

**TOWARDS INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP IN  
LITERACY IN THE EARLY CHILDHOOD CLASSROOM:  
Anglophone Caribbean Perspectives**

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This research was an examination of the perspectives of a group of early childhood education teachers from four Anglophone Caribbean countries about their growth as instructional leaders, based on the self-assessment of their contribution to the enhancement of literacy instruction. Another aspect was the evaluation of the impact of continuous professional development (CPD) on the teachers' developmental process. The data were gathered via an interview schedule, focus groups and participant observation from a purposive sample of forty-six Grade K to 3 teachers, designated as literacy specialists. The findings revealed that whereas 'instructional leader' was not a term participants used to identify their various roles, characteristics of this leadership process were evident in the discharge of their responsibilities. Hence, results showed participants perceived they were resource providers, collaborators and teambuilders for their colleagues in the execution of their duties. In addition, as they acknowledged confronting some teachers who were resistant to change, participants believed that the CPD sessions were central to the enhanced performance in their duties, as they equipped them with knowledge to introduce colleagues to innovative and authentic strategies in teaching literacy.

**Introduction**

With the emergence of early childhood education as one of the primary areas of focus globally, continuous improvement in this field has become a leading subject for discussion among its professionals. Research shows that many conversations centre primarily on the positive consequences of early childhood programmes for young learners' levels of readiness and overall successes as they progress in their school life (Browne & Englehardt, 2016). In addition, issues of theory and professional practices in contemporary research are also topical (File, Mueller, & Wisneski,

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2012). Naturally, these matters which feature prominently in deliberations on early childhood education worldwide have direct influence on trends in the field. Thus, it stands to reason that the ongoing discussion on some of the fundamental tenets of teaching young learners has resonated with early childhood practitioners in the Anglophone Caribbean (Jules, 2019). As a consequence, particular attention is given not only to the instructional practices, but also the roles discharged by experts in the field.

In this regard, more interaction with early childhood teachers/educators and the initiation of authentic classroom activities in the learning process, is an important component of the early childhood teachers' professional growth (Hedges, 2007). Further, as this category of educators is confronted with a body of knowledge which is growing constantly, members are required to stay current and to maintain an advanced level of knowledge of the contemporary theoretical and occupational proceedings in their profession (Nafissi & Shafiee, 2019). Moreover, early childhood educators are duty-bound to exhibit the highest level of prudence and efficacy in their response to the increase in complicated challenges they encounter in the teaching learning process (Waniganayake, 2014). Based on the aforementioned requirements, teachers' engagement in this type of regeneration provides some surety that they are fitted to function effectively as professionals with heightened expertise in their field. Thus, it seems evident that continuous professional development (CPD) is an activity which can be implemented to assist this category of Anglophone Caribbean practitioners in their growth. In fact, their engagement in this procedure is one of the most effective ways to keep pace with the global repositioning (Robinson, Jules & Thomas, 2020). Indeed, the mandate appears to be aimed specifically at a course of action to enhance early childhood educators' competence, so they can stay on the 'cutting-edge' of their discipline.

Another topic among early childhood educators is teacher leadership, and despite the keen awareness and the abundance of research carried out by authorities such as Hedges (2014), Browne & Englehardt (2016) and Nafissi & Shafiee (2019), there still appears to be some dearth in the area. Current research on teacher leadership lacks the depth required to establish a standard representation as there continues to be a high level of

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inconsistency with the present definitions of the term (Berg & Zoellick, 2018). The view is that a more accurate notion of a teacher leader requires a shift from concentrating only on the function of practitioners in the conventional leadership positions (Korach, Ballenger & Alford, 2011). Instead, there is movement towards a conceptualisation of the term that distinguishes teacher leaders as those who demonstrate the highest level of efficacy in implementing professional and pedagogical practices to enhance learners' development (Maxfield, Ricks-Doneen, Klocko & Sturges, 2011). Such actions pave the way for consistent improvement in the overall teaching and learning environment. Learners will benefit from the process of teacher leadership in their classrooms, as they experience the professional expertise of each teacher who instructs them.

Within this context, this current study emerged from a larger body of research organised by the Early Learners Programme (ELP) which sought to evaluate literacy in six Anglophone Caribbean countries. There is no denying that the existing research conditions were favourable for an investigation of literacy acquisition in a creole-speaking environment with learners of different language backgrounds. However, prior to carrying out any research on the acquisition of literacy, teachers should possess the requisite knowledge and expertise to be confident in their mastery as they carry out the research process. For this reason, this research sought primarily to provide information on the perspectives of a specific group of Anglophone Caribbean early childhood teachers on the self-evaluation of their contribution to literacy, leading to their development as instructional leaders in the area. In addition, participants' views on the worth of CPD in equipping them for the various roles associated with instructional leaders were examined. The research was guided by three questions:

1. What are the perceptions of a group of forty-six (46) Caribbean early childhood teachers on their contribution to English teaching to improve literacy instruction in their schools?
2. How do the teachers perceive their function as instructional leaders in teaching literacy?
3. What are the views of the teachers on the value of continuous professional development in catering to their development as instructional leaders in literacy?

### **Early Childhood Teacher and Teacher Leader: Bridging the Disparity between the Roles**

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With the abundance of information that has been brought to the fore about teacher leadership among early childhood teachers, it cannot be ignored that there is limited agreement among educators about what the role of teacher leader embodies (Neumerski, 2013). Consequently, often the lack of accord and sense of community among practitioners about components of teacher leadership, act as a deterrent to those who envision the value to schools (Waniganayake, 2014). In spite of this discord, authorities are aware that as leaders, early childhood teachers occupy a central position in the development and transformation of learning in their schools. So, while it is agreed that the enhancement of teachers' skills and distinctive features are necessary, optimum success in early childhood education requires the component of teacher leadership (Nafissi & Shafiee, 2019). Furthermore, cognisance that all parties within the early childhood teaching and learning environment stand to benefit from developing teachers as efficient leaders with a desire to collaborate with other stakeholders, should be a certain source of motivation for all parties.

