

It Starts at Home: Home Language and Literacy Practices in Jamaica

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Abstract

This study explores the nature of home language and literacy environments (HLEs) among primary school learners in Jamaica, contributing to the limited body of Caribbean-based research in this area. Grounded in ecological systems theory, the study considers how multiple contextual factors in the home interact to shape children's literacy development. Data were collected from 114 caregivers who completed an HLE questionnaire. Findings indicate generally low levels of print engagement and limited participation in formal literacy activities (practices known to support reading and writing), with many caregivers placing greater responsibility on teachers. Jamaican Creole was more frequently used in many homes than English, potentially influencing children's transition from conversational fluency to academic language proficiency in school. At the same time, community religious programs also emerged as important spaces for supplemental literacy engagement. The study underscores the need for culturally responsive approaches and tools in literacy research that reflect the broader sociocultural realities shaping language and literacy development in the Caribbean.

Keywords: home literacy, community literacy, literacy development, Caribbean, writing

Introduction

In 2021, the Jamaica Education Transformation Commission published its report, "The Reform of Education", which stated that 56% of students leave primary school being unable to write. This report was followed by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2022 outcomes, showing 50% of Jamaican students scoring below the minimum level of proficiency in reading. These results are consistent with the wider Caribbean region, where 55% of students are considered to lack basic reading skills (Inter-American Development Bank, 2023; World Bank,

2023). As research has confirmed the key role of home literacy environments in improving child literacy outcomes, researchers and policymakers alike have acknowledged the need to enlist caregivers and local communities in addressing this "literacy crisis" in low- to middle-income contexts (Friedlander & Goldenberg, 2023; Murphy, 2023; Nag et al., 2019). Indeed, in October 2023, the Jamaican Ministry of Education in partnership with the Jamaican National Parenting Support Commission identified parental involvement as one of the pillars of a new comprehensive strategy aimed at addressing poor student outcomes across the educational sector (Jamaica Information Service, 2023).

Beyond the classroom, home literacy environments are known to be significant predictors of language and literacy outcomes for children (Butler & Le, 2018; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002). However, as observed in a recent systematic review by Stone et al. (2020) exploring “what works” for literacy development in the Caribbean and Latin America, only one Caribbean intervention study was identified that investigated the role of home literacy practices, despite the reality that so many learners in the region continue to struggle with the development of literacy skills. Therefore, little is known about home literacy practices in the Caribbean context and their role in literacy development. More work is needed to understand the impact of cultural and contextual factors that characterize the region and shape home literacy practices, such as the more communal nature of many societies relative to the Global North and the unique linguistic landscape of the Caribbean region where oral Creole languages which share somewhat blurred boundaries with the languages of literacy are spoken. Such work could clarify the wider literacy ecology of children in the Caribbean and provide insights into the literacy outcomes of learners in the primary years. It could also help clarify the challenges parents may experience in supporting their children’s literacy in the home and identify existing contextual traditions and practices that may be harnessed to support literacy development. Accordingly, this exploratory study aims to investigate the nature of home language and literacy practices experienced by Jamaican primary school learners by highlighting the literacy trends and practices that characterize local home environments.

Literature Review

Home literacy environments include practices and beliefs within the home that are predictive of literacy outcomes. Parental involvement in literacy activities, literary materials in the home, and adult beliefs and attitudes about literacy are all known to have significant effects on child literacy development (Butler & Le, 2018;

Esmaeeli, 2023; Nag et al., 2019; Puglisi et al., 2017; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002). Sénéchal et al. (1998) classified home literacy experiences into two categories: informal and formal. Informal home literacy activities most commonly include shared book reading, with a primary focus on meaning rather than on the “code” or print itself. Research has confirmed significant associations between storybook reading and the development of foundational oral language skills such as vocabulary and comprehension (Aram & Levin, 2004; Flack et al., 2018; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002, 2014).

In contrast, formal home literacy activities include direct parent tutoring with an explicit focus on print (e.g., letter-sound correspondence) (Puranik et al., 2018; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002). Research has confirmed that these practices have positive effects on the development of more code-based literacy skills such as writing (Aram & Levin, 2004, 2001; Dunsmuir & Blatchford, 2004; Puglisi et al., 2017; Sénéchal et al., 1998; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2014). In addition to these classifications of formal and informal home literacy environments, Puglisi et al. (2017) noted that home literacy experiences can also be classified as indirect or passive, and that parent-related factors (including attitudes and beliefs concerning literacy, as well as personal engagement in literacy activities) also influence the nature of the home literacy environment, and ultimately child literacy outcomes (Phillips & Lonigan, 2009; Wells, 1987). The limited research from low- to middle-income contexts suggests that beyond formal and informal home literacy practices, context-specific factors including parental literacy and proficiency in the language of schooling (Nag et al., 2019); the skill of the family tutor (Aram & Levin, 2001, 2004; Nag et al., 2019); cultural practices (such as oral traditions) (Buvanewari & Padakannaya, 2017); and socioeconomic factors such as access to running water and educational resources (Ngorosho, 2011; Roopnarine & Dede Yildirim, 2018; Wells, 1987), all affect the efficacy of home literacy activities.

