



Issue no: 1 | Vol no: 6 | March 2024: 1-10

An inquiry into divergent literacy practices among communities resident in Nandi County

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Article History

Received: 2023-12-31

Accepted: 2024-01-13

Published: 2024-03-27

Cite this article in APA

Kitur, J. P. (2024). An inquiry into divergent literacy practices among communities resident in Nandi County. *Editon consortium journal of literature and linguistics*, 6(1), 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.51317/ecjlls.v6i1.473>

Abstract

The study is an inquiry into divergent literacy practices among communities resident in Nandi County. This means that the study will explore the different literacy literacies among multicultural and multilingual residents in the County. In this study, a purposive stratified sample of 6 rural-urban mixes of intercultural group locations in Nandi County comprising a purposive selection of 20 respondents in each location using the snowball technique. In addition, data was collected using, face-to-face interviews, literacy diaries, observation, video with inbuilt audio recording, and documentation. The results of the study indicated significant ways in which multilingual residents of Nandi County use literacies in their everyday lives. For example, it was established from interviews and observations made in churches in Nandi County that the church had elaborate literacies evident in its programmes and activities. For instance, the Sunday school curriculum was structured and developed into lessons that children were taken through. In some churches, the lessons were structured to fit the children's ages, that is, lower and upper classes. It was concluded that the skills required for navigating and performing in today's information age invite us to focus on a wide range of literacies. It is evident that individuals and groups always go beyond the literacy they possess when confronted with situations that require them to act or solve a problem. Consequently, this calls for inquiry into literacy practices that are unique to each setting. It was recommended that individuals and groups are not limited to the knowledge and skills they possess only, and therefore, what they do with literacies should be investigated.

Key words: Divergent, inquiry, literacy practices, natural setting, traditional media.



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INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, the term literacy has been conceptualised as a universal skill referring to the ability to read, write, and operate with numbers, which is usually acquired in a school setting. However, research on literacy as the reading and writing ability has mainly focused on how to decode, encode and comprehend printed alphabetic texts (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011). Hence, literacy is considered to be the ability to use a set of skills that individuals use to communicate for survival and functioning in their natural setting and is expressed in various forms such as oral, written, audio, video, and traditional media, among others. Literacy attainment that is functional in nature is no longer correlated with the completion of a certain level of education as in the past but rather to the set of skills that individuals have attained in their everyday lives. The context-dependent nature of literacy was captured by UNESCO (2003) in which literacy was presented as “the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts” (UNESCO, 2005a).

Five different approaches to literacy have been highlighted in academic discussions: literacy as skills, particularly the ability to read, write and calculate, sometimes called cognitive skills or a set of cognitive processes; literacy as applied, practised and situated; or as tasks that require the written word, such as functional, family and work-based literacy; literacy as a set of cultural and social practices embedded in specific cultural, socio-economic, political and linguistic contexts, including schools, family and community contexts; literacy as capabilities, reflected in the person’s ability using the skills to achieve their communicative goals and their purposes; and literacy as a tool for critical evaluation and social change action, also referred to as critical or transformative literacy (UNESCO, 2005).

As literacy evolves over time, it increasingly morphs into other forms, most of which are informed by the cultural context in which the skill is practised. The fact that literacy is embedded in social context and that there are different literacies is an accepted reality (Perry, 2012). The term “literacy practice” that the proposed study addresses refers to the ways

in which people use literacy in their everyday lives. These practices involve values, attitudes, feelings and social relationships surrounding literacy (Street, 1993). Literacy practices constitute “what people do with literacy” (Barton et al., 2000). Literacy practices are closely connected with “literacy events” or observable activities where reading and writing have a role in completing those activities. Literacy events are regular, repeated activities in life, many of which are linked to routine sequences in such areas as workplaces, schools and homes. Literacy mediates nearly all everyday activities in the contemporary world, and people act within a textually mediated social world (Barton, 2001). Texts are a vital part of literacy events, and the literacy study practice is partly a study of specific texts and how they are produced and used.

The skills needed to navigate and perform in today’s information age invite us to focus on individuals who have completed primary education and who are expected to have acquired a level of literacy thought to be universally applicable in an autonomous sense, divorced from its cultural constraints. UNESCO has recognised, however, that literacy is only significant in navigating and performing in the world of today if it enables an individual to function meaningfully in society. This means that individuals have to appropriate literacy in their cultural environments as a social practice. Being culturally grounded, literacy practices are usually customised to fit the local environment where they are found, be it in the sports field, in tea farms, in church or in business. To this end, however, there is a dearth of studies on multiple literacies found in multilingual and multicultural contexts such as is the case in Nandi County. Multiple literacies are powerful indicators of promoting interdisciplinary research culture, yet current studies on literacy have paid little attention to such literacies and instead concentrated on literacy studies based on monolingual and mono-cultural contexts.

