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What is Literacy? Empirical Perspectives on Literacy from Two Rural Communities in Ghana

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ABSTRACT

The concept of literacy is complex and dynamic, having evolved across contexts, cultures, and scholarly traditions. This paper reports findings from two rural Ghanaian communities, Juaso and Saaman, to explore how literacy is perceived and practiced. Framed within the theory of Literacy as Social Practice, the study employs a qualitative comparative case study design, drawing on interviews, observations, focus group discussions, and document review. Findings reveal that literacy extends beyond reading and writing to include functional knowledge, wisdom, and effective communication. While learners prioritize reading and writing, especially in English, opinion leaders and facilitators view literacy as encompassing broader skills and social practices. Tables summarizing perceptions and the importance of reading and writing illustrate the diverse conceptualizations of literacy in the two communities. The study concludes that literacy is not merely about the cognitive capacity of individuals and the ability to acquire and use the neutral and de-contextualized technical skill of reading of reading and writing. Rather, literacy is about what people do with reading and writing and other semiotic forms and multi- modal texts including sound, image, visuals and gestures to make meaning of their day to day lives. Literacy cannot be understood in a vacuum. Instead, it necessarily must be linked with a social activity.

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1. Introduction

This paper is a part-report of a doctoral thesis that was presented to the University of Cape Town, South Africa. The research set out to explore, describe and analyze whether adult literacy plays a role in community development, using Saaman and Juaso as case studies.

The research question that was asked is: What role (if any) does adult literacy play in community development?

The following sub-questions were asked to complement the main question:

1. What counts as literacy for the people of Saaman and Juaso?
2. What counts as community development for the people of Saaman and Juaso?
3. Did participation in the adult literacy classes in Saaman and Juaso by the learners lead to participation in community development in the two communities?
4. What literacy events and practices are used by the learners in their daily activities and do these lead to community development?
5. How is community development practised in Saaman and Juaso and does adult literacy play any role in the process?

There were some limitations in the conduct of the research. These included:

1. Gender representation.

Many of the research participants were male, making the research appear to be gender imbalanced. However, being conscious of the gender imbalance, I sought to rectify this by interviewing women in the community who were social entrepreneurs. Moreover, in my literature review I sought out case studies which involved women so that I could compare with my case study.

2. Potential Researcher Bias

I had had prior experience in the two communities as a development practitioner. I however, only made working visits to the two communities and did not stay there. Nonetheless, this experience helped me in getting access to the two at the time of the research. To make the research participants appreciate the fact that I was there this time as a researcher and not as a development practitioner; I took time to explain to them my new role as a researcher and the objectives of the research. This was necessary so that they would not give responses to my questions in expectation of development support.

The introduction provides the background and situates the study within global and scholarly debates on literacy.

Literacy is a complex and dynamic concept that has undergone many evolutions. Being ‘literate’ or ‘illiterate’ has meant different things to different people depending on scholarly lens, context, culture, institutional or political agenda, or personal experience.

In the international policy community, conceptualizations of literacy have shifted: from basic skills as an end in themselves, to literacy as a tool for development, and finally to literacy as a means of awareness-raising for social transformation. For decades, literacy was conceived as individual cognition and as a set of technical skills, with assumed positive effects on individuals and society. These claims were challenged by theorists of the New Literacy Studies tradition, including Street, Barton, Hamilton, Heath, Scribner, and Cole [1-6].

My own perspective on literacy aligns with this tradition. This paper reports on what counts as literacy in Saaman and Juaso, two rural communities in Ghana, in relation to diverse perspectives on the concept. The aim is to contribute to global debates and deepen understanding for research and practice.

2. Theoretical Framework of the Study

The study is grounded in the Literacy as Social Practice (LSP) paradigm, also known as the New Literacy Studies, which views literacy as contextually embedded social practices rather than autonomous skills.

2.1. Literacy as Social Practice

Concerns with autonomous literacy led to the Literacy as Social Practice (LSP) paradigm. Writers in this tradition emphasize literacy as context- and culture-sensitive [2,3,5]. Literacy is not a neutral skill that is not affected by the context in which it finds itself, as was conceived by proponents of autonomous literacy, but a social practice shaped by institutions, power, and history [1,6-12].