While findings and models from the Global North are informative, and parallels exist across many regions in the Global South, distinct variables and cultural structures within the Caribbean highlight the need for more contextualized investigations. For instance, the Caribbean's unique linguistic landscape presents challenges and opportunities for home literacy development. Additionally, the prominent role of religious institutions and intergenerational family structures further differentiate the region. Single-parent households are especially prevalent, often with fathers absent (Roopnarine & Dede Yildirim, 2018), and many children are raised by extended family members, particularly grandparents (Ricketts & Anderson, 2009; Samms-Vaughan, 2001). These family dynamics have implications for both financial stability and the availability of time and support for home literacy engagement. Despite these distinct sociocultural and linguistic realities, the Caribbean has frequently and ineffectively been grouped with Latin America in educational research, potentially obscuring important contextual differences (Tucker et al., 2025).

Home Language & Literacy Environments in the Caribbean

In the Caribbean, research on the role of the home in education has primarily centered on the concept of parental involvement — an umbrella term encompassing a range of parental activities in both the home and school (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997), rather than focusing specifically on home language and literacy practices. Overall, parental involvement in children's education is often described as suboptimal across the region (Brooks & Roofe, 2022). Studies examining parental involvement have identified several influencing factors, including parents' financial and employment status (Campbell & Kinkead-Clarke, 2022; Cook & Jennings, 2016); levels of education (Samms-Vaughan, 2008); and perceived efficacy or competence in supporting their children's education (Cole, 2021, 2022). Additionally, school-related barriers, such as

limited opportunities and invitations for parent-teacher communication further constrain engagement (Johnson & Carpenter, 2006). Despite these constraints, research has shown that students believe that parental involvement is important for improving their reading outcomes (Lewis-Smikle, 2003).

In a longitudinal study, Cole (2022) considered the impact of early parental involvement on the reading outcomes of 116 Jamaican learners in Grades 1, 4, and 6. The findings showed that relative to parents' reports of involvement and invitations for participation, only teachers' reports of parents' efficacy in helping children had a direct relationship with learner outcomes across grade levels — a finding consistent with reports from other low- to middle-income countries where the skill of the family tutor has been found to moderate the effects of parental involvement in child achievement (see Nag et al., 2019 for a research synthesis). While the study drew on the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) model of parental involvement, less is known about the specific nature of items used to measure parental involvement in the study. Providing greater clarity on the nature of these items, particularly in relation to domain-specific home literacy practices, may help explain the limited predictive relationship observed between parental involvement and reading outcomes. As such, greater research is needed that offers insight into the nature of home language and literacy practices. Such work can provide critical insights for educators and policymakers seeking to address persistent literacy challenges in Jamaica and the wider Caribbean.

In one of the few studies directly exploring home literacy practices in the Caribbean, Roopnarine and Dede Yildirim (2018) used secondary categorical data from the UNICEF Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS), to explore the relationship between parent-child play, book reading, storytelling, and emergent literacy development in five Caribbean islands — Belize, Dominican Republic, Guyana, Suriname, and Jamaica. Child literacy outcomes were based

on maternal reports (yes/no responses) of their child's ability in early literacy skills (e.g., identify 10 letters). Results showed inconsistencies in parental literacy practices across Caribbean islands with both mothers and fathers in Belize being more likely to read to their children, and mothers in Jamaica being more likely to tell stories to their children. Parental engagement in literacy activities in the other islands was comparatively low. In terms of the relationship between literacy practices in the home and early literacy skills in children, mothers' book reading in the Dominican Republic and storytelling in Jamaica were significant predictors of letter identification skills. Similarly, mothers' book reading in the Dominican Republic and storytelling in Jamaica and Guyana were significant predictors of word reading. The researchers pointed out that while the effects of home literacy practices on student outcomes were mixed across countries, SES-related factors such as household wealth (e.g., access to drinking water, house materials, toilet facilities), as well as the number of educational books in the home and preschool involvement often moderated the effects of home literacy practices.

While insightful and seminal, given the research design of this study, there are still some gaps in our understanding of the nature and impact of home literacy environments on literacy development in the Caribbean. As the study relied on secondary categorical information, no information is provided on the nature or the quality of parental engagement in home literacy activities – factors which likely impact the efficacy of these practices for child literacy development. Additionally, and of key importance, is the absence of home language information in the study – a likely confounding variable which may be linked to inconsistencies in findings concerning the role of home literacy environments across Caribbean islands. Given that Creole languages are spoken in all the included countries and considering findings from low- to middle-income contexts showing that home language factors such as parents' proficiency and literacy in the language of schooling can influence the efficacy of parent tutoring (Nag et al., 2019), the efficacy

of home literacy practices across homes in the Caribbean was possibly moderated by parents' levels of English proficiency and literacy. There therefore remains a need for more primary research focusing on home literacy environments in the Caribbean.

In a recent systematic review on parental involvement and family engagement in Jamaica, Lewis-Fokum and Morgan (2022) highlight this gap, calling for deeper investigation into the specific forms of family engagement that support educational achievement. Such research is critical for developing a more nuanced understanding of how home-based practices contribute to literacy development in the Caribbean. The present study aims to contribute to filling the gap in this area of research by exploring the nature of home language and literacy environments of Jamaican primary school learners.

