In this article, Glasceta Honeyghan traces her own literacy development to the sounds and rhythms of her Caribbean youth. My personal account of how my community helped shape me as a writer and educator illustrates possible connections between the family/community and classroom literacy. Whether they take the form of families reading the Bible in their first language, parents reading aloud from a book to their children, children chanting to jump rope, or members of a community congregating in villages, towns, or cities to tell stories, these practices played an important role in contributing to my literacy growth.

My narrative supports growing theoretical accounts of the role of family/society in an individual becoming literate, and the value of storytelling and drama in children's growing mastery of the reading process. I begin my account in my village.

THE RHYTHM OF THE VILLAGE

I look back to my girlhood in a village in rural Jamaica and recall the village-folks and the emotions of my youth. In a world without television, the main attraction for the average villager was largely . . . nothing; no place to go and nothing to see. In that small village, without technology or much in the way of distractions, I grew to appreciate the music in language and the recurring rhythms that resonated through my world. The sounds came through the movements all around me, and I responded to the rhythms in the everyday sounds of such things as stories, the “biggest lie” game, riddle-rhymes, and even the sad sounds at the death of someone dear.

Stories, Lies, and Riddle-rhymes

The voices of the village were unmistakable: the elders gathered at dusk and the children drifted in with the evening shadows. Under a dull moon glowing in the country night darkness, the children listened, enthralled, to hear the elders tell stories that they in turn, would retell. They listened and watched with widened eyes, round and brown as nutmegs, and fell into these stories of intrigue and suspense.

The “Brer Anancy” and “Big Bwoy” stories told of supremely powerful characters, tricksters using absurdity and humor to overcome situations involving those in authority, as well as siblings, friends, or children. Even the variations in details were telling voices that provided a link to Africa. The “duppy”
stories told of spirits of the dead coming back in the form of a “rolling calf,” “old hie,” or “coolie duppy.”

Another form of entertainment was the competition created by “the biggest lie,” when each man tried to outdo the other in an effort to tell the biggest lie. Yet another form of entertainment was riddle-thymes. These were told and answers were expected; other times, the rhymes were told just for the humor.

The stories, lies, and riddle-thymes usually dragged on half into the dark night. The next morning, youngsters could be heard excitedly retelling these on their way to school. At recess, under spreading shade trees, the retelling continued as part of their play, and at night, they listened with wonder and amazement to the same stories again.

The village also swelled with music, whether it was rushing and floating behind a truck loaded with men off to play a competitive game of cricket, or in the fields with working women. There in the fields under the hot, old, striking sun, the women with faces streaked and smeared with the dust from peanut bushes, sang. They sang in the gentle wind as they pulled the clinging peanut pods from bushes. One voice might start out, murmuring the words of the old Negro spiritual “Lawd I Want to be a Christian inna My Heart.” The rest would join in—tenor, alto, bass—and fill the fields with harmony. The children too knew the words to these songs.

On Saturday evenings, the source of entertainment was the village string band with Mr. Julias on his banjú, Mr. Brown with his fife, Mr. Williams on his guitar, and Mr. Fabian shaking two dry gourds full of seeds. The children gathered, knew the words of the folk songs, “Dis Long Time Gal,” “What a Wutless Dry Eye Gal,” “Brown Skin Gal,” and others.

Time moved. I remember being drawn to popular Western songs spilling out of transistor radios, juke boxes, and later, the sound system, into the village. The children knew the words of the songs by Fats Domino, Brook Benton, Dionne Warwick, Aretha Franklin and others. We learned many of the lyrics by heart from the radio, and it seemed our successes were due largely to the felt rhyme and predictable patterns of the songs. These were captured in our own extensive collection of lyrics that we shared and sang at local concerts, and snatches that we wrote into love letters.

The local music gradually shifted to Reggae. The children were rocking and getting down to “Summer Down” by Bob Marley and the Wailers; “The Israelites” by Desmond Dekker and the Aces; “Wonderful World, Beautiful People” by Jimmy Cliff; and “Carry Go, Bring Come” by Justin Hinds and the Dominoes. Again, among the children, importance was placed on possessing the lyrics in order to sing along.

