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By Theophilus Nkansah

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Keywords: *literacy, social, practice, perspective, rural.*

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Theophilus Nkansah

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The findings of the research revealed that for the people of Juaso and Saaman, where the research was conducted, literacy is not limited to the ability to read and write, even though this is seen to be important. For them, literacy is about knowing how to effectively go about their day-to-day activities, and cope with life outside the community.

The discussion, undertaken from an ethnographic perspective has established 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 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.

Keywords: literacy, social, practice, perspective, rural.

I. Introduction

This is a part-report of my PhD thesis, which explored the role of adult literacy in community development in two rural communities in Ghana. The report was submitted to and accepted by the University of Cape Town, South Africa, in February 2016. In this paper, I report on what counts as literacy in Saaman and Juaso, two neighbouring rural communities in Ghana, in relation to the multiple and diverse perspectives on the concept of literacy. The aim is to contribute to the global debate on the concept to aid a deeper understanding of it for the benefit of research and practice. The paper conceptualizes literacy from an ethnographic perspective and describes how research participants from Juaso and Saaman understand the concept. I have made a conscious effort to give a voice to participants in the study on the subject by letting them speak for themselves through direct quotes.

Underpinning the development of this paper are the works of the group of scholars that constitute what has come to be known as the New Literacy Studies (For example, Barton, 1994; Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Heath, 1983; Kulick & Stroud, 1993; Street, 2003).

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a) Research Questions

The research questions that were asked included:

1. What counts as literacy for the people of Saaman and Juaso?
2. What literacy events and practices are used by the people of Saaman and Juaso in their daily activities?

b) Theoretical Framework of the Study

The research was framed by the theory of literacy as a social practice, as described in the section that follow.

i. *Literacy as Social Practice*

The concerns over the views of autonomous literacy led to the birth of the Literacy as Social Practice (LSP) paradigm. Coming from a socio-cultural background, writers within the LSP (also called the New Literacy Studies) tradition, emphasized a model of literacy that was sensitive to context and culture (e.g. Barton, 1994; Heath, 1983; Street, 2003) Literacy is perceived as a social practice, rather than as an autonomous and neutral skill which is not affected by the context in which it finds itself, as was conceived by proponents of autonomous literacy (Street, 1984).

In consonance with the LSP conceptualization of literacy, Street (2003:77) argued that literacy is not about acquiring skills, rather it is a social practice. He conceptualized literacy as being multiple and taking different forms in relation to time and space. He pointed to the power play in literacy in which some literacy practices marginalize others.

Perry (2012:54) understood literacy as "what people do with reading, writing, and texts in real world contexts and why they do it". This view was re-echoed by Prinsloo & Baynham (2008:1- 2) adding that 'literacy' cannot be understood in a vacuum, rather as an integral part of society, a perspective that was also echoed by Hager (2005)

Barton & Hamilton (2000:8) 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

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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.

The history of literacy was corroborated by Freebody (1999:5) when he argued that writing materials and systems used in literacy leave traces for future generations to see.

However, as Street (2001a: 18) observes, the idea of literacy being multiple does not mean that there is one literacy per culture. There could be several literacy practices within the same culture.

Drawing from these categorizations of the nature of literacy, I re-affirm my agreement with the LSP tradition that literacy is an integral part of the social activities of the people who use it. I also agree with Baynham (1995) that literacy is a communal resource. However, social institutions like schools and the church exert a hegemonic influence on the understanding and use of literacy, making some literacy practices appear to be more important than others.

ii. *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.

a. *Literacy Events*

Heath (1982) defined a literacy event as "any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of the participants' interactions and their interpretative processes" (Heath, 1982: 93). Heath (1983: 386) again identified coding and decoding of the written word as an integral part of literacy events.

Literacy being integral to the communication process means it is not necessarily central to the process. Rather, the process is seen as a configuration of action, speech and text. Gee (2000) talked of mode switching from text to speech. In consonance with this conceptualization of literacy, Barton (2001) argued that most oral interactions are around written text. This suggests therefore that our conceptualization of literacy need not be limited to the written text. It goes beyond that.