Research Question

1. What is the nature of home language and literacy environments experienced by Jamaican primary school children?

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the ecological systems approach to literacy development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This approach draws from the socio-cultural research tradition to consider the dynamic and interdependent relationships between individuals and wider societal systems; and how all of these affect individual development, behaviour, and perceptions (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Nero & Stevens, 2018). Within this framework, the child is situated at the center of a set of nested systems that influence development directly and indirectly. The microsystem encompasses the most immediate settings in which the child actively participates, such as the home, school, peer groups, and faith-based institutions like churches or Sunday schools. These environments directly affect the child's daily experiences and

learning opportunities. The mesosystem refers to the interactions and relationships among these microsystems (such as the connections between home and school) which can either reinforce or undermine a child's developmental trajectory.

Beyond these more immediate environments are the exosystem and the macrosystem. The exosystem includes settings that the child does not directly engage with, but that still exert influence on their development. These might include factors such as a parent's workplace, financial constraints, parental education levels, and access to community services. For example, a parent's long work hours may limit their capacity to support home literacy practices, even though the child is not directly involved in that setting. Finally, the macrosystem encompasses the broader cultural, ideological, economic, and political contexts that shape all other systems. This includes societal beliefs about literacy and education, language ideologies (such as the relative status of Jamaican Creole and English), national education policies, and socioeconomic structures related to class and race (Jaeger, 2016). Although children are not active agents of this system, the macrosystem powerfully shapes their opportunities for language and literacy development.

Of particular theoretical relevance to this study, and connected to an ecological approach to literacy, is Cummins' (1979, 2017) distinction between Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). While BICS refers to conversational fluency used in everyday settings, CALP involves the more abstract, decontextualized language skills required for academic tasks such as reading comprehension and writing. This distinction is especially salient in the Jamaican context, where many children may develop strong BICS in Jamaican Creole at home, yet be expected to demonstrate CALP in English at school.

As Syverson (1999) argues, literacy cannot be fully understood by examining individuals in isolation. Building on this insight, the ecological

approach adopted in this study views literacy development as being shaped by a range of nested influences, including individual learner characteristics, instructional factors within schools, and sociocultural practices within homes and communities. This theoretical orientation provides a valuable lens through which to explore the multifaceted and context-dependent nature of home language and literacy environments in Jamaica.

Methodology

The data for this study is drawn from a larger sequential mixed-methods study that explored the nature of writing challenges experienced by Jamaican primary school learners and the ecological factors impacting literacy development (Tucker, 2023). Findings from the larger study showed concerning low performance in narrative writing at the Grade 6 level (the mean score was 53%), with students experiencing significant challenges across the component skills of writing with well over half the sample receiving ratings at the lower end of the analytic rubric in spelling (66%), grammar (76%), vocabulary (59%), organization (86%), and ideation (78%). Adopting a survey design, the present study focuses on data concerning the home literacy environments of these students.

Sample

The sample consisted of 114 parents and caregivers of students from two primary schools in a rural Jamaican town who opted-in to complete the questionnaire. All participants were recruited on the basis of being either the parents or the main caregiver for students in Grade 6 who participated in the larger study.

The Study Context

All parents and guardians were residents of a rural town near the north coast of Jamaica. The centre of commerce in the bustling rural town is the popular local market that attracts farmers, vendors, and shoppers from across the

island particularly on "Market Days". The town's proximity to the North Coast (the tourism hub of the island) and its status as an agricultural and educational centre in the parish means that in addition to farming and vending, residents generally work as teachers and in the service industry as hotel staff domestic workers, taxi drivers, and as civil servants. Given the nature of these jobs, most residents generally have a low to modest income. Regarding access to pertinent resources, many homes still do not have running water. However, residents are generally able to access water tanks or "stand-pipes" in the community. The main universities on the island are located in the nation's capital city, therefore students who are able pursue higher education must move away from the area and tend to remain in the city after completing their degrees for greater job opportunities and the possibility of upward social mobility. The town therefore has a flatter socioeconomic spread compared to more metropolitan areas of the island, with wider variation in income, education levels, and household resources.

Home Language and Literacy Environment Questionnaire

The questionnaire for parents and caregivers was divided into two sections – with Part 1 soliciting information about language usage in the home and participant demographics, and Part 2 soliciting information on home literacy practices and beliefs. The instrument was shared with parents online via the Qualtrics platform.

Section 1: Home Language Environment

In addition to demographic information (e.g., highest level of education), the questionnaire explored learners' language input from parents (or main caregivers), adult relatives, siblings, and playmates. This wide scope proved particularly relevant for the Jamaican context, given that in many cases multiple generations live together in homes and children are often

raised by grandparents or other relatives. Given the unique linguistic context of Jamaica where language usage is generally conceptualized along a continuum — with the pure usage of Jamaican Creole and English at either end, and various levels of mixing in-between (DeCamp, 1971), a 5-step Likert scale was used wherein responses indicating more dominant use of Jamaican Creole were given lower scores and responses indicating more dominant use of English in the home were given higher scores¹.

