



Young children's funds of identity and out-of-school literacy practices: Case study of two early readers (writers)

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Abstract: This qualitative research paper investigates the out-of-school literacy practices and 'funds of identity' of two Grade 2 children from distinct sociocultural backgrounds. Through an in-depth case study, the paper delves into the active, purpose-driven, and engaging nature of these young learners' out-of-school literacy practices. The findings of the study illuminate the pivotal roles of poems, rhymes, drawing, and technology in stimulating young learners' curiosity and active participation in literacy. Importantly, the paper underscores the impact of sociocultural and economic contexts on children's access to diverse literacy experiences and technologies. It further emphasizes the powerful influence of traditional school literacy practices in framing children's perceptions of literacy. In conclusion, the paper offers crucial insights into the multifaceted world of early childhood literacy development. It calls for equitable access to diverse literacy experiences and suggests the need for adaptable school literacy practices that can cater to the diverse needs of young learners, ultimately contributing to fostering a generation of confident, engaged, critical, and literate children.

Keywords

Emergent literacy, Literacy practices, Out-of-school literacy, Funds of identity.

Introduction

In recent times, in India, dramatic strides have been made in improving children's access to schooling, where the elementary enrolment rates have been well over 90% for more than a decade (Government of India, Planning Commission, 2010). This has led to a growing realization that the conversation now needs to move towards improving the quality of education, especially literacy achievement as various governmental and non-governmental surveys and reports continue to present a very dismal state of affairs regarding the literacy achievement of the young in our country (CARE & USAID, 2016).

The current National Education Policy (2020), in this regard, has therefore recognized literacy as the key component of a sound educational program and has emphasized developing foundational literacy and numeracy. It has also brought about a pedagogical and curricular restructuring of school education from the previous 10+2 to the new 5+3+3+4, which now includes a consolidated focus on the foundational stage comprising ages 3-8 in continuation. The creation and focus on the foundational stage are accompanied by a renewed focus on foundational literacy, with the launch of missions such as NIPUN Bharat and the corresponding National Curriculum Framework for Foundational Stage (2022).

Literacy in these policy documents appears to be envisioned as a socio-culturally embedded set of practices rather than just a 'neutral cognitive skill'. The documents establish the critical need for congruence between the children's home and school culture and language, especially in primary years. They also argue for sensitivity to diversity in children's interests and social backgrounds and utilizing it as a resource. However, there is a dearth of literacy research

in India (Sinha, 2019), especially of the kind that could shed light on the literacy experiences of young learners belonging to diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. Given the vibrant tapestry of India's diverse sociocultural landscape, the journey of children towards literacy is bound to be a multifaceted and intriguing exploration. To truly commit to the vision of the National Education Policy (2020) and its corresponding curricular documents, research is required that could provide in-depth insights into the everyday experiences of literacy by young learners from diverse backgrounds. Towards this end, the current paper reports on a case study of two young learners residing in Delhi, India, belonging to distinct socioeconomic backgrounds. The central aim of the study was to delve into their out-of-school literacy practices, intertwined with the notion of 'funds of identity', to illuminate the intricate path of literacy development among young learners.

Within the Indian context, where languages, traditions, and socioeconomic disparities converge, the study of literacy acquisition becomes a nuanced pursuit. By closely examining the out-of-school literacy practices of these two young participants, the study seeks to unravel the myriad threads that shape their identities as emergent readers and writers. The concept of 'funds of identity' provides a lens through which we can understand how personal, cultural, and social factors intersect with the acquisition of literacy skills.

As the paper navigates the stories and experiences of these two young learners, it aspires to contribute valuable insights into the dynamic process of literacy development in the early years. By bridging the gap between formal schooling and the rich tapestry of their out-of-school lives, this study not only adds to the growing body of literature on literacy but also underscores the significance of cultural context and identity in shaping young minds on their journey toward becoming literate individuals. In this respect, it is guided by particular conceptualizations of literacy that form the theoretical framework for the current study, elaborated in the next section.

Theoretical Framework

Since the study set out to explore and shed light on young children's 'funds of identity' and out-of-school literacy practices as phenomena important for understanding young children's literacy development, it is imperative to first note the conceptualizations or perspectives of literacy that guided and framed the study. The study draws from two major perspectives on literacy: the *sociocultural* perspective and the *funds of identity* approach.