The Everyday Sounds

It was as if there was a rhythm in the village air, in the distinct sounds, in the color and cadence of the voices heard daily. I still hear the sounds of the village: the insistent crowing of the rooster; the rhythmic tilt of the Creole of working women, with gourds, machete, and bundled lunch, as they chattered with workmates; of a loudspeaker calling the village to a political meeting, the politician shouting promises; of the woods ringing with the sound of axes splitting firewood; of the sharp thwacking of dominoes under a shop piazza; and of the rolling of the goatskin drums summoning villagers to a revival meeting. Even the battered, blue passenger bus that would howl into gear and lumber through the village seemed to have its own sputtering rhythm as it roared along, raising dust, and spewing black smoke from its tailpipe. The boys in the village mimicked that sputtering rhythm.

The rhythms of maxims and proverbs of folk wisdom were used in casual daily conversations: “Dog a sweat an’ long hair a cover it.” In other words, a person has problems, but is able to conceal their effects from observers. However, it is the rhythm I heard in the poetry of play that struck the chord every time. At a ring game, for instance, the children’s voices seemed to have the power to draw me in.

Dere’s a black girl in de ring,
Tra, la, la, la,
Dere’s a black girl in de ring,
Tra, la, la, la,
Dere’s a black girl in de ring,
Tra, la, la, la,
Fo’ she like suga’ an’ I like plum.

For nearly everything they did naturally, whether the children were playing circle games, uttering playground chants, taunts, and teas or whether they were involved in such activities as spelling, telling riddles, or counting, there was a correlating verbal rhythmic expression which tripped off their tongue.

There were other rhythmic expressions for bantering or for teasing. These were sometimes done as hurtful insults, other times as mere fun. For instance, the expression “Piece in de east yuh nasty beast/ piece in de devil grass piece” could be an insulting response to one child asking another for a piece of candy, or, in the case of one child who might have been whimpering, another would tease: “Cry, baby cry / stick yuh finger in yuh eye / if yuh modder ask yuh why / tell her dat yuh want some pie.”

Other rhymes suggested cures for illnesses, for instance, in the case of a hiccup:

Hiccup, snick up,
Rise up, kick up,
Three swallers from a cup
Will end your hiccup.

In other cases, there were lines that resulted from a skillful play on words. We wrote our own verses, consciously toying with words, experimenting with them:

Do you carrot all for me?
My heart beets for you,
With turnip nose
And your radish face.
You are a peach.
If we cantaloupe,
Lettuce marry,
Weed make a swell pear.

Like adults, the children used maxims in casual conversations—sometimes for fun, other times, they were taken literally: “Finders keepers/losers weepers”; “Ask me no questions, I’ll tell you no lies/ask me again, I’ll spit in your eye”; “Sticks an’ stones may break my bones/ but words can never hurt me.”

The Rhythm of Death

On a more solemn note, the village carried a certain drama and a sad rhythm that accompanied death. No matter how gradually or how suddenly it came, the mighty shock of death brought the same sudden bursts of piercing wails and spasms of sobs. Mourning villagers could not be denied the week-long mourning that culminated in the all-important Nine Night when the spirit of the dead would be driven off. At the setup (an all-night ceremony that is believed to appease the dead and protect the surviving family from witchcraft) those keeping a vigil and who were full of black coffee and white rum would sing, no doubt to match the depth of their gloom. They sang the mournful melodies, “There were Ninety-and-Nine,” “A Drunkard Reach His Cheerless Home,” “Guide Me Oh Thou Great Jehovah,” and a host of other songs they “tracked” from a “sankey” (a book of religious songs composed by Ira David Sankey). The tracking of the sankey followed a routine: one person designated for such a responsibility, read the words, line by line, that were drowned immediately by louder voices of the knot of singers, who caught those words, swallowed them, tilted their heads backwards, dipped their bodies, swerved a little, waved hands toward the sky, and hurled the melody at it.

The songs sprang from the depths of their throats.