Section 2: Home Literacy Environment

The home literacy section of the questionnaire addressed literacy practices in the home; the nature of parent-child interactions during literacy activities; and parents' beliefs concerning literacy development and instruction. The instrument was adapted from the Buvanewari and Padakannaya (2017) home literacy environment questionnaire for kindergarteners in India, with Tamil as a home language. Buvanewari and Padakannaya's tool was found to be particularly suitable for this study due to significant contextual parallels: the tool was specifically created for a lower income context and for children whose home language differed from English (the language of schooling). The questions in the instrument address the five dimensions of a home literacy environment outlined in the literature: "physical literacy environment, parent literacy habits, child's own literacy habits, parent-child interaction for language and literacy activities, and parental beliefs about literacy" (Buvanewari & Padakannaya, 2017, pp. 6–7). The instrument was adapted to suit the Jamaican context (e.g., questions were added regarding Sunday School attendance, reading the local newspapers, and specific writing activities) but also reduced (e.g., culturally irrelevant items removed) to suit the online platform and to encourage survey completion.

A Likert scale format was used for responses in the HLE questionnaire, with parents and caregivers indicating the frequency with which

1. The assignment of numerical scores was not value laden.

they engaged in or observed particular literacy activities or behaviours in their home, and their beliefs about literacy. Each scale step was rated 1-5, with responses indicating disagreement or low frequency receiving lower scores and responses indicating frequency and greater agreement receiving higher scores. Once the survey was completed, a total score was calculated for HLE with higher scores indicating a richer or more supportive home literacy environment. Once consent was obtained, classroom teachers shared the link to the survey with parents.

Findings

Home Language Environments

The first section of the questionnaire which solicited information on language usage in the home as well as participant demographics was completed by 114 parents. As seen in Table 1, all family members more commonly reported using equal amounts of Jamaican Creole and English when speaking to children in the home. Consistent with the creole continuum, few speakers reported the exclusive use of Jamaican Creole or English. While both mothers and fathers showed relatively similar language usage patterns, fathers generally used more Jamaican Creole than mothers when speaking to their children. Siblings tended to use equal amounts of Jamaican Creole and English, but also appeared to speak more English than adult caregivers. Among homes where another adult (most often a grandparent) served as a main caregiver (60% of the sample), caregivers reported using more Jamaican Creole than English in their interactions with children. In these cases, only 20% indicated that English was the primary language used when speaking to the child. These findings suggest that over half of the children in the sample are more frequently exposed to Jamaican Creole than English in their home environments.

While these findings likely give a general approximation of child language input in the home, a note of caution is given here for a few

reasons: 1. Since the findings are based on self-reporting within a context where the use of English is generally associated with higher social status (Nero & Stevens, 2018), it is possible that responses concerning the use of English are inflated. 2. As Nero (2014) points out, owing to the creole continuum, there is a mismatch between perceived and actual language proficiency and usage for many Jamaicans. As a result, many Jamaicans deem themselves fluent speakers of English and at times believe that they are speaking English when this may not be the case. Similar concerns arise in parent responses to questions concerning home literacy practices.

Home Literacy Environments

In total, 86 parents completed the home literacy environment portion of the online survey. Higher scores represented richer home literacy environments. The mean score was 79.39 out of a possible score of 110 and scores ranged from 43–106, with most scores clustering near the centre of the distribution as seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Frequency Distribution of Home Literacy Environment Scores

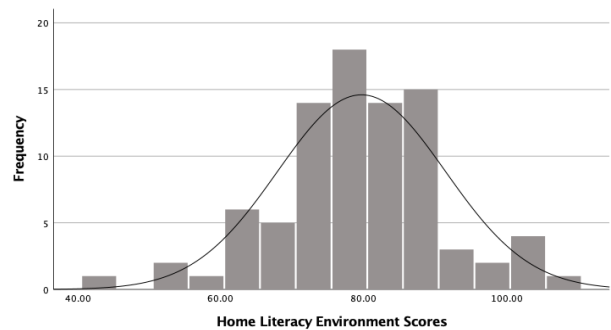


Table 1*Language Input at Home*

Language Input	Always JamC ¹	JamC usually	Equal amounts of JamC & English	English usually	Always English
Mother	0.84%	18.49%	57.98%	22.69%	0.00%
Father	6.93%	21.78%	45.54%	23.76%	1.98%
Other adult caregiver	8.57%	28.57%	40.00%	20.00%	2.86%
Siblings ²	5.38%	17.58%	42.98%	27.76%	6.31%

¹ *JamC* — *Jamaican Creole*

² *Siblings* — *in cases where more than one sibling was present in the home, the average of language used by all siblings was used.*

Reliability

The home literacy questionnaire consisted of three subscales from the Buvanewari and Padakannaya (2017) home literacy environment questionnaire: parent literacy habits, parent tutoring and engagement in literacy activities, and parental beliefs concerning literacy. Buvanewari and Padakannaya (2017) reported high item-level and overall scale validity; however, as items were adapted to suit the Jamaican context, it was important to explore the internal consistency of the measure. Cronbach's alpha calculations were conducted for the three subscales in the home literacy environment questionnaire. In keeping with Field's (2013) guideline that alpha values of 0.7 and above indicate good reliability, findings showed that the parent tutoring and parental beliefs subscales yielded high alpha coefficients of 0.8 and 0.9, respectively, while the home literacy practices scale yielded a lower alpha coefficient of 0.6. A similar trend was observed by Buvanewari and Padakannaya (2017), where parent's literacy practices showed wide variation. In addition to wide variation of parent literacy practices, the relatively lower alpha coefficient for the literacy practices subscale was due in part to the addition of a contextual item concerning Sunday School attendance. As expected, child Sunday School attendance (a religious practice) was not correlated with other parent literacy practices that were included in the home literacy subscale (e.g.,

playing word games, reading the local newspaper). However, based on personal and insider knowledge of the central role played by Sunday School in Jamaican communities and the significant emphasis placed on literacy skills by many Sunday school teachers, as well as the fact that the alpha coefficient was not considerably lower than 0.7, the item was retained.

