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Chapter 17

Challenging epistemic exclusion: Creating a space for understanding Caribbean family literacy practices

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Introduction

The Caribbean's unique cultural identity is shaped by a complex interplay of historical, linguistic and geographical factors. One of the most notable features of the region is its diverse language landscape, which is the result of centuries of colonialism, slavery and migration (Bryan, 2004; Nero and Stevens, 2018; Siegel, 2010). The use of Indigenous and Creole languages, such as Jamaican patois, within families helps to preserve linguistic diversity and cultural heritage and plays an important role in defining cultural identity (Smalls, 2018; Williams, 2020). However, there have been frequent attempts to understand these distinct Caribbean practices through a Eurocentric lens, which has led to dismissal of local knowledge, epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007) and the creation of a narrative that is not representative of the region's reality (Smith-Christmas, 2018; Hardacre and Kinkead-Clark, 2019).

This chapter argues for the importance of understanding family literacy practices in the Caribbean, and particularly in Jamaica. These practices reflect the region's complex cultural heritage and are a symbol of its resilience and strength (Hardacre and Kinkead-Clark, 2019; Roopnarine and Jin, 2016). First, we identify the distinctive factors that shape everyday family literacy practices within the region and trace the development of family literacy in Jamaica. We illuminate the plurality of family literacy and its forms and features, primarily in order to challenge the epistemic exclusion and lack of visibility of practices that arise in many low- and middle-income countries, including in the Caribbean (Berryman, Lawrence and Lamont, 2018). Second, we emphasize the need for culturally responsive forms of family learning that appreciate and recognize existing literacy practices, rather than utilizing family learning as a tool to address

social issues including poor parental practices and anti-social behaviour (Wainwright and Marandet, 2017). Lastly, we call for epistemic inclusion, suggesting a more democratic approach to knowledge about what forms of family literacy are legitimate. By recognizing and valuing these everyday practices, we can preserve their distinctly Jamaican character and challenge the epistemic exclusion that sustains the legacy and impact of colonialism on Caribbean societies. This is particularly relevant in a postcolonial context where hierarchical structures continue to entrench inequalities for contemporary Jamaican families. Ultimately, a socially situated understanding of family literacy can reduce the epistemic exclusion of everyday family literacy practices.

Epistemic exclusion

Family literacy practices in Jamaica, as in low- and middle-income countries, have often been overlooked by policy-makers and researchers, despite the potential for such practices to positively influence literacy development (Schneider, 2018). Although family literacy is increasingly recognized as important in international policy and research, many assumptions about it are derived from Western, middle-class perspectives (Marcella, Howes and Fuligni, 2014; Anderson and Anderson, 2021). This is particularly problematic in the case of Jamaica, where everyday literacy practices, such as the use of Jamaican patois, are deeply embedded in the cultural fabric of the society, yet have been historically marginalized in education policy. For example, standard English is deeply privileged as the language of school and business.

We suggest that this exclusion is the legacy of prioritizing knowledge that arises from positivist, Eurocentric and colonialist sources (Auriacombe and Cloete, 2019; Joseph, 2015). This hierarchical approach has been framed variously as epistemologies of ignorance (Mills, 2012), epistemicide (De Sousa Santos, 2011), epistemological exclusion (Stuart and Shay, 2018) and epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007). The essential concept is that different peoples' knowledge is valued differently, resulting in unfair or unequal treatment that leads to broader social injustice. One mechanism of this injustice is the so-called 'evidence-based' approach, where what is selected for tracking and monitoring reveals biases against practices such as singing, song-writing and oral storytelling, to the detriment or exclusion of everyday Jamaican family literacies.

The establishment of the National Parenting Support Commission (NPSC) in 2013 in Jamaica is a clear example of how evidence-based approaches can lead to an interventionist agenda (Hardacre et al., 2022). The NPSC instituted 'Parent Places' in primary schools throughout Jamaica to help families support their children's learning more effectively. The impact of this initiative was

measured primarily by monitoring absenteeism and dropout rates (Hylton and Hylton-Fraser, 2022). Though seemingly successful in one sense (the rates of absenteeism and dropout were reduced), such initiatives can make families feel under surveillance, corroding trust between parents and schools (Wainwright and Marandet, 2017). Such forms of tracking seldom include accompanying data to capture families' perspectives, which could explain high absenteeism and low retention.

