Chapter 17

The Role of Context in Defining Secondary Language Arts Instruction: A Cultural Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Warrican’s (2009) report on the literacy instructional implications for secondary teachers resulting from the implementation of Universal Secondary Education (USE) in the Eastern Caribbean considered secondary teachers’ perceptions of their pedagogical competence—from feelings of frustration to a growing sense of inadequacy. Meanwhile, the Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC) continues to report dissatisfaction with the delivery in English at the secondary level. This chapter offers a snapshot of the context of secondary education in general and English Language Arts in particular in the Eastern Caribbean. It draws the teaching of secondary English towards a particular set of answers to the question of pedagogical knowledge that should be of concern to secondary teachers of English. These ideas include the use of context as a central factor in interpreting secondary schooling; examination and classroom practice; and the use of professional development and collaborative practice to anchor pedagogical knowledge and experience.

INTRODUCTION

Culture determines what counts in a society (Alvermann, 2005). It is an evolved way of “doing life” (McDermott & Varenne, 1995). Education, including secondary schooling, is situated within cultural contexts. Cultural theorists such as Foucault (1972) and Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), in their analysis of the relationship between education and the reproduction of class relations, contend that schools are not independent of external forces. Schools play an important role in legitimizing, reproducing and reflecting hierarchically arranged bodies of knowledge. In determining the status of English Language Arts (ELA) in Eastern Caribbean secondary classrooms, it is important...
to consider and understand the nature and extent of external forces that shape education in this context. Some of the emerging concerns existed before, but the globalizing process of the contemporary world engenders a complex directive of dynamics, which exercise a decisive pressure on the formulation and implementation of policies at the domestic and external level of nation-states (Serbin, 1998). Against this background, it is important to ask: What ideas (principles, assumptions, ideologies and beliefs) shape how English Language Arts is delivered in Eastern Caribbean secondary classrooms? In English Language Arts, what pedagogical knowledge is of greatest value in Eastern Caribbean secondary classrooms? While these are neither inclusive nor separate constituencies, for the purpose of the chapter they will be considered as such.

To address these questions, this chapter presents the status of Language Arts instruction from the cultural perspective of the Eastern Caribbean. It considers Language Arts instruction in grades 7–11, exploring what is commonly referred to as the secondary years, forms 1–5, or middle grades to early high school, in Eastern Caribbean secondary classrooms. My goal in the chapter is to lay the basis for reframing English Language Arts (ELA) in the Eastern Caribbean classroom, and other small English-speaking states, at a time of rapid change in secondary education. The chapter draws upon the experience of teaching and research at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels and focuses on secondary language arts education within the context of Universal Secondary Education (USE). As such, it takes into account the practice of Language Arts teaching and learning in a time and context of universal secondary education in the Eastern Caribbean, and illustrates the rationale for a new approach to teaching and learning ELA for secondary students. To achieve this goal, I first provide an overview of the educational context of the Eastern Caribbean as a central factor in interpreting secondary schooling. I then examine the role of the Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC) in framing English teachers’ practice. Subsequently, I invite teachers to imagine and consider how professional development and collaborative practice might anchor what we know about ELA and lead to instructional improvement.

BACKGROUND

Societal Beliefs, Attitudes, and Predispositions of Teachers to Secondary Schooling

Schools and teachers assume the role of enabling the political, civic and economic participation of adolescents in society. Teaching is intended to support this access to what society has to offer. Dewey (1929) notes that the needs of the child and the demands of the curriculum are mediated by teachers. But the precise nature of the values and beliefs of teachers of English Language Arts, who mediate the needs of the child and the demands of the curriculum, has always been in a constant state of development and change (Davies, 1996). In fact, the ongoing perception has been that:

...English teachers held strong ideological commitments and beliefs, central to which were a number of truths which were taken to be self-evident, but which were essentially improbable. (Brooks, 1983, p. 39)

Brooks further describes these beliefs as the ‘badges of the faithful’. This value-driven nature that characterizes teachers of ELA is a ‘deeply rooted’ element of their role. It captures: i) English teachers’ profound convictions about the purposes of their work and ii) the important role these beliefs play in establishing and expressing the individual and group identities of English teachers. These beliefs provide insights into the professional worlds of teachers of English.

Firstly, ELA teachers’ beliefs about the purposes of their work are often anchored in a broader
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