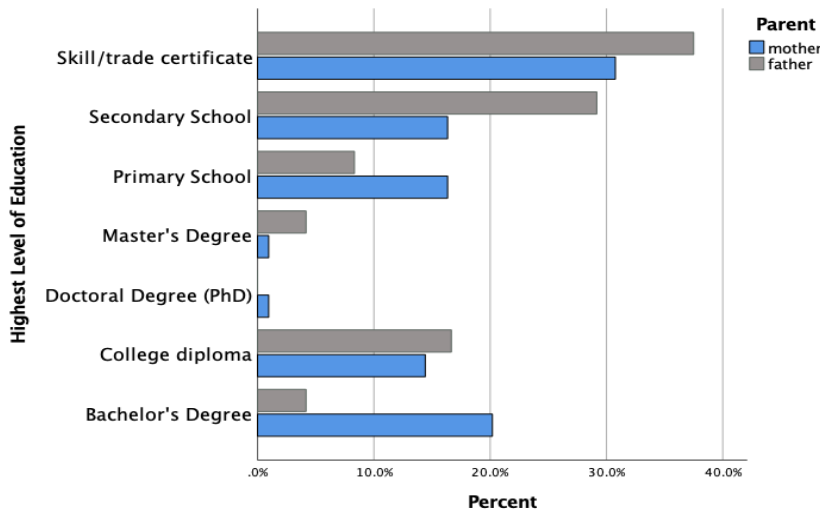
In subsequent sections, the findings concerning the key dimensions of home literacy practices and emerging trends are discussed. At the end of the questionnaire, parents were invited to share any additional thoughts and concerns. These responses were also weaved into the findings to provide a thicker description of the home language and literacy environments and to add explanatory power to some of the observed trends in the data.

Parental Levels of Education

As seen in Figure 2, the most common qualification acquired by parents was a skill or trade certification (e.g., hairdressing, auto mechanics, chef). Following skill or trade certificates, primary school and bachelor's degrees were also common levels of education for mothers, while secondary school (and to a lesser extent, diplomas) were held by fathers. For both groups, postgraduate degrees were uncommon. Of note, almost 40% of mothers in the sample had either primary or secondary schooling as their highest level of education — a pattern that was not observed among fathers.

Figure 2

Parent’s Highest Level of Education



Parents’ Personal Literacy Habits

Parents’ personal literacy habits have been conceptualized as passive or indirect components of home literacy environments (Puglisi et al., 2017) that are correlated with child literacy outcomes (Phillips & Lonigan, 2009; Wells, 1987). Parents most commonly reported writing or typing (61%), playing word games (41%), or reading non-work-related materials such as books (36%) either often or very often, while being observed by their children. However, as the questionnaire did not specify the nature or medium of writing, it is somewhat unclear how parents’ home writing practices might impact student literacy outcomes in the present study. For example, it is not clear whether parents were referring to texting, engaging in extended writing (e.g., narratives), writing notes, or lists, nor is it clear whether some forms of writing, such as texting for example, may impact child writing outcomes.

Parents Engagement in Literacy Activities at Home

Helping with language arts homework and functional activities such as reading product

labels, street signs, and signboards, were the most common activities that parents reported engaging in with their children. The least practiced literacy activities were those more oriented towards formal or direct parent tutoring — such as engaging in extended or creative writing activities with children (e.g., writing stories, songs, poems) and shared book reading that involved pointing to letters and words as well as making explicit letter-sound connections.

Parents Beliefs about Literacy

In the current study, while most respondents (over 75%) strongly agreed that parents could help their children with literacy tasks at home and should encourage interest and confidence in reading and writing, parents were less supportive of statements that put the instructional onus on themselves through the direct teaching of literacy skills at home (e.g., “children do well at reading because their parents teach them to read”; (62% strongly agree). Consistent with such findings, parents provided comments underlining their beliefs concerning the central role of the teacher as the primary source of instruction and the secondary role of parents in providing encouragement and reinforcement:

Howard: Teachers are there to teach, whilst parents are to reinforce what was taught.

Lisa: Parents should always ensure that their children are doing well in school and check their books to see if they have completed their homework.

Marie: I often tell my child to reflex [reflect] on how her day went at school and analyse if she was comfortable and if not try and do better the next [next] day.

Parents' beliefs concerning their role in literacy development may be grounded, at least in part, in their own challenges with providing facilitative home literacy environments.

Barriers to Facilitative Home Literacy Environments

Most comments provided by parents addressed the challenges that they experienced in providing a facilitative literacy environment. Among these responses, the difficulty of balancing the demands of providing for their families and providing a supportive literacy environment was the most common concern, as seen in the excerpts below:

Paul: I am a security guard so am always working to make ends meet, I hardly find time to teach my children but when I do, I teach them different topics and leave work for them which they don't complete most times.