Moreover, although national primary school completion rates and national adult literacy rates are regularly reported, there is a lack of monitoring and evaluation of culturally responsive strategies for family learning and literacy. These strategies have been proven to enhance family-school partnerships (Coleman, 2013; Roofe, 2018). Despite the government's recognition of the need to address the impact of colonialism, as indicated in the Ministry of Education and Youth's report on educational reform in Jamaica (Patterson, 2021), there has been limited progress in implementing qualitative evaluations of strategies that prioritize culturally responsive approaches; the focus has predominantly been on quantitative data collection, specifically related to predetermined outcomes such as attendance, retention and examination results (Hylton and Hylton-Fraser, 2022).

Approximately 90 per cent of Jamaican young people speak patois, but are only tested against universal standards of language and literacy.

Standardized tests such as Jamaica's Grade Four Literacy Test are the predominant means to determine and measure literacy. Such assessments are written in standard Jamaican English and therefore require students to complete the assessment in standard Jamaican English. Approximately 90 per cent of Jamaican young people speak patois (Devonish and Carpenter, 2007), but are only tested against universal standards of language and literacy. This can devalue competency in mixed language literacy, isolate students from their family and social contexts, and obscure the true picture of students' abilities. However, to date government officials have shown little interest in using alternative ways to measure literacy or in including informal family literacy practices as a type of literacy (Hardacre et al., 2022). One possible solution is to complement these measures with more culturally responsive approaches and assessments of family literacy that value and build on the diverse ways that literacy is practised in Jamaica (including storytelling, music and patois), rather than seeking to impose external norms and expectations that align with the colonial roots of standard Jamaican English. This shift in perspective is essential for the development of educational policies that truly reflect and support the diversity of literacy practices in Jamaica.

In summary, the under-recognition of family literacy practices in Jamaica and other low- and middle-income countries, despite their potential impact on children's and adults' literacy development, constitutes a larger issue of epistemic injustice. The marginalization of everyday literacy practices, such as the use of Jamaican patois, in education policy is the result of privileging knowledge derived from Eurocentric sources. This approach to knowledge leads to epistemic exclusion and the establishment of evidence-based approaches that can unintentionally perpetuate surveillance and erode trust between families and schools. Standardized tests and tracking methods fail to capture the nuanced features and complex forms of literacy practices of Jamaican families. A socially situated and culturally responsive approach that values and builds on these practices is necessary to develop educational policies that support the diversity of family literacy practices in the region. It is essential to recognize and address the epistemic injustice that underlies the exclusion of Jamaican family literacy practices from education policy and research.

Tracing family literacy from plantation to backyard

According to Coates (2012), plantation owners deliberately and systematically prevented enslaved people in Jamaica from becoming literate. Enslaved people were kept illiterate as a means of control and exploitation by the plantation owners, who saw education as a threat to their economic interests, since an educated enslaved population was more likely to challenge the status quo and demand their rights (Schneider, 2018). As with other West Indian countries, enslaved people were brought to Jamaica through the triangular trade, and numbered over six hundred thousand (Beckles, 2019). However, withholding conventional forms of literacy – reading and writing in English – could not prevent enslaved people from participating in other, equally powerful forms of literacy.

According to Stanley-Niaah (2010), literacy practices expressed in the form of music and dance have a strong connection to power and dominance in Jamaica. Across the Caribbean, from slave ships to modern dance halls and street dances, they have been used to share stories and histories and to shape identities. Enslaved people used oral traditions, such as stories and songs, to share tales about their homeland, faith, beliefs and experiences. Even today, storytelling remains an important part of the Jamaican family, with notable public figures like Louise Bennett (Miss Lou), Leonnie Forbes and Amina Blackwood-Meeks continuing the tradition. These public figures recognize storytelling as a spiritual and familial event and a form of resistance to power and dominance (Allen, 2017; Smart, 2019). Through the family, the value of storytelling, song and dance is transmitted from one generation to the next, creating a cycle of family literacy that enriches the cultural heritage of the community and the nation. Family literacy is crucial for preserving cultural identity and promoting the continuation of important traditions.

