

THE LITERACY BELIEFS, LANGUAGE ATTITUDES AND TEACHING PRACTICES OF A SELECT GROUP OF JAMAICAN GRADE ONE TEACHERS

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Abstract: *This small-scale, multi-method research examined grade one teachers' literacy beliefs about students transitioning at grade one. The research allowed for a clearer understanding of teachers' expectations about students entering and leaving grade one, teachers' attitudes towards Jamaican Creole, and their literacy practices. Data were collected using an online questionnaire and in-depth one-on-one interviews. Fifty-two grade-one teachers who were recruited from across the six education regions in Jamaica completed the questionnaire. Five grade one teachers who were also recruited through convenience sampling, separately, participated in the in-depth interviews. Based on the questionnaire, the teachers believed the following: students entering grade one should know the alphabet, the letter sounds, how to spell their names, and how to read a short simple sentence; and, on completing grade one should know how to read and write. Most teachers believed that Jamaican Creole is a language, while some translated their students' oral responses from Jamaican Creole to Jamaican English, and some used Jamaican Creole to improve their students' conceptual understanding in the classroom. For their literacy practices, the teachers indicated that they usually do activities that focus largely on constrained skills, such as teaching alphabet letter names. The interview data supported the findings from the questionnaire. The findings are discussed, and recommendations are suggested.*

Keywords: *bilingual, early childhood teacher, grade one, literacy, primary teachers*

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INTRODUCTION

Teachers bring their own beliefs and expectations about how to teach, and what students should bring to the learning process. These beliefs and expectations emerge from both internal and external factors and can potentially influence what teachers practice in the classroom (Buehl & Beck, 2015; Borg, 2003). Education stakeholders are therefore interested in what teachers expect from their grade 1 students to understand how teachers' stated beliefs may influence practice, and therefore how best to support teachers professionally to deepen their knowledge and improve their pedagogy for better student outcomes (Cekiso, 2017; Santos & Miguel, 2019). Additionally, a poignant period for some children is when they transition from pre-primary (kindergarten or basic school) to primary school (Burns, 2018; Jahreie, 2023; Kinkead-Clark, 2021). Education stakeholders want students at the grade one level to make a smooth transition, as it is believed that such a transition can prepare students for a successful school experience, especially if students get a good grasp of reading and writing in the school-based language. Swart et al. (2023) have noted that gaps can exist in students' level of preparedness when children transition from pre-primary to primary school if measures are not put in place at the early childhood level.

Research has shown that phonemic awareness and application of the alphabetic principles build a strong foundation for learning to read accurately and fluently (Yopp & Yopp, 2000). In the sample of Jamaican students in the study conducted by Spencer-Ernandez and Edwards-Kerr (2018), a majority of the basic school students did not possess these literacy foundation skills to enter grade one with a framework that would allow them to become successful in reading and writing. While the students did well on language development (knowing their first name, age, naming colors, etc.), many were at risk for reading difficulties as "40% failed to identify sounds in the initial and final position in words, 32% were unable to identify letters to match them with their sound, and 70% were unable to blend sounds dictated to identify words" (Spencer-Ernandez & Edwards-Kerr, 2018, p. 1271). As these students transition to primary school, it is the grade one teacher who has the task of supporting these children to become readers and writers in the target language, English. Much support from the school will be needed to scaffold these students who come from homes where a culture of reading is not demonstrated, and in contexts where the home language is different from the school language (Bogle, 1997; Christie, 2012; Nag et al., 2024). The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to understand the stated beliefs of grade one teachers as it relates to their expectations of the students transitioning into and out of grade one, their attitudes towards Jamaican Creole (JC), and their literacy pedagogy. By understanding

teachers' stated beliefs and practices, the goal is to understand what teachers expect from their students, and how best to support teachers professionally to deepen their knowledge and improve their pedagogy for better literacy student outcomes.

Kuzborska (2011) "affirmed that teachers possess assumptions about language and language learning, and that these provide the basis for a particular approach to language instruction" (p. 102). If we pay attention to what teachers believe, that is, find out more about the assumptions that they have, we may be better able to address these assumptions in pre-service courses at teacher training institutions or in in-service professional development workshops to effect change in practices that can promote improved reading and writing instruction. The four guiding questions for this study therefore are as follows:

1. What do grade one teachers believe that students entering and leaving grade one should be expected to do in terms of reading and writing?
2. To what extent do the grade one teachers believe that Jamaican Creole (JC) is a language?
3. How do teachers think JC influences the students' abilities to become literate in Jamaican English (JE)?
4. What do grade one teachers indicate are their reading and writing practices within the grade one classroom?