Building on Heath's definition, Street (2001) 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. (Street 2001:21).

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 Wattsapping 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 also instantly receive information from the latter. This phase in the development of technology has enhanced the influence of the global on the local. Whereas literacy events involve the observable acts of doing this with text, literacy practices go beyond the physical act to the more general sociocultural framing that gives significance to particular acts as (Barton 1994; Baynham 1995) observe.

b. *Literacy Practices*

Literacy practices have been defined in several ways by different scholars. For example, Street (1995:2) saw literacy practices as referring to how people use literacy and the meanings, they attach to what they do. Barton, Hamilton & Ivanic (2000) shared Street's (1995) view, and linked literacy practices to how people make use of the written word based on their cultural practices (Barton, Hamilton & Ivanic, 2000: 7).

Culture and context are therefore very key elements in any discussion of literacy practices. For example, as Street (1984) 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 (2001a) 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.

It is therefore problematic when researchers and governments use just surveys and other data collection techniques in an attempt 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.

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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 (Street, 1984) as well as the liturgy in a Christian church. In both instances the same words are repeated over and over again such that people can recite them off the top of their heads without referring to what is written. Literacy practice is also purposeful (Barton &Hamilton, 2000; Barton et al, 2000). 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.

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 (Baynham, 1995). 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.

Prinsloo & Baynham (2008: 5) observed that in a literacy study, empirical units of analysis are derived from literacy events, while the analytical frame is derived from literacy practices.

Methodologically, researchers in the LSP tradition observe literacy events and link them to the broader contexts to have a sense of what is happening. In line with other research done from the LSP perspective, I employed an ethnographic methodology for the collection of my data.

iii. *The semiotic domain of literacy*

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*"* (Coiro et al, 2008:21). 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 (2008: 139) 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. A particular example given by Gee (2008) which resonates well with my argument of iterative religious recitations as literacy practices is Roman Catholic theology (Gee, 2008:137). Members recite long phrases from memory because they have been doing it repeatedly.

The semiotic and multi-modality view of literacy is further supported by Pahl (2008) as well as Prinsloo (2008). The idea of the conceptualization of literacy going beyond written text is also supported by the work of (Cope & Kalantzis, 2012), which noted how the written word, oral and gestures, among other modalities combined to make meaning (Cope & Kalantzis, 2012:3).

iv. *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, 1968, 1977; Ong, 1982) 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.

The acquisition of this literacy is also believed to deliver social, health, economic, and cultural benefits to individuals and communities (EFA Global Monitoring Report (2006). Street (1984:1) labelled this view of literacy "autonomous", also referred to as conventional literacy. Other theorists, including Gough (1995) have substantiated the claims of the 'autonomous' literacy, attributing to it changes such as personal development and improvements in health status (Maruatona, 2001).

v. *Literacy as a Transformative Process*

Contrary to conventional literacy, other scholars, Freire being the pioneer, view literacy from a transformative (or critical) perspective (Maruatona, 2001).

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 (Freire, 1970; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Giroux, 1983, 1997; Hernandez, 1997). This conceptualization of literacy dominated literacy discourse in international organizations including UNESCO.

vi. *Understandings of Literacy in the Field of Practice*

UNESCO and other entities in the international community usually understand 'literacy' as possessing the technical skill of reading and writing. For example, in 1958, UNESCO linked a person's literacy status to being able to read and write (UIL, 2010:20). In 1978, UNESCO saw literacy to make people function effectively in their

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groups as well as achieve personal and community development (ibid).

Again, in 2005, UNESCO linked literacy to the achievement of personal goals, development of knowledge and potential, as well as increased participation in community (UNESCO, 2005a: 21).

As was noted by Fransman (2008: 55), policy documents such as the "Dakar Framework for Action and the Millennium Development Goals of 2000 (MDGs)" underlined the importance of 'literacy' in achieving development. The underlying perception in a conventional literacy Programme is that literacy can lead to community development. This perception influenced many of the conferences organized by UNESCO on Adult Education which ended with conclusions or recommendations that reflect this assumption. For example, the Montreal Conference on Adult Education, organized by UNESCO in 1960 concluded that increased literacy among the populace was essential for countries to be able to address the challenge of underdevelopment (UNESCO, 1960).