Additionally, while early childhood educators must proceed toward teacher leadership with a positive outlook, they are obliged to take notice of the reality that the ability to make the most of the process of teacher leadership as a powerful resource for professional improvement, is hampered by lack of a collective scholarship (Berg & Zoellick, 2018). Even with this awareness, as teachers go forward with high expectations of the process, measures should be put in place to ensure that they can develop their leadership skills to the fullest, through participation in adequate training, with vital support. Particularly in the Anglophone Caribbean, it is essential that coaching exercises for early childhood teachers attend to all the existing linguistics and sociocultural factors which make the region unique and have an impact on the success of the entire teaching and learning process. Jules (2019) claims that one such circumstance specific to the Caribbean which requires diligence by the early childhood teacher leaders is the process of assisting young learners' acquisition of literacy and catering to these learners' overall language development.

**Teaching English to Support Literacy Development in Early Childhood: The Caribbean Context**

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Some educators assert that the most effective English teachers are those who possess a deep knowledge of the subject (Coe, Aloisi, Higgins, & Elliott Major, 2014). Currently, the spread of English as a means of communication globally continues to propel all stakeholders to ensure that learners have the opportunity to acquire this language from an early age (Nafassi & Shafiee, 2019). Accordingly, with specific reference to the Anglophone Caribbean, the teaching of English is particularly important, because in many countries where Creole co-exists along with English, the overlapping of language boundaries presents several linguistic complexities in the classroom (Simmons-McDonald, 2006; Roberts, 2008; Bryan, 2010). Further, with Standard English as the language of instruction in most schools in the Caribbean, the complication of the existing linguistic situations may require early childhood teachers to teach English as a second language, foreign language and a dialect for young learners who are nonstandard speakers of English (Roberts, 2014; Robertson & Simmons-McDonald, 2014). Certainly, it is not uncommon for Caribbean early childhood education teachers in a classroom context to be faced with the challenge of teaching learners whose language reveals the repertoire of the local varieties from their communities.

In this regard, assisting young learners in developing literacy skills necessitates Anglophone Caribbean teachers' mindfulness to the processes of pedagogical traditions and practices in teaching English, as well as the basic knowledge that generally, these learners' acquisition of a home language establishes that they already possess some competency in English (Roberts, 2014; Robertson & Simmons-McDonald, 2014; Stewart, 2017). For this reason, the reality of the classroom teaching and learning environments for English in the Anglophone Caribbean obligates early childhood teachers to expand their abilities beyond the acquisition of the elementary skills and knowledge of Standard English. These educators should be apprised of the fact that learners with mastery of the home language can be perceived as having a resource which is an asset to facilitate literacy development (Roberts, 2014). Naturally, this extension of teachers' capabilities demands a comprehensive understanding of the most effective pedagogical practices (Robinson, Jules & Thomas, 2020). In this situation, the responsibility of early childhood teachers is at its highest because an unsuccessful effort can result in young learners who perceive learning English as difficult, so that later in their development, they can be demotivated to proceed with the learning process (Nafassi & Shafiee, 2019). Based on this assertion, Brown & Englehardt (2016)

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propose that improvement of early childhood teachers' pedagogy in English maintains top priority. Hence, acknowledgement of researchers' conclusions about teaching English, reinforces forcefully the immense responsibility of early childhood teachers in the Caribbean as they endeavour to cater to learners' specific literacy needs.

**Instructional Leadership in Literacy Instruction: The Caribbean Reality**

Generally, individuals involved in early childhood education endorse the need for consistent improvement in the programme. Despite this environment, minimal consideration appears to have been given to instructional leadership specifically (Vogel, 2018). Even with the knowledge that instructional leadership can strengthen the overall teaching and learning conditions for early childhood teachers, the lack of attention to this aspect is still evident. From this perspective, in the Anglophone Caribbean, instructional leadership among early childhood education teachers is deemed as valuable. Moreover, based on the existing complexity with teaching English in the development of literacy in early childhood classrooms, the demand for instructional leadership in literacy instruction seems inevitable (Roberts, 2014; Simmons-McDonald, 2014). Nevertheless, while the expansion of their role as teacher leaders to include instructional leadership requires improvement in their fundamental knowledge of teaching English, this level of competence is only one aspect of early childhood educators' overall responsibility.

Additionally, based on the existing challenges present in most classrooms in the Caribbean, as instructional leaders in literacy, Caribbean teachers are expected to function as reflective practitioners. This component equips them with the ability to counter the complicated classroom realities that are evolving consistently (Christie, Enz, & Vukelich, 2011). This means that Caribbean early childhood teachers must be ready to develop creative pedagogical strategies to cater to their young learners' needs, while at the same time attending to their own professional growth. Furthermore, because instructional leadership sets out to provide teachers with coherent guidance, knowledge of curriculum alignment, along with a supportive and collaborative professional work environment, they are also tasked with the duty of being the force to motivate colleagues

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(Pacchiano, Klein & Hawley, 2016). Hence, instructional leaders in literacy in the region are obligated to inspire their colleagues toward achieving continuous improvement in their professional practices via meaningful collaboration. Certainly, early childhood teachers who demonstrate the propensity and eagerness to take on the role of instructional literacy leaders should be assisted in this task.

