Chapter 15

Fostering True Literacy in the Commonwealth Caribbean: Bridging the Cultures of Home and School

S. Joel Warrican
The University of the West Indies Open Campus, Barbados

ABSTRACT

This chapter takes a close look at literacy in the Commonwealth Caribbean and explores factors that contribute to its status in the region. It links the current state of literacy to historical roots of education and relates it to other educational phenomena such as democracy in education, universal secondary education and technology in education. It argues that the current reported literacy rates for the region may be misleading as evidence suggests that for years, many students have been leaving school with insufficient literacy skills. The chapter proposes that the disconnect between the home or out-of-school culture of students and the academic/school culture contributes to poor literacy development which disempowers young people, especially males. It reports on what is being done to promote literacy in the region and concludes by sharing a vision of the way forward.

INTRODUCTION

Worldwide it is acknowledge that literacy is a key determinant of development (UNESCO, 2009). A literate society is better able to contribute to the social, political, economic and cultural development of countries. Indeed, in the so-called developing world, there is a thrust to raise literacy levels among the working class and/or the “underprivileged” with a view to helping them to improve their social and economic circumstances, and by extension, those of their countries. Donor agencies that undertake assistance in such countries set a high store on literacy and annually they invest large sums of money in literacy programmes. For example, in its Millennium Development Goals, the UN included as a target for the new millennium, an increase in the proportion of children, especially girls, in the developing world learning to read and write (UN, 2006). Furthermore, UNESCO declared a decade of literacy for 2002 to 2012, and emphasis was placed on activities designed to increase the literacy profile of the poorer countries worldwide. It is in this context that much discussion was held.
on the status of literacy in the Commonwealth Caribbean. Studies were commissioned (e.g. Warrican, 2008a; Warrican, 2008b) to investigate this issue and recommendations were made. Additionally, projects were funded and governments introduced programmes to address the perceived challenges with literacy in the region.

Despite these initiatives, there is today, concern about the levels of literacy in the Commonwealth Caribbean. National assessment outcomes are scrutinized and analysed and questions are raised as to whether or not sufficient strides have been made in this area when the investments are taken into consideration. This chapter puts forward the notion that, whatever financial support is given, other factors that are deeply rooted in the systems of education continue to have a less than positive effect on the status of literacy development in the region. It links the current state of literacy to historical roots of education and relates it to other educational phenomena such as democracy in education, universal secondary education and technology in education. Importantly, this chapter discusses the impact of two cultures on the development of true literacy in the Commonwealth Caribbean. It explores the notion that these two cultures, home culture and academic/school culture, appear to be at odds with each other. As Evans (2001) points out, “some students bring to the school their own ideology, cultural forms, values and expectations that may differ according to class or ethnic group. This makes students respond to school practices, rules and requirements in ways counter to what the school expects” (p. 8). This disparity may to a large extent be contributing to poor literacy levels among young people. The resulting poor literacy levels may disempower youth, leading to their disengagement with and limited participation in the mainstream society. The chapter reports on what is being done to promote true literacy in the region and concludes by sharing a vision for the way forward towards literacy that empowers.

**EDUCATION IN THE COMMONWEALTH CARIBBEAN: ITS GENESIS**

The notion that literacy is empowering is not a recent one. The European colonizers who settled in the Caribbean and who used slave labour to keep their properties functioning knew this well and consequently, prior to emancipation, the skills of reading and writing were reserved for the ruling class. Since schooling was considered a contradiction to the system of slavery (Gordon, 1963), no formal provisions were made for educating slaves (King, 1999) and, in the Caribbean and other places in the Americas, slave owners vigorously opposed teaching slaves to read and write, sometimes treating it as a criminal offence (Dunkley, 2011; Perry, 2010; Mizell, 2010). With the signing of the declaration of emancipation, colonizers lost the ability to physically control former slaves, but to some degree, seemed to find other ways, whether consciously or otherwise, to maintain control over the lives of these individuals. This control was achieved through education.

**Educating the “Natives”: A Means of Disempowerment and Control**

It has long been established that a major purpose of education should be to help people to become critical thinkers, able to make reasoned decisions and to know right from wrong. Among other things, education should help to raise sensibilities to cultural activities (for example art, music, literature), to develop characteristics such as tolerance for human differences and empathy, and to encourage a spirit of community and cooperation. An educated society questions the status quo and calls authority figures into account for their actions and decisions. The ability to read and write contributes largely to becoming educated and education in its true sense is empowering. It is not inconceivable then, that literacy can be used
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