to get rid of the worm-eaten roots of the structure” (4). Simply put, in order to improve on our society in Trinidad and Tobago, we must first understand how it came to be this way. This thesis suggests that Cultural Literacy is the key to instigating such change, and a pedagogical view of Cultural Literacy and hence implantation into school curricula in Trinidad and Tobago, is a valid means of cultural intervention for the purpose of creating cultural change in the long term through education. This would allow for the targeting of the nation’s youth, the leaders of tomorrow and future of the nation. According to UNESCO’s website, “Education is the primary agent of transformation towards sustainable development, increasing people’s capacities to transform their vision for society into reality. Education for sustainable development teaches individuals how to make decisions that consider the long-term future of the economy, ecology and equity of all communities”.

While attempts to reform secondary school curriculum by including considerations for diverse cultural experiences have been made under the Secondary Education Modernisation Programme (SEMP), there is still much to be done to this end. Nevertheless this thesis will

explore what is needed much beyond cultural diversity inclusion in school curricula in Trinidad and Tobago, in the form of Cultural Literacy. Furthermore, this thesis puts forward that the definition of literacy itself needs to be expanded beyond reading skills to comprehension and contextual understanding, which is where Cultural Literacy comes into play.

Culture itself is an engine for sustainable development, contributing to a sound, feasible, economic sector through income generation and decent employment, and making it possible to address the economic and social dimensions of poverty in the context of cultural heritage and cultural and creative industries. However, the ramifications of harnessing the power of Culture go far beyond economic benefit.

The utility of Cultural Literacy is attributed to the power of Culture itself. Culture is not just a promoter but a vehicle of human development. In this vein, the compellingly rich cultural diversity found in Caribbean nations, is of tremendous value. Cultural Literacy is an integral part of achieving such a feat of development as it equips persons with knowledge of self, respect for others, sense of pride and self-appreciation, sense of openness, and empowerment (García 56). More specifically, it would empower persons with the discerning eye necessary to navigate the formidable legacies of hierarchical and racial stratification in post-colonial Trinbagonian society. These critical thinking skills are important in preventing youth from absorbing and assimilating the existing paradigms that result in our societal ills, in the hopes that they can go on to create a better future for Trinidad and Tobago.

In recent years concern over critical thinking skills have increased as the demands of coping with twenty-first century issues have grown (Uribe-Enciso 80). Paul (24) argues that challenges faced in human life are complex and multifaceted and hence, critical thinking is the only way to effectively solve them. Taking this into consideration, a system of education that

facilitates critical thinking development must be promoted. This thesis puts forward that Cultural Literacy is a critical thinking component, and hence should be included as an important consideration in Education system curricula.

This is particularly important in facing the adverse effects of Globalisation and Neo-colonialism. This thesis aims to highlight the need for an increase in Cultural Literacy of the population of Trinidad and Tobago in order to combat these ills for the sustainable development of the nation and actualisation of an idealistic society. Hopefully, recognition of the sheer importance of Cultural Literacy would influence policy-making, educational practices, and cultural change, breaking down social and cultural boundaries, to enable future thinkers to effectively wield soft power for the purpose of creating positive changes in all facets of society.

Thesis Statement

Within Trinidad and Tobago, it can be argued that there is great need for an increase in Cultural Literacy, as it is necessary for producing critically thinking citizens and effecting long term sustainable development of the nation and this increase can be achieved by injecting Cultural Literacy in the Education System.

Parameters

This thesis focuses on establishing Cultural Literacy as a missing component in the Education System of Trinidad and Tobago, with specific attention to English Language teaching and literacy at the Primary and Secondary School levels. A socio-cultural approach is taken in churning the information at hand, with a perspective grounded in a post-colonial context. E.D. Hirsch's views are used as a theoretical framework for justifying the need for educational reform in Trinidad and Tobago, with Cultural Literacy at the core.

Historical Background

Trinidad and Tobago, like the rest of the Caribbean archipelago and the continental lands that encompass the edge of the Caribbean Sea, have a shared history distinguished by the political, economic, social and cultural dynamics of a plantation economy and colonial priorities (García 56). It is crucial that the effects of historical forces be recognised as thriving in the contemporary Caribbean setting.

The ontological effects of colonialism on the Caribbean are quite profound. From re-discovery onwards, the influence of Europe has been pervasive. Amerindian populations were devastated by colonial impact and exploitation; Pre-Columbian economies were eradicated or relegated by mercantilism, primarily in the form of the sugar plantation; and the social order was reconfigured to the colonists' visions of order of racial stratification based upon white supremacy.

The multi-cultural or multi-ethnic historical facets of Trinidad's social stratification have ensued in its contemporary "plural-yet-divisive" modern profile in this post-colonial society, instead of resulting in a cosmopolitan society. This thesis theorizes that the lack of understanding among Trinidad and Tobago's population, of the colonial remnants embedded in culture, directly results in a lack of unity and other serious social problems, such as racism, discrimination, inequality, poverty.

One of the reasons for this lack of Cultural Literacy lies in the legacy colonialism has left in the education system of Trinidad and Tobago. This system would have first been developed by the British, while still under their rule. In the post-emancipation period, the policies in education attempted by the British government and more so by the Trinidad government formed an integral part of a deliberate effort to strengthen "English civilization" in the colony. In fact Norrel

London explained that the overall goal of the English curriculum in colonial times was to prime students to function as “good colonials”. English language was given importance as a subject, as it was a chief tool for sustaining British hegemony over the minds of its colonized people. A strong commitment to the principles that formed the English curriculum in those days has been continued in post-colonial Trinidad and Tobago (London 288-289).

Borne of colonisation, our Education system in Trinidad and Tobago perpetuates the mastery of the Western Academic canon, when it should be striving to enable learners to critique this canon. Such critical thinking practice would empower learners to perceive themselves as having agency in society. Furthermore, the current Primary and Secondary school curricula lack potent sociocultural contexts for major Festivals celebrated in Trinidad and Tobago. This could be seen almost as a form of censorship, embedded in a system designed to produce a well-behaved, compliant, workforce, unquestioning of authority. One may go as far to say that an uninformed population is an easily controlled one.

Such historical realities which have shaped the way society exists today must be learnt, especially to prevent internalisations of colonial perspectives and hence combat the loss of vital contexts of power dynamics and the deliberate exploitations that Caribbean ancestors were subjected to.