Conceptual framework for teachers' beliefs and practices

This descriptive multi-method study can be interpreted both through the conceptual framework of Buehl and Beck's (2015) ecological model of teacher beliefs and practices and the literature on literacy and language. These authors make the point that there is a reciprocal and complex relationship between teachers' beliefs and practices, and that there are both internal and external supports and hindrances to teachers' beliefs and practices. Internal supports and hindrances are those beliefs that are inside the teacher, such as, other beliefs, knowledge, experience and level of self-reflection and awareness. The external supports include those factors at the classroom, school and national levels. Also helpful is the point that teachers do not possess one belief system, but that it should be seen as a system of beliefs in which many complex and maybe seemingly contradictory beliefs reside within any teacher. Other researchers support this conceptualization about teachers' beliefs and practices being both complex and reciprocal (e.g., Farrell & Guz, 2019; Kuzborska, 2011; Morris, 2022).

Applying Buehl and Beck's (2015) ecological model to understanding the beliefs and practices of grade one teachers can help us describe and explain what is happening at this crucial entry point of grade one at the elementary level of the education system. Through

this ecological model, certain questions can be asked as it relates to the internal and external supports and hindrances that grade one teachers may experience. We focused on what teachers believe about what to expect from students at the grade one level, the teachers' stated literacy practices, and what the teachers believe about JC and its role in students' becoming literate in English. Answering these research questions is important as this study fills a gap in the literature about the literacy, language beliefs and practices of grade one teachers in Jamaica. Although there is some research in literacy at the elementary level (e.g., Ali & Christopher, 2022; Bryan, 2004; Davies, 2008; Lewis-Fokum & Colvin, 2017), there is room for further research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Teaching emergent readers and writers

Beginning readers initially identify words by recognizing the sounds in their language (phonemic awareness through oral language development) and learning the letters that correspond to the different sounds (alphabetic principle). While some children may learn the alphabetic principle intuitively or at home, many children may need phonics instruction to support them in learning the alphabetic principle (Campbell, 2020). Some researchers would argue that while students are developing phonemic awareness, students also need to learn the concept of print, for example, how to handle a book, and that in English we read from top to bottom and left to right (Gehsmann & Mesmer, 2023). Additionally, there is the concept of the word in text, that is, children must understand that whereas there are no obvious spaces between words when we speak, there are spaces between words when we read and write, which can be developed even through singing activities (Galeza & Rasinski, 2023; Gehsmann & Mesmer, 2023). As word recognition becomes automatic, that is, students can recognize words immediately and effortlessly, then fluency can develop. Fluency in turn can facilitate reading comprehension, the goal of reading, as students read words more accurately, and with the appropriate speed and expression (Rasinski, 2012). Students build their vocabulary by being able to recognize new words, which greatly enhances their ability to use those words in their writing. Therefore, the five pillars of reading as supported by the National Reading Panel in the United States – phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (Cassidy et al., 2010) – plus the concepts of print, the concepts about words in text, and writing development make up in our estimation eight core literacy skills.

Reading Instruction: Constrained versus Unconstrained Skills

In conceptualizing the reading process, we turn to Paris (2005), who categorizes the different elements of reading into two major skills: constrained and unconstrained skills. Constrained skills are those skills within which knowledge is finite for the learner and would constitute core areas such as the alphabetic principle. These skills are “directly teachable” and would include, for example, knowing that there are 26 letters of the alphabet, 44 phonemes (letter sounds (/k/) and letter combination sounds (/ch/)), 20–30 common spelling rules and 100 or more commonly used sight words (Snow & Matthews, 2016, p. 58). Unconstrained skills are those skills that are not always directly teachable, have no ceiling in terms of content knowledge, and can be learned over a lifetime, for example, vocabulary, comprehension, and background knowledge (Paris, 2005). Unconstrained skills are tied to socio-economic status and parents’ professional background. Snow and Matthews (2016) make the point that “language skills and world knowledge are important for success with literacy. Yet many prekindergarten through third-grade classrooms ... still focus on constrained skills, which are easy to teach and easy to test” (p. 59).

