



## Literacy practices among Kapsabet residents

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### Abstract

This study sought to examine literacy practices among Kapsabet residents. This is because different literacy practices among communities in multilingual contexts remain under investigation. This is the case obtained in Kapsabet Township, Nandi County, Kenya. The residents in this township are largely multilingual, with a majority being speakers of English, Kiswahili and Kalenjin. The aim of the proposed study was to examine literacy practices in the everyday life of these residents. The study adopted a largely qualitative research design underpinned by Street's theory of literacy as a social practice. A social perspective on literacy focuses on the ways in which people employ literacy in their daily lives. The study used a purposive stratified sample of 20 respondents obtained in specific areas of the township. Data was collected using the following research instruments: face-to-face interviews, observations, literacy diaries, documentation and inbuilt audio recorders. The results indicate significant ways in which Kalenjin residents of Kapsabet use literacy in their everyday lives. The study is expected to benefit scholars in applied linguistics, policymakers, and the general public by allowing them to use the study's results in their operations.

**Key terms:** Applied linguistics, interviews, literacy practices, multilingual, self-education.

## INTRODUCTION

The term literacy has largely been conceptualised as a universal skill referring to the ability to read, write and operate with numbers, usually acquired in a school setting. Consequently, literacy attainment is usually correlated with the completion of a certain level of education. In Kenya, for example, an individual who has attained a grade four level of education is expected to be somewhat literate. This conceptualisation of literacy as a universal skill is best captured by what Street (1984) calls an autonomous approach to literacy as a skill or set of skills developed by the individual and detached from the social context in which it is practised. However, given the complexity of our present-day world, the notion of literacy as a monolithic concept has been disputed, and the alternative construction of multiple literacies has been proposed. Street (1984, 1995) was one of the first scholars to challenge the notion of singular literacy, dichotomising autonomous (context-free) and ideological (context-dependent) models of literacy. This realisation is best captured by the notion that there is a difference between school-based literacy and literacy that is based in the community. The context-dependent nature of literacy was captured by UNESCO (2003) in which literacy was presented as "the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts" (UNESCO, 2005).

UNESCO identifies five different key approaches to literacy, namely, literacy as a set of skills, literacy as applied, literacy as a tool for critical reflection and action, literacy as capabilities, and literacy as a set of social and cultural practices (UNESCO, 2005). While literacy conceptually captures the key abilities of reading, writing and computing, literacy practices deal with how individuals communicate in society through the written word. According to UNESCO (2003), literacy is further manifested in the use of oral and written communication, which finds its place in the everyday lives of all humans alongside other ways of communicating. Indeed, literacy itself is not a single entity but comprises interrelated practices manifested in many of its forms in which it is perceived, oral,

written on paper, cast on the computer screen, on TV, on posters, on mobile phones and on signs.

As has been previously mentioned, literacies are inextricably linked with the particular cultures, histories and experiences of individuals and groups. In Africa, for example, many people are faced with the phenomenon of multilingual literacy in their normal lives since they possess literacy skills in more than one language. The motivation for the current study was to examine what literacy practices Kapsabet residents engage in, given their multilingual nature. In this regard, there are useful things to learn from the literacy practices in which individuals, groups, and communities in the Kapsabet community are engaged.

The current study has explored the ways in which Nandi County residents use literacy in their everyday lives. In this regard, the study has demonstrated how residents of Kapsabet use literacy to conduct such activities as elections, both for groups and for organisational leadership. These people normally conduct elections in their self-help groups, churches and even when electing directors of institutions. They interact with literacy as they live, work, and trade and carry their everyday duties and responsibilities in areas of agriculture, social life, and trade.

According to the Nandi Development Plan of 2019, Kapsabet is located in Nandi County, which is one of the 47 counties of Kenya. The County is located in the Northern part of the Kenyan Rift Valley. Kapsabet town is the headquarters of Nandi County and forms part of the Kapsabet Township. Being a suburban area, residents of Kapsabet Township have a good mix of literacy practices. Many world-renowned athletes who hail from Kapsabet high-altitude topography particularly engage in sports literacy practice as well as other literacy practices. Results of this study indicate that Nandi County has rich and unique literacy practices that have hardly been explored in credible research. This is exhibited through a number of literacy practices, including sports and farming literacies.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Literacy as a social practice has been influenced by Street (1984). Street's theory conceptualises literacy as a series of practices (rather than skills) that are rooted in specific situations and are inseparably linked to the cultural and power dynamics in society. Barton and Ivanic (2000) note that literacy practices constitute what people do with literacy. The Practices involve more than actions and are shaped by values, attitudes, social relationships, and feelings. Social relationships are important, as "literacy practices are more usefully understood as existing in the relationships between people, within groups and communities, rather than as a set of properties residing in individuals" (p. 8).