The songs sprang from the depths of their throats as if they had stored a special voice in the darkness of their inward parts. Together, in one great voice, the sound slowly rose higher and higher into a great far-flung voice, a huge calling sound, rising up like the tide and filling the yard, sweeping out into the road, bouncing off the hills, raising up valleys, drowning the village, and flooding over into the beyond, strong and mighty. The singers drank a salty-sugary mixture to clear their throats gone hoarse, and they carried the notes through the night, into the morning. The children knew the tunes, the words. That voice too had the power to pull me in.

Toward evening, under the fading sun, the rawness of feelings about death continued. With grief about to consume them at the funeral, the same voices came with great sighs and big groans; the women’s wails became contagious, and soon tears rose and fell plenty. The ritual carried an aura. Looking back, I see at the heart of the ritual were the spiritual, mystical, and supernatural phenomena articulated by those ordinary people, where lay the testament of hope, faith, and endurance. It was a powerful and binding spell. Today, I still hear the melodic rhythms of what I now realize as an extraordinary conscious expression of an art form.

The Rhythm at Home

I still hear my mother rousing us from sleep with “Early to bed, early to rise/makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise.” At home, my parents took the Bible’s admonition at Deuteronomy 6: 6, 7 literally: that parents were responsible for inculcating Bible principles on their children’s minds and hearts. I remember the prayers we were expected to memorize: The Our Father prayer, the 23rd Psalm, and “Now I lay me down to sleep/I pray the Lord my soul to keep/I should die before I wake/I pray the Lord my soul to take.” I can still hear my my mother shuffling my sibling and me off to school: “Labor for learning before you grow old/for learning is better than silver or gold/silver and gold will vanish away/but a good education will never decay.” I still remember the lines of her favorite hymns from her Hymnal, lines sung at church, lines we were expected to remember (since we did not own a hymn book) to share in the Friday night worship: “Just Over The Mountain,” “There’s a Land that is Fairer Than Day,” “Oh Beulah Land.”

I can still hear my father reading the story of Joseph and his eleven brothers from the King James’ version of the Holy Bible. I can still see it sitting there on his lap: the big black book, the only book in the home, the only book read at home.

There were the other stories my father told—tales of his life as a worker on the Panama Canal, tales told with snatches of Spanish that I still recall. Born in 1873 and being the eldest survivor in the village, my father was revered for these stories. Perhaps, since he was closer to God and the Founding of the world than anyone else in the village, people felt his stories had to be true, and after all, there was no one to challenge him. In the quiet afternoons, with the sweet smell of mangoes in the air, he told about the slave trade, the Maroon War, and the 1938 riots.

The Rhythm in Church

The peal of the church bell broke the quiet Saturday morning and spoke to the village. It was no mere piece of clanging metal; it had power. That mighty peal came as though all the rushing waves, the roaring thunder, and the bellowing of the animals were rolled up in one reverential voice and called the village to gather for God’s greatness.
In church, the religious teaching we received at home was reinforced. In Sabbath School, it was expected that we recite Bible texts that we had memorized at home—particularly the psalms, verses from the book of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes—that would be recited on Thirteenth Sabbath. Even as a child, my nerves tingled to recite those verses. To me, although the message being rendered was blurred, arousing a morbid fear of God, there was an emotional clarity, lifting my spirit toward the eternal. As an adult looking back, I can see how this experience had the impact it did. I can now look back at the great poetic and aesthetic process in those expressions I learned through memorization—the use of repetition, verbal parallelism, and patterns of sound. In both the Hebrew and Greek scriptures, in poetry and poetic prose, I see the repetition of words, of special patterns of words that increase the semantic effect.

The book of Proverbs does this very well. The style and expression in the book is in the Hebrew poetic style, most of which is structured in parallel poetry. It consists of making rhythmic lines that give parallel thoughts or ideas. Its beauty and power of instruction lie in this thought rhythm. The thoughts may be synonymous or contrasting, but the power of the parallel is there to give extension to the thought, to enlarge upon the idea and to make sure of conveying the meaning in the thought. The expressions in Proverbs 10:7, 30, 12:25, and 15:8 provide examples, indicating that the matter dealt with should penetrate the heart:

10:7 The memory of the just is blessed: but the name of the wicked shall rot.
10:30 The righteous shall never be removed: but the wicked shall not inherit the earth.
12:25 Heaviness in the heart of a man maketh it stoop: but the prayer of the upright is his delight.
15:8 The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord; but the prayer of the upright is his delight.