### **The Function of Continuous Professional Development**

According to Kloosterman (2012), continuing professional development (CPD) is a process which involves maintaining and enhancing the aggregate knowledge, skills and experience related to individuals' professional activities. Therefore, as teachers endeavour to keep abreast of the global trends, authorities have prioritised CPD to demonstrate their consistent heightened recognition of the need to provide related opportunities conducive to teachers' overall development (Gomba, 2019). While this improvement process comprises all the natural learning experiences and planned activities in which teachers engage, CPD also encourages and supports them in providing adequate time to record and review, as well as to attempt strategies and reflect on their learning and professional experiences (Brown & Englehardt, 2016). This means that CPD as a systematic and planned procedure allows early childhood teachers to maintain and develop professional competence, creativity and innovation for lifelong learning (Kloosterman, 2012).

On the matter of professionalism, early childhood teachers seem cognisant of the contract of caring for the overall development of their learners, as well as improving their function as teacher leaders. Therefore, in an effort to stay current, stakeholders such as policy makers and early education advocates, advise organising CPD for early childhood educators. It is notable that converse to the traditional one-off sessions for professional development, the present model emanating for CPD is more long term, continuous school based, collaborative sessions which attend to learning in the classroom and correlate to curricula (Darling-Hammond, Hyler & Gardner, 2017). Indeed, as members of the group of Caribbean English teachers, early childhood educators acknowledge that with the consistent shifting in their field, CPD enables them to maintain adequate pace with this worldwide movement (Robinson, Jules & Thomas, 2020). In view of the paradigm shift, CPD becomes essential to realising continuous improvement in the complex work of teachers (Darling-Hammond, Hyler & Gardner, 2017). In the Caribbean classroom setting, with awareness of the worth of CPD, it seems that the early

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childhood teachers can be in a better position to sustain their instructional leadership in literacy.

### **Context for the Research**

The impetus for this present research dates back to 2013 with a proposal for a series of Language Arts instructional workshops. The central objective of the project was to advance teachers' continuing education in methods and strategies in teaching Language Arts as an outreach response to primary school teachers' consistent requests for assistance. Therefore, the first two-day Instructional Workshop in the Teaching of Reading Comprehension was held at one of the campuses of The University of the West Indies, for twenty-five Grade 1 and 2 primary school teachers, in July 2013. At the conclusion, all participants assessed the workshop as extremely valuable in providing them with pertinent knowledge and strategies to improve their pedagogical practices in the Language Arts classroom.

In addition, from 2016 to 2018, after participating in a longitudinal research project investigating literacy development among Grade k to 3 learners in selected Caribbean countries, this researcher had heightened enthusiasm for an examination of early childhood teachers' perceptions of their worth and instructional practices in literacy instruction. As teacher-leaders, a central component of the participants' duty was sharing their knowledge and skills with colleagues by delivering workshops during scheduled visits with teachers from selected schools in their respective countries (Cook-Mackinnon et al., 2016). This activity along with the implementation of a series of CPD sessions by literacy experts from the research team, presented favourable conditions for investigation into other related areas of literacy instruction.

While this researcher functioned as a consultant and facilitator during the CPD sessions, one of the major concerns identified was participants' need to enhance their professional practice with effective methods and strategies in teaching literacy. Another issue was their desire for comprehensive knowledge of how to foster a spirit of collaboration among colleagues as they set out to achieve the objective of catering to the literacy needs of their learners. Thus, considering participants' requisites, the conclusion was that a focus on their progression to instructional leadership



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in literacy would be beneficial for them. As a consequence, while instructional leadership was not the central focus of the 2016 research project, the issue emerged as worthy of further investigation. Further, it seemed reasonable to propose that participants' engagement in CPD was a useful process to prepare them for transitioning in their leadership role. Therefore, as the earlier incentive of the Instructional Workshop from three years prior further strengthened the motivation and reinforced the utility of this present research, it was also deemed valuable to investigate the role of CPD in the participants' process to instructional leaders.

It is noteworthy that at the commencement of the 2016 investigation, participants requested a change from their previous title of identification as reading coordinators, to the term literacy specialist. They concluded that the former designation presented a limited description of their real duty and failed to provide an adequate conceptualisation of the functions and roles they performed in the execution of their work. In their view, the title literacy specialist was more suitable, especially for colleagues who attained the appropriate degree of qualification (Cook-Mackinnon et al., 2016). Thus, with this new tag, as well as the typical roles of reading specialists, participants had the responsibility primarily as resource providers, collaborators and teambuilders, who work directly with colleagues by providing support via coaching and other professional development. For this reason, hereafter, the term literacy specialist is used as a referent to the participants in specific places in this article.

This research sought to analyse the perceptions of a group of early childhood teachers from the Anglophone Caribbean, to examine the self-assessment of their contribution to English teaching to improve literacy instruction in their schools towards their development as instructional leaders, and to assess the value of CPD in catering to their competency and growth during the leadership process.

## **Method**

### **Research Design**

The present research utilised qualitative methods primarily, with quantitative indicators merely to highlight any common trends rather than a statistical analysis. Data were collected via participant observation, a structured-interview schedule and focus group discussions. While functioning as a consultant and facilitator during CPD sessions at selected locations in each country, this researcher was a participant observer within the research settings, so that the CPD period corresponded with

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observation for data collection. It is significant that for this present research, the larger body of research from which these data were collected was ongoing. Therefore, to ensure that the research was not compromised and to maintain confidentiality of the participants as well as for ethical reasons, the pseudonyms E, F, H and J were used to represent the countries in which they taught (see table 1).