While orality, music and dance are important ways to encode and transmit shared history and experiences within and beyond the family unit in Jamaica, Aljoe (2004) warns against generalizing the experiences of enslaved people across the Caribbean and emphasizes the individuality and distinct character of the various islands and groups. Nevertheless, the advent of mass media has created more opportunities for connecting experiences across the islands: for example, many families sat together in front of their radios and listened to Miss Lou using patois to recite poems, share stories and sing. From 1965 to the 1980s Miss Lou hosted a Jamaican daily variety show called *Ring Ding*, the first locally produced children's programme in the Caribbean to be broadcast on television. At the time, watching *Ring Ding* with Miss Lou was a tremendously significant familial event. According to Morris (2014), beyond the obvious aim of entertaining children and their families, *Ring Ding* was an opportunity for families and the wider community to participate in a cultural experience in patois, the everyday dialect and language most people used.

[I]n the 1960s Jamaica was experiencing political turmoil, as the country struggled to define its identity and assert its independence. This period was marked by a growing consciousness of race and the need for social justice.

Ring Ding was first broadcast on television in 1968, six years after Jamaica's independence from Britain. At this time there were no specific educational programmes for families. Although *Sesame Street*, the popular American children's programme, premiered four years after *Ring Ding* and was also shown on local television, it did not have the same ability to bring Jamaican families together. This was especially significant given the social climate of the time. Before independence, the country was subjected to colonial policies that favoured the ruling class, perpetuating social and economic inequalities. Family policies and the educational system reflected these disparities. Furthermore, in the 1960s Jamaica was experiencing political turmoil, as the country struggled to define its identity and assert its independence (Thame, 2014). This period was marked by a growing consciousness of race and the need for social justice. During this time there was a sense of pride in Jamaican culture and an increasing recognition of the importance of preserving and celebrating the island's particular identity (Brissett, 2018). This cultural awakening also exposed the disparities in education between the ruling class and the majority Black population, including low literacy rates and a lack of emphasis on education for most Black people in Jamaica. The culturally responsive learning experience provided by *Ring Ding* was crucial in promoting alternative literacy practices rooted in the familial, cultural and social

identities of Jamaicans. It popularized the characters of local stories such as Big Boy, Annie Palmer, Rolling Calf and Bredda Anansi, a trickster spider, the last of which was itself inspired by the Ghanaian Ashanti tribal story character (Ellington, 2016). Such examples helped Jamaican and other Caribbean younger generations connect their roots and histories across lands and oceans.

By the 1970s there was a steady shift towards making conventional forms of print literacy central to Jamaican family learning practices. Following the 1970 census, which revealed that less than 50 per cent of Jamaican adults were literate, political efforts to change these statistics resulted in a wave of government initiatives. In 1974, the Jamaica Movement for the Advancement of Literacy (JAMAL) was launched as a country-wide programme aimed at 'eradicating illiteracy' through the provision of reading classes. Efforts to achieve this goal targeted specific demographic groups and geographic areas known to have higher rates of illiteracy. For instance, in his review of adult literacy in Jamaica, Miller (1979) noted that JAMAL classes were predominantly provided in rural communities, factories and inner-city communities.

There is suspicion of top-down initiatives that seek to impose Western values and cultural norms on the local population.

Although JAMAL was aimed at teenagers and young adults aged 15 to 35, many of the people in this age cohort were parents and would often bring their children to their reading classes. This programme provided opportunities for families to sit by their kerosene lamps and bond and read together as part of a government-backed initiative that only a few years earlier would have been unthinkable. Though the demand for JAMAL classes waned over the years, they had a lasting impact on family literacy. However, the most prominent literacy programmes at present focus on promoting children's development of conventional literacy skills, under-utilizing the legacy of JAMAL as a familial activity. Existing literacy programmes exclude embodied and enacted forms of literacy such as playing board games and video games, using social media, creating videos, and creating dances (Leonard, Hall and Herro, 2016).