Traditionally, the ability to read, write and calculate constitutes the conventional understanding of literacy. However, in modern contexts, the term has been seen to be the ability to use a set of skills that individuals use to communicate for survival and functioning in their natural setting and is expressed

in various forms such as oral, written, audio, video, and traditional media, among others. In such a case, literacies are diverse and mainly comprise social practices that depict how individuals communicate in ways that go beyond the conventional ways of reading and writing in their natural settings.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopted Street's (1985) Theory of Literacy as a social practice. The theory of literacy as a social practice has been heavily influenced by Street (1985), and grounded in data that describe the various ways in which people use diverse literacies for different purposes in their everyday lives. Barton et al. (2000) outlined six propositions about the nature of literacy in the social realm:

- i. Literacy is best understood as a collection of social practices; these can be inferred from literacy events, which are mediated by written texts such as reading verses in the Bible, patient information leaflets in a medicine packet, or running speed in an athletic field.
- ii. There are different literacies associated with different domains of life. The literacies include religious literacies, health literacies, and sports literacies, as informed by (a) above.
- iii. Literacy practices are patterned by social institutions and power relationships, and some literacy is more dominant, visible and influential than others. Social institutions might include churches, hospitals, or schools.
- iv. Literacy practices are purposeful and embedded in broader social goals and cultural practices. Social goals might include fostering cohesiveness and togetherness and creating binding values.
- v. Literacy is historically situated in that the way the concept evolves represents changing social events and circumstances. Literacy practices change, and new ones are acquired frequently through processes of informal learning, formal learning and sense-making. Literacy practices are dynamic. This means that as old ones get dropped, new ones are acquired.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding literacy as a socially contextualised practice helps us understand the ways in which practices may vary across diverse communities. Understanding multiliteracies helps us understand the varied ways in which people communicate and make meaning. Street (2000) opines that literacy is a social practice because the skill permeates people's political, social, and cultural life. Street argues that literacy is embedded in the activities of people's ordinary lives whether or not they regularly read books or do much writing. In the nature of literature, its use is embedded in the culture in which it is practised. This means that literacies are found in the natural setting as they do their daily chores and in cultural activities. Literacy, therefore, plays a role in enabling individuals to function well in their work and is also evident from their expression of culture. For instance, it emerged that the way beads are used in decorating gourds among the Nandi speaks volumes in the number of beads used as well as the sizes of the gourds.

Consequently, the use of these beads communicated a message understood by the intended recipients. For example, as has been noted in this study, the number three is used to denote a woman and represents respect, honour and industry associated with a woman among the Nandi. As was noted in the study, literacies are clearly a means of communication, which, in most cases, is more than reading and writing. This, therefore, means that the literacies identified in this study go beyond the conventional ways of reading and writing as it included traditional media literacies, which were part and parcel of Nandi County residents. In other words, as depicted by the findings of the current study, literacies were embedded in residents of Nandi County both in what they do and in their lifestyles. It was, therefore, not possible to explore literacies in the context of the study without a discussion of these cultural/traditional media literacies, which were found to be conspicuous and fundamental.

Divergent literacies are often associated with the term *new literacies*, which may refer either to literacy practices that are related to digital technologies or to a rapidly changing social context, depending on who is using the term (Lankshear &

Knobel, 2003). Consequently, these new literacies were explored in the current study in the form of textual, digital, visual and technological literacies. These included examining what individuals did with, for example, the several literacies on social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp. It emerged from the study findings that residents in Nandi County utilised social media platforms in basic communication, sending coded messages mainly in the form of emojis among the young people and conducting fundraising for school fees, medical expenses, and funerals, among others.

A number of diverse literacies have been carried out in different parts of the world. One such example is Russo et al. (2013), who studied teachers' spatial literacy in terms of visualisation, reasoning, and communication. The study conceptualised spatial literacy as consisting of three overlapping domains: visualisation, reasoning, and communication. The study explored several spatial literacy aspects to better understand how a mathematics teachers' group reasoned about spatial tasks. Seventy-five pre-service and in-service teachers worked on problems that involved spatial objects, their properties, and their relationships. Teachers' responses suggested that their spatial literacy skills were underdeveloped, with deficiencies most evident in problems that were solvable by dimensional reasoning. Poor vocabulary and misconceptions hindered teachers' performance. Teachers who used multiple reasoning strategies were more likely to solve a problem correctly than teachers who used a singular approach to literacy.