West Indian history contains many examples that illustrate the core values of colonial governance. The happenings of brutality during indentureship alone illustrates the emergent construction of a system of disciplinary practices and constituent abuse of its subjects, As a way of testing the new limits of efficient and effective conduct, the state-orchestrated indentureship scheme aimed to reflect the terms and conditions of freedom in early post-emancipation society (Kerrigan 16).

The period between 1838 and 1848 marked a crucial time of experimentation with strategies of rule in order to consolidate projects of freedom and moral policing. This meant constant struggle between planters and colonial administrators for refinement of methods of controlling labour. According to transcripts of the National Archives in the United Kingdom of case CO 29151 153: Mr. Wilkinshaw's Ill-treatment of Coolies (1848), maltreatment and abuse on Wilkinshaw's part was seen by him as measures for "encouraging obedience". His abuse of labourers benefitted the state as his defence was based on his actions being framed as disciplinary techniques. Violence was a measure in preserving colonial social order. This is one case in an intensive, extensive legacy of suffering, neglect, misery and violence inflicted upon peoples brought to the Caribbean to be exploited for labour, for the purpose of economic gain of those in power (Kerrigan 17).

The very economic system brought here through colonisation, capitalism, is one grounded in exploitation of labour for the purpose of enriching the minority in power. This legacy can be seen in the exploitation of the nation's fossil fuel resources while blatantly ignoring the advice of economists to diversify the economy. This inherent problem in post-independence governance is rooted in a style of leadership and rule grounded in corruption. Corruption is the epitome of self-serving practice at the expense of others. Such values in political leadership can be attributed to the colonial past. The historical subjugation to such rule has been assimilated to the extent that it is increasingly being emulated. It is because of this trend that critical thinking is particularly crucial tool that future leaders in Trinidad and Tobago must have, for the creation of a better future.

Objectives

- To establish the importance of Cultural Literacy
- To affirm the need for Cultural Literacy within core curricula in education systems in Trinidad and Tobago
- To explore a definition of Cultural Literacy with strong relevance to the Caribbean and Trinidad and Tobago

Methodology

The approach taken in this thesis is one of an exploratory case study, grounded in an historical and socio-cultural context, with a strong pedagogical view. It engages in discourse analysis surrounding Cultural literacy as it applies to accomplishing long term cultural change in Trinidad and Tobago, through inclusion in the Education System. This thesis seeks to justify that Cultural Literacy should be included in Educational curricula in Trinidad and Tobago, and proposes that Cultural Literacy is a missing component that can potentially increase the comprehension skills performance levels of students for the purpose of increasing their critical thinking skills. It draws connections between existing research findings, theories and expert perspectives, through discourse analysis on pedagogical views of Cultural Literacy; this involves a mixed approach in connecting trends in quantitative data surrounding literacy performance in schools in Trinidad and Tobago, with qualitative data such as the conceptual framework of E.D. Hirsch's theories on Cultural Literacy, and professional insights from oral interviews with experts. Interviews with experts in the Education field who conduct research crucial to this thesis were interviewed to obtain their professional opinions on Cultural Literacy integration into national curricula. Hence experts selected for interview were Dr. Lemoy Petit-Hunte, Literacy

and Professional Development Coach and Reading Intervention Specialist, and Dr. Paulson Skerrit, Lecturer at the School of Education, University of The West Indies.

This mixed approach is applied in order to validate the hypothesis that there is in fact great need for increasing the level of Cultural Literacy in Trinidad and Tobago. This thesis also proposes that further research on techniques of how to include Cultural Literacy in Curricula must be done in order to determine effective methods of student learning, as well as, a Dictionary of Cultural Literacy of Trinidad and Tobago be established.

Chapter Outline

Chapter 1: Conceptual Framework

This chapter uses E.D. Hirsch's work on Cultural Literacy as a foundation upon which to expand understanding of literacy itself while looking at the usefulness of Hirsch's theories and its relevance in Trinidad and Tobago.

Chapter 2: Cultural Literacy and Pedagogy in Trinidad and Tobago

Here Cultural literacy is looked at as a component of critical thinking skills, for which there is increasing demand for including in Education curricula (Uribe-Enciso 80). E.D. Hirsch's views on the importance of Cultural Literacy in a nation are used for galvanizing the notion that targeting youth for this measure of cultural intervention would be an effective one. Connections between comprehension skills as a literacy component and Cultural Literacy are drawn in order to establish Cultural literacy as a missing component in educational considerations. This chapter seeks to establish Cultural Literacy as a missing link in increasing performance of students in comprehension skills, which in turn feeds critical thinking skills.

Chapter 3: Conclusion and Recommendations

This chapter discusses the relevance of a deepened and widened definition of Cultural Literacy as it applies to a Caribbean context and recommends further study be conducted on how to effectively include Cultural literacy at the core of Educational Reform. It also recommends that a Dictionary of Cultural Literacy be developed by Caribbean experts to serve as a starting point for students to access a body of shared knowledge (background information) to help increase comprehension skills and hence achieve a higher level of literacy, which makes for critically thinking citizens.

Chapter 1: Conceptual Framework

Cultural literacy is a term coined by E. D. Hirsch, which emphasizes the idea that reading comprehension requires not just formal decoding skills but also wide-ranging background knowledge. His seminal book *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*, brought forward critical arguments against the pure emphasis on teaching of formal reading skills in literacy training. His work has deconstructed the concept of literacy and established a need to go beyond teaching the mechanical skills of reading: he defined Literacy as understanding what is read, which requires relevant background knowledge on the subject matter at hand (Hirsch et al. x).

In Trinidad and Tobago, there has been a stark focus on eliminating illiteracy. The literacy rate, according to the United Nations Educational, Science Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) 2010 survey, is at 98.7% in persons 15 years and older. While the ability to read and write in a population is a basic human right that all must possess (Roux 3), Hirsch's work on Cultural Literacy demonstrates need for educational reform in Trinidad and Tobago. There is much merit in going beyond the ability to pronounce words and recognize their literal meaning. This involved first expanding or evolving our understanding of the term literacy.