Jamaican language situation and literacy

The second response about teaching early literacy must be answered from Caribbean literature because of our specific language context. Many Anglophone Caribbean countries, like Jamaica, are bilingual (Kennedy, 2017). Bogle (1997), in her qualitative study, noted that many primary teachers were frustrated with teaching reading to some of their students. Bogle (1997) felt that teachers were ignoring the children’s home language in the learning-to-read process, not realizing that the children were moving from a language-by-ear, JC, to a language-by-eye, JE. Craig (2014) went a step further in his conceptual paper and argued that JC-speaking children have an extra layer of work to do to read successfully in English:

These two things are (1) to learn the relationship between written or printed shapes and the meanings they represent; and (2) to perceive or vocalize the latter meanings in terms of English sounds, English word forms, and English syntax. (p. 21)

Craig (2014) explains that while the child, whose home language is English, has only to learn the relationship between the printed shapes and their meanings, the Creole-speaking child, whose first language is JC, must learn the first part and also the second, that is, to translate the sounds, word forms and sentence structure into a related but different language, JE.

It becomes critical, therefore, that teachers develop their literacy and language awareness skills to know these two aspects of reading for the Creole-speaking child: first, the key areas of reading as listed above; and second, the structure of JC and JE to better support the Creole-speaking child in learning how to vocalize the printed words in terms of English sounds,

word forms, and structure. Other Caribbean researchers have also advocated for greater language awareness pedagogies within professional development training for the language/literacy teacher (Kennedy, 2017; Lewis-Fokum et al., 2023).

Transitioning: Different expectations between pre-primary and primary teachers

According to Kinkead-Clark (2021), there seems to be tension between the expectations of pre-primary and primary teachers as to what school readiness looks like for students transitioning into grade one. In her qualitative study of 33 primary and pre-primary teachers, Kinkead-Clark (2021) indicates that there was little agreement between the two groups of teachers about who should teach certain skills. Pre-primary teachers thought that their students were ready for grade one, “but just not according to the high standard of the primary school teachers” (p. 9). Additionally, the pre-primary teachers were “skeptical of primary school teachers’ unrealistic expectations of children” (p. 9). These differing expectations are not unique to the Caribbean as some early childhood centers in the United States attempt to address this tension by incorporating more targeted time for literacy and math’s instruction, while at the same time retaining their focus on play and socio-emotional development (Swart et al., 2023).

METHOD

To examine the beliefs and practices of grade 1 teachers regarding reading and writing instruction in the Jamaican classroom, both quantitative and qualitative sources of information were used. Data were collected through a questionnaire completed online and one-on-one in-depth interviews.

Participants

Questionnaire participants

Fifty-two grade-one teachers who were recruited through convenience sampling from various schools across Jamaica’s six school regions completed the questionnaire. Forty-nine of the teachers were women (96.1%) while two (3.9%) were men. Exactly half of the teachers, 50%, were in the 40-49 age group, followed by the 30-39 age group (28.8 %), the 50-59 age group (9.6%), the 20-29 age group (7.7%), and those in the 60 and older (3.8%) age group. Largely, the teachers were older women who had been in the teaching profession for over twelve years (57.7%). Thirty-six (70.6%) of the teachers had taught grade 1 for between 0 to 7 years, while fifteen teachers (29.4%) had taught grade one for eight years or more. All the teachers except two were full-time teachers. All teachers had some form of

training, with the majority of them having a bachelor's degree (84.6%), five teachers (9.6%) had a diploma, and three teachers (5.8%) had a master's degree. Most of the respondents were from Region 6, representing the parishes of Clarendon and St. Catherine (n = 22, 42.3%), with the next largest group being from Region 1, representing the parishes of Kingston and St. Andrew (n=16, 30.8%).

In-depth interview participants

Five grade 1 teachers who were recruited through convenience sampling from three schools in Region 2 participated in the in-depth interviews. They included four females and one male, all with a bachelor's degree as their highest degree. Three were in the 30-40 age group, and the other 2 in the 40-50 and 50-60 age groups, respectively (McNamee-Christie, 2023).

Measures

Questionnaire

A questionnaire was developed for the study based on the findings from a qualitative study which was conducted previously by two of the authors, in which they explored the teaching of reading and writing in three grade one classrooms in Kingston, Jamaica (Lewis-Fokum & Thomas, 2018). The questionnaire comprised three sections. In the first section, there were eight questions that sought background information from the teachers, including age group, gender, education and number of years teaching. In the second section, there were 14 questions that asked the teachers about their beliefs about teaching reading and writing. They responded to these items using the response options: 1 – 'strongly disagree,' 2 – 'disagree,' 3 – 'agree,' and 4 – 'strongly agree.' An example question from this section was, 'I believe that students entering grade 1 should know the letters of the alphabet.' In the third section, there were 17 questions that asked the teachers about the frequency with which specific instructional strategies are used in teaching reading and writing. Participants responded to the items using the response options: 1 – 'never,' 2 – 'rarely,' 3 – 'to some extent,' and 4 – 'a lot'. An example question from this section was, 'I read aloud to my students.'