Barton & Hamilton [10] proposed the nature of literacy as listed below:

- Literacy is best understood as a set of social practices; these can be inferred from events which are mediated by written texts
- There are different literacies associated with different domains of life
- Literacy practices are patterned by social institutions and power relationships, and some literacies become more dominant, visible and influential than others
- Literacy practices are purposeful and embedded in broader social goals and cultural practices
- Literacy is historically situated
- Literacy practices change, and new ones are frequently acquired through processes of informal learning and sense making

2.2. Literacy Events and Practices

Two key concepts that occupy the epicenter of the social practice theory of literacy are literacy events and literacy practices. I discuss each of these concepts below.

2.2.1. Literacy Events

A literacy event is any occasion in which written text is integral to interaction [13]. Examples include checking timetables or reading road signs [14]. Literacy events often combine written, oral, and multimodal forms, including texting, social media, and digital communication [15-16].

Heath defined a literacy event as any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of the learners' interactions and their interpretative processes. He again identified coding and decoding of the written word as an integral part of literacy events [13].

Building on Heath's definition, Street gave examples of literacy events that can easily be observed in any situation where they are happening. These included checking timetables and reading road signs [14].

In my own understanding, literacy events include those moments in the interactions between people in which decoding and encoding of text feature. There are now multiple modes of expression and communication in addition to the traditional written word, such as sending text messages via mobile phones, sending e-mails, chatting with people on Facebook, and more recently Watt sapping which allows chatting and sending of photos instantly. These written modes of communication are sometimes interspersed with oral communication. These new developments reflect vividly the local-global nature of literacy, where people can instantly send information from their local locations to global spaces and instantly receive information from the latter. This phase in the development of technology has enhanced the influence of the global on the local.

2.2.2. Literacy Practices

Literacy practices have been defined in several ways by different scholars. For example, Street [17] saw literacy practices as referring to how people use literacy and the meanings they attach to what they do. Barton, Hamilton & Ivanic shared Street's view, and linked literacy practices to how people make use of the written word based on their cultural practices [18].

Culture and context are therefore very key elements in any discussion of literacy practices. For example, as Street [5] found in Iran, against the common expectation that learners taught in the state schools would be the ones to translate what they learned in the classes into commercial activities, it was rather the learners from the Quranic schools that were able to do that. The reason could be that Iran being an Islamic State, the learners from the Quranic schools had more social recognition and clout to undertake those activities. The learners from the state schools were perhaps seen to be oriented outwards and therefore did not enjoy the same social recognition. This shows the importance of identity and social recognition in literacy practice.

Literacy practices go beyond the observable literacy activity. It is linked to the wider environment. As Street observed, in a literacy practice, we can only understand what is happening when we talk and listen to people, as well as link the activity to other things they do [14].

It is therefore problematic when researchers and governments use just surveys and other data collection techniques to establish people's literacy status. This approach has resulted in many people who use reading and writing in diverse ways being branded 'illiterate, this is so in the sense that these people may not consider many of the activities they engage in as literacy.

A literacy practice can be observed as a regular, iterative event. Examples of these would include recitations of prayer in the mosque as Street found in Iran, as well as the liturgy in a Christian church. In both instances the same words are repeated such that people can recite them off the top of their heads without referring to what is written[5].

A literacy practice is also purposeful. The Quranic recitations as well as the liturgy prayers of Christians are intended for the spiritual upliftment of practitioners. A literacy practice is thus the reason behind what people do in a literacy event [6].

In literacy practices, the oral and the literate overlap, and reading and writing is seen as a communal resource. This means that possession of this technical skill may not be a priority at the individual level if it is available in the community. For example, people with reading and writing difficulties can be part of development planning committees and contribute effectively as others who can write take the minutes [12].

Prinsloo & Baynham observed that in a literacy study, empirical units of analysis are derived from literacy events, while the analytical frame is derived from literacy practices [8].

Literacy practices refer to how people use literacy and the meanings they attach to it [17-18]. They are embedded in broader sociocultural contexts, identity, and recognition [5,12]. They are also purposeful and often communal [8,12,16].

2.3. The Semiotic Domain of Literacy

Literacy extends beyond print to include multimodal texts, images, gestures, and digital communication.

The focus of LSP on literacy as social practice has in recent times been expanded to include the use of "text and other digital forms that demand new social practices, skills, strategies, dispositions, and/ or literacies" [19]. There have been studies that expand the earlier focus on literacy as text to include attention to image and other semiotic forms, as well as multi-modal texts that include visuals and sound. For example, in 'Literacies, Global and Local' Gee defines a semiotic domain as one in which 'words, symbols, images and/ or artifacts' combine to provide

meaning. These modalities are used in the communication process and they are understood by all members of the domain. An example given by Gee, which resonates well with my argument of iterative religious recitations as literacy practices is Roman Catholic theology. Members recite long phrases from memory because they have been doing it repeatedly [20].