**Table 1. Dates and Countries Visited for CPD Sessions and Duration of Observation**

Year & Date of PD Session	Country & Observation Sessions	Observation Time
<b>2016</b>		
February 16	J	4 hr 45 min per session
April 17	H	
May 25	F	
July 22	E	
	4 sessions	19 hrs/1140 min
<b>2017</b>		
January 2	E	4 hr 45 min per session
May 14	J	
May 24	E	
June 20	F	
June 27	J	
August 3	F	
November 26	H	
November 28	H	
	8 sessions	38 hrs/2280 min
<b>2018</b>		
April 4	E	4 hr 45 min per session
May 21	F	
June 27	J	
July 27	H	
	4 sessions	19 hrs/1140 min
<b>Total No</b>	<b>16 Sessions</b>	<b>76hrs/4560 min</b>

Note. Schedule prepared by author in August 2018

According to the information in Table 1, the observation sessions lasted for approximately nineteen months from February 2016 to July 2018, with sixteen CPD sessions implemented over the period. Each CPD interaction lasted 4 hours and 45 minutes, commenced at 9:00 AM and concluded at

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3:00 PM, excluding a 15-minute break and 1 hour for lunch. Participants in each of the four countries received four CPDs during the nineteen-month period, so that the overall observation was in place for 76 hrs or 4560 minutes; the majority of the CPD sessions were implemented in 2017. During these forums, participants were exposed to the implementation of current approaches and related methods and strategies in literacy instruction. Further, sessions increased participants' awareness of the significance of home language and young learners' use of the local variety. The central aim was to prompt participants' re-evaluation of the negative attitude towards home language and its function in the young learners' overall literacy development.

Data collection through a structured-interview schedule lasted for approximately 45 minutes for every participant. In addition, they engaged in two focus groups each comprising 4 (four) participants - one representative from each country. Conversations were for approximately 90 minutes. Qualitative data were recorded, then transcribed and coded for the themes and subthemes which emerged; focus group data were presented as verbatim responses. The research incorporated methodological triangulation; this type of methodology enhanced the level of integrity and credibility (Yeasmin & Rahman, 2012).

### **Research Instruments**

Three instruments were used for this research: an observation guide, a structured interview schedule and focus group. As the primary instrument, the observation guide focused on 13 leading areas based on four dimensions which emerged from the work of researchers such as York-Barr & Duke (2004); Berg & Zoellick (2018); Maxfield, Ricks-Doneen, Klocko & Sturges (2011) (see table 2). From 6<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> August 2018, the three instruments were piloted to a select group of early childhood teachers from 10 primary schools, to remove any ambiguity with the items and to increase the trustworthiness of the research.

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**Table 2. Observation Guide for Data Collection with Dimensions of Leadership**

<b>Dimensions</b>
<b>Function as Teacher Leader</b>
1. Provision of resources to enhance learning process
2. Regard for colleagues' expertise
3. Supportive of colleagues
<b>Applying a Collaborative Approach</b>
4. Working with colleagues in catering to learners
5. Close network of teachers
6. Awareness of colleagues' contribution to the learning process
<b>Instructional Leadership in Literacy</b>
7. Demonstration of comprehensive content knowledge and pedagogical skills
8. Participating in decision making
9. Facilitating resources to meet learners' needs
10. Demonstration of organisational skills
<b>Effective Team Building</b>
11. Evidence of promotion of coaching for colleagues
12. Inspiring colleagues to be team members
13. Promotion of team spirit
<b>General Comments</b>

Note. Observation guide prepared by author in August 2018

Table 2 highlights the 13 key questions from the four dimensions for the collection of observation data: *Function as Teacher Leader* (3 questions); *Applying a Collaborative Approach* (3 questions); *Instructional Leadership in Literacy* (4 questions) and *Effective Team Building* (3 questions). The section *General Comments* facilitated additional reported information. To gather narrative perspectives from the participants, the interview schedule comprised a set of 8 open-ended questions organised into four categories (see table 3).

**Table 3. Structured Interview Schedule for Participants**

<b>A</b>	<b>Biographical</b>
1	In which country do you teach?
2	How many years have you been a teacher?
3	What grade/level do you teach presently?
<b>B</b>	<b>Literacy Instruction</b>
4	What are your views on the methods and strategies used in teaching English to facilitate literacy?
5	How do you attempt to resolve any challenges you encounter teaching literacy in the classroom?
<b>C</b>	<b>Professional Development</b>
6	How has the continuous professional development in which you have participated in the last two years provided you with the expertise you need to function as a teacher leader?
<b>D</b>	<b>Instructional Leadership</b>
7	What benefits do you think you can achieve with becoming an instructional leader in literacy?
8	What are your views on the influence of instructional leadership in literacy on the team building process?

Note. Interview schedule prepared by author in August 2018

In Table 3, the four categories of questions are presented: *Biographical* (3 questions); *Literacy Instruction* (2 questions); *Professional Development* (1 question) and *Instructional Leadership* (2 questions).

During the data collection process, all participants completed the interview schedule face-to-face; the two focus group sessions were carried out online to ensure the eight participants (four in each group) were able to contribute while resident in their respective country.

### **Participants**

The research used a purposive sample with a population of (n= 46) Grade K to 3 teachers from four Anglophone Caribbean countries (see table 4). For the required criteria, participants were experienced practitioners in early childhood education, members of the study sample in the larger literacy research project, teacher leaders and worked at schools in the Anglophone Caribbean.

**Table 4. Countries in Which Participants Teach and The Grades**

Participants' Country	Grade K	Grade1	Grade 2	Grade 3	N0 Participants	Percentage
Country E	2	3	3	4	12	26.0
Country F	3	4	4	4	15	32.6
Country H	2	2	3	3	10	21.8
Country J	2	2	2	3	9	19.6
Total:	9	11	12	14	46	100

Note. Information on participants prepared by author in August 2018

The information in Table 4 shows that each country had an adequate number of participants for the research with the largest representation (n=15) from Country F and the least (n=9) from Country J. The majority of participants (n=14) taught 8-9-year-old learners (Grade 3); the least number of participants (n=9) instructed 4–6-year-olds in kindergarten. Thus, each grade on which the research focused was represented adequately. While the small sample size (n=46) was a limitation, the credibility of the research was strengthened with the application of persistent observation which utilised representative elements in the conditions.