In-depth interview guide

An interview guide was developed to examine teachers' beliefs and practices regarding teaching reading and writing, which allowed the researcher to ask a set of questions but maintain the latitude to probe during the interview. Like the questionnaire, the guide was developed using the findings of the earlier study by Lewis-Fokum and Thomas (2018) and consisted of 19 questions. The questions required teachers to provide details on how they taught reading and writing and their beliefs about JC as a language. Two examples of the questions asked from the guide were: "Which activities work best with your students in teaching them how to recognize letters and words?" and "What do your students write?"

Data collection

Ethical approval was obtained for the study from the Mona Campus Research Ethics Committee (ECP 138. 18/19). Permission to conduct the study was also received from Jamaica's education ministry. All the teachers who participated in the study provided informed consent prior to the data collection. Prior to the data collection both the questionnaire and the in-depth interview guide were piloted with three grade 1 teachers (not study participants), and minor modifications were made to the wording of some of the questions. The data collection for the questionnaire was carried out online via Google Forms in two ways. First, the questionnaire was sent to the principals of a list of schools selected through convenience sampling from across the six school regions in Jamaica, and they were asked to send the instrument via email to their grade 1 teachers. Second, the questionnaire was shared with a graduate student, who was a teacher, via WhatsApp and she was asked to share it with grade 1 teachers. The 52 teachers who completed the questionnaire did so via Google Forms between February 2022 and May 2023. The five grade 1 teachers who participated in the in-depth interviews were not among those who completed the questionnaire online. Another graduate student, who carried out the interviews with the teachers in face-to-face interactions, recruited them differently from three schools in one school region. The interviews were digitally recorded and lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. The interviews were carried out between March and June 2023.

DATA ANALYSIS

Quantitative Data

The questionnaire data were analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22. A frequency analysis was first conducted on each question to check for and address any out-of-bound responses and missing data prior to data analysis. Descriptive statistics including frequency distributions and percentages were then conducted to characterize all the variables for the participants. The items constituting the teachers' beliefs and practices were grouped separately into clusters according to their relatedness and a sub-theme or label assigned to them according to the literature for presentation (Song et al., 2013). Cronbach's alpha coefficient was then calculated to estimate the internal consistency reliability of the items constituting each cluster of items identified. Internal consistency reliability is the degree to which a group of items are correlated, indicating that they are measuring the same concept (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). The value 0.7 is considered the benchmark for Cronbach's alpha coefficient. At this level and higher, items are considered to be sufficiently measuring the same concept (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011).

Qualitative Data

To analyze the interview data, all interviews were transcribed verbatim, labeled and stored as individual electronic files (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To become familiar with the data, transcripts were read and reread as initial notes, and memos were written to capture thoughts and impressions about the data as patterns emerged. Open codes were generated through line-by-line coding. Key statements were highlighted, each with a different color. The open codes were then grouped into categories based on the research questions. The data were summarized and presented using descriptive prose. Verbatim responses from the participants were included to substantiate the claims made about the data.

RESULTS

Each subsection of the findings parallels one of the four research questions. The findings are presented under the following headings: teachers' beliefs about students transitioning into grade one; teachers' beliefs about students transitioning out of grade one; teachers' beliefs about JC as a language; the impact of JC on learning literacy in English; and teachers' literacy practices.

Teachers' beliefs about students transitioning into Grade One

Teachers believed that students entering grade one should possess certain literacy skills. An overwhelming majority of the grade one teachers believed that students should know the letters of the alphabet (94.2%) and know the letter sounds (92.2%) (Table 1). A similarly large portion of the teachers also believed that students entering grade one should know how to spell their names (96.2%) and how to write their first and last names (92.3%). These activities speak to the skill of writing beyond scribbling. Though not as high, more than half of the teachers wanted the children entering grade one to be able to read a short, simple sentence (69.2%). All these abilities describe a student transitioning into grade one who has a strong foundation for a school-based literate identity. In other words, students entering grade one who already possess these skills are off to a stronger start for learning to read and write in grade one than their peers who do not possess these skills (Spencer-Ernandez and Edwards-Kerr, 2018).

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Table 1.