The semiotic and multi-modality view of literacy is further supported by Pahl [21]. as well as Prinsloo [22]. The idea of the conceptualization of literacy going beyond written text is also supported by the work of Cope and Kalantzis, which noted how the written word, oral and gestures, among other modalities combined to make meaning [23].

2.4. The 'Great Divide' View of Literacy

Proponents of the ‘great divide’ view of literacy claimed the existence of a great divide, socially and cognitively, between ‘literates’ and ‘illiterates’, ability to read and write being the invisible line that divided these two sets of people.

The literature suggests that the ‘great divide’ theorists such as Goody and Ong saw literacy as cognitive skills whose functions are not context, time and culture sensitive, and which have positive effects on individuals and societies. Literacy was therefore conceived as a skill to be acquired and which was the preserve of a privileged few. It was perceived to create a dichotomy between ‘oral’ and ‘literate’ societies, a divide which the individual crosses upon acquiring literacy, and thus achieves the new cognitive abilities, enabling more complex abstract thought as well as attitudes needed to function in a modern, scientific society than is possible in oral societies [24-26].

The acquisition of this literacy is also believed to deliver social, health, economic, and cultural benefits to individuals and communities. Street labelled this view of literacy “autonomous” and referred to as conventional literacy [5]. Other theorists, including Gough and Maruatona have substantiated the claims of the ‘autonomous’ literacy, attributing to it changes such as personal development and improvements in health status [27-28].

2.5. Literacy as a Transformative Process

Contrary to conventional literacy, other scholars, Freire being the pioneer, view literacy from a transformative (or critical) perspective [28].

Transformative literacy is perceived as a tool for empowering learners so that they can in turn contribute to the transformation of the communities in which they find themselves. The assumption was that through the acquisition of the needed knowledge, skills, attitudes, and awareness, learners would be able to identify and work towards changing the oppressive elements that militate against their progress [29-32]. This conceptualization of literacy dominated literacy discourse in international organizations including UNESCO.

2.6. Understandings of Literacy in International Policy and in the Field of Practice

Organizations such as UNESCO have historically defined literacy narrowly as reading and writing [33]. though broader definitions have emerged in global frameworks, which linked literacy with personal and community development [34]. By the 2000s, literacy was strongly tied to development goals, though critics like Bhola have warned that literacy alone cannot drive societal transformation [35].

In 2005, UNESCO linked literacy to the achievement of personal goals, development of knowledge and potential, as well as increased participation in community [34].

The period 1990-2010 witnessed an increased affirmation in global policy framework that literacy played a role in sustainable development. The World Education Forum held in Dakar in 2000, for example, emphasized the need to promote literacy to achieve sustainable development [34].

The United Nations Literacy Decade (2003-2012), and United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014) reaffirmed that commitment to adult literacy is essential if the dreams of sustainable development and poverty eradication are ever to be realized [35].

However, contrary to the global discourses on the affordances of literacy with respect to social transformation, Bhola

noted that "we should not expect literacy to have a deterministic role in societal change" arguing that although literacy is necessary, it cannot effect such changes on its own. He was of the view that congenial socio-political environment was essential for literacy to contribute to societal change [35].

I share the view of Bhola [35] on the inadequacy of literacy alone to cause positive changes in individuals and communities. However, I hasten to add that the conceptualization of literacy in the international community has been skewed towards viewing literacy as a technical skill, consistent with the autonomous tradition. This ignores the contextual and social aspects of literacy, giving a clear indication of the influence that the conventional view of literacy has had on development thinking.

3. Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative case study design to explore local understandings of literacy. Data were collected over ten months using in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, participant observation, informal conversations, and document review. Twenty-two purposively selected participants—including adult literacy learners, facilitators, and community leaders—took part. Data were analyzed inductively through constant comparison to identify patterns and themes.

3.1. Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative, comparative case study design [36-44]. Ethnographic methods were used to capture local perspectives. This approach enabled an in-depth exploration of participant perspectives and social practices.