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 (UNESCO, 2000a). The 2010 Belém Framework for Action recognized literacy as providing learning opportunities for young and old alike (UIL, 2010:17)

In the first Global Report on Adult Learning and Education, UNESCO reported that "young people and adults who struggle with reading, writing and operating with numbers are more vulnerable to poverty, social exclusion, unemployment, poor health, demographic changes, displacement and migration, and to the impacts of man-made and natural disasters" (UIL, 2010:24)

This view of the correlation between literacy and sustainable development was further buttressed by International development agencies. As was reported by Bhola, (2008), the United Nations Literacy Decade (2003-2012), and United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014) have now reaffirmed that commitment to adult literacy is essential if the dreams of sustainable development and poverty eradication are ever to be realized (Bhola, 2008:11).

However, contrary to the global discourses on the affordances of literacy with respect to social transformation, Bhola (2008) noted that "we should not expect literacy to have a deterministic role in societal change" (Bhola, 2008: 28) 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.

I share the view of Bhola (2008) 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.

c) Location of the Research

The research was located in Juaso and Saaman, 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 has to drive through Saaman to get to Juaso.

d) 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 has to 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.

e) My Position as Researcher

To reduce reactivity which could bias the results of my research, I spent more time in the communities and participated in some of their activities – funerals, church services, and committee meetings. 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. From their responses, I could see this objective was achieved. Again, to show respect to them and show that I appreciate the role they played in the research process, I plan to report back to them the results of my research.

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II. Methodology

a) Scope of the Research

The main purpose of this research was to explore the perceptions of the people of Juaso and Saaman on literacy, as well as the literacy events and practices they employ in the day-to-day lives to ascertain how these fit into the global literacy scholarly debate. Participants in the research included learners and facilitators of the literacy classes, as well as community leaders who participated in the community development process.

b) Research Design

I used the qualitative methodology, and the case study method, to enable me to collect data in a natural setting and understand the focus of the research from the perspectives of the research participants (Prinsloo, 2005). Unlike quantitative approaches which focus on applying measures using numbers and striving to have findings that are generalizable to the relevant population (Bryman, 2008), words and actions of the participants became the data for analysis (Hancock et al, 1998; Maykut & Morehouse, 1994) and these are not intended for generalization. Bryman (2008) argued that the qualitative approach to research was developed to address the shortfalls of the quantitative approach. He argued that the latter approach had limitations in accounting for the context in which research is undertaken as well as social issues. In view of the foregoing, I considered the qualitative tradition an appropriate approach to answer my question.

c) The Case Study Approach

I used a comparative case study research method to help me to collect in-depth data in the two communities which I then compared during the analysis stage. As the research was aimed at providing an insight into people's perceptions and experiences, it required the use of a design that allows collection of data from people, documents, and observation of activities of people in their natural settings.

d) Case Study Methodology

There are different ideas about what a case study is. Johansson (2003) noted some of the common ideas put forward by scholars including (Gillham, 2000; & Yin, 1994). These are that "the case study should have a 'case' which is the object of study. The 'case' should: be a complex functioning unit, be investigated in its natural context with a multitude of methods, and be contemporary" (Johansson, 2003:2).

These commonalities notwithstanding, different researchers emphasize different features of case studies. For instance, whereas Stake (1998) argues that what is crucial to case study research is not the methods of investigation, but rather interest in individual cases, other researchers such as Yin (1994) place more emphasis on the method and techniques that constitute a case study.

In this research, I will be guided by the dispositions of both Stake (Ibid) and Yin (Ibid), focusing on both the method and techniques used as well as interest in individual cases.