Teachers' beliefs about students entering and leaving grade one

Items	Response options n (%)	
	Strongly Disagree/ Disagree	Strongly Agree/ Agree
1. I believe that students entering grade 1 should know the letters of the alphabet	3 (5.8%)	49 (94.2%)
2. I believe that students entering grade 1 should know the sounds of each letter of the alphabet ^a	4 (7.8%)	47 (92.2%)
3. I believe that students entering grade 1 should know how to spell their names	2 (3.8%)	50 (96.2%)
4. I believe that students entering grade 1 should know how to write their first and last name	4 (7.7%)	48 (92.3%)
5. I believe that students entering grade 1 should know how to read a short and simple sentence	16 (30.8%)	36 (69.2%)
6. Grade 1 is a critical year for literacy development	3 (5.8%)	49 (94.2%)
7. It is important for students completing to know how to read by the time they leave grade 1	4 (7.7%)	48 (92.3%)
8. I believe that if students do not leave grade 1 reading they can catch up in the later grades ^a	7 (13.7%)	44 (86.3%)
9. If students do not know how to read by the end of grade 1 they will have a difficult time catching up with their reading in later grades	23 (44.2%)	29 (55.8%)

Notes. ^an=51, Cronbach's α for the 9 items in this cluster = 0.758

These teachers' high literacy expectations from the questionnaire data were also reflected in the interview data. One teacher shared her description of a child reading at grade one:

... the child can identify letters without seeing pictures, is able to blend letter sounds to identify words, able to read words in[a] sentence or passage without stuttering and they are able to understand what is read.

Within their belief system, therefore, this group of grade one teachers expects that students entering grade one should already possess certain literacy abilities.

Teachers' beliefs about students transitioning out of grade one

Most of the teachers surveyed responded that grade one was a critical year for the students to grasp the foundational skill of reading (94.2%) (Table 1). Many teachers also believed that it was important that upon completing grade 1, students should know how to read (92.3%). The majority of them (86.3%) believed that students would eventually catch up in later grades if they were not reading at the end of grade one. Although not an overwhelming majority, more teachers believed that students would have a difficult time later on in their school experience if they left grade one not being able to read (55.8%). Here are the opinions of two teachers outlining factors that could impede literacy learning:

... I would love for all of them to be able to read at the end of Grade 1. However, I have foreseen due to the struggles I am presently seeing that some would not be able to read comfortably at the level they should be at by the end of grade one, due to several challenges like lack of parental involvement, Creole interference, lack of exposure to print materials and technology etc. (PR)

Not all the students will be able to read at the end of the school year because of the mixed ability class, the class size, the level [at which they are] and a lack of parental support. (SM)

Both these teachers listed several factors that they believed contributed to the difficulty of children learning to read and write by the end of grade one. A common factor voiced by them was the lack of parental support (Stewart et al., 2022).

Teachers' beliefs about JC and its impact on becoming literate in English

A majority (72.5%) of the teachers believed that Jamaican Creole is a language (Table 2). This is a shift from previous decades when many thought that Jamaican Creole was simply 'bad English', and therefore not a language (Christie, 2012). Most teachers (73.1%) shared that they used JC in the classroom to facilitate students' understanding of the concepts. And, while more teachers believed that JC affected how children speak in English (80.8%) and write in English (75%), fewer teachers agreed that JC affected how children learn to read in English (53.8%).

Table 2.

Teachers' Beliefs about Jamaican Creole and its Impact on Literacy in English

Items	Response options n (%)	
	Strongly Disagree/ Disagree	Strongly Agree/ Agree
1. Jamaican Creole (JC) is a language ^a	14 (27.5%)	37 (72.5%)
2. It is necessary to teach some children in JC in order for them to understand certain concepts	14 (26.9%)	38 (73.1%)
3. JC affects students' ability to learn how to read in English	24 (46.2%)	28 (53.8%)
4. JC affects how students write in English	13 (25.0%)	39 (75.0%)
5. JC affects how students speak in English	10 (19.2%)	42 (80.8%)

Notes. ^an=51, Cronbach's α for the 4 items in this cluster = 0.604

One teacher from the interviews summed it up aptly:

In reading, Creole speaking students are not able to blend letter sounds, syllabicate to pronounce words and write in English – students write just like they speak and send friendly text messages. (SM)

This quote corroborates Craig's (2014) position that the Creole-speaking child has two steps to engage with in learning to read: making the connection between sounds and the printed words and translating these printed words into English sounds, word formation, and syntax.