Across the Anglo-Caribbean, criticism is still directed at initiatives such as JAMAL, which aim at improving family and community literacy but are perceived as paternalistic and steeped in the region's history of plantocracy and slavery (Hylton and Hylton-Fraser, 2022). The plantocracy, which dominated the island's political and economic structures, saw education as, at best, a tool to prevent social unrest, rather than as a means of improving the lives of the enslaved and free Black population. As a result, there is suspicion of top-down initiatives that seek to impose Western values and cultural norms on the local population (Brissett,

2018). These policies and guidance may be geared towards assimilating families into the dominant Western culture and way of life, rather than empowering local people to preserve their cultural heritage and traditions and pave their own paths towards literacy.

Challenging a social investment perspective of family literacy

Although there is no denying that Jamaica has reaped many benefits from having a highly literate population, everyday forms of literacy are not sufficiently valued. The elevated status of conventional forms of literacy is bolstered by a 'social investment perspective' (Wainwright and Marandet, 2017, p. 213) on policy-making in Jamaica, which positions 'the family' as a productive location for civic improvement. From this return-on-investment approach, literacy is seen to have high economic value, and the acquisition of literacy skills should provide families with improved job prospects and improved ability to access better health care and housing (Kim and Belzer, 2021; Prins et al., 2021). Despite this perspective, which ignores the social and economic conditions that constrain families' circumstances in the first place, literacy initiatives become associated with employability and social mobility, where participants are viewed as units to be optimized (Fine, 2016; Ravitch, 2010).

In this context, programmes such as JAMAL can unintentionally reinforce 'gendered, classed and racialised accounts of family competence and individual value' (Gillies, Edwards and Horsley, 2016, p. 221) despite being intended to work for social justice. The social investment approach is characterized by deficit narratives that frame families as at fault, often without acknowledging the structural inequalities that produce low literacy levels in the first place (Tyler, 2013; Thompson, 2019; Bishop, 2005). The influence of the social investment approach may also restrict what counts as legitimate literacy to encompass only those practices with the potential for boosting social mobility, such as writing and speaking in standard English. This focus leads to more emphasis on formal instruction in phonics, grammar and spelling, marginalizing other family literacy practices such as sharing stories in patois (Hickling-Hudson, 2014; Street, 2003).

The importance and validity of literacy as a social practice

An alternative to the social investment perspective is the socio-cultural view, which sees family literacy as 'activities rooted in a cultural and social context' (Papen, 2005, p. 92), not as a set of discrete and neutral skills to be acquired in pursuit of social mobility goals. From the socio-cultural perspective, family

literacy can be seen as a 'practice dependent on community norms' (Manca, Bocconi and Gleason, 2021, p. 2) which takes multiple forms and is developed through different social activities and interactions. This framework helps family learning practitioners to consider the varied reasons for using literacy and the different meanings individuals ascribe to it, and also reveals how literacy is always contested in relations of power (Street, 2003). This perspective calls for the removal of boundaries and expectations about what literacy is or can be in any given setting or at any specific time. The key question is that of 'whose literacies are dominant and whose are marginalised or resistant' (Street, 2003, p. 77). Such questions are particularly valuable in the post-colonial context where uniform, standard and universalist understandings of literacy are entrenched, and where the dominant understanding is that literacy is 'a ladder that people have to climb' (Papen, 2005, p. 35).

This perspective calls for the removal of boundaries and expectations about what literacy is or can be in any given setting or at any specific time.

The framing of literacy as socially and culturally mediated, and thus power-laden, has been advanced by many scholars over the last half-century, including Freire's (1979) notion of critical literacy and the work of the New Literacy Studies scholars (Manca, Bocconi and Gleason, 2021), among others. Despite such long-standing calls for a radical shift away from the technocratic, Eurocentric and colonial notions of literacy, in Jamaica examples of substantive and far-reaching change are very rare, even though Jamaican school curricula and teacher training programmes are beginning to recognize the importance of helping children connect learning in school with their lived experience within their family, community and broader society (Roofe, 2018).