Literacy practices constitute "what people do with literacy" (Barton et al., 2000). Literacy practices are closely connected with "literacy events" or observable activities where reading and writing have a role in the completion of those activities. Literacy events are regular, repeated activities in life, many of which are linked to routine sequences in such areas as workplaces, schools and homes. Literacy facilitates almost all daily activities in the contemporary world, and people act within a textually mediated social world (Barton, 2001). Texts are a vital part of literacy events, and the literacy practice study is partly a study of specific texts and how they are produced and used. Literacy practices such as religious literacies, health literacies or sports literacies can be inferred from literacy events which involve written texts, verses in the Bible, patient information leaflets in medicine packets, transaction bills and so on. These literacy events reside in various literacy domains (contexts) such as church domains, home domains, school domains, athletics field domains and so on.

The skills necessary to navigate and execute in today's information age invite us to focus on individuals who have acquired a level of literacy commensurate with the information demands of the modern world. UNESCO has recognised, however, that to navigate and perform in the world of today, literacy is only significant if it enables an individual to function in their society meaningfully (UNESCO, 2005). As a social practice, literacy practices are usually domiciled in the

social environment in which they are practised, be it in the home setting, in the sports field, in the tea bushes, in church or in the marketplace, a case that obtains among residents in Nandi County, Kenya. In Nandi County, which was the focus of this study, there has been a dearth of studies on multiple literacies found in this multilingual and multicultural environment. Current studies on literacy have paid little attention to multiple literacies and instead concentrated on literacy studies based on monolingual and mono-cultural contexts. In a nutshell, it is generally recognised that literacy is multiple and woven within the sociocultural lives of communities, but what is not yet fully understood is how multiple it is, that is, how this multiplicity plays out across and within differing sociocultural contexts.

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopted an ethnographic design. The study set out to examine literacy practices emanating from sports, farming, religion, trade and civic activities. The study adopted an ethnographic design, which meant that the researcher took time to immerse himself in the lives of residents in their natural settings so as to closely examine the literacies among them. The benefit of this design is that it gives more accurate and detailed data/information from the findings than other designs. However, the limitation of this design is that it is time-consuming as it requires the researcher to be in the place of study personally for a considerable length of time.

The data was collected from 20 Kalenjin-speaking individuals who were selected through purposive sampling techniques through in-person interviews, questionnaires, and observations, with adult Kalenjin speakers living in specific households. These adults were defined as individuals who were aged 18 years or older. The personal interviews gathered information on demographic characteristics, language background, educational background, and literacy practices. To ensure comparability across all samples, the interviews and questionnaires were the same for all the respondents. Data was gathered at homes, sports fields, workplaces, social places, and churches. Specifically, some data was collected at marketplaces, on streets, and in informal settlements.

## RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The findings from Kapsabet Township revealed a number of literacies that were unique to the area. In particular, sports literacy practice among athletes presented literacy domains of ball games, athletics, and indoor games. Each of these literacy events involved reading score charts, speed intervals and writing down points.

It was noted that due to the prominence of athletics in the study area, most athletes have converged in Kapsabet for purposes of training both for commercial and educational/scholarship purposes. From as early as 4 a.m. in the morning, athletes, as observed in Kapsabet, have already commenced their training. The study revealed that athletes train by following a written programme given to them by coaches that mainly encompasses roadwork, hill work, fartlek/intervals, track running, physical exercises, rest and diet. It was established that though most of the athletes had dropped out of school, they were able to read and follow the training programmes to the letter.