Teachers' literacy practices

The teachers' literacy practices were categorized according to four areas related to emergent literacy development based on the literature: oral language, early word reading, fluency and comprehension, and drawing and writing. In developing children's oral language, the grade one teachers indicated that they usually read aloud to their students (86.5%), translated students' JC oral responses to JE (61.5%), and included songs when teaching literacy (59.6%) (Table 3). In other words, teachers engaged students in these activities more than twice per week. At least once per week, this set of grade one teachers included games when teaching literacy (59.6%). One teacher explained that:

In helping my students to identify letters I make them from cardboard and have them feel them while calling their names. To help them identify words, I have them play various games, e.g., I Spy, The Postman and I am in a Well. (EM)

Table 3.

Oral Language Development

Items	Response options n (%)		
	Usually (≥ 2 x/week)	Sometimes (3-4x/month)	Rarely/Never (0-2x/month)
1. I read aloud to my students	45 (86.5%)	6 (11.5%)	1 (1.9%)
2. I translate students' oral responses in JC to JE	32 (61.5%)	17 (32.7%)	3 (5.8%)
3. I include songs when teaching literacy	31 (59.6%)	18 (34.6%)	3 (5.8%)
4. I include movement – hand, or feet, entire body moving when teaching literacy ^a	25 (49.0%)	21 (41.2%)	5 (9.8%)
5. I include games when teaching literacy	18 (34.6%)	31 (59.6%)	3 (5.8%)

Notes. ^an=51, Cronbach's α for the 5 items in the cluster = 0.770

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This paints a picture of a fairly engaging teacher-directed classroom that is appropriate for this age group. The moderately high percentage of teacher translations from JC to JE (61.5%) is noteworthy, yet not surprising, given the bilingual language situation in many Jamaican classrooms.

Nonetheless, early word reading was the greatest focus of the teachers as noted in Table 4. Most of the teachers indicated that they practiced early word reading skills more than twice per week. The teachers usually taught their students the alphabet letter sounds (88.2%), phonics (84.6%), the alphabet letter names (78.8%), and blending and segmenting activities(76.9%) more than twice per week.

Table 4.

Early Word Reading

Items	Response options n (%)		
	Usually (≥2x/week)	Sometimes (3-4x/month)	Rarely/Never (0-2x/month)
1. I teach alphabet letter sounds ^a	45 (88.2%)	5 (9.8%)	1 (2.0%)
2. I teach phonics when teaching reading	44 (84.6%)	7 (13.5%)	1 (1.9%)
3. I teach alphabet letter names	41 (78.8%)	9 (17.3%)	2 (3.8%)
4. Students do blending and segmenting activities	40 (76.9%)	9 (17.3%)	3 (5.8%)

Notes. ^an=51, Cronbach's α for the 4 items in the cluster = 0.872

These early word reading skills are important as they help students to understand the alphabetic principle, which is a core area for learning to read and write. One teacher highlighted the early word reading teaching practices as:

... using pictures, blending letters and sight words drill ... phonics is taught every morning during intervention. Alphabet drill is used to identify and practice letter sounds, blending sounds using songs to pronounce words and play letter bingo. (SM)

A majority of the teachers stated that they usually spent time teaching early word reading skills to their grade one students, but not to the total neglect of fluency and comprehension. As it relates to this dimension, there were fewer teachers who regularly engaged in these activities more than twice per week. The preferred method of reading was as a whole class (65.4%), then in pairs (38.5%) and then individually (36.5%) (Table 5). In other words, teachers typically practiced choral class reading, which has its benefits, but also its drawbacks. The main drawback of choral reading is that the stronger readers tend to drown out the reading of striving readers. More than half of the teachers also indicated that they assessed individual reading more than twice per week (66.7%).

Table 5.

Fluency and Comprehension

Items	Response options n (%)		
	Usually (≥2x/week)	Sometimes (3-4x/month)	Rarely/Never (0-2x/month)
1. Students answer comprehension questions ^a	36 (72.0%)	13 (26.0%)	1 (2.0%)
2. Students read a story/passage as a whole class	34 (65.4%)	14 (26.9%)	4 (7.7%)
3. I assess individual student's reading ^b	32 (66.7%)	15 (31.2%)	1 (2.1%)
4. I teach students specific comprehension strategies ^c	26 (51.0%)	20 (39.2%)	5 (9.8%)
5. Students read in pairs or a buddy system where a stronger reader helps a struggling reader	20 (38.5%)	25 (48.1%)	7 (13.5%)
6. Students read individually on their own ^c	19 (37.3%)	28 (54.9%)	4 (7.8%)

Notes. ^an=50, ^bn=48, ^cn=51, Cronbach's α for the 6 items in the cluster = 0.619

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Teachers also focused on comprehension (69.2%) and comprehension strategies (50%). From the interview data, we have a sense of some of the comprehension strategies that they used even at the grade one level:

Apart from questioning, activating my children's background knowledge and using that knowledge to help them understand what they are reading ... making inferences and predicting are two other strategies that I make use of in the classroom for the students to draw conclusions. (PR)

Another level of comprehension is responding to a stimulus in writing, which is described in Table 6. Children move from scribbles on paper to writing conventional written forms as they grow in their literacy development. More than half of the teachers (67.3%) had their children involved in drawing and writing activities more than twice per week.