Anne: I strongly agree in helping my child, yes am a single parent an [and] I have to go out there an fen [and fend] for them. When I come home there a lot of shore [chores] to be done an [and] I help them but the 100% what I should be doing is not there but I encourage her to do her best an help in whatever way I can.

Parents consistently acknowledged the importance of fostering facilitative home literacy environments for their children despite their limitations. In addition to the demands of supporting the family, some parents commented on the difficulties of providing facilitative home literacy environments when they themselves struggled to understand school assignments and

had low levels of English literacy. This issue is especially pointed in the study context, where a considerable number of mothers reported primary school as their highest level of education, and where numerous children, particularly those with elderly caregivers, received a greater amount of input in Jamaican Creole relative to English — the language of literacy. For many such parents, the role of the teacher in their child's literacy development was paramount due to their limitations in providing additional support at home, with one parent commenting that their child was simply "better off in front of the teacher."

Community Literacy Practice

Jamaica is known for having the most churches per square mile in the world (Lowe, 2021; Olsen, 1999) and the relatively small town in which this study is situated is no exception, with over 20 churches in the area. In response to this contextual feature and research highlighting the importance of using context-sensitive measures of home literacy environments (Nag et al., 2019; Ngorosho, 2011), a questionnaire item addressing Sunday (or Sabbath) School attendance was added to the instrument, given its central role in the lives of many Jamaican children and the research showing the benefits of religious literacy activities for child literacy development (Papen, 2018). In the present study, Sunday School emerged as one of the most common literacy practices outside of the classroom. Only 15% of parents reported that their child did not attend Sunday School, while the rest of the sample reported attending sometimes (42%) or every week (43%).

Discussion

The Nature of Home Language and Literacy Environments

Overall, the study findings suggest low levels of print engagement in the home, with both formal code-based activities such as writing

and informal meaning-focused activities such as shared storybook reading being relatively uncommon. Instead, literacy practices were often functional in nature, such as reading signs, labels, or instructions—activities that may support the development of Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS), but offer limited opportunities for fostering the more abstract, academic language skills encompassed by Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). Relatedly, in terms of beliefs about literacy, parent responses suggested a greater onus on teachers, particularly for print-focused literacy activities. Findings showing less facilitative home language and literacy environments may add an explanatory piece to the larger ecological puzzle of the poor writing outcomes observed among primary school learners from the larger study, and by extension, across the island (see Jamaica Education Transformation Commission, 2021). Indeed, research has consistently shown that formal home literacy practices are more strongly correlated with, and predictive of, the development of code-based literacy skills such as writing (Aram & Levin, 2004, 2001; Puglisi et al., 2017).

The findings of this study echo those reported in other low- to middle-income contexts in the Global South, where home language and literacy environments are influenced by a confluence of factors including parental levels of education, proficiency in the language of literacy, and economic constraints (Friedlander & Goldenberg, 2023; Nag et al., 2019). More specifically, the findings align with previous Caribbean research pointing to the moderating role of parental socioeconomic status and parental self-efficacy in supporting children's learning (e.g., Cole, 2021, 2022). The findings also underscore the value of using an ecological systems framework to interpret child literacy development in the Caribbean, which emphasizes the nested and interacting environments that shape child development.

Home Language Practices

Findings related to home language use highlight the need for context-sensitive measures of language and literacy practices. In the Caribbean, research has shown that in addition to a high prevalence of single-parent households, many children are raised by older caregivers — particularly grandparents (Lewis-Fokum & Morgan, 2022; Samms-Vaughan, 2001). At first glance, the data suggest relatively balanced exposure to Jamaican Creole and Standard Jamaican English (the language of instruction) with 58% of parents reporting equal use of both languages in parent-child interactions. However, a more nuanced examination reveals that 60% of the children in the sample were raised by older caregivers in the home, primarily grandparents, who reported using Jamaican Creole more frequently than English when communicating with children. As such, most children represented in the sample are exposed to and primarily speak Creole in the home.

While this is not inherently problematic, and research in second language acquisition underscores the value of home language maintenance in supporting additional language learning, Jamaica currently lacks a ratified language education policy. Although a draft policy was developed in 2001 and has now been updated (MoEY, 2022), it has not yet been formally approved. In practice, Jamaican Creole is largely excluded from Language Arts classrooms, reflecting broader societal attitudes toward language. This creates a significant mismatch between the languages of the home and school, particularly in environments where caregivers have limited English proficiency or formal literacy skills. Indeed, in the present study, some parents and caregivers noted challenges in helping their children with homework due to their own limited proficiency in English. In such contexts, caregivers may avoid engaging in print-rich literacy activities to prevent feelings of inadequacy or shame.