The *sociocultural* perspective regards literacy as a *social* and *cultural practice* that is shaped by history, social context, and institutionalized power, as opposed to a mere *skill* or *ability* that operates more or less at an individual level (Compton-Lilly, 2013). The notion of practice employed in this perspective involves more than just actions with texts; instead, practices connect to and are shaped by, values, attitudes, feelings, and social relationships (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). In this sense, "identities people construct and the relationship that they form shape their reading and writing practices", thus, within this perspective, "literacy and literacy practices are means for performing particular identities" (Compton-Lilly, 2006, p. 60).

Moreover, understood as a socially embedded practice, this perspective has shifted the notion of literacy from a single continuum or level to imagining a variety of configurations or a plurality of '*literacies*', thereby challenging the reified schooled notions of literacy as a set of 'neutral' and 'technical' skill (Hull & Schultz, 2001). This perspective is both based on and has further engendered research into accounts of literacy outside of school (Hull & Schultz, 2001).

Connected to this conceptualization of literacy is the *funds of identity* approach. This approach is based on the previously developed "funds of knowledge" approach which views "households as containing ample cultural and cognitive resources with great, *potential utility* for classroom instruction" (Moll et al., 1992, p. 134). Funds of knowledge (multiple bodies of knowledge, ideas, and skills that a household accumulates in order to maintain itself and its members) become 'funds of identity' when people actively internalize them to make meanings and to define themselves, and thus refers to "the historically accumulated, culturally developed, and socially distributed resources that are essential for a person's self-definition, self-expression, and self-understanding" (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014, p. 37). Within this perspective, identity is not understood as a purely psychological phenomenon, that is as something 'fixed' existing in people's heads as individual 'properties' or 'traits', rather it is mediated through people's social and cultural world (made up of sociodemographic conditions, social institutions, artifacts, significant others, practices, activities, ideologies and so on) (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014).

Together both of these perspectives provide impetus to study children's out-of-school literacy practices and the ways these interact with their social identities (employing the concept of funds of identity) within different contexts. The next section of the paper will elaborate on the methodology of the study.

Methodology

The study employed a qualitative case study methodology as it aimed to understand young children's out-of-school literacy practices and its intersection with their social identities, where literacy and identity both were understood as socially and culturally embedded sets of phenomena and therefore highly context and case-dependent. The purpose of the study was not simply to establish that social backgrounds impact literacy engagement and development but to capture the nuances of the process. Toward this end, the study was designed with the following objectives:

- To identify and examine young children's out-of-school literacy practices.
- To document ways in which young children's out-of-school literacy practices intersect with their social identity (employing the funds of identity approach).
- To examine young children's out-of-school literacy practices as a stimulus for rethinking schools and classrooms.

Focal participants- Ashika and Gunjan: Keeping in mind the aims and objectives of the study, two children aged six years studying in grade two, from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds were selected as cases for the study. Since qualitative case study research is not sampling research, that is, cases are generally not selected for representational purposes but rather to maximize what can be learned concerning the purpose of the study, cases were selected with the general principle that “we need to pick cases which are easy to get to and hospitable to our inquiry” (Stake, 1995, p. 6). As the study hinges on permission to observe personal spaces (such as home or other residing areas) and access to these spaces was of primary concern, personal networks were explored to select cases as convenient or opportunity samples (as in Cohen et al., 2007).

The first focal case of the study was Ashika (pseudonym), a six-year-old second-grade student enrolled in a private school in the Delhi NCR region. She resided in a cooperative housing society, where her family owned a spacious three-BHK flat. The housing society offered an array of amenities, including a skating rink, swimming pool, gardens with swings, and proximity to a bustling marketplace. Ashika's household consisted of four members, comprising her mother, a software engineer working from home, her father employed in an IT back office, and a younger brother aged 1. A full-time nanny was entrusted with the care of her toddler brother. Notably, both of Ashika's parents held Master's degrees in Computer Application, with her house filled with all sorts of technological devices including Amazon's digital assistance Alexa, a smart TV, Smartphones (including her personal one), and her own personal tablet. She had her own personal room with a study table, bunker bed, and storage for her school and play supplies.