Table 6.

Writing and drawing

Items	Response options n (%)		
	Usually ($\geq 2x/\text{week}$)	Sometimes (3-4x/month)	Rarely/Never (0-2x/month)
1. Students engage in drawing activities	35 (67.3%)	12 (23.1%)	5 (9.6%)
2. Students engage in writing activities ^a	35 (68.6%)	13 (25.5%)	3 (5.9%)

Notes. ^an=51, Cronbach's α for the 2 items in the cluster = 0.812

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Here, one teacher who was interviewed described her writing strategies, including the Language Experience Approach:

... retelling using the five fingers to retell what was read, ... use the Language Experience Approach to make connections with passage/lesson, anticipating the upcoming events in narratives, considering and sharing existing knowledge before exploring a nonfiction book, and engaging in discussions with how, why, and what-if questions, answer simple written comprehension questions. (SM)

Engaging grade one students in retelling and discussing what they are reading, and then writing about the experiences using the Language Experience Approach is commendable and speaks to moving literacy practices beyond the constrained skills (Paris, 2005).

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this paper was to examine the beliefs and practices of grade one teachers in relation to their expectations of students transitioning into and out of grade one, their beliefs about Jamaican Creole, and literacy pedagogy. In the previous section, we presented the findings from both the questionnaire and interview data based on the four research questions that guided the study. In this section, we discuss the findings in relation to Beuhl and Beck's (2015) ecological model of teachers' practices and beliefs, Paris's (2005) constrained and unconstrained model of literacy skills, and the literature review.

Teachers' beliefs about literacy and language for students transitioning into and out of grade one

The grade one teachers who participated in this study expect students to enter grade one knowing the alphabet, the letter sounds, knowing how to spell their names and how to read a short, simple sentence. If students fit this profile, then one can imagine that the teaching and learning process would be less challenging for the teachers (McClachlan, 2019; Spencer-Ernandez & Edwards-Kerr, 2018). However, when students do not fit this profile, the teaching and learning process is more likely to be frustrating for both the teacher and the students given the teachers' expectations about the literacy identities of incoming grade one students (Bogle, 1997; Kim et al., 2016).

From the qualitative data, one teacher reflected that she was already seeing the "struggles" with some of her students in learning to read and write. In addition, although she wanted students to transition out of her grade one class being able to read, she had her doubts about some of the students. Yet, the teachers were hopeful that some of these students would eventually catch up in their literacy abilities in later grades. This

hopefulness must be tempered, however, in the absence of programs targeted to address literacy challenges (Spencer-Ernandez & Edwards-Kerr, 2018). Some argue, like the early childhood educators in Kinkead-Clark's (2021) study, that these are "unrealistic" expectations for children at this age. However, this type of academic demand placed on children by a culture of testing (Lewis-Fokum & Colvin, 2017) and by the global technological economy is not slowing down. Perhaps, as Kinkead-Clark (2021) has noted, the concept of "readiness" as children transition from pre-primary to primary must be re-conceptualized for different sets of students to meet the specific needs based on the home and language/literacy environment from which children come. Additionally, families must be engaged in targeted ways to support teachers as they help to build the reading and writing skills and behaviors of children (Nag et al., 2024).

Based on Beuhl and Beck's (2015) ecological model, the "high" expectations of this set of grade-one teachers raise a host of questions about where these expectations are coming from. Are these expectations coming externally from the curriculum, the Grade One Inventory Learning Profile (GOILP) assessment, or internally from the teachers' own beliefs? Are these expectations realistic for students entering grade one, that is, children who are 6-7-year-olds? And how can pre-primary schools aim to better balance preparation of the socio-emotional skills and the academic skills?

Most teachers stated that they believed that JC was a language and stated that they translated their students' oral responses from JC to JE and used JC in teaching to improve their students' conceptual understanding in the classroom. Both responses indicate a greater valuing of JC in the classroom (Lewis-Fokum et al., 2023). However, there were some differences in beliefs as it related to the impact of JC on reading, as fewer teachers believed that the home language affected students' ability to learn how to read in English, which contrasts with Craig's (2014) explanation.