Cases where caregivers frequently engage in oral interactions in Jamaican Creole and to a lesser extent, English, may primarily support the development of BICS. However, less frequent engagement in literacy practices that foster CALP — such as shared reading in English, writing activities, or explicit vocabulary development, could help explain persistent challenges in academic literacy performance. This mismatch between the language of the home and the cognitive-linguistic demands of the school environment may further compound difficulties, particularly for children raised by caregivers with limited proficiency in English. In the larger study (Tucker, 2023), children who spoke Jamaican Creole as their dominant home language scored significantly lower in narrative writing compared to their English-dominant peers. These children demonstrated marked challenges in oral language skills, particularly in grammar and vocabulary diversity — areas that are closely associated with both code- and meaning-based activities such as writing and shared storybook reading (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2014).

Sociodemographic Factors

Research from low- to middle-income contexts has consistently identified parental socioeconomic status (SES) and levels of education as strong predictors of both the richness of home literacy environments and children's academic outcomes (Nag et al., 2019; Roopnarine & Dede Yildirim, 2018). In particular, maternal education has been widely used as a proxy for SES (Hoff, 2006) and is positively associated with literacy practices and outcomes in both the Global North (Dunsmuir & Blatchford, 2004; Tizard et al., 1988) and the Caribbean (Roopnarine & Dede Yildirim, 2018). In the present study, 40% of mothers reported primary or secondary school as their highest level of education — a finding that may help explain, at least in part, the lower levels of print engagement and more formal literacy activities observed in many homes. While it is not assumed that lower levels of parental education automatically result

in less facilitative home literacy environments, it is possible, in line with wider research, that many mothers within this context (particularly those with primary school level education) may feel less efficacious in supporting the language and literacy development of children. Such a finding lends support to research from Cole (2022) wherein teachers' reports of parental efficacy to help children was one of the strongest predictors of reading outcomes of Jamaican learners across the primary school years.

Beyond educational background, socioeconomic constraints also shaped the nature of home literacy environments in this study. Echoing findings from the wider Caribbean (Campbell & Kinkead-Clarke, 2022; Cook & Jennings, 2016; Roopnarine & Dede Yildirim, 2018), parents reported significant challenges in balancing the demands of working to “make ends meet”, managing their homes, and being present to support the language and literacy development of their children. Given these circumstances, it is unsurprising that parents were generally less likely to endorse questionnaire items that placed greater onus on themselves in supporting the literacy development of their children. However, it is important to recognize that socioeconomic disadvantage does not uniformly result in poor literacy outcomes. Evidence from a synthesis of studies in low- to middle-income countries (Nag et al., 2019) suggests that some families and communities manage to make efficient use of limited resources, supported by positive attitudes toward literacy. This is particularly relevant to the present study, where community-based literacy experiences such as Sunday Schools appear to play a notable role in the literary lives of children.

Opportunities for Literacy Enrichment in the Community

While the findings point to generally less facilitative home language and literacy environments, they also underscore opportunities for literacy development beyond both the classroom and the immediate home. Consistent

with research highlighting the influential role of the broader community in child development in low- to middle-income contexts (Friedlander & Goldenberg, 2023), study findings showed that 85% of children attended a local Sunday School — making it the most common literacy-related event outside of school.

Friedlander and Goldenberg (2023), in their work with children in Rwanda, advocated for the inclusion of religion in ecological models of literacy development in the Global South, where religious institutions often play a central role in everyday life. Indeed, such a perspective is particularly poignant in Jamaica — the country known for having the most churches per square mile in the world (Olsen, 1999; Lowe, 2021). Additionally, with most teachers in the larger sample reporting volunteering as Sunday School teachers on a weekly basis (Tucker, 2023), it was important to account for this contextual experience of children as a source of community literacy practice. Sunday School in Jamaica serves not only to transmit Christian beliefs to younger generations but also facilitates literacy development. Activities such as Bible reading, memorization of scripture, poetry, singing, and reading, offer children meaningful, sustained engagement with print (Reid, 2022). Prior research supports the value of such religious literacy activities, which have been shown to strengthen foundational language skills like phonological awareness and oral language (McMillon & Edwards, 2014), as well as support higher-order skills such as reading comprehension (Papen, 2018).

An Ecological Understanding of Jamaican Home Literacy Environments

The findings underscore the value of using an ecological systems framework to interpret child literacy development in the Caribbean. This perspective emphasizes the nested and interacting environments that shape child development. In this study, influences ranged from proximal settings, such as the home, to broader sociocultural and economic conditions

— all of which jointly shaped children’s language and literacy experiences.

In line with Bronfenbrenner’s ecological framework, the findings point to the potential influence of multiple microsystems on literacy development, particularly the home and faith-based community programs. While caregivers in this study appeared to provide less facilitative language and literacy environments, particularly in terms of print engagement and code-/meaning-based literacy practices, local community programming such as Sunday Schools emerged as an important source of supplemental literacy enrichment.

Within the mesosystem, the findings suggest both interconnectedness as well as tensions among microsystems. Teachers, for instance, were key figures in both school and Sunday School settings, demonstrating overlapping and interconnected roles across microsystems. At the same time, the data also highlight tensions within the mesosystem, particularly the misalignment between home and school language practices. While Jamaican Creole was more commonly spoken in homes — particularly among children raised by older caregivers (60%), the language of instruction, learning, and assessment in schools remains Standard Jamaican English. This disconnect may limit caregivers’ ability to provide literacy environments aligned with the language expectations of the formal education system.