Yin (2003) gave instances in which a researcher could decide to use a case study design. One of such instances which apply to my research is when the researcher wants to cover conditions in the context that he deems relevant to his/her study. As I wanted to examine how learners and other community members involved in community development use literacy in their natural social contexts, I considered the case study design appropriate for my research.

e) Data Sources

The use of multiple data sources in case study research enhances data credibility. Interviews, direct observations, participant observations and document review were the data sources used in my research. The case study research design was appropriate for my research because as Yin (2003) put it, case study research designs allow flexibility and can be used to collect a wide range of evidence. Willis (2007) suggested that case studies are about "real people and real situations… rely on inductive reasoning …illuminates the readers' understanding of the phenomenon under research". Willis, 2007:239).

f) The Data Collection Process

i. *Methods of Data Collection*

In this thesis, I conceptualized literacy from the perspective of literacy as a social practice (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Baynham, 1995; Heath, 1983; Prinsloo, 2005; Scribner & Cole, 1981; Street, 1984, 1995).

As a result, I used four ethnographic methods to collect data from research participants in the two communities. These included:

1. In-depth interviews (Focus group and individual). In the interviews I used the semi-structured interview guide.
2. Participant observation
3. Informal conversations
4. Document review.

The ethnographic methods used made it possible for me to have a holistic/contextual, comparative, and cross-cultural picture of the research question. The use of this method thus helped me to compare the role of adult literacy in community development in the two communities.

I stayed in Juaso for a period of 10 months - though not continuously. There were times I moved out for a while and returned there - collecting data from research participants both in Juaso and Saaman. I was given accommodation in Juaso by the leaders of the community. I had thought that the data collection

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process was going to be smooth and that participants were going to be readily available. But that was not going to be. I had to schedule and reschedule interview appointments, sometimes more than twice before I would get the chance to interview. This was particularly so in the case of Juaso. Because I was staying in Juaso, I had intended to finish collecting the data in Juaso and then I would start data collection in Saaman. I had to change my strategy due to the unavailability of respondents in Juaso. I decided to work concurrently in both communities based on who was available to be interviewed.

g) Language used in Data Collection

All data was collected using the Akan language except on two occasions in Saaman where English was used. Interviewing in Akan and writing in English was not a challenge for me because I am an Akan myself and I speak and write the language very well. The essence of what people said in Akan during interviews and conversations were therefore accurately captured without fear of losing information. However, where proverbs were given in Akan, I maintained the Akan rendition of it to preserve the originality of what was said.

h) 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 participants 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 (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994), 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.

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 due to the fact that 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 workplaces 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

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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 practiced and what development activities have been undertaken in the community. I explored these questions more during the one-on-one interviews.

i) 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. I used this data to triangulate those collected from observations and informal conversations, as well as from individual interviews (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). In each community I conducted one focus group discussion involving nine participants. I purposively selected participants in the focus groups using the maximum variation strategy to include people from different social domains. The groups were homogenous to ensure maximum participation (Ritchie & Spenser, 1994). I used homogenous groups 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.

I used FGI to explore the perceptions of people on literacy. This helped me understand what counts as literacy to them. 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. The focus group discussion at Saaman was easier to organize than that of Juaso, which I had to reschedule twice because key participants were not available.

j) Individual in-Depth Interviews

These helped me gather more in- depth data and ask probing questions or inquire 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. (Creswell, 1994). 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.

k) Participant Observation and Informal Conversations

These were additional data collection tools I used, and they helped me to see 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 (Rule & John, 2011). 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.

l) 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 adult literacy classes. Having done that, I was then 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.

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m) Data Analysis Process

I used the interpretive methodology to analyze my data, using the words, views and experiences of my research participants for the analysis. I approached the data analysis stage of my thesis with the understanding that there are many ways of analyzing qualitative data and as Pope & Mays (1996) noted, qualitative research is an interpretative and subjective exercise, and the researcher is intimately involved in the process, not aloof from it. I therefore needed to make decisions on how I wanted to analyze my data. To do this, I needed to decide what I wanted to get out of my data.

Based on the focus of my research, I aimed to get insights on my research questions as outlined on page 9 from my data. Having found data to understand these, my purpose was then to describe and interpret what I have found in the data, I needed to decide on what theoretical approach to adopt for the analysis of my data, bearing in mind my research question. I used an inductive approach in generating meaning out of my data. I developed propositions inductively derived from a rigorous, systematic, objective, and critical analysis of the data (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994).