It goes without saying that reading is the most important academic skill. However, in Trinidad and Tobago, our understanding of literacy and reading are limited to the mechanical skills of pronouncing words and memorizing their literal meaning. But the aim of reading is communication, and shared meanings are essential for communication. He sustains that such background knowledge is what facilitates comprehension. Hirsch's Dictionary of Cultural Literacy is meant to facilitate such a body of shared meanings. Hirsch portends that Cultural Literacy, unlike expert knowledge, is access to a body of knowledge that enables persons to

understand each other and the background information of how things came to be what they are now. *The Dictionary of Cultural Literacy* developed by Hirsch and his colleagues was intended to be an evolving body of information that is useful and worth preserving, that every American should know. The purpose of such a list of definitions, which focused on cultural understanding and background knowledge of terms, has been described by Hirsch as priming members of American society to engage in its public discourse. Such information enables persons to comprehend what is written in the daily newspapers, news reports, what is said by leaders and politicians, and begin unpacking layers of meaning in popular art forms (Hirsch et al. x-xi). A culturally literate public makes for informed voters, who can elect officials and leaders based on merit and performance, for the good of the nation, rather than be manipulated by basal factors such as blind party loyalty.

There are German, Dutch, Swedish versions of the dictionary, each having been adapted to its own relevant national language and culture. The people of these national communities understand that a shared language and shared values contain intrinsic value and are not only important in communication but also in preserving historical contexts and layers of meaning in expressions of language (Lagerspetz 1). Hirsch's ideas on Cultural Literacy should also be adapted to the Caribbean context in order to flesh out the full usefulness or potential for the region of Trinidad and Tobago. While the definition of the term Cultural Literacy has changed since Hirsch first coined the term, there is a need for widening and deepening its definition for a Caribbean context. This thesis puts forward that in this age of information, globalisation and competing, political, media narratives, Cultural Literacy is an incredibly important tool that each citizen should be equipped with.

While Hirsch's views offer much to be considered, many reviewers viewed his dictionary as a controversial work (Shamshayooadeh 273). This dictionary listed over 5,000 facts pertaining to American heritage that Hirsch and his colleagues believed every American should know. Within the heated debate over the dictionary, it has been referred to as a "narrow list of majority-based cultural histories" (Shamshayooadeh 274). There is ongoing deliberation over the benefit of contextual knowledge inherent to process-based learning, versus simple fact retention, which such an "essential" list was accused of representing. Even though his views are considered narrow by some, it has since progressed to speak to multicultural sensitivity and understanding. As it pertains to education in the United States of America, many experts agree that creating Cultural Literacy is vital within the modern-day classroom, in that the expanding diversity of the student population requires understanding and appreciation of others' lived experiences, foundations and cultures (Shamshayooadeh 273). However, those who accused Hirsch's work of consisting of methods that exacerbate the problem of superficial learning, too easily overlooked the main points of his efforts. His works actually emphasizes impressing the importance of background knowledge in building the comprehension and hence communication levels of persons. In fact, he strongly believed that acquaintance with complex historical contexts enables students to rationalize the world around them. Applying this to a Caribbean context, this thesis claims that Cultural Literacy being introduced into the Education system a solid step in creating a society whose members can navigate creating more understanding between different ethnic and social groups. Such skill-building is vital in being able to also navigate international narratives in the context of the power dynamics of national states and the influence colonial centres on concepts of civilisation, economy and progress.

Within the field of cultural and literary studies, Hirsch's views have been built upon for the expansion of the meaning of Cultural literacy. It is now defined as an attitude to or understanding of the social and cultural phenomena that shape one's existence—bodies of knowledge, fields of social action, individuals or groups, and of course cultural artefacts, including texts: it is a way of looking at social and cultural issues, especially issues of change and mobility, through the lens of literary thinking. It is a means of discovering and establishing sense, by looking at the textuality, fictionality, rhetoricity and historicity of things. It is part of the general movement of interdisciplinarity within humanities and between humanities and other disciplines, but it is a distinctive activity within that larger movement (Segal 68). In other words, Cultural Literacy is a precise way of engaging in critical thinking; in a manner which is grounded in cultural knowledge, specifically its socio-historical contexts. This type of cultural familiarity equips one in a manner such that they can begin to operate nimbly within the bounds of particular bodies of knowledge. This is a vital pedagogical concept which our Educational institutions of Primary, Secondary and Tertiary levels must be open to. This speaks directly to the role of education in the formation of a society's citizens.

The preface of *The New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy*, which is the latest revision, states that it is expected to be continually revised and added to, with terms updated with more relevant cultural understandings. Hirsch's dictionary was hence never meant to be a static, narrow text, but rather a basic source for accessing shared public knowledge which evolves in a cumulative fashion (Hirsch et al. i-iii).

The extensive cultural diversity of Caribbean territories such as Trinidad and Tobago, through the vehicle of Cultural Literacy, presents an opportunity to facilitate increased common understanding among persons from different social and ethnic groups. This kind of

understanding would combat concerns such as racism, violence and inequality. This of course would require that each member of society possess an adequate level of Cultural Literacy, that is to say, be informed of the historical contexts from the West Indian perspective, thus giving rise to an appreciation of the experiences of our ancestors and the circumstances that shaped the society that exists today. Cultural Literacy doesn't just involve knowing and understanding the 'why', but a truthful 'why'. It involves assimilation of knowledge of the people, places, events and ideas that have shaped cultural conversation involving former colonies such as Trinidad and Tobago.

One may go as far as to say, the true potential of the term can only be fleshed out and realized in a Caribbean setting, where remnants of ancestral culture collide and coalesce. The core concept of Cultural Literacy in this thesis recognizes the complex heterogeneity of cultural origins, which is acutely relevant to Caribbean nations such as Trinidad and Tobago.

This intensive connection between Cultural Literacy and acute awareness of our past, is further echoed in Hirsch's book. In the first chapter he discusses *The Black Panther*, the official news organ of the Black Panther Party, a publication he considers "a radical and revolutionary newspaper." He indicates how it was "highly conservative in its language and cultural assumptions, as it had to be in order to communicate effectively". Some reviewers condemned Hirsch's mere mention of The Black Panther on the basis that he was "throwing a rhetorical bone or flashing his counter-hegemonic credentials to his academic audience" (22). However, this is a crucial moment in the argument, primarily as it underscores Hirsch's attempt to draw parallels between Cultural Literacy and the construction and circulation of counter-hegemonic political discourse and one's intervention into such a system. It also affirms the idea that a fundamental aspect of Cultural Literacy application is that a rather high degree of literacy in the relevant

culture-shared knowledge, cultural traditions, systems, is a pre-condition for any politically engaged, transformative or transgressive discourse. This thesis posits that the injection of Cultural Literacy be two-fold: through intervention within the Education system of Trinidad and Tobago and also through development of our own dictionary, entitled *Dictionary of Cultural Literacy: What Every Trinbagonian Should Know*.

