Chapter 15
Fostering True Literacy in the Commonwealth Caribbean: Bridging the Cultures of Home and School

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ABSTRACT
This chapter takes a close look at literacy in the Commonwealth Caribbean and explores factors that contribute to its status in the region. It links the current state of literacy to historical roots of education and relates it to other educational phenomena such as democracy in education, universal secondary education and technology in education. It argues that the current reported literacy rates for the region may be misleading as evidence suggests that for years, many students have been leaving school with insufficient literacy skills. The chapter proposes that the disconnect between the home or out-of-school culture of students and the academic/school culture contributes to poor literacy development which disempowers young people, especially males. It reports on what is being done to promote literacy in the region and concludes by sharing a vision of the way forward.

INTRODUCTION
Worldwide it is acknowledge that literacy is a key determinant of development (UNESCO, 2009). A literate society is better able to contribute to the social, political, economic and cultural development of countries. Indeed, in the so-called developing world, there is a thrust to raise literacy levels among the working class and/or the “underprivileged” with a view to helping them to improve their social and economic circumstances, and by extension, those of their countries. Donor agencies that undertake assistance in such countries set a high store on literacy and annually they invest large sums of money in literacy programmes. For example, in its Millennium Development Goals, the UN included as a target for the new millennium, an increase in the proportion of children, especially girls, in the developing world learning to read and write (UN, 2006). Furthermore, UNESCO declared a decade of literacy for 2002 to 2012, and emphasis was placed on activities designed to increase the literacy profile of the poorer countries worldwide. It is in this context that much discussion was held...
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The notion that literacy is empowering is not a recent one. The European colonizers who settled in the Caribbean and who used slave labour to keep their properties functioning knew this well and consequently, prior to emancipation, the skills of reading and writing were reserved for the ruling class. Since schooling was considered a contradiction to the system of slavery (Gordon, 1963), no formal provisions were made for educating slaves (King, 1999) and, in the Caribbean and other places in the Americas, slave owners vigorously opposed teaching slaves to read and write, sometimes treating it as a criminal offence (Dunkley, 2011; Perry, 2010; Mizell, 2010). With the signing of the declaration of emancipation, colonizers lost the ability to physically control former slaves, but to some degree, seemed to find other ways, whether consciously or otherwise, to maintain control over the lives of these individuals. This control was achieved through education.

Educating the “Natives”: A Means of Disempowerment and Control

It has long been established that a major purpose of education should be to help people to become critical thinkers, able to make reasoned decisions and to know right from wrong. Among other things, education should help to raise sensibilities to cultural activities (for example art, music, literature), to develop characteristics such as tolerance for human differences and empathy, and to encourage a spirit of community and cooperation. An educated society questions the status quo and calls authority figures into account for their actions and decisions. The ability to read and write contributes largely to becoming educated and education in its true sense is empowering. It is not inconceivable then, that literacy can be used...