It is therefore important for family literacy policy-makers and programme providers in Jamaica to look at more applications of culturally responsive pedagogy, such as that embodied in Te Whāriki, the bicultural early years' curriculum that reflects the 'dual heritages of Aotearoa/New Zealand' (Gould and Matapo, 2016). Te Whāriki aims to engender a sense of belonging, and to increase the potential of Māori children and families to actively participate in and contribute to shaping school spaces and encourages a sense of pride in their identity, language and culture (Berryman, Lawrence and Lamont, 2018). The adoption of Te Whāriki pedagogy has established a shared obligation for protecting the Māori language and culture among all the people of Aotearoa, including New Zealanders of British descent (Zhang, 2017). Te Whāriki aims to be integrative, acknowledging the shared history of the island and looking towards constructing a shared future. Although the adoption of Te Whāriki pedagogy

is a positive step, some concerns related to the lack of guidance and support for teachers to effectively implement it have been raised (Blaiklock, 2017). Nonetheless, understanding the design and deployment of Te Whāriki could offer Jamaican policy-makers insights that go beyond calls for culturally responsive pedagogy and plan for a counter-colonial curriculum that advances socially situated understanding and practices of literacy.

Naming impediments and drivers: Towards a socially situated understanding of literacy in Jamaica

In recent years, literacy initiatives in Jamaica have been primarily directed by the government's efforts to achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and Vision 2030 goals (Brissett, 2018). Although this target-driven approach can restrict how literacy is defined, perceived, practised and accepted, over the past two decades stronger appeals have also been made to minimize the privileging of standard English over Jamaican patois (Mühleisen, 2022). The response to these appeals remains uneven: for example, children who have a strong command of patois may be selected to perform at cultural events while children who have a strong command of standard English are selected for more prestigious events (Bryan, 2010; Kouwenberg, 2011) or to represent the school at a public event. This indicates that the acceptance of socially situated family literacy in Jamaica will be shaped both by both drivers – such as the support of schools and educators – and impediments – such as the dominant cultural attitudes and beliefs that shape and maintain the status quo.

Identifying specific drivers and impediments is a response to epistemic injustice, which can be tackled when people name their conditions as a step towards dismantling harmful structures. By identifying these drivers and impediments in *Table 1*, we recognize the power imbalances in the production and distribution of knowledge about acceptable forms of family literacy (Fricker, 2007). When a hierarchy emerges around language and literacy – as when patois is reserved for cultural events and standard English for mainstream school events – this suggests that not all individuals have equal access to power and decision-making in producing the knowledge and narratives that shape their lives and communities (Robinson, 2000). These hierarchies are based on assumptions such as the belief that children who can switch seamlessly from patois into what is perceived as high-quality standard English are more academically and socially able and offer a better reflection of the school's standards. By exposing these hidden elements, individuals and communities can assert their agency and engage in critical reflection on how power, privilege and oppression inform their experiences and realities (Freire, 1970). We have modelled this process of naming in *Table 1*.

Table 1: Impediments to and drivers of a socially situated understanding of literacy in Jamaica

IMPEDIMENTS	DRIVERS
Education system Teacher training in Jamaica tends to place limited value on socially situated forms of literacy, such as music, dance, storytelling, or the use of patois, because the dominant cultural and educational norms prioritize formal, written forms of literacy in English and devalue the informal, oral traditions and expressions prevalent in local communities and cultures.	Drawing on cultural assets Jamaican cultural assets such as music, dance, storytelling and patois provide a rich tapestry of knowledge, values and experiences that can be used to develop literacy skills in a meaningful and relevant context. Engaging with these cultural forms can also foster a sense of pride and belonging among families, helping to build a supportive community that values literacy development in multiple forms. Incorporating cultural assets into teacher education and training curricula and literacy education can help to bridge the gap between home and school literacies, fostering greater understanding and collaboration between families and educators.
Legacy of colonialism The Eurocentric and homogenizing forces of colonialism led to a loss of cultural identity and knowledge, as well as the dominance of English as a medium of instruction and determinant of literacy and a literate Jamaican person, and the persistent marginalization of non-dominant cultures and literacy practices. For education, this means that standard English is required in classrooms and assessment. It is continually reinforced as the superior language for use in important spaces, while patois is relegated to informal and social spaces. Similarly, practices such as the common entrance exam are markers of an education system that continues to emulate a British approach long since abandoned in the UK, indicating an attachment to traditional educational practices and a reluctance to embrace more progressive models.	Legacy of resistance The historical legacy of resistance to colonial oppression can be used to highlight the power of literacy as a tool for liberation and cultural preservation. This legacy emphasizes the recognition of the cultural context in which literacy practices are situated and the role they can play in shaping individual and collective identities. The learning and use of patois along with English on equal and complementary terms could help redefine what literacy is and who counts as literate. Family literacy programmes grounded in a cultural heritage of resistance have the potential to empower individuals to use literacy as a tool for liberation and self-expression.