Hirsch's works firmly plants Cultural Literacy as a grand concept that at its core increases the comprehension potential of a student. This comprehension of background knowledge is strongly identified as a component of critical thinking skills, which have been identified as crucial problem solving skills that the future generations must have (UNESCO). While many have written about Hirsch's views, there is little to no research on applying his theories to a Caribbean context, leaving a large area for new research.

Chapter 2: Cultural Literacy and Pedagogy in Trinidad and Tobago

Many substantial paradigm shifts in the thinking of those responsible for development and modification of Education Curricula in Trinidad and Tobago are required. This thesis points out two: the broadening of the definitions of literacy, and secondly the notion that Cultural Literacy is vital in education of children.

Borne of colonisation, our Education system in Trinidad and Tobago perpetuates the mastery of the Western Academic canon, when it should be striving to enable learners to critique this canon. Such critical thinking practice would empower learners to perceive themselves as having agency in society. Furthermore, the current Primary and Secondary school curricula lack potent sociocultural contexts for major Festivals celebrated in Trinidad and Tobago. This could be seen almost as a form of censorship, embedded in a system designed to produce a well-behaved, compliant, workforce, unquestioning of authority. One may go as far to say that an uninformed population is an easily controlled one (Clarke 492).

While Hirsch's views on Cultural Literacy were widely criticized, there is much that is useful to be taken from his work. Hirsch emphasized that children must be exposed to meaningful cultural content through thoughtful interaction with the content. It must not simply be an exercise in memorization, but one of internalisation. The aim is to empower students to analyse, compare, evaluate, communicate, defend, critique, invent and create. This empowerment comes from being in sync with a shared body of background knowledge, full of historical and social contexts. This involves moving away from the notion that successful education practice revolves around simply reading and recalling facts. According to UNESCO, the contemporary understanding of literacy goes "beyond its conventional concept as a set of reading, writing and counting skills, literacy is now understood as a means of identification,

understanding, interpretation, creation, and communication in an increasingly digital, text-mediated, information-rich and fast-changing world". Hirsch's works emphasizes that the way to foster the development of these attributes in children, is to inject Cultural Literacy into curricula. This does not call for only imparting background knowledge, but demonstrating and impressing upon students the importance comprehension skills. Its importance lies in the building of communication levels of persons in society in order to build a more robust society that can engage in national discourse and sound decision making.

Targeting youth in this manner through curricula, would be an essential measure in building future stronger communities and a society of critical, innovative thinkers. This type of thinking is necessary for combatting contemporary problems apart from social ills and economic issues, such as climate change (Paul 121).

2.1: Trends in Literacy Data in Trinidad and Tobago

To date, the Education System of Trinidad and Tobago has held eradicating illiteracy as a main focus. While this has been and continues to be largely successful, with literacy rates of 98.7% in persons 15 years and older, focusing on the mechanical skills of reading alone is not enough. As mentioned before, Hirsch's work stresses on the broadening and deepening of our understanding of literacy; where comprehension is stressed as an important part of literacy. A central objective of the education structure of Trinidad and Tobago (T&T) is to enable students to realise their potential as critical thinking and problem-solving members of society (Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, Ministry of Education). Comprehension is vital to learning in school and creates the scaffolding for students' imminent success. The capability to read with deep comprehension accentuates the achievement of that fundamental goal, but there are children at the primary school level in Trinidad and Tobago despite competent

decoding skills, have low comprehension. Poor comprehension skills among primary school students in Trinidad and Tobago were highlighted as a key issue based on 2013 National Test outcomes, and observations they made of classroom practices (John and Joseph 67). Additionally, in 2006 and 2011, nationally representative data on students' reading comprehension competencies which come primarily from participation in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), documented for a large proportion of Standard Three students in Trinidad and Tobago, a lack of higher levels comprehension skills, critical for interacting with written text beyond superficial levels of understanding (Petit-Hunte).

According to Dr. Paulson Skerrit, who wrote about the reading performance of Primary School students in Trinidad and Tobago, underperformance in comprehension skills seems to be the current trend. He cited Professor Harold Ramkissoon's projection that by the 2016 rollout of PIRLS assessment, Trinidad and Tobago would be above the international mean of 500. The PIRLS 2016 reading assessment specifically measured comprehension skill performance of Standard 3 students in Trinidad and Tobago, along with students from 4 other countries. Students from Trinidad and Tobago did not attain the projected scores, but instead achieved below this projection with a score of 479. While this is an increase from previous years, Skerrit states that it is not a "statistically significant" increase (Skerrit). He states that "Having participated over the 15-year period from 2001 to 2016, we have moved upwards by more than 40 points, but we managed to remain below the international reading achievement mean of 500 points. This is certainly a matter for grievous concern given the many expensive reading achievement initiatives that have been put in place over the years.

In his interpretation of the PIRLS scores he goes on to say that 80% of students are performing at the Low International Benchmark (400 points) which, by PIRLS standards, means

that our system has managed to educate majority of Standard 3 students only to a basic level of reading achievement. He has adamantly proclaimed that these standardized test scores illustrate that “much needs to be done to support the literacy development of our nation’s readers”. Dr. Lemoy Petit-Hunte agrees that the PIRLS scores are a stark underperformance and goes on to say that based on her in-situ evaluations of students of the same category in Trinidad:

Many of them can respond accurately to right there (explicit level) questions, but they experience difficulty in actively monitoring their comprehension, holding in mind referentially important information, integrating information within various parts of a text to form a coherent understanding, and evaluating information.

These are crucial reading skills valued universally in education as crucial to positive academic outcomes. (75)

She also echoed the theories of E.D. Hirsch in stating that while recognizing and pronouncing printed words is foundational in literacy, comprehension skills are vital to learning, and underscores the MoE’s goal of enabling students to fulfil their potential as critical thinkers.