Then using the constant comparative method, which I will describe shortly, I compared and contrasted categories emerging from the data for Saaman and Juaso and tried to establish relationships between the categories. I found this theoretical approach very suitable for analyzing my data as my purpose was to describe, interpret and report.

I used the notion of on-going analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994) as I started the data analysis process concurrently with data collection. This helped me to "cycle back and forth between thinking about the existing data and generating strategies for collecting new – often better quality-data (Miles & Huberman, 1984, p. 50). As I analyzed the data collected, I was directed to new areas to explore, new questions to ask, and new strategies to use in collecting the needed data.

After the data had been collected, I began the coding process with the aim of beginning to focus on the potential meanings of the data. I followed three basic procedures in the coding process given by Coffey & Atkinson (1996) which I describe later under the coding sub-heading.

n) Validity and Reliability

The validity of research refers to the extent to which an account accurately represents the social phenomena to which it refers (Hammersley, 1992). Similarly, According to Hammersley (1992) reliability has to do with "the degree of consistency with which instances are assigned to the same category by different observers or by the same observer on different occasions" (Hammersley, 1992:67). In the view of Seale (2004) and Silverman (2000), the degree of consistency should reflect accuracy of data and credibility of judgment. Silverman (1993) points out that checking the reliability of ethnographic research is closely related to assuring the quality of field notes and guaranteeing public access to the process of their generation. To ensure the reliability of my research, I strove to show evidence of the consistency with which data was gathered. Typed copies of my field notes, interview transcripts and researcher's journal are also available for public scrutiny (Silverman, 1993: 146-148).

Carspecken (1996, quoted in Cooper, 2005:94) noted that validity rests on whether: 1. Data or field records produced were true to what occurred; 2. the analysis was conducted correctly; and 3. the conceptual basis of analytical techniques was sound. In the conduct of the research, I was careful to meet the validity criteria as outlined by Carspecken as closely as possible.

III. Findings/Results

a) Perceptions on Literacy from Saaman and Juaso

Saaman and Juaso are in the Fanteakwa district in the Eastern region of Ghana, lying one kilometre away from each other, Juaso lying next to Saaman. Inhabitants in the two towns freely walk to and from each village. The regional capital is Koforidua, and the district capital is Begoro. Saaman is 138 km away from Accra, the capital city of Ghana, whereas Juaso is 139 km away. To access Saaman and Juaso from the district, regional or capital city, one branches off the main road at Osino, and travel two (2) kilometres to get to Saaman and then to Juaso, which lies one kilometre away from Saaman.

The perceptions on literacy presented here are those of opinion leaders and learners and facilitators of adult literacy classes in the two communities that I interviewed for my doctoral degree.

b) Opinion Leaders' Perception on Literacy

Daniel, the Unit Committee chairman of Saaman, said in an interview that he perceived literacy as knowledge and skill. He used his own farming experience as an example to illustrate his point. He said, as an experienced farmer, he has knowledge as to what to do at what time. According to him,

> From 15th August to 15th September if you plant maize for the lean season, you will get a good harvest. If you go beyond these days, the maize may fail because it may not get the needed rainfall.

Dennis, the literacy class facilitator in Juaso agreed with Daniel. He observed that there are people who can combine two or more colours to create a new colour, combine wires to create electricity or to spark a vehicle. Others who have never been to school are able to weave baskets from palm branches as a means of earning income or use those same palm branches to make 'Ajokuo' (used in trapping fish and crabs in the river). According to him, these skills place literacy into two categories, 'Efie nyansa' (home literacy) and 'sukuu

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nyansa' (school literacy) as was explained by Dennis during the focus group discussion at Juaso.