However, the programmes were different for track and road races. For example, those reading training manuals for sprints, such as the 100-metre race, could not train in a programme for marathoners. In the study, it was established that most athletes used literacy to adhere to the programmes and excel. The basic resources for training included reading manuals for training shoes and shorts but, more importantly, a timer. It was found that every athlete had a stopwatch for self-timing during every training session. For instance, it was noted that while athletes trained, timing was very critical. It was observed that coaches recorded times in training intervals. Besides, from interviews, it was noted that such records were used to connect athletes to participate in races abroad. Furthermore, it emerged from the data collected that indeed, athletes were involved in reading and signing contracts with foreign managers, as well as in the application of passports, visas, and travel documents, which were reported by athletes to have elaborate reading and writing, most of which were done on online platforms. The athletes also communicated by writing emails and using WhatsApp with their foreign

managers, reading the messages communicated back, and replying to them where necessary.

This was confirmed by one athlete, SLP1, a respondent in the study, who noted that:

*'I always wake at 4.am to catch up with my colleagues for the morning run. This we start by jogging for say 1-2 km, then we start increasing the pace slowly by slowly. We do that for 2 hours. Finally, after that we do some exercises then go and take breakfast, and then take some rest. However, the programmes are different for different days that have been written for us by our coaches. It is written in English. Though, I dropped in class six, I am able to read the sports programme and follow instructions given. Like for me I am a marathoner and our programme is different from that of sprinters. In our schedule, we do hill work, fartlek; track training such as speed work, among others. We follow our programme strictly alongside rest and meal schedules' (SLP1, 2022).*

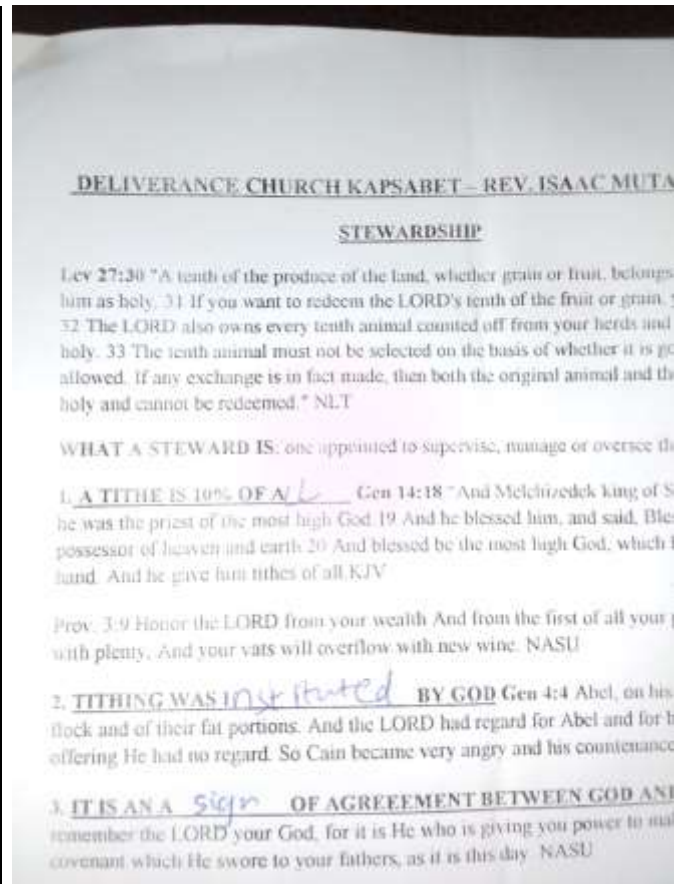
Data collected mainly through interviews revealed that athletes were able to follow the training programmes and achieve the expected results by reading training manuals and other training materials. Reading enabled them to meet the expectations of their coaches. Most of the sports training programmes were written in English, and athletes were expected to read and follow the programme. It emerged that even those athletes with low levels of education eventually got used to the training programme. They got accustomed to it. In the study, by interviewing the athletes, it was established that most athletes used literacy to adhere to the programmes and excel.

In a church setting, Bible verses were read and some memorised, as in the case of Sunday school. Besides, preachers made sermon notes by choosing topics to preach from, reading and writing notes from bible passages chosen, and writing the main points alongside relevant bible passages. In church settings, the congregants followed the sermon by opening and reading the bible passages read by the preacher. By so doing, they could also write notes from the sermon in their notebooks or pieces of paper, which they used for reference while doing their bible study at home. It was also established from observations and interviews



that some churches had developed bible study materials that their members used for bible study at home. For instance, *Nam ak Isoman*, a daily devotional bible study guide, was used in some homes where family members read the Bible and the devotional book during their family prayer time, normally done in the evening. Literacies were also noted in the reading of prayer books and hymn books. It was also established that most readings were done in Kalenjin or Kiswahili. However, in some churches, especially those in towns, these readings are done in English. Hence, the religious literacy practices had several textual literacies embedded in their activities.