The second focal case of the study was Gunjan (pseudonym), a six-year-old second-grade student enrolled in an EDMC Government school in Delhi. She resided with her family in a rented room situated in the densely populated locality of Gharoli village, characterized by narrow lanes flanked by both residential buildings and shops. The building where she lives has four stories, with each story comprising two rooms and a common bathroom/toilet, occupied by different tenants. Gunjan's family occupies a single room on the fourth floor of the building, sharing it among the four family members, including her mother, a housewife, her father employed as a daily wage craft worker, and her three-year-old younger brother. The family's limited living space is supplemented by the generosity of their landlord, who allows them to use the adjacent room on the floor (utilized as storage by the landlord) as a makeshift kitchen. Gunjan's mother attended school till grade five, while her father completed his education up to grade eight. The family's possessions included a double bed, basic utensils, a small refrigerator, a plastic chair, a floor rug for the children to sit and play, and a single smartphone shared among all members. Clothes owned by the family were stored in a 4x4 feet shelved cavity in one of the walls in the room.

Data collection and analysis: The study made use of observations and semi-structured interviews as data collection strategies. The focal children were observed in out-of-school settings spanning over one month. For both the children observations took place in the home setting, except for one instance in which Ashika was observed during her playtime outside. The focal children were observed at least once per week and care was taken to observe them during weekdays as well as over weekends to get a fuller picture of their daily routines on different days. Observation as a strategy for data collection involved maintaining in-depth written records of the events to “provide a relatively *incontestable description* for further analysis and ultimately reporting” (Stake, 1995, p. 62).

The study supplemented the data collected through direct observations with semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each focal child as well as with the parent responsible for the main caretaking of the child (in both cases it was the mother of the focal child). Interviews for both cases were conducted after one

round of observation (to identify the relevant parent as well as to ask more focused questions). Interviews were recorded (with consent) and later transcribed. Moreover, as suggested by Esteban-Guitart and Moll (2014), standard interview with children was supplemented with art-based methods to elicit response regarding their funds of identity. In this method, children were asked to draw a self-portrait, with the following instruction: “I would like you to show me on this piece of paper who you are at this moment in your life. If you wish, add the people and things most important to you at this moment in your life” (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014, p. 38).

For the data analysis process, the recorded data was first transcribed and then coded. The codes emerging from the data were thematically organized to look for patterns. The codes and themes, used for analysis, partly emerged from the data and partly were driven by the research questions. The next section of the paper will report the major findings from the study.

Findings

This section will report on the major findings of the study, discussed thematically keeping in mind the objectives of the study.

Children’s out-of-school literacy practices

The data from the study point towards the apparent dominance of school-related literacy practices on children’s engagement with literacy in out-of-school settings. This can be understood with two interrelated trends emerging from the data, where- first, children even in home settings engaged with literacy majorly for school-related purposes, and second, children’s understanding of literacy was heavily influenced by a school-based perception of literacy. The significance of this finding will be tied together in the discussion section of the paper.

Literacy practices at home: The majority of events (not all) involving literacy that were observed for each focal child, involved the child engaging with literacy for school-related purposes. For instance, in the case of Ashika, the majority of the time during the first observational visit, the child was engaged in finishing her holiday homework with her mother. Similarly, for Gunjan, the majority of the observed events involved the child either doing her homework or tuition work. Data from the interviews, regarding the daily routines of both the children and questions regarding their engagement with reading and writing activities, suggests that both the children engage with reading and writing predominantly for school-related purposes. Other than this, however, certain trends in data were observed, which are important for understanding children’s out-of-school literacy practices, these include-

Children’s literature at home: For both cases, literature for children other than the school textbooks was documented. However, they differed in their form and function. Ashika had a collection of 7 books, all of which were in English, but they differed in type and difficulty level. For instance, one was a tactile book (on each page you can slide or pull up something), one was an audio/visual book, and one was a personalized book that her mother got printed from a website, and so on. These books were carefully selected by her mother, to capture the child’s “interest” and to get her in the “habit” of reading (words used by the mother during the interview). The mother also shared that she planned to get some books for her in Hindi but didn’t find any “good” books and eventually didn’t get the time to do so. The data suggests that some amount of reading for entertainment or interest purposes happens in the case of Ashika as while flipping through one of the books (the one which had the child’s name in it), I observed that she had traced her name throughout the book and had copied it on several places as well, the child also picked up one book while showing it to me (which was a rhyme book), and read the entire book to me (I could tell that she was reading because at one place she also corrected herself). During the interview as well, she shared how she liked reading much more than writing because it’s much easier, whereas writing is “boring” (her words).