In contrast, Zarcadoolas et al. (2005) conducted a study on understanding health literacy: an expanded model. The study investigated how individual capabilities and social processes explain or predict health outcomes. In the study, it was established that poor health, low literacy, poor education and early death are strongly linked around the world. In the study, the researchers proposed an expanded model of health literacy characterised by four domains: fundamental literacy, which is reading, writing, speaking, numeracy, science literacy, civic literacy, and cultural literacy. In this model, the study examined selected pieces of the public discourse about bioterrorism and terrorism that took over the mass media during the United States anthrax threat

in 2001. The study concludes that the model of health literacy is useful for analysing health communication, aiding in constructing more understandable and appropriate health communication, and ultimately leading to the development of a new measure to assess health literacy skills in individuals. This study demonstrates that unless health communications are tailored to the local cultures and contexts, they will not be as successful as they could.

Similarly, Openjuru and Lyster (2007) examined how Christianity provides the impetus for local literacy practices in a rural community in Uganda. They concluded that these Christian literacy practices form a central part of the community's literacy activities and are manifested in different contexts, from public to private, using a wide range of easily accessible religious literature in the community. They argued that through examination of Christian literacy practices, it was possible to bring out the literacies in any setting. Consequently, this study will explore spiritual/religious literacies among Christians, Muslims, Hindus and other religious groups in Eldoret slums. This study only differs in focus from the proposed study, in which the latter focuses on several literacies while the former focuses on a single strand of literacy.

Wedin (2004) examines a study carried out in rural areas of Karagwe in Tanzania on literacies constituting what he regarded as an excellent example of a multicultural country where a multitude of ethnic groups have existed. The Karagwe study was situated in a homogenous social environment and differed from the proposed study in scope and sample diversity. The proposed study, for example was expected to reveal how lowly and educated women in self-help groups are able to conduct their meetings, write minutes, keep records of their finances, etc.

In a study done by Kirigia (2017) on Maternal Health literacy conducted in Meru County, Kirigia identified several levels of literacy and literacy difficulties among the subjects. Although the study by Kirigia clearly addresses issues in health literacy as a strand in one of the literacies in Meru, the proposed study focused on multiple literacies.

Besides, Nabea (2009) had done a study earlier in the same Meru region, which appraised literacy practices among rural villagers. He came up with a variety of practices peculiar to his chosen village and discovered how the participants used literacy in their own way to benefit them, even in situations where an outsider would consider some expressions “wrongly used”.

A similar study was carried out in Norway in 2016 on literacy among adults, and the rates were pegged on the number of books at home. Like in the previous case, the focus of the proposal would actually be on how the books are used with respect to existing literacy and not the literacy rates.

METHODOLOGY

The current study surveyed everyday literacy practices by assessing the functional use of the literacy skills of a representative sample of the Nandi County selected localities. The data was collected through in-person interviews with adults living in specific households. These adults were defined as individuals who were aged 18 years or older. This study was conducted in selected community groups of residents in Nandi County. This study adopted an ethnographic design. Ethnographic study is a qualitative method in which researchers observe and interact with a study’s participants in their real-life environment. The ethnographic study takes a cultural lens to investigate people’s lives within their communities (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). The study was significant as the researcher immersed himself in the day-to-day lives of the residents in the study. The following areas were purposively selected for the study due to cost-effectiveness: Kapsabet and Nandi Hills Township. In addition, a purposive sample of 50 respondents representing a cross-section of Nandi residents comprised of local Kalenjin and non-Kalenjin communities, immigrants and refugees, and local non-Africans were involved in the study. Inferential and descriptive statistics were employed to analyse data gathered from the questionnaires. The study was mainly qualitative in nature, but aspects of the quantitative technique were incorporated to discuss the findings of the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The study revealed a number of literacy practices among residents of Nandi County. The literacies in the study area mainly emanated from three key areas: homes, cultural/traditional media and social interactions. For instance, it was observed that residents of Nandi County read varied textual and digital content. Such persons were spotted reading newspapers/magazines, Bibles written in English, dictionaries, story books and novels. They were also seen scrolling down WhatsApp pages and Facebook walls on their phones. Some were able to use search engines such as Google or Chrome to browse and get information and read. Indeed, as was observed in the study, the use of social media and consumption of digital/internet has grown tremendously, even among persons who have no or little education. As such, evidence from interviews and observations showed that some were able to write SMSs, reply to WhatsApp messages, and comment/post on Facebook despite their low level of education.