3.2. Case Communities

Saaman and Juaso, where the research was undertaken, are two rural communities in the Eastern region of Ghana. These are neighbouring communities with similar characteristics in terms of language, occupation, and governance structure. The distance between the two communities is one kilometre and one must drive through Saaman to get to Juaso. The next big town from Saaman, Osino, is about five kilometres away where both communities do their banking transactions. There is no community beyond Juaso. Both Saaman and Juaso have similar characteristics in terms of population, infrastructure, Governance, language, occupation, and religion.

3.3. Researcher Positioning

I had prior experience as a development practitioner in these communities. To reduce bias, I explained my new role as researcher, participated in community life, and emphasized reciprocity.

3.4. Data Sources and Collection

Multiple sources enhanced credibility: interviews, focus groups, participant observation, informal conversations, and document review [36-38,44-46].

3.5. Selection of Research Participants

Different sets of participants were selected to be part of this research. These included those that attended the literacy classes in the two case communities, the facilitators of the literacy classes as well as community members or opinion leaders purposefully selected to represent all sections of the entire community I had informal conversations with the literacy class learners either in their places of work or in their homes. The literacy class facilitators and the community members and opinion leaders were interviewed, whereas the observations covered the general social activities in the communities.

To ensure maximum variation in participation, the purposive sampling technique was used to select a total number of 22 people (6 women and 16 men) from the two communities, 11 from each community, consciously including both men and women in the research [38].

At Saaman, 10 of the women who had participated in the Adult Literacy programme were still available in the community. Out of these, 3 were selected to participate in the research. Similarly, 9 of the men who had participated in the class were still in the community. Out of these, 3 agreed to participate in the research. In addition, 1 literacy facilitator, and 4 key people closely involved in community development activities took part in the research.

In like manner, at Juaso 3 men and 3 women, who had participated in the literacy class and the literacy facilitator, (male) were purposively selected to participate in the research.

Thus, I included 7 out of the 18 participants in the literacy programme still available in the community in the research. For involvement in community development activities, I included people in the community who were closely involved in the development activities in the community. This included the Assembly member, Unit Committee chairman and two opinion leaders.

Equal numbers of men and women who had participated in literacy classes were interviewed. The predominance of men in the research in positions of power was since both communities are patriarchal societies and men occupy all the leadership positions. For example, the literacy class facilitators, the Assembly members, the Unit Committee chairmen and opinion leaders in both communities were male. This did not affect the results of my research as my focus was not on women but rather on adult literacy and community development in general as I stated in the literature review. However, being conscious of the gender imbalance, I sought to rectify this by interviewing women in the community who were social entrepreneurs. Moreover, in my literature review I sought out case studies which involved women so that I could compare with my case study. In this way I tried to deepen my understanding of the findings.

Twenty-two participants from the two communities were purposively selected to participate in the research based on their availability and willingness to participate.

For each group in the two communities, the same questions were asked. For research participants who participated in the literacy classes, I asked them questions on what motivated them to join the literacy classes, what they learned, what they used the knowledge acquired for, whether participation in the literacy class helped them to contribute more towards community development. I also asked them about situations in their daily lives in which they used or felt the need to be able to use reading and writing. In addition to these questions asked during informal

conversations with them, I observed in their homes and work places what literacy practices they used in their day to day social activities.

The facilitators of the adult literacy classes were asked questions about the objective of the literacy classes and these were triangulated with the objectives spelt out in the policy document which established the literacy classes to see if the understanding of the facilitators and that of the programme designers was in tandem. The facilitators were also asked questions on the content of the classes, how the classes were organized, the duration of the classes, and whether in their view the literacy classes helped the learners to contribute more towards community development.

For the research participants who were selected based on their involvement in community development, I asked them questions on what they perceived community development to be, how community development is practiced in the community and community development activities undertaken in the community. I also asked who, in their view had responsibility for community development.

For purposes of triangulation, I conducted one focus group discussion in each community involving most of the research participants prior to the individual interviews or informal conversations. In the focus group discussions, I explored what literacy as well as community development meant to the people, how community development is practised and what development activities have been undertaken in the community. I explored these questions more during the one-on-one interviews.

3.6. Focus Group Interviews (FGI)

The reason for using the focus group interviews (FGI) was to use the group interaction dynamic to gather data from different perspectives in one setting. This data was used for triangulation with those collected from observations and informal conversations, as well as from the individual interviews [38]. In each community one focus group discussion involving nine participants was conducted. Participants in the focus groups were purposively selected using the maximum variation strategy to include people from different social domains. The groups were homogenous to ensure maximum participation. Homogenous groups were used because the literature confirms my personal experience in working with rural communities that within homogenous groups there is more interaction and therefore more effective in gathering data.