IMPEDIMENTS	DRIVERS
Standardized testing in colonial language and literacy Standardized testing and literacy measurement practices tend to focus on a narrow definition of literacy and prioritize certain literacy skills, such as reading and writing in the colonial language, English, over others. This narrow definition of literacy often neglects and devalues the cultural and social knowledge embodied in other forms such as oral storytelling, music, dance and patois. As a result, these forms of literacy are not recognized or valued in educational settings, leading to their social marginalization.	Recognition of other forms of literacy The growing acceptance of the value of localized or Indigenous literacy practices around the world, such as Te Whāriki in Aotearoa/New Zealand, legitimizes the value of culturally specific forms of literacy and knowledge. Bicultural curricula like Te Whāriki acknowledge the significance of Indigenous perspectives and knowledge systems and seek to integrate these into dominant structures in society at equal levels. Such curricula provide a model that could be adapted to Jamaican students and families and to the specific cultural, political and historical landscape of the island.
Hermeneutic injustice Epistemic injustice includes hermeneutic injustice, the unequal distribution of capacities and opportunities for understanding, interpreting and making sense of one's experiences and the world. Storytellers, for instance, may be accustomed to their cultural practices being marginalized because of the way they are expressed (orally in patois rather than in written English), and may not perceive their experience as one of exclusion or oppression. The exclusion from interpretation can lead to a lack of recognition, understanding and respect for these forms of literacy, as well as acquiescence in the dominant forms of literacy, such as reading and writing in English, within communities (Medina, 2012; Beverley, 2022).	Towards knowledge democracy In the knowledge democracy movement, diverse and inclusive ways of knowing and generating knowledge are valued. Using a knowledge democracy lens, families can see their literacy practices as valuable and worthy of recognition and support, rather than as inferior to dominant or standardized forms. To build a knowledge democracy, grassroots initiatives, including community-led knowledge sharing and literacy programmes, empower individuals and promote diverse forms of knowledge. Simultaneously, structural changes such as educational reforms are needed to position different forms of knowledge equitably.

Table 1 presents our reflections on how family literacy in Jamaica is shaped by social, political and economic structures, and some of the potential opportunities for redefinition and action for more inclusive family literacy. Through similar forms of critical reflection and naming, communities can develop an empowering understanding of their reality and work towards creating a more equitable and just world (Giroux, 1983). The naming of conditions is an essential component of liberatory education for social change (hooks, 1994). In the context of Jamaica, this reflection on socially situated forms of family literacy contributes to expanding narrow definitions of literacy, which could help to reduce the marginalization of local cultures and the erasure of valuable forms of knowledge that are integral to families' literacy practices (Smart, 2019).

Conclusion

This chapter argues for the importance of understanding family literacy practices in Jamaica as historically and socially situated. These reflections are already rooted in Freire's critical literacy and the work of New Literacy Studies. Despite the growing influence of these perspectives on global and national educational discourses, their implementation remains pressing and relevant to Jamaica. We argue that Caribbean educational and cultural practices continue to be examined through and dominated by the colonial legacy and Eurocentric lenses, which produce and reproduce a narrative that does not accurately reflect the region's reality. A socially situated understanding of family literacy could challenge the epistemic exclusion of everyday family literacy practices that sustains the legacy and impact of colonialism

The chapter also provides some examples of literacy practices and events, such as *Ring Ding* and the JAMAL programmes, which could provide a platform for more inclusive, diverse literacy forms and practices. Other examples, such as the Te Whāriki curriculum based on the dual heritages of Aotearoa/New Zealand, offer inspiration and ideas for identifying and creating culturally responsive forms of family learning and literacy. These literacy initiatives should not be used solely as mechanisms to address social issues but also to legitimize and build on Jamaica's existing literacy practices. Overall, the chapter emphasizes the need for knowledge democracy, to challenge the epistemic legacy of colonialism and the hierarchy of knowledge systems, and to promote a broader understanding of forms of knowledge that transcend the ability to read and write in English.

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