### **Analysis & Results**

The findings were assessed for accuracy through an online session with four participants: one from each of the representative countries. The technique (i.e., member checking) provided the opportunity to verify the results and enhance the trustworthiness. Some data from the structured interview were analysed using Microsoft Excel. Table 5 presents the responses as average percentages to focus on any existing tendencies. Tables 6 to 11 outline the cumulative qualitative data from the themes and subthemes coming from observation, while the remaining qualitative data from the interview and the focus group are presented below the tables. To further ensure participants were non-distinguishable, they were identified with a numeral (for example- Participant 23).

First area of focus: *Participants' perceptions on their contribution to English teaching to improve literacy instruction in their schools.*

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**Table 5. Number of Years Participants Taught**

<b>No Years Teaching</b>	<b>No Participants</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
< 1	0	0
1-3	3	6.5
4-6	6	13.1
7-10	14	30.4
>10	23	50

Note. Data prepared by author in August 2018

The results from Table 5 showed that most of the participants were experienced in their field with half being in the profession for more than 10 years (23 participants- 50%) while over 40% (20 participants) taught for 4 years or more. None of the participants had taught for less than 1 year.

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**Table 6. Theme and Subthemes from Observation of Participants' Function as Teacher Leaders**

Themes and subthemes	Observation data/Participant observation
<p><b>1. Demonstration of leadership skills</b></p> <p><b>a. Sharing of resources</b></p> <p><b>b. Acknowledging teachers' competence</b></p> <p><b>c. Supportive of teachers</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants ensured folders with resource material were accessible to colleagues. They indicated meeting with teachers at least fortnightly to share information. This was verified with relevant journal entries and field notes.</li> <li>• Participants exhibited a high level of eagerness in recalling examples of teachers' effective application of new content, inclusive of implementation of the methods and strategies associated with the Thematic, Integrated and Balanced approaches in their classrooms.</li> <li>• Participants were consistent sources of support for colleagues. They presented much evidence of this each session from entries in their reflective journals and observation notes, which validated their efforts.</li> </ul>

Note. Data prepared by author in August 2018

The data in Table 6 indicated that participants demonstrated heightened awareness of critical aspects of their duty as teacher leaders. With their expertise and accessible material, participants functioned as reliable resource persons who ensured that teachers gained knowledge of the effective approaches to literacy. This positive trait was enhanced by the high level of support they gave to colleagues. In fact, participants seemed to celebrate colleagues' competence when they applied innovative strategies during classroom instruction. These results were supported by the following focus group data:



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**Participant 40:** *When we visit schools and observe teachers delivering some excellent lessons using an Integrated Approach to merge Language Arts areas with other content areas and facilitate learners in combining their skills of speaking, listening reading, writing and viewing tasks, it is so gratifying to know we contributed to their progress in literacy instruction.*

**Participant 11:** *There is such positive feedback from teachers who are supported when we share and pass on the knowledge we have. In particular, they were grateful for the assistance with implementation of the balanced literacy block and using the strategies of reading aloud, shared reading, guided reading, independent reading, and word study to improve their learners' literacy.*

**Participant 6:** *We try to maintain weekly contact with teachers during school to be a source of help. For example, during my last visit, I fulfilled my group's request for more information about the Balanced Approach to Reading in relation to how it empowers them to respond to each learner's individual literacy needs.*

**Table 7. Theme and Subthemes from Observation of Participants' Resolution of Issues in Teaching English to Improve Literacy**

Themes and subthemes	Observation data/Participant observation
<p><b>2. Resolving Issues in English Language</b></p> <p><b>a. Identifying issue</b></p> <p><b>b. Resolving issue</b></p> <p><b>c. Organising solutions</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants used keen observational skills to isolate challenges within the teaching learning environment. In particular, they focused on those classified as niggling such as the negative attitude to learners' home language and hesitance to change from some traditional strategies.</li> <li>• Participants took their role of resolving teachers' issues very seriously and extended much effort in this area.</li> <li>• Participants recognised that an important aspect of developing learners' literacy was working together and reaching out to other stakeholders. They organised workshops and interactive meetings for engaging with principals, ministry officials and parents and guardians.</li> </ul>

Note. Data prepared by author in August 2018

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Based on data in Table 7, participants reported resistance to change in instructional approaches and methods from some teachers and principals. In some instances, participants revealed that learners' home language was discarded as 'broken English' and as a deficiency in their ability to learn Standard English. With the knowledge acquired from attending workshops on, 'Positive Perceptions on Home Language', 'The Use of Home Language in Literacy Development' and 'Home Language Awareness', facilitated by the team consultants who were linguists, participants were resolved in their mission to share their expertise and inspire colleagues and other stakeholders to adapt to the necessary repositioning in literacy instruction. During the focus group sessions, as participants appeared to acknowledge the worth of their efforts in enlightening their colleagues, they expressed the following views:

**Participant 7:** *We need to lead the charge in the change of teacher attitude and behaviours towards acknowledging learners' home language in teaching Standard English.*

**Participant 41:** *From the additional knowledge and clarity I gained about differentiated instruction and ways to make the strategy work with teaching English to enhance literacy development in our classrooms, despite the challenges which can occur like bad attitudes towards the home language and possible limitations with those teachers who want to hold on to traditional ways of teaching, I can now really assist teachers.*

Further results showed that participants conveyed their preparedness to deal with the challenges that emerged in the classrooms inclusive of varying levels of literacy competence, diversity in language and culture and specific literacy difficulties such as attention deficit disorder. They worked on the solutions as a team. Their responses during the focus groups further support this conclusion:

**Participant 7:** *Continued collaboration with all parties is necessary to resolve the problematic areas such as no motivation to improve learners' literacy in the home environment and even those with special needs like learners who suffer with dyslexia and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.*