This does not however, mean that the data collected through this means was standard. There were variations in them.

One limitation I was confronted with was the fact that many of the research participants were male, making the research gender imbalanced. This was because both Saaman and Juaso are patriarchal communities, with men occupying almost all the leadership positions. The Assembly member, Unit committee chairperson, opinion leaders and the literacy class facilitators were therefore all men.

FGI was used to explore the perceptions of the people on literacy. This helped in providing understanding on what counts as literacy to the participants. Through the interactions in the focus group interviews I was able to decide which participants to follow up in the in-depth interviews, as well as to know which areas to follow up on with individuals.

3.7. Individual In-Depth Interviews

These helped me gather more in- depth data and ask probing questions or inquired about contradictions that arose in the FGI. I used a semi-structured interview guide (see appendix 1) to help me focus on the research question and to be able to probe interviewee responses further, seek clarifications, as well as be able to observe and

follow up on non-verbal cues [45]. The in-depth interviews were used to triangulate data from the observations and informal conversations, as well as from the FGIs. In each community I interviewed 4 people.

3.8. Participant Observation and Informal Conversations

Participant observation and informal conversations were additional data collection tools used. These helped in bringing to the fore the literacy practices of the people in their natural settings. I participated in the activities of the participants I was observing when it was possible. In the process I engaged in informal conversations with them in various social domains to identify what literacy practices they used. These included their places of work, their homes, church and other social domains. For example, I accompanied Lemuel, a participant in the literacy class in Juaso and Dennis, the literacy class facilitator to a funeral in the community. I used the open-ended format of participant observation to take note of all literacy events and what these meant to the people [46]. I kept detailed field notes as well as a journal of emerging issues and insights. My observation focused mainly on the six people in each community who participated in the adult literacy programme. With respect to the participants in the adult literacy classes, I looked out for what literacy practices they used in their day- to- day activities.

3.9. Document Review

It would not be complete to explore local understanding of literacy without a review of the adult literacy classes held in Juaso and Saaman. Even though my focus in this research was not to evaluate the success or otherwise of the literacy programme, I felt it was important to review the literacy programme. I got access to and reviewed the hand- out used in training the adult literacy facilitators. The title of the document is: Initial and Refresher Training for NFLD Facilitators. The manual was developed by the Non-Formal Education Department of the Ministry of Education. I reviewed this document as it would help me understand the objective of the government in designing and implementing the adult literacy classes. Having done that, I was then be able to compare the motivation of the learners for participating in the classes to see whether the objectives of the programme designers and those of the learners were in sync. Comparing the contents of the training manual and the content of the literacy classes held also helped me understand the possible / intended impact the literacy programme.

3.10. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed inductively using the constant comparative method [47-49]. Validity and reliability were ensured through triangulation, careful field notes, and transparent coding [50-54].

4. Findings/Results

The findings present how participants conceptualized literacy and the importance of reading and writing in daily life.

Findings reveal that community members conceptualize literacy in multiple ways. While adult learners equated literacy primarily with the ability to read and write in English for banking, travel, and religious purposes, opinion leaders emphasized literacy as knowledge, skill, and wisdom expressed through problem-solving and effective communication. Reading and writing were associated with status, confidence, and respect, but oral knowledge and practical competence were equally valued.

4.1. Perceptions of Literacy

Opinion leaders, learners, facilitators, and community members expressed diverse perspectives on literacy. Table 1 presents how different groups perceived literacy that ran through both communities.

Table 1. Perceptions of Literacy in Juaso and Saaman

Group	Perception of Literacy	Examples/ Illustrations
Opinion Leaders	Literacy as knowledge and skill	Farming knowledge; Carpentry, using stones to record money received.
Adult Learners	Reading and writing (esp. English)	Filling Bank forms; Reading and writing letters; Reading the Bible
Literacy Facilitators	Home and school literacy	Basket weaving; colour mixing; Reading the Bible
Community Members	Literacy as wisdom	Ability to speak persuasively

4.2. Importance of Reading and Writing

Participants emphasized both functional and symbolic roles of reading and writing. Reading and writing were perceived as vital for coping outside the community, record keeping, banking, avoiding exploitation, and gaining respect. Literacy was linked to economic opportunities, higher social status, and effective participation in community life.