From the context of the study, it emerged that sermon preparation was rich in varied literacies that were signified by intense bible study. For example, in RLP4, bible reading was common when pastors/clergy were preparing sermons. One pastor in reported thus: *I normally read bible scriptures and then make notes before I go and share my sermons. When finally I go to preach I use my notes to deliver the sermon. I start by reading the main text aloud and then go on expounding as I share the gospel. Normally, I allow my congregants to open their bible verses before I read from mine. The purpose of my preaching is to edify my congregants.* It was established that the process involved reading the Bible, devotional books, books on topical subjects and bible commentaries. Below is an example of a sermon prepared by one pastor in Kapsabet.



**RLP1: A Written Sermon Prepared by a Pastor for his Congregants to Fill the Blank Spaces**

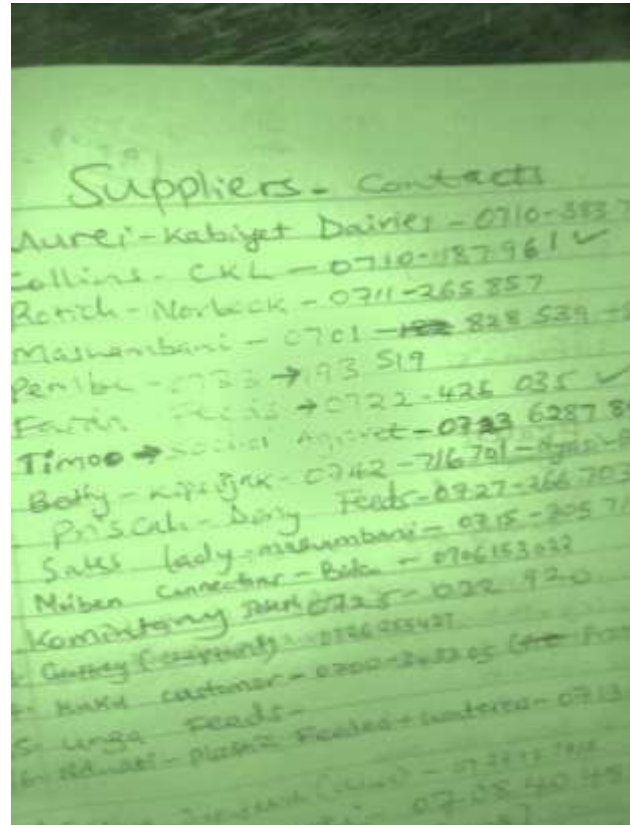
The sermon has the main points and bible verses. The writings done using a biro pen were filled out by a congregant as the pastor preached. The sermon was prepared and delivered in English.

In a farming setting, the following domains were noted: planting, weeding/ spraying and harvesting. These domains invited literacy events involving reading spacing/fertilizer application, chemical mixing instructions in packaging manuals and recording of sales such as those of green tea leaves supplied to tea factories. In some instances, it was observed that farmers read from online platforms on how to carry out their farm practices. This constituted digital literacy, which involved searching for information, downloading, and reading. It was also noted from interviews done among farmers that some of them used platforms to ask questions by typing and sending them to emails/blogs, as well as to give comments by

typing and posting mostly in English. The study found varied literacies in dairy farming, sheep and goat rearing, as well as in poultry farming. The literacies were evident in routine management practices such as deworming, treatment of livestock, keeping of production, breeding and sales records. In particular, in FLP1, one farmer was observed deworming his cows by first reading instructions on dosage. The literacies identified in animal husbandry were best illustrated by a respondent who said: *I have developed myself into a successful dairy farmer by being an ardent reader. Though I dropped in form two, this has not stopped me from being a successful farmer. I started my journey in dairy farming in 2008 by first of all visiting successful dairy farms and took notes from their success stories. I learnt about deworming and use of accaricides with particular interest in dosage instructions. I also learnt about some common livestock diseases and their symptoms. To date I still read a lot on these livestock diseases and how they can be prevented. I also learnt about other livestock rearing practices especially feeding in terms of livestock nutrition and quantities required per animal depending on their body weight. I also keep myself updated on this through online platforms by reading on best practices in dairy cattle management and production. I also listen to radio programmes on dairy farming and attend agricultural shows, where I take time to read pamphlets and ask questions.*