In the case of Gunjan, she had the NCERT’s Hindi graded series at home which she got from the school (a set of 5 books graded in terms of difficulty). Out of these 5 books, she could only read the one graded at level 1. She also shared that these books are not given to her for keeping, rather they are going to be tested on it, and after that had to return these books back to school. In this sense, the function and purpose of these books were not engagement or entertainment (as was the case with Ashika) but rather more school-oriented.

Social media and technology at home: In both cases, social media and technology emerged as prominent mediums where children engage with literacy in out-of-school settings. These mediums were used both for school-related tasks as well as for entertainment and leisure activities. Watching videos on YouTube emerged as a common practice in both homes. The multiliteracies perspective has argued that literacy needs to be understood in a broader sense, as not just

limited to paper-pencil phenomenon or print literacy, but may involve a variety of communication channels, including signs and symbols that occur in digital platforms (Cope and Kalantzis, 2000). In this sense, children's engagement with social media and technology could be understood as a form of literacy practice at home. Moreover, in both cases, COVID and classes happening online were the impetus for buying new technology, which in the case of Ashika was a tablet and a Smartphone (her personal), and in the case of Gunjan was a Smartphone (shared by whole family).

In the case of Ashika, she was observed on two different observational visits watching YouTube Vlogs. Questions about her daily routine also revealed that she engages in watching YouTube videos on a daily basis. Regarding the content of these videos, the child shared that she likes to watch "chota bheem, My Little Pony, pogo" and so on. The mother was of the opinion that the child has learned spoken English by watching these YouTube videos, as she shared

"English is not our mother tongue but still she has learned to speak very good English, spoken English because of this YouTube, she watches every day for hours. She has learned a lot from it. It was quite surprising for us. I will not take credit for her English-speaking skills. YouTube has a big contribution in that"

The mother also shared that the child uses "Google" a lot, to search for queries for which she didn't find satisfactory answers from others or to correct people if she thinks that they are giving her wrong answers. The mother shared that if the child cannot type out the entire question, she uses Alexa's voice assistance feature to Google something on her own.

In the case of Gunjan, she and her younger brother were also observed watching YouTube together on the Smartphone. The mother shared that only the younger brother watches more "cartoons" and Gunjan seldom "watches YouTube", she majority engaged with it for study-related purposes. Gunjan herself shared that she uses the smartphone to watch craft-related videos for school projects or to "practice" writing and mathematics such as revising and writing math tables or copying names of fruits and so on. The influence of 'school-like' practices was pretty evident in Gunjan's social media-related practices.

Drawing and poetry/rhymes as literacy practices at home: For both cases, drawing and poetry/rhymes emerged as important literacy practices that child engaged with at home and for purposes other than school-related. In both cases, children showed an inclination towards drawing as an activity that they engaged with at home on their own accord. As Kendrick and McKay (2004) noted, "Children naturally move between art...and language as ways to think about the world" (p. 109). In the case of Ashika, she showed me her "journal" that she maintained, in which she had drawn a variety of things of interest to her, including her school and playground, tooth fairy, Disney princesses, her family, and so on. A lot of these drawings were accompanied by texts as well, such as the name of her school, her family members, her own name, a note to the tooth fairy, and so on. Similarly, in the case of Gunjan, she also showed me the drawings she had made on her old notebooks, including drawings of flowers, trees, peacocks, and a greeting card she made for her class teacher. She had also written a note for her class teacher on that card. Children's drawings in this way act as prompts for their writing practices. As Zimmerman (2012) has argued, drawings in a way are writing and they can act as a bridge from one symbol system to another.