2.2: A Brief Look at the Current Primary School Curriculum

In a personal interview Dr. Lemoy Petit-Hunte, she stated that the National Primary School curriculum already contained elements of Hirsch’s ideas on Cultural Literacy. She referred to a “modern” take on Cultural Literacy being likened to the concept of “Core Knowledge” which is used to communicate effectively with others. She described a Core Knowledge curricula approach as one which reflects the importance of building strong foundations of knowledge and literacy skills and explicitly addresses both skills and content knowledge development. She explains that:

There is evidence of a continuum of skills and the adding of knowledge as children transition from ECCE to Infants1 and then to each successive class within primary school education. It is premised that the early engagement of our local cohort of students in clearly identified strands of, for example, listening, speaking, viewing, reading, writing, spelling, and decoding across subject areas, lays a solid foundation via which our students can more efficiently engage in further stages of formal education. In addition to the above, the national primary school curricula of Trinidad and Tobago is broken down into three coherent levels each of which explicitly describes the outcomes desired for all children at that level and adds key knowledge and skills not unlike that constituted by Hirsch's concept of cultural literacy or Core Knowledge curricula. (Petit-Hunte)

From her explanations it can be seen that Hirsch's theories are taken in a reductive manner and applied to mainly mechanical aspects of literacy. While some elements may include cultural content, and exposure to complex language constructs, these foundations do not place a distinct focus on deeper comprehension skills.

She described Cultural Literacy in students as an "ability to read with deep levels of comprehension, express themselves effectively and efficiently in writing, and accurately understand what others are saying, factor into employability". This description is a similarly narrow take that holds employability as the main goal of the Education System of Trinidad and Tobago, when globally, producing critical thinkers is an international trend in education. Her words lend evidence to the fact that Cultural Literacy needs to be fleshed out in a Caribbean context of critical thinking.

She referenced the National Curriculum for Primary Schools in Trinidad and Tobago, as containing elements of Hirsch's theories, but these elements referenced, which were the achievement objectives that over-extrapolate reading and communication skills to "collaboration" and "leadership skills". It is however acknowledged, that such frameworks for teaching are only as successful if teachers implement them, and there is need to determine the extent to which these goals of Core Knowledge are being implemented in the classroom.

This thesis portends that the Core Knowledge approach is a good start to including Cultural Literacy in Primary Schools, but needs to include a stronger focus on comprehension skills. When asked if Cultural Literacy could increase PIRLS students- performance, she had this to say "I stress that if within the application of cultural literacy, educational focus is placed on teaching students how to comprehend and how to use comprehension -fostering and comprehension- monitoring strategies as a way of helping them develop strategic reading behaviours much like those used by skilled readers, then comprehension skills performance can be increased" (Petit-Hunte).

When Dr. Skerrit was asked the same question, he admitted that it was something he had never considered before, but that it made sense that creating means of supplying students with background knowledge would increase their comprehension skills (Skerrit).

2.3: Past Initiatives to Increase Literacy

The 2016 edition of the PIRLS Encyclopaedia acknowledged some of the well-intentioned efforts of the Ministry of Education of Trinidad and Tobago (MoE) in deploying literacy officers at select schools so teachers could benefit from additional training, as well as, conducting of national workshops to facilitate ongoing training for teachers, and the encouragement on the part of the MoE in the use of culturally relevant reading material were all

commended. Credit was also given to the Leading for Literacy Programme, launched by MoE in 2013, which provided training for teachers and principals and parents in a synthetic phonics programme.

MoE also collaborated with UNESCO, National Library and Information System Authority (NALIS) and various authors and private sponsors, in order to implement the Leading for Literacy programme, which facilitated the provision of diverse reading materials and hosting of training programmes. However it is clear to see that despite these initiatives, comprehension skills are lacking in primary school students. These initiatives also cement the fact that the understanding of literacy held in the Education System is one that prioritizes phonics and technical aspects of reading words, instead of focusing on student understanding of the meaning of what is being read. This thesis proposes that Cultural Literacy can begin to bridge the gap between reading literal words and understanding what is being communicated by them.

Aside from these efforts that targeted the Primary School level of the Education System, the Secondary Education Modernisation Programme (SEMP) was developed by experts as an initiative for curriculum reform at the Secondary level. The SEMP proposed a curriculum that claimed to consider the diverse cultural experiences of students in Trinidad and Tobago, in a manner that gave all students opportunity to develop their full potential. Patricia Worrell analysed the SEMP Language Arts Curriculum through qualitative content analysis to critique its orientation in relation to its lofty goal. She referred to a national curriculum as a formal statement of what the society in general deems important for what its young people should know and hence can be seen as a form of political discourse. This statement stresses the mere importance of well-formed national curriculum (Worrell 3-5).

This points to one challenge in curriculum development as different groups in a society fight for power over which areas of knowledge should be prioritized, as a means to actualize their political agendas. Another challenge to curriculum reform is that most persons in Trinidad society do not see the need for cultural diversity to be included at the core of curricular, as the average person has internalised the narrative that the height of academic achievement are those in line with Western academic mainstream canon. In fact Norrel London explained that the overall goal of the English curriculum in colonial times was to prime students to function as “good colonials”. English language was given importance as a subject, as it was a chief tool for sustaining British hegemony over the minds of its colonized people. A strong commitment to the principles that formed the English curriculum in those days has been continued in post-colonial Trinidad and Tobago (Worrell 6-8).

While the SEMP curriculum document attempted to identify cultural elements for inclusion, which were specific events, icons, tools, and technologies of different cultures, these elements altogether made for contracted and superficial knowledge concepts as they lacked historical contexts that pertained to ‘why’ and ‘how’. It also leaned heavily to a reductive representation of Indo-Trinidadians, as it primarily selected from the Hindu sector, while only mentioning vaguely the Muslim festivals of Eid and Hosay. Such proposed educational notions come from policy-developers who maintain uninformed positions, which in effect perpetuate social disharmony.

The SEMP curriculum attempted to include contributions of different groups in society in order to include cultural diversity knowledge, and while this is a step in the right direction, it is not enough. From a post-colonialist perspective, curriculum should be allowing students the opportunity to critique the language and literary canon, hence constructing understandings of

language and the world around them. This type of critique would allow students to understand canon in terms of how it maintains certain groups in positions of power. Such contexts attempt to empower students as citizens having agency in their society (Worrell 9-11).