The study also revealed a number of literacy practices found among traders in Nandi County. The literacies were noted in the banking of money, where traders were reportedly seen filling banking slips while making deposits, and in keeping track of sales and purchases, literacy practices were evident. It was established through data collected that the traders were creatively making use of their literacy to conduct their trade activities. The traders could read price lists/catalogues and be able to set competitive prices for their goods, which enabled them to get profits while being fair to their customers. This was evident right from the largest supermarkets/ retail stores to small traders, including “Mama Mbogas” and petty hawkers. By doing so, they were able to keep track of the sale of their goods and eventually be able to calculate total sales in a given time period as well as calculate net

profit/loss. Other traders used pieces of paper, receipt books, stock books, old diaries, and other writing materials to keep records. It emerged that traders kept records in different ways. One trader in BLP1 kept records of his suppliers by having a list of their contacts at the back of his records book. The photo is shown below:



**BLP1: List of Supplier Contacts Kept by a Trader**

The list has the name of the supplier and what the supplier is, as well as their phone numbers. The trader had this to say about the list of contacts: *'this list of suppliers makes it easy for me when making orders and acts like my reference. Besides, in case I am far off, my shop assistants can easily make orders without having to call me to make orders. In addition, I prefer written contacts, because this acts as my backup because the phone may get lost and I may lose such important contacts'*.

The list of suppliers constitutes literacy since the trader wrote the contacts for reference and keeps

using them when the need arises. While using the contacts, he/she has to dial the numbers on the phone before making a call.

In essence, most of these traders used textual literacy, while some used technological literacy to keep track of their sales. For instance, it was observed that some businesses utilised computer applications/software that tracked sales and also showed the remaining stock. For instance, in large businesses, traders use computers installed with sales software to keep their records. In the study, the use of computer software was mostly witnessed in supermarkets and chemist shops. This computer software enabled traders to keep track of their sales and monitor stock levels at any one period. Usually, the user logs in with their individual passwords both for the attendants and the owner/manager. This means that the owner is able to see the sales done by each staff member and the range of items sold. It also shows the remaining stock on the shelves and is, therefore, useful in indicating items that need to be ordered. In most cases, this method is fool-proof and is gaining popularity in large shops that have several employees making sales/handling money. It is noted in this study that residents with higher levels of education were associated with computer literacy practices. Such traders used technological literacies to function and be able to overcome their challenges.

On the contrary, most informal traders engaged in literacy practices involving pinning their receipts together instead of filing them; one trader kept his receipts on goods supplied to him by sticking them in an old exercise book. This, he said, enabled him to track the prices of items bought and make references where necessary. Such a skill was deemed to have been borrowed from school, where children used to

stick pictures on exercise books as part of their learning.

Several literacy practices were identified on farms. In particular, literacy practices were evident in the following areas: estimation of spacing distances, reading and applying instructions in the use of agrochemicals such as acaricides for spraying their livestock, herbicides, and pesticides. The study revealed that a number of farmers utilised the concept of measurements through actual measurement or estimation to achieve uniformity in their farm activities. Simple items such as sisal strings, sticks, leg strides, or mere estimation were used to get crop spacing or line spacing for crops.

## CONCLUSION

The study concludes that there are several literacy practices among Kapsabet residents. These are farming, religious, sporting and trading literacy practices. Equivalent literacy domains are farm domain, church, athletics and business domains. Equally, literacy events in Kapsabet comprise reading farming input instructions, reading Bible verses, reading score/speed charts, and reading price lists. In a nutshell, through a process of self-education, most residents creatively used diverse ways to utilise literacies to function, survive, and overcome their challenges in their setting. As such, textual, digital and technological literacies were noted in the study. The findings of this study are useful in revealing the unique aspects found among Kapsabet, providing a platform for comparing and contrasting in other settings. The study points out the fact that though there are universal literacies, each particular context provides unique literacies that need to be studied contextually. Besides, language in each context needs to be explored in greater detail.

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