In Ecclesiastes there are also many repetitions and parallelisms. At Ecclesiastes Chapter 3 verses 1–8 the repetitive pattern indicates that there is a time for everything:

1. To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven; 2. A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted; 3. A time to kill and a time to heal, a time to break down and a time to build up; 4. A time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; 5. A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; 6. A time to get and a time to lose, a time to keep and a time to cast away; 7. A time to rend and a time to sew; a time to keep silence and a time to speak; 8. A time to love and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace.

The phrases establish a pattern that appealed to my ear then as it does now—“A time,” “A time.” I still find the emphasis convincing.

As an adult, I look back at the psalms I memorized, and I have learned to appreciate them on a different level. The Book of Psalms, a collection of 150 sacred songs are lyrical poems written in unrhymed, Hebrew verse. They display unsurpassed beauty of style and rhythmic flow of thought—full of wonderment, depth of subject matter, and strong expressed emotions. Psalm 23 is universally accepted as one of the masterpieces of all literature but is even more magnificent in the beautiful simplicity of its expression of loyal trust in God. Psalm 8 provides a splendid sample of such profound expression where the Psalmist, in a dramatic voice, contrasts God’s greatness and man’s smallness.

1. O Lord our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth! Who hast set thy glory above the heavens. 2. Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings hast thou ordained strength because of thine enemies, that thou mightest still the enemy and the avenger. 3. When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained; 4. What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man that thou visitest him? 5. For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour. 6. Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet; 7. All sheep and oxen, yea, and the beasts of the field; 8. The fowl of the air, and the fish of the sea, and whatsoever passeth through the paths of the seas. 9. O Lord our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth!

Now I look back at the village church and see that these scriptures were a living message, a message full of beauty and style, with an almost spellbinding effect, appropriate to its grandeur and content. Yes, there were the elements of the spiritual, the mystical, the supernatural there, where we as children drank along with our elders from the spiritual rock-mass.

As a child, my spirit was drawn even to the all-day Sabbath, because in the big church, everything blended into one big drama. There was the slow hymnal rhythm, sung by the congregation and accompanied by the plangent music of the church organ. And there I was, a growing girl, awestruck by the whole drama.

The organist struck the keys of the mighty organ that made the ceiling shake. The conductor climbed on his chair and raised the choir to its feet. I sat there enthralled, staring at his broad back. The choir started off slowly, and the sound of their voices was more like that of the braying of a tired donkey, and, for a minute my heart stopped. I stuck my fingers in my ears for fear that everything would fall flat. To my relief, however, the main soloist emerged in her white gown, and I felt great pleasure as her enormous voice broke forth, a voice that seemed too big for the little church. Slowly, the rest
of the choir joined in. The conductor’s hands started flashing, his black jacket flying, and all together the choir threw their heads back, their voices swelling and soaring upward, rocking the church, lifting it and setting it in mid-heaven where I felt a paradisiac peace. Finally, after the voices ranged from full-throated loudness to a bare whisper, the conductor wiped his two hands and the organ and singing came to an end with a resounding finish. The congregation screamed a great amen. I sat there, feeling like a venerable saint, my soul surrendering, being swept away on wings to heaven.

Today, my mind is still set in the insistent reality of that extraordinary feat, of those people’s exceptional power to express their inner strength and faith. Lines and the tune from “Glorious is Thy Name” are still latched to my memory.

There was an interval of silence—heavy, deep, solemn. The pastor stepped forward in his pulpit, rested his hand on the open Bible, and burst into a sermon about a blaze-kindled hell. I recognized some of the same Bible verses my father read to me, some verses my mother taught me in prayers. The sermon was explosive, upsetting and yet, tender, because there was a certain aura, mingled with miracles and mysteries, that pulled me in.