Chapter 3: Conclusion and Recommendations

The ongoing focus on technical aspects of reading in English Language curricular as well as within MoE literacy initiatives can be seen as a continuation from our colonial past, where focus was placed upon pronouncing the individual word. A literate reader distinguishes the object-language's alphabet, grammar, and an adequate set of vocabulary whereas a culturally literate individual distinguishes a certain culture's signs and symbols, including its language, specific dialectic, stories, entertainment, idioms and idiosyncrasies. The culturally literate person is able to talk to and understand others of that culture with fluency, while the culturally illiterate person fails to understand culturally-conditioned insinuations, references to historical events, idiomatic expressions, jokes, names, and places. Emphasis on understanding the meaning of words or meanings that manifest when phrases are used together can be described as contextual meaning not blatantly stated, but more implied. Prioritizing this level of comprehension is of paramount importance as can be seen from comprehension scores on international standardized tests. This thesis proposes that Cultural Literacy be incorporated into the core of the curriculum so as to not only increase reading comprehension skills, but for development of critical thinking skills. The diagram below (fig. 1) illustrates these connections.

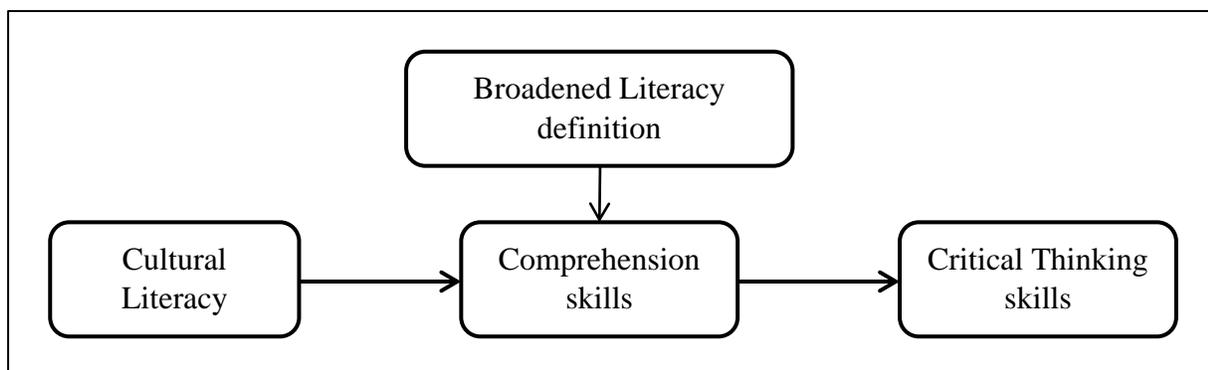


Figure 1: Concept map showing linkages between Cultural Literacy, comprehension skills and critical thinking. Source: Author

The long-term importance of critical thinking skills have been stated, needless to say, they bear particular urgency in the Caribbean context. Trinidad and Tobago is an ideal example of how the deepest depths of Cultural Literacy can be fleshed out in a Caribbean setting that comprises diverse cultures that have absorbed colonised thinking resulting in regressive educational practices. Hirsch's thoughts on Cultural Literacy were from the American nationalistic perspective, of a country with a dominant culture dealing with an increasing influx of migrants from what is considered, minority cultures. Whereas, a local perspective calls for a definition of Cultural Literacy that considers the many different cultural groups in Trinidad and Tobago being given equal space and place as they all contribute to the overall culture. This thesis implores that including cultural diversity knowledge in teaching is not enough, but Cultural Literacy can point a way forward in evolving the national curriculum for the formation of a better, more unified, society.

While many attempts have been made by MoE to reform national curriculum and improve it, they have all fallen short. This thesis recommends that further research be done in order to determine effective methods of including Cultural Literacy practice exercises into teaching. This would involve education experts across many disciplines developing a new programme for curriculum reform with Cultural Literacy as a core consideration, and then for an experimental phase of implementation of this reformed curriculum to be carried out, to ascertain the effectiveness of these measures in improving student comprehension skills.

In her interview Dr. Lemoy Petit-Hunte recommended that strategy training frameworks be implemented as a means of imbuing Cultural Literacy into the curricula. One such technique which she herself has extensively researched is called Reciprocal Teaching, which "provides

support to students as they use questioning, predicting, clarifying, and summarizing to develop comprehension within a context of collaborative discussions based on written texts, is crucial. Such a teaching and learning process has been found to assist students in developing skills in understanding both explicit and implicit meanings, using related background knowledge, attending to key information, evaluating the text for internal consistency, self-monitoring of comprehension, and generating inferences and conclusion. These are all skills demonstrated by top PIRLS performers. Ameliorating our students' higher-order comprehension skills can produce improvement in our students PIRLS performance" (Petit-Hunte).

Furthermore, this thesis also strongly recommends that a Dictionary of Cultural Literacy of Trinidad and Tobago should be written and compiled by a team of experts across many disciplines, similar to Hirsch's *The New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*, which would contain words, phrases, idioms, notable historical figures and public figures with definitions grounded in a Caribbean context, with focus on background information on each item. A similar format for Hirsch's book can be undertaken, where the book is divided into sections according to different fields or disciplines. Such a text would be instrumental in providing ease of access to years of historical context, acting to bridge misunderstandings perpetuated over the years. It would also reiterate the importance of contextual meaning when reading any text, which aids in developing critical thinking skills. In addition, Dr. Skerrit recommended that this contextual background knowledge be also made available to students through digital means. Aside from an ebook format, he explained that now that teaching and assessments are increasingly being conducted in a digital format in multi-modal ways, that comprehension passages and reading exercises can be accompanied by bits of background knowledge, accessed by clicking on icons near specific words or phrases. In this

manner students can readily access this information, such as a brief historical context or concept map, to assist them in understanding the contexts within the readings they are being exposed to (Skerrit).

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Appendix A: Interview with Dr. Paulson Skerrit

Question 1

So I read your article that was in the newspaper about the concerns on students in Trinidad and Tobago falling below average reading standards and that was based on the PIRLS 2016 reading assessment, with results being compared to projections made by Mr. Harold Ramkissoon. Considering that that assessment evaluated reading comprehension skills of students, would you agree that contextual knowledge is a vital component of comprehension skills?