To further buttress this point, Ken, a- 70-year opinion leader at Juaso gave this anecdote during the focus group discussion at Juaso:

> … There was a man called Kofi Mensah[1] who used to buy cocoa from farmers for the government. He had never been to school. But he would use stones to represent every bag of cocoa he filled. When he had finished, the number of stones would show him the number of bags filled and he would pay the farmers accordingly. He never worked at a loss…

Thomas, the Assembly member, agreed with Daniel, Dennis and Ken. He said he believed knowledge and skill are innate and a gift from God. He gave this example to prove his point:

> In the past there were carpenters who had never been to school, but they could sit and design things which were very neat. Those carpenters produced better quality wooden products than carpenters who have had formal training.

Nathan, the Assembly member of Juaso, however, said he agreed that literacy is innate, but it has got nothing to do with religion. He said people are born with talent which can be advanced through learning.

But for the learners in the adult literacy class who were interviewed, literacy meant only one thing as described in the section that follows.

c) What Literacy Means to Learners

In contrast to the perception expressed by some of the opinion leaders, the research revealed through informal conversations with some learners both in Saaman and Juaso that for most of them, what counts as literacy is nothing but the ability to read and write in English. A few of them, like Abena and Peter, wanted to be able to read in the Twi language.

Most of the adult literacy learners in Saaman and Juaso that participated in the research indicated that the desire to be able to read and write in English was what motivated them to join the literacy class. They needed the ability to read and write to cope with day- to-day practical situations outside the community such as doing banking transactions which require filling in bank forms, keeping records, and reading sign boards when traveling, so they would not miss their way.

They also linked the ability to read and write to status. Some participants even dropped out of the class because even though they had been promised they would be taught how to read and write in English that was not happening. They felt bad they could not read and write in English. For example, Grace, a participant in the literacy class in Saaman told me that she felt inferior to other ladies who could speak English 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.

It is clear from the words of Grace that ability to read and write in English is linked with feelings of self-worth and hope for better job prospects.

Hayford, also a participant in the literacy class in Saaman said he felt embarrassed that he could not read and write in English, especially when he went to the bank, and he had to fill forms in English, but he could not.

Similarly, in an informal conversation with Rose, a participant in the literacy class in Juaso, she told me that she joined the literacy class because she wanted to be able to read and write so that she could read the bible and write things herself without always having to depend on other people.

d) Literacy Conceptualized as Wisdom

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 are able to 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), 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).

By way of summary, after all the conversations in the two communities, it came out clearly that the perceptions on what counts as literacy for some people in both communities were the same. For some of the opinion leaders, literacy is functional and is synonymous with knowledge and skill. It goes beyond the ability to read and write. However, ability to read and write is an important part of literacy and for majority of the learners that were interviewed, to be able to read and write in English to cope with day- to- day life situations, was all that literacy meant.

Literacy was linked to a person's social status and gave a feeling of self-worth. Furthermore, literacy is conceptualized as wisdom- expressed in the way a person communicates and solves problems. Literacy is believed to be innate to every individual and has got nothing to do with ability to read and write.

[1] Name changed to protect identity

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This leads me to explore what perceptions people in the communities hold on the importance of reading and writing.

e) Perceptions on the Importance of Reading and Writing

In Saaman and Juaso, as in many rural communities in Ghana, communication is mainly verbal and is done in the local language, in the case of Saaman and Juaso, Akuapem Twi. There is thus little need for reading and writing so long as people are within the confines of the community. However, once outside the community, situations arise which call for the ability to read and write. In Ghana, the official language is English and most writing is done in the English language. It should therefore be understood that when people talk of reading and writing, they are by default talking about reading and writing in the English language.

f) Coping with Daily Living

During a focus group discussion in Saaman with research participants, Daniel likened inability to being blind. He gave the anecdote below as an illustration:

> My own grandmother and her husband, none of them went to school. In those days during church fund- raising every member is given an envelope into which to put money. The church wrote the names of the members on the envelopes. It happened that in the process the envelope bearing the name of my grandmother was given to my grandfather and vice versa. . None of them noticed this mistake because they could not read and write. Because my grandfather was rich, he had put more money into his envelope. However, during the fund -raising each envelope was opened and the amount each person contributed announced. It came out that my grandmother contributed more than my grandfather. This generated a long quarrel between the two back at home. (All laughing). If they knew how to read and write this would not happen.