**Participant 34:** *Our visits to the schools and interactions with teachers and principals are extremely helpful in allowing us to identify particular challenges that result from varying differences in learners' literacy*

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*competence or even the kind of the assistance they receive at home and we work together to overcome them.*

In addition to setting up professional learning communities to share ideas and develop best practices in literacy instruction, participants organised workshops, as well as special meetings and interactive sessions. The objective was to educate other stakeholders such as principals, education officers and parents on the relevant proceedings and to bring them 'on board'. It is notable that participants believed they were predisposed to overcome any resistance to innovations which they were set to implement. The following views emerged from the interviews:

**Participant 20:** *Generally, teachers are trying to improve their delivery during sessions; if they encounter any problems, I am here to assist them.*

**Participant 28:** *I am aware that some teachers will refuse to change their practices and I must have a strategy ready to deal with this in the best way, to get them working with us.*

**Participant 16:** *We realise that not everything will go smoothly because some teachers can be resistant to change. We must be there to guide them.*

The results were credible evidence that participants felt they made a valuable contribution to the progress of literacy instruction and the improvement in this area at their schools. Moreover, the findings also revealed their acknowledgement that any success was achieved as a team, with the sole purpose of catering efficiently to learners' needs.

Second area of focus: *Participants' views on their function as instructional leaders in literacy.*

**Table 8. Theme and Subthemes from Observation of Participants' Responses to Instructional Leadership in Literacy**

Themes and subthemes	Observation data/Participant observation
<p><b>3. Instructional Leadership in Literacy</b></p> <p><b>a. Enhanced teachers' knowledge</b></p> <p><b>b. Decision maker</b></p> <p><b>c. Facilitator</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Over the period, participants steadily acquired new knowledge about teaching English to improve literacy and carried out the process of restructuring their knowledge effectively.</li> <li>• Even when faced with challenges, participants experienced some success in reinforcing to principals and colleagues the new methods and strategies in literacy instruction.</li> <li>• Participants facilitated colleagues who required assistance with application of strategies for teaching English to enhance literacy. Attention was given to strategies for home language awareness.</li> </ul>

Note. Data prepared by author in August 2018

Based on observation findings in Table 8, participants seemed to consider themselves best qualified to ensure that colleagues were current with pedagogical practices in literacy instruction. Their responses revealed the stance on their readiness for advancement in the process. While in the focus group discussions, participants expressed the following:

**Participant 17:** *I've gotten greater clarity on how to bridge the gap between the Standard English and the students' home language to assist teachers with literacy instruction.*

**Participant 33:** *We looked at a variety of activities to incorporate home language in the classroom with projects and lessons to assist teachers in developing learners' literacy and to help them make the distinction between Standard English and their home language.*

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**Participant 5:** *An instrument to monitor teachers' progress in teaching English to develop literacy would be useful.*

**Participant 27:** *The teachers requested examples of activities on how to make use of students' language for transition to the standard and I accommodated by providing them with ideas about displaying both varieties of language in the classroom with the use of charts and drawings. I also explained how to use interactive games to expose learners to the different varieties.*

**Table 9. Theme and Subthemes on Observation of Participants' Use of a Collaborative Approach**

Themes and subthemes	Observation data/Participant observation
<b>4. Collaboration in Learning Process</b>	
<b>a. Catering for learners</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Participants placed learners' overall needs, inclusive of literacy needs as top priority; this was their major area of focus consistently.</li></ul>
<b>b. Colleagues networking</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Participants' discussions revealed recognition that changes with professional practices and pedagogy required a density of teachers with multiple links working together. Participants set out to achieve this.</li></ul>

Note. Data prepared by author in August 2018

**Table 10. Theme and subthemes on observation of participants' role in team building**

Themes and subthemes	Observation data/Participant observation
<p><b>5. Effective Team Builder</b></p> <p><b>a. Peer &amp; expert coaching</b></p> <p><b>b. Effective Motivator</b></p> <p><b>c. Building team spirit</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants ensured that colleagues benefited from their current knowledge. They facilitated peer coaching in areas such as Assessment and Home Language Awareness where colleagues required the greatest assistance. Participants also reached out to experts in the field.</li> <li>• As participants motivated each other, they engaged in activities and executed various roles, they were aware that colleagues required motivation to maintain their support and commitment to the task.</li> <li>• Participants seemed cognisant that a positive team spirit among colleagues was crucial and created a WhatsApp group to increase their accessibility to colleagues. Participants did not use the term instructional leader as identification.</li> </ul>

Note. Data prepared by author in August 2018

The information in Table 9 indicates that participants seemed driven by their ultimate duty to cater to the overall development of their young learners and recognise that success in this process would not be achieved with a solo effort. Furthermore, based on the findings, in the dispensation of their duties, participants were duty-bound to assume a position of leadership in teaching literacy to ensure colleagues were current with the most effective methods and strategies.

One of the essential features of being a teacher-leader is the ability to collaborate effectively with colleagues in the execution and completion of tasks. The data in Table 10 are evidence that participants were aware of this

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important trait. Added to this, with areas that teachers found challenging to implement such as Differentiated Instruction, Assessment of Literacy and Home Language Awareness, participants' provision of peer and expert coaching sessions for colleagues also had a positive effect on team spirit. These activities also had a decisive influence on all parties' self-development and identity as early childhood educators. Along with their visits to the schools, the constant link participants established via the technology, helped to further strengthen their effectiveness in motivating colleagues and heighten the team spirit. During their conversations participants stated:

**Participant 25:** *Our visits to the schools reveal that our assistance and how we work with teachers are very valued and appreciated by them and the principals.*

**Participant 44:** *The interaction with teachers while carrying out my duty is a great experience; it is a wonderful network that makes the job less challenging.*

**Participant 16:** *One of the major issues emerging from teachers is that it is necessary to maintain contact with them and we assured them this was one our top priorities.*

