

Culture In Education - A Mandate For Schools

Cultural development, awareness and higher levels of self esteem are among the goals of the Ministry of Education, through its Culture in education programme in schools.

The programme, which was introduced six years ago, as one response to the growing trends of anti-social and destructive behaviours among Jamaican youth, aims to produce Jamaicans who know, understand and appreciate their history and heritage, and are thereby empowered to be the best examples of Jamaica to themselves and to the world.

One factor that propelled the establishment of the programme, was the sense of dissociation from the Jamaican culture, expressed by young persons (14–25) in the islandwide consultations during the development of the national cultural policy. To ensure the smooth integration of cultural elements into the school curriculum, each school has a culture agent, whose responsibility is to ensure the integration of aspects of Jamaican culture into the school curriculum. Currently there are culture agents in over 700 schools.

The culture agents attend regular workshops run by the Ministry, during which they are shown different methods of integrating current affairs into their curriculum e.g. using the times of sprinter Asafa Powell in mathematics classes, or his body structure to discuss biology and food and nutrition. According to Director of the Culture in Education Programme, Amina Blackwood Meeks, the programme explores the full range of understanding and interpretation of culture, not just the performing arts, but everything about being Jamaican. The content, context and methodology of the curriculum encompasses how we use everything about us, all the manifestations of our culture. She added that this includes the lilt in our voice, our agriculture, our cuisine, the way we turn the language upside down, so that “the entire world is having 2008 but we are having two thousand and love.”

To facilitate the involvement of students in their culture, there is an effort to take students out on field trips. Admitting that the value of field trips is often underestimated, she cited the example of a teacher, who, on taking students from a primary school in Kingston to Cross Roads, realised that they had never seen the clock situated in Cross Roads, which is one of Jamaica’s historical landmarks. She noted that the school is barely 10 miles from the clock but added that since many children do not travel 10 miles from where they live and go to school, just to take them outside of the radius of what they have become accustomed to provides real learning experiences.

Field trips include places like Flat Bridge, and a number of heritage sites and national monuments across the country, and these visits often include lectures which place the trip in a historical context for the students. One of the flagship projects of the Culture in Education Programme is ‘Jamaica Day’ where once every academic year, the last Friday in February is designated to showcasing aspects of Jamaica’s culture through the performing arts, visits to historical sites, sporting activities and recognition of outstanding citizens.

According to Mrs. Blackwood Meeks, the Culture in Education Programme has contributed to aspects of Jamaica’s development outside of the classroom, noting that the Ministry has been involved with the Culture and Values Task Force of the Planning Institute of Jamaica, towards developing Vision 2030 Jamaica.

Vision 2030 is Jamaica’s first 25-year development plan, aimed at putting Jamaica in a position to achieve the status of a developed country by year 2030. “So, we are able to show teachers in a very concrete way, how the work of the Culture in Education Programme, in terms of the values and attitudes, is critical to the visions of the new Jamaica … the link between the Culture in Education Programme and the imperatives of national development is becoming more and more self evident.”

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