Beyond these more immediate systems, both the exosystem and macrosystem influence children’s experiences of home language and literacy environments. Study findings showed that exosystemic influences, such as financial constraints, employment demands, and limited formal education also constrain the ability of some parents to participate in, or prioritize home-based literacy activities. Consequently, greater responsibility for supporting children’s literacy development was often placed on teachers, particularly for print-focused practices like storybook reading and writing. At the macrosystemic level, overarching cultural influences such as societal views on the role of

teachers and parents in literacy instruction; the cultural significance of religious institutions; the status of Jamaican Creole versus English; as well as patterns of intergenerational caregiving likely shape caregivers' beliefs and practices related to literacy support. Taken together, the findings demonstrate how the interaction of factors across the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem contributes to a more holistic and context-sensitive understanding of home literacy practices and child literacy development in the Jamaican context.

Conclusions and Implications

In 2023, the Jamaican Ministry of Education named parental involvement as a crucial and indispensable factor in addressing poor student performance across all levels of the sector (Murphy, 2023) – an acknowledgement consistent with the ecological systems approach to literacy development and the relatively large body of research highlighting the key role of home literacy environments in student outcomes. In response, this exploratory study sought to address a significant gap in the literature by examining the nature of home language and literacy environments among primary school learners in the Jamaican context. A key contribution of this study is that the findings provide a window into the nature of more domain-specific home language and literacy practices in the Jamaican context, relative to a more general account of parent involvement. As such, the findings can contribute to a more holistic understanding of reading and writing outcomes on the island. The findings also point to the potential of community- and faith-based programs as meaningful contributors to children's literacy development—offering promising avenues for intervention locally and regionally.

The findings have implications for research and practice. Considering the concerning literacy outcomes in Jamaica and the wider Caribbean region (Inter-American Development Bank, 2023; World Bank, 2023) and research highlighting the key role of home environments in literacy development, parents, caregivers, and communities may benefit from resources

providing guidance on creating more facilitative home literacy environments that support both reading and writing skills among children. Such resources would need to be context-specific, using varied accessible mediums (e.g., websites, videos, social media) to highlight activities and tips for incorporating both formal and informal literacy practices into daily family routines.

Based on the study findings, future research is needed to explore the nature and role of cultural and community practices in literacy development. Exploring the efficacy of already existing and culturally sustainable resources in communities such as Sunday Schools may prove to be particularly useful in contexts like Jamaica where the church plays a central role in community development, libraries are few and under-resourced, and where schoolteachers often volunteer as Sunday School teachers (Tucker, 2023). While the present study only used Sunday School attendance as a proxy for community literacy, it may be worthwhile to explore other context-sensitive community literacy practices and their possible role in supporting literacy development in similar contexts. Similarly, in future research, it may be worth exploring the role of storytelling — another cultural hallmark of oral cultures, that may serve to facilitate literacy development in both the home and school languages, while facilitating cultural transmission across generations.

A key implication emerging from this study is the need for contextually grounded tools to understand home language and literacy environments. Typical predictor variables from Global North contexts may overlook key community-driven forms of literacy engagement, such as faith-based education, that play a substantial role in children's literacy trajectories in the Caribbean and similar settings. As such, researchers are encouraged to adapt, develop, and validate tools that are better able to capture the nature of child development in the Caribbean context — considering contextual features such as family structures, linguistic landscapes, language policies, and the impact of the wider community.

The Jamaican Ministry of Education has already acknowledged the critical role of parents and caregivers in addressing the island's persistent literacy challenges. As efforts continue, there is a need to broaden the definition of meaningful parental engagement, particularly in rural and low-resource communities. In collaboration with researchers, the Ministry should work to develop culturally and contextually responsive frameworks and guidance that recognize diverse forms of engagement, including oral storytelling, functional literacy activities, and participation in faith-based programs as legitimate and valuable contributions to children's literacy development. At the same time, and as previously discussed, greater efforts should be made to provide accessible training and resources to caregivers, to strengthen their confidence and capacity to engage in home-based literacy practices.

This study was not without limitations. A key limitation of the present study concerns the likelihood of sampling bias. In administering the questionnaire online rather than in-person (orally) or using a paper format, it is likely that numerous caregivers may have been excluded as the task not only required traditional literacy skills (i.e., reading) but also technological literacy, and access to devices. Future studies may consider diverse modalities to reduce sampling bias. Additionally, as the current exploratory study adopted a survey design that relied on self-reporting — future research in the field may benefit from the triangulation of various ethnographic data collection methods (e.g., observation, interviews) which would possibly allow for deeper engagement with participants and thicker descriptions of Caribbean home literacy environments.

Finally, it is important to underscore that this study was conducted in a rural Jamaican town and does not seek to offer a comprehensive account of home literacy environments across the island. To develop a more representative understanding, future research would benefit from inferential designs that incorporate a range of locational contexts (e.g., urban vs. rural, across multiple islands).

Ethical Approval

Ethical Approval was granted by the Departmental Research Ethics Committee for Education at the University of Oxford (Reference no.: ED-CIA-21-033). Study participants provided written consent (online) after reviewing the study information documents and consent forms. Study information forms outlined the nature of the study, the reasons for requesting participation, information confidentiality procedures, as well as on the storage and usage of data. All participants were fully aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Pseudonyms are used throughout.

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Declaration of Interest Statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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