Hayford, a participant in the literacy class at Saaman said:

> If someone has knowledge but does not know how to read and write it affects him a lot… someone may have a lot of information that he may want to document. However, because he cannot read and write, he may ask someone to write for him. If the person does not agree with him about what he is saying, he can write different things from what he says. Therefore, if you have knowledge but cannot read and write it affects you negatively.

In my interactions with the research participants at Juaso through focus group discussions and one-on-one interviews, I gathered that perceptions held by the people of Juaso that I interviewed on the importance of reading and writing was in the main not different from those I interviewed in Saaman. The ability to read and write was considered important for purposes of reading and writing letters, making banking transactions, reading inscriptions when traveling, making profit out of business, wealth acquisition, and being respected in the community.

There are no banks in either Saaman or Juaso. People who have to do banking transactions travel to Osino. At the bank, officials complete the forms for those who cannot read and write. Using this as an example, Dennis observed during the focus group discussion that it is important to be able to read and write so people are not cheated out of things of value to them. He said that bank officials who fill bank forms for people who cannot read and write can steal their money from them.

g) Communication and record keeping

During a focus group discussion in Saaman, there was consensus among the participants that the ability to read and write engenders confidence, increases knowledge, as well as enhances record keeping and sending of information.

Daniel, the Unit Committee chairman for Saaman agreed to this during a one-on-one interview I had with him, when he said:

> Being able to read makes the person confident…There are people who, because they have not had formal education, they do not know how to do certain things. But if you have been to school, you know what to do and you are confident in yourself.

Daniel's assertion that having had formal education is tantamount to knowing what to do is debatable and unrealistic. Education does not teach all things. A person who has not had formal education but has had experience and exposure to certain things would be better placed to those things than one who is educated but not experienced in what needs to be done. In the same vein, the assumption that being able to read and write engenders confidence is also debatable. I see these perceptions as effects of negative hegemonic influences from the West which made people who could not read and write feel inferior to those who could.

Again, some of the participants in the focus group discussion saw the importance of record keeping in the sense that what is documented can be referred to even after a hundred years because as Nathan put it, 'tekrema mpro' (the tongue never decays). Hayford agreed to the importance of being able to read and write for purposes of record keeping because it is not everything that one can commit to memory. Moreover, if one cannot read and write and asks another person to document something for him, the person can misrepresent the facts if he does not agree with him.

h) Life outside the community

During the focus group discussions in Saaman and Juaso, it came out clearly that one way reading and writing is important is to be able to read inscriptions to know where to pass and where not to pass. As Dennis

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from Juaso put it, "we don't miss our way if we know how to read and write"?

Moreover, they agreed that as most information is written, one needs to be able to read and write to have access to information, as Nathan put it, 'anibuei saafee ne akenkan'(Meaning ability to read and write is the key to civilization).

Peter said:

> … if in your old age you want to prepare a will for your children and you can't read and write, the one who does it for you can change what you say. But if you are able to write these things down yourself it will be difficult to lose the property you have worked hard with your children for many years to acquire to someone else.

On the importance of reading and writing to community development, Joshua, an opinion leader in Saaman noted that Saaman is an old community and traditionally well known in the area. Their forefathers made a name for themselves through conquests in war. As Joshua observed,

> …But because our forefathers did not help posterity in terms of reading and writing, a time came when this community was 'flopping' and Akutu (name changed) was developing more than us… when we started sending our children to school, we have seen that even today Akutu people are afraid of people from this community who are knowledgeable and can read and write.

i) Reading and writing and respect

Research participants from both Saaman and Juaso clearly expressed the view that ability to read and write engenders respect. Life in Saaman and Juaso, like many rural communities in Ghana, is communal. Everybody is known by all in the community and everybody's business is everybody's concern. It is therefore very easy to lose or gain respect in the community by what one does or does not do. The ability to read and write was linked to respect in both communities. During the Saaman focus group discussion, there was a general agreement among participants that people who can read and write are more respected than those who cannot. As another participant in the focus group, Lemuel, a participant in the literacy class from Juaso noted, "Even in this community when there is a meeting and a person who has been to school arrives, he is given the highest seat". However, the group also agreed that the link is not that straightforward as a person's character would determine whether he should be respected or not.

j) Commercial activities

The ability to read and write was also thought to be important for trading purposes. In the focus group discussion at Juaso, participants agreed that reading and writing was important to enable trade between blacks and whites. Using the silent trade era to support his point, Newman, a farmer, an opinion leader and secretary to the Unit Committee believed that it is important to read and write English which is the white man's language so that blacks can trade with whites.