As if my appetite for these haunting rhythms was not satisfied, I went along with other youngsters to the other church—The New Testament Church of God—around the corner, mainly to attend nightly meetings, that to begin with, were charged with a traditional call-and-response-mode:

Let’s praise de Lawd
(Praise de Lawd)
Let de church say t’ank yuh Jesas
(T’ank yuh Jesas)

Then there were gospel readings, much like what we heard at the Seventh Day Adventist, then hymns, usually short and repeated, accompanied by hand-clapping, singing, amens, tamborine playing, hooting, and shrieking. It was charged with the Holy Ghost, which turned it into something dramatic. On Sunday afternoons, the children gathered in one of the villagers’ yards and replayed the drama in their own play-church. There we sang the choruses we had learned from the adults, one of which still clings to my memory:

Something in my heart like a stream running down,
makes me feel so happy, as happy as can be.
When I think of Jesus and what he has done for me
Dere is something in my heart like a stream running down.

THE RHYTHM IN SCHOOL

By the time I entered school at age 6½, I was reading fluently. In the first grade, the ‘Dick and Jane’s’ were in the hands of the few well-to-do children. However, I merely had to listen, and when my turn came, the girl next to me allowed me to read from her book, and I fell right in. I remember the teacher pulling the words right out of the book, writing them on the blackboard, and teaching the class letter sounds, then whole words, then back to the textbook. I remember the interaction of the Creole spoken by the villagers and the Standard English demanded by the teacher.

The old half-tumbled-down schoolhouse was full of horror. There was nothing warm and friendly about that first-grade teacher who bopped the children constantly with a ruler, hurled insults at them, and beat them on their fannies with a thick, leather belt. Poetry, however, mainly nursery rhymes, brought an artistic sweetness to school life. The rhythm and music of “Georgy Porgy,” “Hickory Dickory Dock,” “Jack and Jill,” and other nursery rhymes set our feet tapping, our heads moving, our hands clapping. The chants and catchy phrases became a socializing force for us. They were replayed on the playground to jump rope, on the road home from school, and after evening chores.

As the children advanced to higher grades, they were memorizing and reciting “The Pied Piper of Hamlyn” by Browning, “It Was a Lover and His Lass” by Shakespeare, “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud” by Wordsworth, “Oh My Love Is Like a Red, Red Rose” by Burns, “When I Consider How My Life is Spent” by Milton, and other poems. We also sang many of these poems to tunes, but I could sing and recite these, long before they were formally introduced to me, because my older brothers and sisters had to come home and memorize those lines—lines the teacher wrote on the chalkboard for children to copy in their notebooks.

What was happening to the children and the poetry was magical. Despite the grandeur and remoteness that these poems from the motherland brought with them, the poetry itself seemed to reach us; we were entertained by its chiming. These poems did not spring out of our everyday life in that village; but they got me thinking of the strange things in the world and imagining how they were made. The process of memorizing would usually culminate in choral recital or group performances, whereby we were really deciphering the poems’ structure and meaning. One great thing that poetry could do was arouse feeling, put one in a pleasant and satisfied state of mind, and in our world without easy access to books for most children and without distraction, the play of words became our play. With ease, excitement, and spontaneity, we collaborated, we replayed words, phrases, and stanzas, and performed the works of Shakespeare and other poets in our play.

Something else was happening. I saw a connection, a coherent plan running through the home, school, and church. In school, for instance, my classmates and I were reciting the
same “Lord’s prayer” we learned at home and at church, as well as some of the same scriptures. Some of the same poems we recited in school, we were reciting at local concerts and festivals. Preparing for these festivals required extensive memorization practice to compete at parish and at national levels. There was always a happy, competitive atmosphere as we prepared for these festivals, and we had a considerable collection of poems and verses that we shared. Among these were poems by Louise Bennett, an acclaimed Caribbean woman writer who wrote in Jamaican Creole. Bennett used the speech of the greater mass to capture and express their poetic sentiment, as is evident in her poem “Back to Africa”: “Back to Africa Miss Matty? Yuh noh know wha yuh dah-sey? Yuh haffe come from some web fuss, Before yuh go back deh . . . .” In these lines and in subsequent stanzas, Bennett questions the wisdom of those Jamaicans who wish to go back to Africa. According to Bennett, the confusion it would cause would make the trip futile. Along with the pleasure her poems provided, they brought a sense of impoverished childhood, I wished I could stop crying and defend my beliefs like Huw in How Green Was My Valley; I loved the warmth, wit, and wisdom in Goodbye Mr. Chips; I was concerned that events in my life were running with nothing to stop them like in The River; and I was concerned that villagers found me strange like Jennie in The Portrait of Jennie. My thirst persisted, and I read more books.