Moreover, both the children also showed an inclination towards poetry and rhymes, which prompted them to read on their own accord (and not specifically for school purposes). In the case of Ashika, while sharing her children's literature with me, she shared how she likes reading poetry and that her favourite book was "Wheels on the bus go round and round" (which is a nursery rhyme), which she even read aloud to me, singing all the while, going through each page with her fingers tracing the text. When asked why she liked this particular book, she replied because it's "so easy". Similarly, in the case of Gunjan, she also shared that she liked reading poetry and that there is a specific poem in her textbook that she likes to read. When asked why she liked to read that, she replied "vo aa gai mujhe" (because I could get that). This aligns with the arguments made by Emans (1978), who highlighted that children seem to have a deep-seated interest in rhymes and these can be tapped as resources to facilitate children's reading development.

Children's funds of identity (intersection between literacy practices and social identities)

Certain trends from the data emerged that shed some light on how children's literacy practices at home intersected with their social identities. In this regard, what needs to be noted first is that in both cases parents showed an attitude of engagement, involvement, and concern with their child's education. In the case of Ashika, this was evident from her mother's account of why they chose to not stay back in their hometown when they moved there during the COVID, as they wanted their kids to have better quality education in the city. The mother was also observed helping the child with various school-related tasks. In the case of Gunjan, this was evident from her mother's account of how they have put their child in tuition since age 2 to help her in her studies. The mother also shared that they had previously enrolled the

child in a private school but had to shift her to a government school because the private one got closed (and because of monetary issues they could not enroll her to another private school). The child, in her interview, also recounted how her parents helped her in her studies.

However, the family's socio-economic condition and parents' educational and economic background largely dictated what kind of experiences in general and literacy experiences in particular they were able to 'curate' or provide for their children. In the case of Ashika, owing to her socio-economic background, she had access to a wide variety of experiences which also feeds into her funds of identity. For instance, during the self-portrait task, she talked about a wide variety of resources and experiences she had access to, which included her toys, her tablet, how she loves swimming, experiences of vacation (how she loves nature and also drew a horse she saw in Mt Abu), experiences related to her hometown which they visit often (drew pictures of her friends from there) and so on. The mother also shared that lately, she has developed an interest in learning to skate and often visits the skating rink with her.

Moreover, the mother seemed to be keenly aware of the developmental needs of the child, as she shared

"I try to give more time (to Ashika) because I think she needs me more because she is learning right now, the baby is still young....but the kind of attention (Ashika) needs right now, what is required for her growth that needs to be taught only I can do that being the mother"

This awareness has also translated into the mother 'curating' experiences for the child, as she shared

"Although she (Ashika) doesn't want to do art (class), she normally likes arts...amm...so I made her do it.... because I read somewhere that arts improve children's concentration...and along with concentration it also improves creativity...so I wanted to groom her creative side as well, so I put her in art class as well as Karate. Both, one side will be physical, and on the other...both have their own benefits"

In terms of literacy experiences, the mother was aware that her daughter didn't like reading that much and least writing, so she made sure to buy books for her that would "catch her attention", especially the ones which had a lot of pictures in them. She also made sure to make an experience out of book reading, as she shared

"I told her that every night she has to read at least 2 pages...she has to read, I will also read for her, however she feels like doing it, but she will definitely read...next day after reading she will narrate to her grandparents, so that's how I tried that she reads"

The mother's educational and economic background allowed her to create such experiences for the child.

In the case of Gunjan, owing to her socio-economic background and the locality where she lived, she didn't have access to many outdoor activities and spaces (it was a closely packed locality filled with buildings and narrow lanes). This was also reflected in her self-portrait task, where she drew herself, her mother (as the person most important to her), and the foods she liked to eat.

Moreover, the mother, depending upon her educational and economic background tried to create experiences for Gunjan, evident in a number of instances, such as, the mother shared that she tries to take her children out to the nearby park on weekends. The mother also shared that she tries to help Gunjan in her studies, but limited by her own educational experiences, she generally takes help from the "internet", from where she gives "work" for Gunjan to complete, such as writing numbers, fruit names, and days of the week and so on. She also shared that since the age of two years, they have put their daughter in tuition, to help her in her studies.