**Participant 40:** *To maintain the level of enthusiasm and professionalism with which these team members are approaching their roles and related duties, we must attend to any concerns they have.*

**Participant 20:** *Overall, the team is working well. It is extremely commendable that despite the challenges such as some stakeholders' resistance to change, and learners' varying literacy needs, this team is working very well.*

**Participant 14:** *We must motivate teachers to continue working in our absence.*

Participants' responses supported their exhibition of common features of instructional leadership such as resource provider, facilitator, decision maker and being supportive of colleagues. In addition, during their discussions and interviews, participants reiterated the importance of collaboration in the teaching-learning process. It is significant that they used the terms 'network', 'team' and 'team members' to reference colleagues. Further, participants' earlier selection as members of the group of teachers to work on the literacy project (i.e., the 2016 longitudinal research) seemed to suggest that they initially possessed some distinctive leadership qualities. However, the findings highlighted that whereas features of functioning as an instructional leader were evident,

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participants failed to use the term ‘instructional leader’ as a distinction for themselves as a special group of teacher leaders.

Third area of focus: *Participants’ perceptions on the value of continuous professional development in catering to their development as instructional leaders in literacy instruction.*

**Table 11. Theme and Subthemes on Observation of Participants’ Views on Continuous Professional Development Enhancing Expertise in Literacy Instruction**

Themes and subthemes	Observation data/Participant observation
6. Participation in Professional Development  a. Enhancing expertise  b. Effectiveness  c. Options for CPD	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The CPD sessions provided participants with the type of support needed to enhance their competence in teaching literacy.</li>   <li>• The CPD sessions facilitated sharing of information in each country and feedback indicated visits with face-to-face interaction with consultants and facilitators were extremely useful.</li>   <li>• Participants were innovative with organising CPD sessions to continue their progress in the absence of the consultants and facilitators.</li> </ul>

Note. Data prepared by author in August 2018

The findings in Table 11 showed that participants were committed to facilitating colleagues’ exposure to the same developmental conditions which they experienced; they were determined that overall, this type of knowledge was important in going forward in teaching literacy. In fact, participants’ engagement in CPD for 19 months and their feedback supported the premise that overwhelmingly, this type of planned interaction increased their competence and effectiveness as literacy specialists and teacher-leaders. Participants’ responses during the discussions corroborated their eagerness to share their CPD experience with colleagues:



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**Participant 1:** *More than anything, these sessions are extremely effective in ensuring that the aims of the entire project, not only teaching English to improve literacy, are achieved.*

**Participant 8:** *I envision a series of CPD sessions which will happen in such a way for teachers to continuously improve on their weaker areas of the teaching and learning process.*

**Participant 2:** *The CPD sessions we organised were successful; we worked as a team – they have built my confidence to go further.*

**Participant 17:** *The CPD sessions have focused on areas such as collaborating and teambuilding. These are really important if we are to grow as teacher leaders.*

According to the results, participants perceived that CPD would influence their development as teacher leaders. It is noteworthy that whereas participants never used the term ‘instructional leader’ in their responses, the findings support the claim that they had commenced this developmental leadership process, based on the roles they performed. Hence, while participants did not explicitly state that CPD enhanced their instructional leadership process, the findings indicated they advocated the worth of these sessions to their advancement in leadership in literacy instruction.

## **Discussion & Conclusion**

This research set out to investigate the perceptions of a group of early childhood teachers from the Anglophone Caribbean to find out the self-assessment of their input in teaching English to improve literacy instruction in their schools. Additionally, the aim was to examine participants’ development in the process of instructional leadership, along with the worth of CPD in catering to their mastery and growth as instructional leaders.

### **Contribution of English teaching to improve literacy instruction**

The overall contribution that early childhood teachers make to initiate the process of fitting each learner for adoption of his or her purpose and place in society is paramount. Moreover, an essential aspect of their professional practice is positioning young learners for development of life-long literacy skills. Thus, similar to other locations worldwide, in the Anglophone Caribbean the responsibilities of early childhood education teachers include introducing learners to English within the formal academic

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setting to promote literacy. Accordingly, participants indicated that one of their major challenges was teaching Standard English to improve learners' literacy development. They revealed that this difficulty resulted from the variation of English as the home language which learners produced in their classrooms. Thus, a high level of diligence must be taken to ensure that learners do not conclude later in their learning process, that success in learning the English Language is unachievable for them (Cameron, 2010). Certainly, participants' work indicated their comprehensive understanding of the obligation towards learners' success in acquiring competence in Standard English as a component of their literacy development.

The current global movement in early childhood teacher education identifies clearly the accountability of teachers in the Caribbean to re-examine their pedagogy with English instruction (Robinson, Jules & Thomas, 2020). This proposition increases the pertinence of the claim that one of the stumbling blocks of early literacy learning is finding efficient language teachers who can perform this onerous job (Cameron, 2003). In light of this, results revealed participants' firm commitment to sharing quality resources with colleagues, inclusive of their expert knowledge in teaching English to aid in enhancing and developing literacy. From this perspective, this group of early childhood literacy specialists, as they were classified, were well-placed to continue conquering the challenge by seizing the responsibility to function as teacher-leaders. Indeed, participants voiced the perspectives firmly that with the support they gave teachers in teaching English, they made an invaluable contribution to literacy instruction in their respective countries.