---

What was happening to the children and the poetry was magical.

The most extraordinary discovery, however, was when I recognized the connection to my own world—the stories told to me, the poems I memorized and performed. There was a relationship between the familiar, the voice of the village, and the unfamiliar, the situation in books.

I became a teacher at age 13, assisting my teacher with the preschoolers. I replayed the same poems, stories, and riddles that I had learned as a child. Today, as a professor, I feel a rush, a force as I replay these same poems, stories, and riddles with my preservice teachers.

Implications for Literacy Instruction

It would seem that one of the fastest growing research areas is that of family and community literacy, and we are looking at how teachers can best build upon those foundations. Indeed, in my effort to revisit my own early literacy experience, I see how much schools can learn from the range of literate practices to which students might be exposed.

I look back on my small world, one without the sort of distraction that can come with television, and I remember a world with eternal rhythms and undercurrents brought mostly by the people, their voices, their spirit. I feel privileged to have come from a culture that embraces so much. I see that many of those practices in that small village worked toward effective literacy learning and have implications for literacy instruction today. For instance, in storytelling and its literacy-related benefits, many educators have emphasized the value of storytelling as a means of both understanding oral language and a sense of story (Greene 1996; Peck, 1989; Strickland & Morrow, 1989; Trousdale, 1990; Williams, 1991). Strickland and Morrow (1989) noted that storytelling helps foster growth in language, and they identified a connection between storytelling and reading development.

Those stories told to me as a child taught morals, traditions, and traditional values. I now see a link to a broader historical tradition—an integral part of African culture—linked to the history of slavery and the survival of the human psyche. As children listening, we suspended disbelief and became involved enough in the oral text to believe and to wish that certain elements were really true (Norton, 1998). I see an even broader link in that, for instance, some of the verses and songs of my childhood have long been familiar to English-speaking children everywhere. Further, there is a complex body of stories, fables, and legends written down from oral history over the centuries, in all parts of the world. Most reflect the same traditional values and bear themes around similar universal truths in regard to values, struggles, desires, and emotions.

I now see that the socialization events in that village were active and influential. McNaughton’s (1995) research with New Zealand families has led him to develop the theory of co-construction, which helps explain Vygotsky’s (1978) concepts of the strategies of early literacy. McNaughton stresses the interaction between the children’s own mental construction and those of their families and cultural groups, that children’s constructions are a joint outcome of personal and social activity. Studies by Clark (1976), Morrow (1995), Taylor (1995), and McNaughton (1996) all seem to suggest that literacy already exists in the child’s world at home, although it may take forms different from that which the child might encounter in school. In my case, for instance, my earliest literacy effort was reading the Bible. Not surprisingly, statistics now show that about 90% of Jamaican households are religious, and that there are more churches per square mile than anywhere else in the world.

There were the Mother Goose nursery rhymes. Today, many of those rhymes are criticized for their sexism and violence, but many educators, along with many poets agree that poetry gives children pure enjoyment and extends their knowledge of concepts, expresses moods, expands vocabulary, and gives insight into self and others (Norton, 1998).

I look back at the choral reading, the choral recitals for the festivals, where the teacher modeled by reading aloud, providing intonation and sound; giving us the opportunity to talk together about what poetry means, using oral language to plan,
and using oral language to interpret written language (Hennings, 1997). Back in the village, those practices included what Piazza (1998) refers to as “paralanguage,” which refers to attributes of speech that signal linguistic qualities such as pitch, stress, volume, and other language modulations, and characters’ voices, all of which is integral to meaning.

My earliest literacy effort was reading the Bible.