Furthermore, another trend in which the intersection between literacy and social identities seemed to be emerging was regarding the languages that the children came to learn (or didn't learn). In both cases, the parent didn't mention the mother tongue of the child during the initial reporting, as in both cases, children never got to learn that language. In the case of Ashika, her mother reported Hindi and English as the languages spoken at home (with Hindi being reported as the mother tongue). During later conversations, however, it came up that their 'native' language was actually *Garhwali*, but the parents, and consequently the child, never got around to learning that language.

In the case of Gunjan, her mother reported Hindi as the mother tongue and the language spoken at home. However, during a later engagement, it emerged that the mother actually spoke a slightly different variety of Hindi, which she termed *khadi boli*, but the child had learned the "school variety". The mother also recounted the experience of her children having acquired the language particular to the city and shared that when they visit their hometown their relatives who live there often remark that her children have become "*shehri*" (city-like).

These accounts brought forth the struggles of hierarchy between languages that exist in India, as well as the intimate relationship between language and identity.

School literacy practices (stimulus to rethink)

As mentioned before, one of the major findings that emerged from the data points towards the apparent dominance of school-related literacy practices on children's engagement with literacy in out-of-school settings. This section will highlight how school literacy practices have been heavily influencing children's perception of literacy as well.

In this respect, it is first important to note the trends that emerged regarding the children's school literacy practices. In both cases, data point towards the prevalence of traditional and mechanical school literacy practices. As is evident from the children's responses regarding their Hindi and English classes, in the case of Ashika, she responded

Researcher: *Aur Hindi and English ki classes Mai kya hota hai? (What happens in Hindi and English classes?)*

Ashika: *Bus likhvate hai (only writing)*

Researcher: *Kya likhvate hai? (What in writing?)*

Ashika: *amm....jaise chapters vagara ke question answers (amm....like question answers from the chapter)*

Researcher: *ma'am aapko questions deti hai aapko likhna hota hai?*

Ashika: *ma'am actually board pe na, kuch....ek question likhti hai aur ek answer, ek question - ek answer, aise karke..aur vo sab hume copy karna hota hai (ma'am actually on the board, some....she writes one question and one answer, one question- one answer, like that...and we have to copy all that)*

Researcher: *dono classes mai yahi hota hai? (This happens in both the classes?)*

Ashika: *Han (yes)*

Researcher: *aur reading karate hai kuch class mai? (Does any reading happen in the class?)*

Ashika: *reading toh karate hai, par chapters, jo book se chapter padhna hota hai tab ma'am padhti hai, baccho ko nahi padhvati (reading do happen, but chapters, the chapter we have to read from the book, that ma'am reads, don't make children read)*

Similar experiences of copying from the blackboard were recounted by Gunjan as well, and experiences of repeating after the teacher when 'reading' English. However, Gunjan shared that she can read Hindi on her own and if she doesn't get anything she asks the class teacher.

Evidence of such practices was also present in children's school notebooks. In the case of Ashika, her notebook was filled with question-answers from different chapters. In addition to that, there were exercises in which some drawing was made by the child, below which a few sentences were written regarding that. It also included a few worksheets containing fill-in-the-blanks (printed worksheets in which the child has filled the blanks). In the case of Gunjan, her notebook has works like- *paryayvachi shabd* (synonyms), *Rikt sthan bhara* (fill in the blanks), *dino k naam* (days of the week), *varna mala*, and *Sulekh* (calligraphy).

Moreover, children's perception of literacy seemed to be guided by such traditional and mechanical practices, as they seem to majorly understand reading and writing as school practices. This was evident in children's responses to questions about whether they like reading/writing and the reasons behind it, and in their ideas about what according to them are their best/not best writings.

In the case of Ashika, she shared how she didn't like writing because it's "boring" and difficult as "*hath thak jate hai*" (my hands get tired). When asked to share any writing in which she thinks she hasn't done all that well, she shared a piece in which her teacher has marked her "Ab" (Absent). In the case of Gunjan, she shared that she likes English because "*writing achi aati hai*" (gets good handwriting). When asked to show some writing she considers her best work, she showed me some writing samples from the school notebook and shared that she considers them best because she has "good handwriting" in them. She also showed me some work in which she had received a "star" and "good" from her class teacher.