In addition, it was observed that Kiswahili was common in multilingual settings and was mainly used by local Kenyans. Kiswahili was used to break the language barrier to facilitate interlanguage communication. Instances when Kiswahili was largely used included trade, church services in cosmopolitan areas, explaining medical conditions to a doctor, parents talking to teachers in a school, and everyday communication. Some youths and children have adopted Kiswahili as their Mother Tongue despite both their parents speaking to them in their mother tongue. This was common even in rural areas, where children choose to communicate in the language of their peers (Kiswahili) rather than that of their parents.

It also emerged that there were instances where broken Kiswahili was used. One particular instance observed was with one Indian trader in Kapsabet town, who, while talking to their customers, said: *‘wee nataka nini. Mabati? Ghani? Mimi pana iko na hiyo. Mimi iko na Dumu Zas peke yake. Nini ngine? (OMI, 2022).*

From data collected in homes in Nandi County, it emerged that parents were able to check on the subject performance and class position of their



RLP2c: Sunday School Craft Work

From the interviews done, it was established that the Sunday school craft work is normally done as the summary of the lessons learnt in a Sunday school class. As can be seen from the craft, Day 1's lesson is that God loves me, while Day 2's lesson is that I am God's friend, and Day 3's lesson is that God provides. This means that it is being used to reinforce what has been taught, as in the case of a school lesson where teachers prepare charts to display the summary of his/her lesson. The only difference here is that Sunday school learners are involved in coming up with the crafts by themselves and not the work of teachers, as is the case in school.

As they interacted, residents were able to communicate despite their language differences. For instance, foreign nationals were able to communicate with locals despite the language barriers. Furthermore, health literacies were also identified. In the study, respondents with low education were found to be able to interpret medical reports and prescriptions. They were also able to know the categories of prescriptions and the roles each played in the treatment process for common ailments.

From the current study, the literacies examined were not restricted to reading and writing in the ordinary sense but more so the application of literacy skills in

solving everyday life challenges. Cultural and traditional literacies were also explored. This means that the meanings being expressed in symbols, colours, decorations and other non-verbal cues are deemed to be, in the actual sense, written. For instance, the numbers four and three, as used in a Nandi setting, mean a lot. It emerged that four is used to denote masculinity and shows the respect, dignity and honour given to the man in the Nandi society. Similarly, the three denote the purity, respect, and dignity given to women in the Nandi community. It is common, therefore, to find a Nandi *Sotet* (Gourd) or *Kerebet* (serving dish) with either three or four beads. As a result, the two numbers, when used, have deep meaning, which was identified in the study (Interviews at Nandi Hills Mausoleum, 2022).

It also emerged that most of the literacies in the current study were of non-verbal nature, being expressed in non-written and non-spoken words, yet had hidden and deep meanings that its users understood. In the current study, non-verbal literacies were in the form of a language. It emerged that these non-verbal literacies were very common, especially among the Nandi, as noted by one respondent: *"The Nandi dialect and culture in general is full of symbolism expressed in figurative language. For us, non-verbal communication is not just a way of passing messages, but it is a significant part of our language. In fact, non-verbal communication is another language for us. For us, the Nandi, shapes, colours, sizes and other non-verbal items have very deep meaning. For instance, if you ask a typical Nandi, Uneet? (how is it?), he will answer, U tany (literally translated to mean it's like a cow). But in actual sense, among the Nandi, the cow is associated with the good and regarded as the best form of investment, and therefore, anything that is good is equated to a cow. That's why they say it's like a cow to mean it's good"* (ALP1).

For instance, it was observed that among the Nandi, the number four is used to signify masculinity, and three is feminine. Consequently, anything that belongs to a woman has three components or items, while anything pertaining to a man has four items. It emerged from the study findings that these numbers are significant to the Nandi people, even to the extent

that applauding a man has to be done four times. A man is also given milk from a Kipsegerit gourd with four beads, while women use artefacts with three beads or three items. The number three is used by the Nandi in reference to women. It emerged that the number three denoted beauty, purity and the source of life and industriousness in the Nandi women.