**Function as instructional leaders**

The more contemporary leadership approaches which encourage collaborative leadership conform to the early childhood teaching principles and practices highlighted in the current shifting perspectives in early childhood education (Nafassi & Shafiee, 2019). Recognising the significance of collaboration, effective literacy teaching in the region needs educators who perceive this aspect as indispensable to achieving the central objective of catering to learners' overall needs. In this research, participants perceived collaboration to be one of the major keys to success in literacy instruction and based on their firm commitment to this

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undertaking, an active close-knit network of colleagues was formed. Further, through the collaborative process, teachers learned to develop trust in each other and in the learning process (Hord & Hirsh, 2009). For early childhood teachers, the level of support and collaboration they exhibit are hallmarks of effective leadership. As instructional leaders, early childhood teachers can facilitate collaboration and take fellow-teachers along with them on this professional developmental journey (Berg & Zoellick, 2018). Furthermore, teacher leaders are tasked with cultivating the decision-making process and being supportive of any positive changes occurring in the profession (Berg & Zoellick, 2018).

Generally, the execution of leadership stipulates that teacher-leaders must perceive colleagues' competence as an asset for educational improvement for the institution and the field itself (Berg & Zoellick, 2018). A typical act associated with the charge as teacher leader is to acknowledge colleagues' expertise. Based on the findings, participants recognised the requirement of team effort for effective transitioning in literacy pedagogy. Accordingly, functioning in this leadership role enables these teachers to embrace awareness of the precondition of enhancing their pedagogical and organisational skills (Robinson, Jules & Thomas, 2020).

As early childhood classrooms are not isolated entities, working with other organisations is critical (Pacchiano, Klein, & Hawley, 2016). This means that along with collaborative teachers and supportive school administrators, team building with teacher leadership entails commissioning other stakeholders such as parents and community leaders who have either a direct or indirect influence in the teaching and learning process as posited by Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, and Easton, (2010). This action of reaching out beyond the classroom towards other contributors is crucial. Moreover, participants' purposeful efforts to institute a spirit of team building which strengthened relationships with these individuals was an intrinsic aspect of the leadership process. Indeed, participants' organisation of special stakeholder workshops and meetings demonstrated their heightened recognition of the role of these contributors. If the process of teacher leadership is to function effectively, as participants engaged in leadership outreach, simultaneously they continued to frame their own professional identity as teacher leaders. This move signals a need for advocacy for a high level of communication at all stages. Such interaction can be considered paramount for early childhood teachers in the Anglophone Caribbean, who are intent on developing or enhancing their leadership abilities. It is vital that participants as teacher leaders appeared to execute an appropriate response to the call to become

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critical partners in their colleagues' daily professional development. Certainly, one more dimension of their obligation is to recognise the value in transitioning to the role of instructional leaders in literacy instruction.

**Value of CPD in development as instructional leaders**

Timperley, Wilson, Barrar & Fung (2007) claim that the investment in teachers is the most important external fundamental action to influence learners' achievements. Accordingly, results highlighted participants' conclusion that it was necessary for colleagues to be guided through the process of implementation of changes in teaching literacy and judged that CPD was an effective method to ensure fellow teachers were equipped to carry out their duty. CPD not only serves to enhance teachers' levels of competence, but also plays a central role in their ownership of their professional practices (Edwards, 2009). In addition, when teachers are allowed to experience the useful application of CPD, they will transition to a position of more knowledge in their teaching and develop a more comprehensive understanding of their distinct roles as teacher-leaders (Darling-Hammond, Hyler & Gardner, 2017). With these aforementioned details in mind, participants indicated that the CPD sessions enabled them to gain more information about teaching literacy and extended their professional practice. Such views correlate with the claim that Caribbean early childhood teachers and instructional leaders are among the category of teachers who desire CPD catering directly to their needs (Robinson, Jules & Thomas, 2020). Added to this, CPD provides teachers with a high level of fulfilment and equips them with the ability to design, plan and deliver instruction more efficiently (Robinson, Jules & Thomas, 2020). Accordingly, participants assessed CPD as useful to Anglophone Caribbean early childhood educators in their overall development as teacher leaders.

**Recommendations**

This research confirms the justification for continuing examination of the procedures of self-assessment as a means of charting the way forward for literacy instruction for young learners in the region. Hence, as the group of teachers categorised as literacy specialists continue to lead this charge,

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self-assessment of their expertise and value as experts in their field is essential in the dispensation of their duty. By the same token, it is noteworthy that these teachers were consistently aware of their membership in a team. As a consequence, the recommendation is for other Caribbean early childhood teacher leaders to engage in self-assessment to get a sense of their own worth and specific roles in their schools.

Among other duties, the literacy specialists took on the mandate of teacher-leaders and team builders in teaching literacy in their respective countries. In this regard, for this process to be successful, the value of these teachers cannot be nullified. Therefore, based on their demonstration of increasing proficiency in literacy instruction, these experts should be afforded some autonomy by school administration to chart the course of their learners' development. The members in this group of teacher leaders have already set out to position learners for success in developing literacy as they perform the various roles, including that of resource providers and supporter among colleagues. For this reason, the recommendation is that the literacy specialists be afforded every opportunity to build on their mastery for the benefit of young learners.

While it is accepted that CPD is useful for early childhood teachers, their views on the most effective CPD must be voiced to assist in the decision-making process in relation to aspects such as the topic of focus and the delivery. Accordingly, Guskey (2002) asserts that teachers' collaborative and consistent involvement in planning and problem-solving are critical components of successful professional development. In spite of the present shift to CPD that is more practical and viable, often ministerial or school administration decide on sessions for early childhood teachers with traditional approaches, with no input from the proposed recipients. However, in keeping pace with the current global trend which stipulates a change in this arrangement, the recommendation is for teachers' direct needs to be the major influence in the organisation of CPD.

As every teacher should be uplifted by the title which identifies him or her, as requested by the participants, the term literacy specialist was used exclusively in this article in reference to this group of teachers. Considering this, while this research was not focused directly on the main 2016 literacy project, the recommendation is that consideration be given to the use of the term literacy specialist to classify teachers who perform the associated duties. Therefore, it must be advocated that there is value and wider currency in ascribing the title of literacy specialists to this category of teachers.

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