Again, reading and writing were seen as important for making profit out of business and acquiring wealth. Two of the participants in Juaso expressed this perception during the focus group discussion which was also confirmed in one-on-one interviews. Lemuel, a participant in the literacy class, for instance, believed that,

People who have not been to school, especially traders, they can engage in their business for more than ten years, but you don't see any profit accruing from the business. All because they do not know how to read and write.

In the view of Alfred, as well, a person can only make money if he is financially literate. But even then, another person may steal the money from him if he does not know how to read and write.

During the one-on-one interview I had with Ken, he corroborated the view of Alex when he argued that a trader who cannot speak English would have difficulty dealing with customers who spoke only English.

From the conversations with research participants from both Saaman and Juaso, one can see the influence of the autonomous model of literacy on the perspectives of many of them on their understanding of literacy. For many of them the ability to read and write is of prime importance and is even linked to respect and confidence. This perception is problematic as in a community the factors that generate respect and confidence go beyond the ability to read and write. There are people in communities who cannot read and write but due to their character, they command the respect of all and are very confident in all they do.

IV. Discussion

This article examined the various theoretical perceptions on what literacy is and ended with empirical evidence from the perspectives of what selected individuals and groups from two rural communities in Ghana perceive literacy to be. The discussion, undertaken from an ethnographic perspective has established 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 (Street 1984) 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 (Pahl 2008; Prinsloo 2008). Literacy cannot be understood in a vacuum. Instead, it necessarily has to be linked with a social activity (Baynham 2005; Hager, 2005).

The literature has shown that many people labelled 'illiterates' use literacy in many forms (Heath, 1982, 1983; Scribner & Cole, 1981; Street, 1984) and

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thus problematizes the assumed dichotomy between 'literates' and 'illiterates' as well as between 'oral' 'literate' societies.

Relating the empirical views of the people of Saaman and Juuso to the theoretical perspectives discussed, it comes out that the perceptions of majority of the people interviewed in the two communities on what counts as literacy, are at variance with the views of conventional literacy, as well as those of major international organizations and policy makers in Ghana and the developing world at large. Their views reflect the functional view of literacy as expressed by proponents of the social practice view of literacy (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Street, 1995) among many others mentioned earlier in this paper. Their views do not however, align with the views of proponents of critical literacy who conceptualize literacy as a tool for empowerment of people, to enable them to question the status quo and challenge the oppressive elements in society (Apple, 1999; Dorvlo, 1993; Freire, 1970; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Giroux, 1997, Hernandez, 1997).

In both Saaman and Juaso, the people interviewed perceived literacy in a functional manner but not radical, in agreement with the ideological model of literacy. 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.

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 (Goody, 1977; Ong, 1982; Olson, 1977, 1994) 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 (Street 1984; Heath, 1982; Scribner & Cole, 1981). 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' as I pointed out in chapter two. The perception of literacy among many of the research participants was also found to be consistent with that of the UNESCO Institute of Lifelong Learning (2013) which talks about people developing competencies to help them live in fulfilling ways.

The findings from Saaman and Juaso also confirm the argument of proponents of LSP that literacy varies from context to context (For example, Prinsloo & Breier, 1996; Street, 1984, 1995; Wedin, 2004). Even between the learners in the adult literacy classes and the community leaders, literacy was conceptualized differently. This means that in undertaking research or designing a literacy programme, the meaning of literacy should not be taken for granted. Rather, its meaning in the context in question should be explored as indicated by Robinson-Pant (2008) and Nabi et al (2009).

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