Response:

It is, um but I know that is a big debate now. I was helping to work on updating of standards of reading for the NEAP , that the National Assessment for Educational Placement so their reading assessment, they asked me to comment on it and the biggest thing that came out of the recommendation was whether um there needs to be a greater effort to address cultural issues in the assessment. PIRLS joined in the debate and what they were saying was that there needs to be some systems put in place so that students can get the support they need for items that may have cultural bias, and that may affect their responding to the [comprehension] passages. Of course There were different sides to that debate because some felt teachers need to teach very explicitly how to address cultural issues when they come up, as you read a passage so you can respond to the questions. PIRLS argument was that before they sent the items they sent the items to MoE and they would have considered those items and given feedback so that they could address any cultural bias. So they didn't agree that having a blurb to click on to get some sort of explanation, you can click on it and get support you need to improve your comprehension. And those supports

would not be things tested in the passage, but they would be critical to understanding of the passage. PIRLS is saying cultural bias would not have been an issue in their assessment, as they would have sent passages to be pre-approved by MoE and get their feedback. But not everyone agrees with that but I still think that it's something that we have to be aware of because we have our unique vocabulary here we have items unique to Trinidad and Tobago, we have some phonemes that are unique to Trinidad and Tobago that are different from how things work in [Standard] English but as I said, PIRLS claims that those things were considered.

We are not living in a world where students are exposed to international cultures through television and they need to be aware and be able to read and understand information that is not culturally specific.

Question 2

In 1987 ED Hirsch coined the term Cultural Literacy and he had some strong pedegogicalviews in that he believed Cultural Literacy was lacking in the American Educational system and it encompasses contextual background knowledge to target improving comprehension skills of students. This would refer to historicity of events, icons, expressions of language. Do you think that Cultural Literacy, as Hirsch theorises, could be the missing link in the Education system in Trinidad and Tobago

Response:

His comments are very correct when it comes to what we know about the American Education system, its not very much international but I dont think our system operates the same way. I think that Teachers here use a lot of literature not specific to Trinidad and Tobago; very early on children read books that contain aspects like snow that are not specific to Trinidad and Tobago.

So while we want to be aware of the context that is not just Trinidad and Tobago don't think that we are so limiting in choice of texts materials or resources that blinds our students to what is happening abroad.

Question 3:

What about a Caribbean context of cultural literacy, are we provided enough contextual knowledge for local vernacular and historical knowledge, are we imbuing enough of that into the education system?

Response:

You're right I think we are not, having travelled across the Caribbean there are times I would be talking about a particular local fruit and people in other Caribbean countries would call it by another name. Each Caribbean country has a unique lexicon for language and we make assumptions that our cultural knowledge allows us to understand things or even our pronunciations of things as we have different creoles. So if we are not exposed to that we would have different comprehension of texts, but CSEC is Caribbean based, they may be pulling passages for their examinations that may not be written in Trinidad and Tobago and that would put students at a disadvantage. So I think I am going to agree that it is something we need to attend to.

Question 4:

And it sort of applies to historical events in trinidad as well,at the Primary and Secondary school level, when we learn about certain festivals like Hosay we may learn about it in a superficial context or at the surface level but the Hosay Riots and that context of rebellion may not be delved into. Indians and Africans were massacred in the 1884 riots and this sort

of contextual background knowledge is really important for students to understand what our ancestors went through. The post-colonial context is not really shared in school.

Response:

I agree with that, I've never given that much thought, I guess the value of teaching literacy allows for supporting that but I agree with that perspective in that teaching students to navigate that cultural landscape, it comes back to the same point of providing students with deepened understanding of the culture in becoming culturally literate. Um and teaching both reading and writing as a means for getting students to deepen their appreciation for their culture.

Question 5:

It kind of um signifies to the definition of literacy we embrace right now is more focused on the mechanical aspects of literacy, reading and writing, pronunciation, word recall, but comprehension requires so much understanding and referential knowledge, so taking that into a Caribbean context this referential knowledge could be very deep and be a lot. When we think about literate students being critical thinkers in the future, I think this historicity or contextual background knowledge is so much more important for a Caribbean context.

Would you agree?

Response:

Yes, yes I would agree.

Question 6:

One of Hirsch's books is a Cultural Literacy Dictionary that has over 5000 words expressions, historical icons and for each of these items he gives an extended definition

explanation, with background information. It's meant to be sort of like a student's companion book that students can refer to gain deeper knowledge to improve their comprehension skills. Do you think that it would be a good idea to have a Cultural Literacy Dictionary in a similar format but with a Caribbean context or specific to Trinidad and Tobago?

Response:

Cultural Literacy Dictionary?

Yes for example, if Hosay was an item in this dictionary the historical context of the riots being an example of people standing up for their right would also be there.

Response:

Yes I think so I think it would be valuable. Of course the big question is whether those things should be provided along with passages that students encounter. Now teaching and assessments are conducted in a multi-modal way where you can click on something and get a diagram, or click on something and get an explanation in a blurb and we can teach students how to get that information themselves. It goes back to the debate about the PIRLS assessment whether students should be provided with certain information but in the digital age of multimodal text, considering that a dictionary would be a large physical or digital book, I think in the passages students meet, multimodal text allows students to get that background information. To me I would like it to be integrated into digital texts. It would support students by having them embedded in digital literacy. Students can be quick with multitasking and clicking on something to get a concept web to give information in that way.

Do you think that you would consider Cultural literacy in your future research?

Response:

I think it's something that we have to investigate more especially considering the debate that came up with PIRLS assessment results.

Appendix B: Interview with Dr. Lemoy Petit-Hunte

My thesis basically aims to affirm that Cultural Literacy needs to be included in national curricula in Trinidad and Tobago. Cultural Literacy is a term coined by E.D. Hirsch in 1987 but has since been expanded upon. It basically refers to being versed in contextual background knowledge and targets comprehension skills in students. It encompasses the historicity of events and expression of language.

Question1: In your opinion could Cultural Literacy be a missing link in the national curricula of Trinidad and Tobago?

Response:

Cultural Literacy, a term coined by Hirsch (1987) and which is now commonly referred to as Core Knowledge, originally carried a national orientation to literacy in the American community pertaining to what it is that people take for granted in educative circles when they communicate with each other. Hirsch indicated that there is a set of core knowledge that certain people have the ability to utilize in understanding (what others are saying when they speak as well as written materials inclusive of the content in their textbooks), interacting collaboratively or cooperatively, and, ultimately, communicating effectively with others. Hirsch highlighted concern regarding the significant distinction between those in America who had that taken-for-granted knowledge and skills and those who did not. Consequently, cultural literacy originally stemmed

from a notion of inequity between advantaged and disadvantaged children and concern for how to create equity in education whereby all students could attain that body of core knowledge and skills descriptive of the original definition of cultural literacy.