For example, Grace, a dressmaker and learner at Saaman, indicated that she felt inferior to other women who could read and write because she could not. In her words,Anytime I go to the bank and see those ladies speak and write English with so much ease, I feel inferior to them and embarrassed that I cannot do same… Who knows, if my parents had not died, I would also be working in a bank or at some other place, taking big pay and not a common dressmaker.

These domains are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Reported Importance of Reading and Writing.

Domain	Importance of Reading and Writing	Community Illustrations
Daily Living	Coping outside the community; navigating urban environments	Reading road signs to avoid getting lost; filling bank forms
Social Relations	Respect, confidence, and higher status	English speakers seen as superior; schooled members given leadership seats at meetings
Record Keeping	Secure documentation and preservation of information	Preparing wills; documenting financial contributions at church
Economic Activity	Business transactions and profit-making	Traders who read/write earn more; financial literacy prevents exploitation
Community Development	Tool for broader participation in development and decision-making processes	Leaders link schooling and literacy to community prestige and comparative growth

4.3. Literacy as Wisdom

Participants also equated literacy with wisdom as expressed in communication and problem-solving ability.

It came out from the research that in both Saaman and Juaso, some people perceived literacy as wisdom which is expressed in the way a person communicates. People endowed with this kind of wisdom are believed to be deep thinkers and can provide valuable advice on issues when approached. This came out during focus group discussions and one-on-one interviews both in Saaman and Juaso. As Newman observed in an interview I had with him in Juaso, 'sometimes, even when something is wrong the way the person puts it across indicates to all around that he is wise'.

He referred to this kind of skill in communication as "nyansa kasa" (wisdom talk, literally in the Akan Language), what Dennis, the literacy class facilitator, in a focus group discussion, referred to as "Efie nyansa" (Home literacy), differentiating it from "sukuuu nyansa" (School literacy).

5. Discussion

In both communities, some of the learners in the adult literacy classes, the facilitators, as well as majority of the community leaders had the same functional view of literacy. The point of departure between these views is the emphasis placed on what literacy is to be used for. Whereas majority of the learners who participated in the research placed priority on ability to read and write to cope with daily living, enhance their self-esteem, as well as participate unhindered in the larger society, the facilitators emphasized ability to read and write to make up for lost educational opportunity early in life. The community leaders interviewed, on their part, emphasized knowledge and skill for personal economic gain and the educational advancement of their children, whereas policy makers place value on reading and writing as a tool for achieving community development.

The perceptions of majority of the people interviewed in the two communities on what counts as literacy are at variance with those of major international organizations and policy makers. Their views reflect the functional view of literacy as expressed by proponents the ideological view of literacy.

Concerning ability to read and write, even though many of the participants linked it to self-image and an increased opportunity to get jobs, that sense of a great divide as expressed by the great divide theorists was not present. Literacy was conceptualized more as knowledge and skill. The assertion of the great divide theorists is therefore brought into question, reinforcing the arguments of earlier researchers who had challenged these claims. Literacy is thus not just being able to read and write and acquisition or lack of it does not separate a group of people from others. It is therefore not right to separate people into 'literates' and 'illiterates. The findings also confirm the argument of proponents of ideological literacy that literacy varies from context to context.

6. Conclusion

This study concludes that literacy is multidimensional, socially embedded, and valued differently across groups. Recognizing these diverse literacies is essential for designing inclusive policies and programs.

Literacy in Juaso and Saaman extends beyond technical reading and writing to include wisdom, social competence, and functional knowledge. This challenges conventional definitions and supports the view of literacy as context-dependent.

The study examined theoretical and empirical perspectives on literacy. Findings show literacy is not merely technical skill but also knowledge, skill, multimodality, and social practice [5,21-22]. It problematizes divides between literates and illiterates [13,3-5,24-27,55-56]. Participants' views aligned more with functional literacy and social practice models than with critical literacy [57-58,29-32]. Contextual diversity confirms literacy varies across communities [59-60].

Policy makers must therefore avoid assuming a universal definition of literacy and instead explore its contextual meanings [61-63].

By foregrounding local perspectives, the study contributes to global debates on literacy and underscores the importance of recognizing diverse literacies in research, policy, and practice.

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Data Availability

Data supporting the findings are available upon request.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Informed Consent

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

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