Both the children when talking about reading and writing, seem to be focussing on superficial and mechanical aspects of literacy. These ideas about literacy seemed to be emerging from their school experiences of literacy. This trend is consistent with what Street (1995) has referred to as the '*pedagogization of literacy*', where literacy increasingly has been associated with the institutionalized process of teaching and learning while ignoring or marginalizing many other uses and meanings of literacy. As a result, a contrast can be witnessed in the data between the personally meaningful, active, and engaging world of children's out-of-school literacy practices and the apparent dominance of traditional and mechanical school literacy practices. Understanding young children's out-of-school literacy practices can provide a stimulus to rethink school literacy practices and move them beyond just formal and mechanical aspects of literacy to consider a variety of functional aspects including communicative, representational, and entertainment purposes.

Researcher's dilemmas and limitations of the study

Conducting a qualitative case study, especially one involving human participants, is in no way a purely 'objective' or straightforward process; rather, it demands a reflective approach. As the data collection and interpretation process is heavily researcher-dependent, it requires maintaining self-awareness and self-reflexivity to add to the rigor and validity of the research. This section underscores some of the dilemmas I experienced as a researcher and certain limitations of the study, important to acknowledge potential influences on data collection and interpretation as well as to establish the significance of the study.

Influence of researcher's positionality: The influence of a researcher's positionality on the data collection and interpretation process is a critical aspect of this study. It became apparent in the differing dynamics established between the two participant families. In the case of Ashika, where informal channels led to our engagement (in this case family friend), I assumed an informal presence. This was evident as Ashika's mother addressed me by name, and Ashika affectionately referred to me as "didi" (sister). Conversely, when approaching Gunjan's family through a formal channel (in this case school), my presence was perceived as formal, reflected in all family members addressing me as "ma'am". This shift in formality underscored how the choice of engagement channels can influence the researcher's positionality within households, and consequently might have shaped their responses and my data collection process.

Moreover, my own cultural and linguistic background played a significant role in understanding the sociocultural and economic contexts of the participants in relation to my own. For instance, in Ashika's case, my belonging to the Garhwali community prompted me to dig deeper when her mother reported Hindi as their mother tongue, as I was well aware of the significance of regional languages within our community. Conversely, with Gunjan's family, although I discerned differences in accents, it was only through subsequent interactions with other community members that I learned about "khadi boli" as their mother tongue, instead of the reported Hindi. This awareness highlighted how shared cultural and linguistic backgrounds can enhance the researcher's ability to perceive nuances in participants' responses. Researchers truly act as primary tools for data collection, and in this sense, it needs to be acknowledged that their subjectivity and positionality inevitably shape the data collection process and the interpretations that follow.

Mitigating vulnerability: Working with vulnerable individuals, particularly in the context of researching young children, has been a reflective and ethically nuanced aspect of this study. Throughout this research, I was acutely aware of the responsibility to safeguard their rights and well-being. However, vulnerable positions do not just relate to young participants. When obtaining informed consent from Gunjan's mother, who was barely literate, it was evident that the traditional approach of written consent would not suffice. Instead, I opted for a comprehensive oral explanation, ensuring she understood the purpose, procedures, and voluntary nature of her participation. However, witnessing her sign a document she couldn't read, relying solely on my verbal explanation, underscored her vulnerable position. Additionally, it made me critical of the differing nature of informed consent obtained from the two participating households, also influenced by my varying positions within these households.

Spatial influence: Another aspect that inevitably influenced the data collection process was the difference in the availability of space within the two households, especially for conducting individual interviews. In the case of Ashika's spacious 3 BHK flat, there was ample room to conduct interviews with each participant individually, ensuring a focused and uninterrupted interaction. However, in the context of Gunjan's one-room rented space, challenges arose when it came to creating a private and conducive environment for interviews. It felt awkward to request household members to leave during the interviews, resulting in disruptions and the mother initially responding on behalf of the child. It became necessary to intervene and gently explain the importance of hearing the child's perspective directly. While the mother complied, the presence of all family members engaging in various activities within the confined space may have subtly influenced the child's responses and the overall data-collection process. These experiences underscore the significance of considering the physical environment and its impact on the dynamics of data collection, as it can either facilitate or hinder the depth and quality of insights obtained from participants, especially in contexts with limited space.