Perhaps professional development training would need to target content knowledge which explicitly informs teachers about those two sets of skills pointed out by Craig (2014): children learning the alphabetic principle, and the relationship between speaking in one language (JC) and learning to read in another language (JE) for the bilingual child. These bilingual challenges have been addressed by projects such as the Professional Development of Primary School Teachers (PDPST) in their teacher training workshops (Lewis-Fokum et al., 2023).

Teachers' stated literacy practices at grade one

Using Paris's (2005) conceptualization of reading, the grade one teachers in this study emphasized constrained skills in their literacy practices. Most of the teachers usually practiced activities that focused largely on constrained skills, such as, teaching alphabet letter sounds and names. In other words, teachers were engaged in helping children with phonological awareness activities and building children's knowledge of the alphabetic principle through phonics. In terms of unconstrained skills, fewer teachers indicated that their students answered comprehension questions, and just half taught the students specific comprehension strategies. This greater focus on constrained versus unconstrained skills was also observed by Snow and Matthews (2016) in the United States. In Jamaica, however, projects like the Literature Based Language Arts Project (LBLAP) (Lewis-Smikle, 2006) and the Caribbean Centre of Excellence in Teacher Training (CCETT) (Warrican et al., 2013) were projects that incorporated the right balance between the constrained and unconstrained skills and reaped success.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings from this research study, there are three recommendations:

1. There are projects that have been successful in promoting better early literacy skills, such as CCETT, LBLAP, and PDPST. We contend that what is needed is for greater collaboration between the ministry of education and the universities to re-engage these projects. One way to make the principles and content within each project sustainable and scalable is by making the materials openly accessible to teachers on various online professional platforms.
2. Targeted professional development for early childhood and primary school teachers needs to be conducted by both the education ministry and schools to improve the literacy and language content and pedagogy of our teachers to ensure alignment and smooth transition from the pre-primary to the primary curriculum. Teachers at all levels must be working towards similar goals for the development of children's literacy and language skills.
3. Further research is needed in the areas of teaching and learning as it relates to early reading and writing, curriculum alignment with literacy best practices, bilingual literacy practices, parental knowledge about literacy academic support, and contextualizing literacy research from a Caribbean perspective.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

There are a few limitations to this study that should be noted. First, convenience sampling was used to recruit teachers for the online questionnaire and in-depth interviews. Both samples were limited and therefore were not representative of the population of grade 1 teachers. The findings of the study therefore cannot be generalized to all grade 1 teachers. Second, the findings of the study were based on self-report measures. Self-reports, although an important angle for any topic being investigated, do not provide a complete picture of the topic as self-report data are said to be prone to social desirability effects. As such, it is recommended that multiple methods of data collection be used to collect the information when studying a topic to determine if similar findings are obtained (Hsiang et al., 2020). Despite the limitations, however, this study makes a significant contribution to the literature by adding information regarding the topic of grade one teachers' literacy beliefs, language attitudes, and teaching practices from a Jamaican perspective.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper was to understand the stated beliefs of grade one teachers in relation to expectations of students transitioning at grade one, teachers' attitudes towards Jamaican Creole, and their literacy pedagogy. In summary, our research revealed the following four points. First, the grade one teachers had "high" literacy expectations of incoming grade one students. Second, the teachers were aware that not all their students would transition out of grade one knowing how to read and write. Although a high percentage of teachers felt that students could catch up with their literacy skills after grade one, research has shown that this is difficult to achieve as children progress through school (Spencer-Ernandez & Edwards-Kerr, 2018). Third, the majority of teachers believe that JC is a language, translate their students' responses from JC to JE, and sometimes use JC to aid students' conceptual understanding of ideas taught in the classroom. Fourth, a high percentage of teachers do activities that focus largely on constrained skills as opposed to unconstrained skills, which has been proven to be problematic (Snow & Matthews, 2016). Indeed, there is a balancing act between developing children's social and emotional needs through play-based learning and providing sufficient academic-type foundational skills at the pre-primary level. Moreover, when children with limited literacy experiences transition to primary school, "teachers will need explicit understandings of how language and literacy develop, of what influences different family and cultural contexts exert, and of how they will need to be

able to use a range of pedagogies for supporting literacy learning” (Mclachlan, 2019, p. 21). Preparing and supporting such quality early childhood teachers is the responsibility of effective teacher training programs.

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