Hirsch positioned cultural literacy as a fundamental function of communication within a democracy. Within such a political system, effective communication holds educational implications for children developing knowledge of civic duties, the quality of their interactions, as well as matters of economic fairness where, in order to earn, their ability to read with deep levels of comprehension, express themselves effectively and efficiently in writing ,and accurately understand what others are saying, factor into employability.

Similar to Hirsch's concern regarding inequity between groups or classes of students and the need to provide certain teaching and learning experiences in a certain way to help all students attain the ability to communicate effectively and thrive as citizens, the Trinidad and Tobago national curricula is underscored by the need to narrow the achievement gap among students across local spheres of neighborhoods, culture, and economic, social, religious, and ethnic diversity.

Similar to Hirsch's Core Knowledge approach to curriculum design that is steeped in putting content knowledge and skills building at the heart of every kind of school in every kind of setting, the local curricula show evidence of such an approach through a cumulative, coherent, content-specific national curricula at rural, urban and suburban school districts and at government owned, government assisted and privately owned schools (with the exception of certain primary and secondary privately owned internationally managed schools).

Hirsch's Cultural Literacy or Core Knowledge curricula approach reflects the importance of building strong foundations of knowledge and literacy skills in the early years from preschool to grade eight and explicitly addresses both skills and content knowledge development. That early start (it is premised), particularly at the preschool and elementary school level, lays the groundwork for more effective language development and future success. Similarly, the national curricula of Trinidad and Tobago exposes children as early as the preschool level to, for example, oral language, nursery rhymes, poems, finger-plays, songs, storybook reading and storytelling, listening and speaking, writing, language conventions, and general emerging literacy skills. There is evidence of a continuum of skills and the adding of knowledge as children transition from ECCE to Infants1 and then to each successive class within primary school education. It is premised that the early engagement of our local cohort of students in clearly identified strands of, for example, listening, speaking, viewing, reading, writing, spelling, and decoding across subject areas, lays a solid foundation via which our students can more efficiently engage in further stages of formal education.

In addition to the above, the national primary school curricula of Trinidad and Tobago is broken down into three coherent levels each of which explicitly describes the outcomes desired for all children at that level and adds key knowledge and skills not unlike that constituted by Hirsch's concept of cultural literacy or Core Knowledge curricula.

It is important to note that the learning experiences throughout the seven-year primary school journey focus on core content, building critical communicative and higher-order thinking skills, and helping students develop desirable dispositions for positively interacting with others, fulfilling the vision of successful students, as well as developing character and values that are central to their roles as caring, productive and responsible citizens locally, regionally and

internationally. Additionally, a continuous journey of growth, development, and learning, culminating in a readiness to more smoothly transition to secondary education, is explicitly articulated. These characteristics of the national curricula of Trinidad and Tobago are significantly similar to ideals of cultural literacy as relates to education as well as Core Knowledge Curricula.

Although our local curricula provide an abundance and detailed guidance to teachers, I believe there is need to determine the extent to which the curricula is being implemented as envisioned by the developers. This is particularly important for equitably high quality learning outcomes. There is also need to determine the extent to which our local cohort of teachers embed the teaching of critical skills within the key content they bring to or share with their students. Such a determination is important as skill objectives are most effectively targeted when they are embedded or anchored to the key content of a particular knowledge domain.

In closing, it is my opinion that although the term Cultural Literacy or Core Knowledge curricula has not been highlighted in the national curricula of Trinidad and Tobago, there is evidence of basic ideology and pedagogy of the Cultural Literacy model as championed by Hirsch.

Question 2: Given that Hirsh associated Cultural Literacy with comprehension skills, do you think that Cultural Literacy can increase comprehension skills performance in students and hence increase performance in PIRLS?

Response:

After Hirsch (1987), there are researchers who discussed cultural literacy in relation to various subjects of human and educative interests; comprehension is one of those areas. Within the 21st century, cultural literacy has grown in scope and has provided support for shifts from the

teacher-centered and heavily controlled traditional ways of providing comprehension activities to more facilitative, collaborative and student-centered teaching and learning activities where students engage in discussing , for example, their predictions about a reading material, clarifying what they do not yet understand, generate questions, and summarize chunks of texts so that the main idea is clear to them. Currently, cultural literacy, in the form of students interacting with others to create meanings and collaboratively discussing reading materials to generate and review comprehension of those materials, is a critical skill.

It is my opinion that when the 21st century concept of cultural literacy, as pertains to the development of comprehension skills, is well-aligned to theoretical underpinnings of sociocultural theory as it relates to learning, the role of metacognition in reading comprehension, and principles of the zone of proximal development and scaffolding, enhancement in students' comprehension skills performance can be realized. I stress that developing students' comprehension skills is undergirded by a strongly established theoretical base. That base indicates explicit teaching of comprehension strategies can enhance students' understanding of text (Palincsar & Brown, 1984; Rosenshine & Meister, 1994), scaffolding students in their zone/zones of proximal development is an effective tool for promoting their learning (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986; Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976) , and it is through social interaction with others in their classroom that the cognitive processes to comprehend are developed (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986).

Nationally representative data on the local cohort of Standard Three students who participated in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) (2011) revealed that statistically, although Trinidad and Tobago's students made a 6% improvement in the lower-level comprehension skills of reproducing explicitly stated information and producing straightforward

inferences, there was very little change in their struggle with interpreting, integrating and evaluating information which are three foundational higher-order comprehension skills that are crucial to proficient reading.

In closing, I stress that if within the application of cultural literacy, educational focus is placed on teaching students how to comprehend and how to use comprehension -fostering and comprehension- monitoring strategies as a way of helping them develop strategic reading behaviors much like those used by skilled readers, then comprehension skills performance can be increased. Consequently, I advocate a strategy training framework, as, for example, Reciprocal Teaching (Palincsar & Brown, 1984) that provides support to students as they use questioning, predicting, clarifying, and summarizing to develop comprehension within a context of collaborative discussions based on written texts, is crucial. Such a teaching and learning process has been found to assist students in developing skills in understanding both explicit and implicit meanings, using related background knowledge, attending to key information, evaluating the text for internal consistency, self-monitoring of comprehension, and generating inferences and conclusion. These are all skills demonstrated by top PIRLS performers. Ameliorating our students' higher-order comprehension skills can produce improvement in our students PIRLS performance.