I look back at the vivid human drama in that village as performed in folk songs, spirituals, stories, and riddle-rhymes. I appreciate them for their significance—they instilled in me a deeper understanding of my historical legacy—and for conveying the feelings of those everyday village people. Likewise, these cultural events can provide opportunities for children of various ages and interests from all over the globe to celebrate the influences of many cultures.

Now I see a larger connection to my own cultural identity. Those literacy engagements—home, community, and church—opened up the potential for literacy in school to what Piazza (1999) refers to as multiple forms of literacy. Shared reading and reading aloud benefited poor readers. Poor readers were reciting along, profiting from the oral practice. Many of the best oral storytellers were not able to read. Many children who read poorly were those who performed best at reciting poetry and at dramatizing. That same practice was taken into the classroom where no stigma was attached (Galda, Cullinan, & Strickland, 1993) and is supported by arguments on listening comprehension (Pearson & Fielding, 1982). This, I imagine, has great implications for slower readers, which would include ESOL students.

Now I look back and I see that I breathed in the rhythm of the village like air. Perhaps I was blessed with a poet’s gift for sense and wonder, for rhythm, and an eye for details. The home, school, church, and community were woven together where daily life, mine and others’, pulsed, was enriched by a spiritual presence. They all brought me to a full circle of literacy, and today my perceptions and beliefs of how literacy is learned are interwoven with memories of that slow rhythm in that village in rural Jamaica.

I still hear the voices, and occasionally, I find myself blurtling out lines when I recite verses for my students, when I do a poetry reading. When I write, I find myself recording the Creole, the rhythm in my own poems, but it is also true that my strongest voice is in the village lingo, the Creole. Indeed, my deepest thought processes are bound up in the structure of the Creole, in the voices that surrounded me, that reached within me, the voice Teale (1992) refers to as being ultimately bound with culture. I find within me a voice so strong that it becomes a spiritual compulsion, pulling me to pen and paper to utter such lines as “De strong woman,” (Honeyghan, 1998) a poem I wrote for my mother.

DE STRONG WOMAN
De strong woman don’t form no group,
don’t never demonstrate,
De strong woman don’t trow no stone
altho her man fling one.
De strong woman don’t cuss, nor fight
de one who share her man;
She bite her lip an’ persevere
an’ in her silence speak.
De strong woman don’t got no time
fo’ worry, fret, an’ cry;
She sigh an’ groan an’ muster strengt’
fo’ recover an’ rebuil’.
De strong woman is not enslave;
her spirit can’t be cage;
Her power lie in cunning wit
fo’ play submissive role.
She defrock herself, bare her flesh
to him who bruise her soul,
Den she find herself full of chile,
meanwhile, she go empty.
A gush of pain bust fort’ de chile
an’ de chile fins’ outcry
strike up an unbreakable bond
become her driving force.
Her sagging breas’ she suck de chile
She watch it go unhurt.
De chile coo, babble, creep an’ walk
an’ meck way fo’ de nex’.  
De strong woman don’t wrench herself
from her maternal charge;
She learn fo’ conquer discontent.
Devotion keep her bound.
An’ when pain pin de woman down,
She don’t curl up an’ die.
She rise up, fall, an’ rise again
an’ release her cry in fait’
De strong woman bury her man
An’ grieve an’ look beyon’.

References


Glasceta Honeyghan is the coordinator for literacy instruction in the division of teacher education at Florida Memorial College in Miami, Florida. She has a strong interest in integrating poetry throughout the elementary school curriculum.

MEMBERSHIPS AVAILABLE IN THE NCTE COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC DOUBLESPEAK

A limited number of memberships in the reconstituted Committee on Public Doublespeak will be available to interested members of the Council. Major functions of the committee will be to create a series of concrete classroom exercises (lesson plans, discussion outlines) calculated to focus student attention on particular uses of language that the committee is prepared to call irresponsible, and alert the profession generally to the forces that in the committee’s judgment are misusing the language: government and its military personnel, industry and its advertisers, educators, you and me.

If you would like to be considered for membership in this group, send a one-page letter by June 15, 2000, explaining your specific interest in the committee, relevant background, and your present professional work to: Administrative Assistant to the Secondary Associate Executive Director, NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1096.