Limited generalizability: One significant limitation of this case study is that it focuses on only two Grade 2 children from specific sociocultural backgrounds. Therefore, the findings and insights generated from this study may not be widely applicable to all children in different sociocultural contexts. The limited sample size restricts the generalizability of the findings and calls for caution when applying them to a broader population.

Sample homogeneity: The study's concentration on two distinct sociocultural backgrounds, while valuable for in-depth exploration, also means that the sample may not fully capture the diversity of experiences among children. Variability within each sociocultural group might exist, and the study may not account for these nuances.

Short data collection period: Another constraint is the limited time allotted for data collection. An in-depth understanding of young children's literacy practices and funds of identity may require a more extended observation period to capture changes and patterns over time. The relatively short duration may limit the depth of insights that can be obtained.

Potential bias: Given that the study relies on self-reporting, observation, and interviews, there is the possibility of social desirability bias, particularly with young children. This bias may affect the accuracy of the information collected, as children may provide responses they believe are expected by the researchers or adults around them.

Single-point-in-time snapshot: The study provides a snapshot of the children's out-of-school literacy practices and funds of identity at a specific point in time. It may not capture potential changes or developments that occur after the data collection period ends.

Despite these limitations, this case study is a valuable starting point for understanding the interplay between sociocultural backgrounds, literacy practices, and identity formation in young children. It serves as a foundation for future, more comprehensive research that can build upon the insights gained and offer a more representative perspective on this complex topic.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this case study shed light on the active, purpose-driven, and engaging nature of young children's out-of-school literacy practices, particularly in the context of their engagement with poems, rhymes, drawing, and technology. Poems and rhymes emerged as captivating avenues for fostering interest and engagement in literacy. These forms of expression ignited the children's creativity and nurtured their language skills and love for storytelling. On the other hand, drawing acted as a vital starting point for their interaction with writing. Children labelled and made notes alongside their drawings, demonstrating how drawing can act as prompts for writing and a medium of self-expression, especially for children who are at the emergent stages of writing development.

Moreover, technology, specifically smartphones and social media, emerged as potential mediums for engaging children with literacy. Depending on the sophistication of the technology, it played a dual role, enhancing their agency and facilitating self-exploration. For instance, Ashika's use of voice assistance to "Google" information showcased how technology can serve as a powerful tool for satisfying children's curiosity and expanding their knowledge. Such technology can also act as a springboard for children who have not yet fully developed conventional reading and writing abilities. Digital technologies, when used thoughtfully, can enrich children's literacy experiences and have the potential to become an empowering tool. However, like any tool, its impact is going to depend upon the practice to which it is put, and as such further careful consideration is required on the potential of new technologies on literacy development. It is also essential to ensure equitable access to these technologies to bridge potential gaps stemming from socio-cultural and economic backgrounds.

Furthermore, the study evidently points towards the role of sociocultural and economic backgrounds in shaping children's literacy experiences and technology access. Both case families exhibited a strong commitment to their child's learning, yet their economic resources and educational backgrounds posed limitations. This underlines the importance of equitable access to diverse literacy experiences and technologies in schools so that children from diverse backgrounds can benefit and have access to developmental opportunities that their families might not be able to provide. However, schools should also acknowledge and build upon the literacy experiences that children from diverse backgrounds bring to the classroom.

Schools play a pivotal role in shaping children's perceptions of literacy, often representing the embodiment of "powerful literacies". The data indicated that traditional and mechanical school literacy practices heavily influenced the children's understanding of literacy. These traditionally structured and mechanical approaches risk narrowing children's perceptions of literacy. This finding emphasizes the need to reevaluate and evolve school literacy practices, especially for children who lack exposure to a variety of experiences at home. Ensuring that school-based literacy

embraces diverse modes of expression and engagement is crucial for providing all children with a holistic and inclusive literacy education.

In essence, this study serves as a call to action to rethink our approach to literacy education, recognizing the significance of out-of-school experiences, technology, and equitable access in shaping the literacy journeys of young children. These insights provide valuable guidance for future research and interventions aimed at nurturing a generation of engaged, confident, critical, and literate young learners.

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