ALP1 Field Data, (2022)

The above photo shows the items used by the Nandi woman, including a grinding stone (Koitab bai) with three edges, a maize flour mat made from the skin (Muitab bai) and a threshing mortar with a cylindrical shape. It emerged from interviews conducted in the Nandi Hills Mausoleum that all these denote that these items belonged to a woman because of the three, which, according to the Nandi number three, is feminine. It emerged that round and oval shapes were used in reference to the Nandi woman. It was also established through interviews that the shapes and purposes of the said items clearly depicted traditional media literacies understood in the context of the study. It can, therefore, be inferred that there was, and is, a clear non-verbal communication expressed in the use of these items, which was deemed as read/written.



ALP1: Serving Dish/Plate

The above photo shows a Nandi *Kerebet* (serving dish/plate) with three beads, meaning it was used by women. This is because, as noted earlier, the number three represents a woman in the Nandi context. The Nandi *Kerebet* is used to serve ugali. It was revealed from interviews done at Nandi Hills Mausoleum that the three beads convey a non-verbal message of the person to whom the dish belongs or as to the dish can be used to serve. One respondent in FFIs 1 reported that the *kerebet* is made from palm leaves that are woven and joined together to form a small basket-like and rounded dish. It has a small leather strap that is beaded and used for handling. In contrast, the *Kerebet* used by men had four beads (ALP, 2022).

It can be inferred from this data/information that, indeed, there are innumerable literacies found in the cultural context that have deep and rich meaning when seen through a cultural lens. As a result, some of these literacies, though unwritten in the ordinary sense, have been identified and discussed in this study. In particular, the artefacts literacies presented varied non-verbal literacies that were identified in this study.

Discussion

This study confirmed that literacy plays a vital role in people's progress in any setting. Indeed, illiteracy as a social practice is an essential skill that is necessary for survival for all individuals in any setting. The study findings revealed that literacy was utilised in religious, home and cultural contexts. This finding, in line with Street's (2000) argument that literacy is a social practice, permeates people's political, social, cultural, and, in fact, almost all aspects of life. Further, Street argues that literacy is embedded in the activities of people's ordinary lives whether or not they regularly read books or do much writing. In the nature of literacy, its use is embedded in the culture in which it is practised in the context of this study.

The current study also confirmed that in a multilingual setting, parties interact and communicate despite the language barriers. They find a way of communicating with literacy as a social practice, either through non-verbal signals or an intermediary language. In the context of the study, respondents from various language groups interacted in English, Kiswahili or even non-verbal symbols to communicate. As observed by Canagarajah and Wurr (2011), people are always open to negotiating diverse languages in such communities in their day-to-day public life. In every interaction, their shared space will typically feature dozens of languages. They make no assumption that they will meet people who communicate in their own language most of the time. This mindset prepares them to negotiate different languages as a fact of life. When they meet a person from another language group, they do not look for a common language that will facilitate their interaction. This was found to be the case in the study area, with people from various language groups communicating in Kiswahili.

In many cases, such a search will be futile, so they usually begin the interaction in their own languages, but both parties maintain their own preferred codes throughout the conversation. This kind of practice makes us wonder how communication is possible

when there is no common code shared. What enables people to communicate is not shared grammar but communicative strategies and practices that are employed to negotiate their language differences. Furthermore, these strategies are not a type of knowledge or cognitive skill but a form of resourcefulness that speakers use in the unpredictable communicative circumstances they encounter (Canagarajah and Wurr, 2011). This is why it was found that respondents resorted to non-verbal communication whenever an intermediary language was non-existent.

The study conducted in a multicultural setting provided insights into interactions among people from diverse backgrounds. The current study explored multiple literacies such as trade, farming, health, sports and spiritual literacies. This was a departure from other studies, which have mainly focussed on one or two strands of literacy.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: The skills required to navigate and perform in today's information age invite us to focus on a wide range of literacies. It is evident that individuals and groups always go beyond the literacy they possess when confronted with situations that require them to act or solve a problem. Consequently, this calls for inquiry into literacy practices that are unique to each setting. As a result, this will inform both the implementation of school and community literacies.

Recommendations: The researcher made the following recommendations. Firstly, each setting, be it rural or urban, should be treated as a unique setting for literacy investigation surveys and academic purposes. Secondly, individuals and groups are not limited to the knowledge and skills they possess only. Through literacy as a social practice, the two act to survive in any given situation. Finally, when individuals and groups interact through social literacy, they interact through an intermediary language or even non-verbal signals.

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