

Literacy Practices and Constructions Among Migrant Muslim Filipino Families

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Abstract

This ethnographic study examined literacy practices and their meanings among migrant Muslim Filipino families. Data collection involved participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and collection of texts and artifacts related to reading in homes for a period of three months. Participants for this study were three Maranao families who lived at the Islamic Center and migrated from Lanao del Sur.

Ethnographic data revealed that migrant Filipino families have varied literacy practices and that socio-cultural factors such as ethnic background, age, and gender influenced the literacy practices of these families. It was also discovered that the meaning of literacy was determined by the following factors: ethnic identity, social role of language, and the dichotomy of domestic and literacy chores. Based on the above findings, the following are recommended: 1) for teacher education to include in its agenda opportunities for discussion regarding students' ideas and beliefs about literacy; 2) to consider families' socio-cultural context in designing curriculum; and 3) to do further research on the affective aspect of literacy and effect of migration on literacy practices.

Key words: literacy practices, literacy events, texts

Functional literacy rate in the Philippines is pegged at 94.6% but the 2003 Functional Literacy, Education, and Mass Media Survey (FLEMSS) shows that in ARMM (Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao) about one in ten of the population 10 to 64 years old cannot read and write or are basically illiterate. It has a functional literacy rate of 62.9 %, the lowest among the fourteen regions of the country. The National Statistics Office also reports (NSO, 2000) that ARMM has the highest number of out-of-school children and youth. Due to “push and pull” factors such as economic opportunities, the Mindanao conflict, attraction to city life, and education, many Muslim Filipino families migrated to urban centers bringing with them their out-of-school children and youth (Kadil, 1995). Every year, the number of Muslim Filipinos in urban centers increases (NSO, 2007) and with this comes the problem of providing quality education for families whose culture, values, and practices are quite different from that of the dominant culture.

This study veered away from viewing literacy as a neutral skill and separate from socio-cultural context but looked at it in the context of literacy as a social practice.

Socio-cultural context includes factors like socio-economic status, gender, ethnic background and age (Compton-Lilly, 2009). Literacy as a social and cultural practice means that values, attitudes, feelings, tastes and practices of people have to be considered when talking about literacy (Barton, 2007). The significance or importance of literacy in one’s life shows his/her values. Literacy is ideological in that meanings are derived and created through the social interaction of people and practiced within the social and political contexts and it is affected by power relationships within the context in which it is used (Street, 1995). People’s conceptual and mental framework about literacy is influenced by the social and cultural context of the people. A socio-cultural model of literacy moves beyond a narrow skills and process view of literacy. In this model literacy is viewed as a cultural activity embedded in social practice and considers how culture influences literacy practices and how it is understood in their own context. Likewise, proponents of New Literacy Studies (NLS) see literacy not as a mental phenomenon but as something people do inside society. They assume that literacy is a social practice constructed in everyday interactions across local contexts (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Street, 1995, 2001) and can only be studied through the social and cultural context of the people (Gee, 2000). For Vgotsky (1978) the socio-cultural context is central in the literacy development of a person, which means

that the development of literacy is achieved through scaffolding within social practices.

Literacy is not just about reading and writing but also includes values, attitudes, feelings, social relationships and cultural models. It has three components. These are 1) practices, 2) events, and 3) texts.

Literacy, therefore, is a social practice (Street, 1993, Larson & Marsh, 2005) and a social experience (Robinson, 1990) determined by cultural, political, social and ideological factors. Barton and Hamilton (2000) offer further elucidation in defining literacy as a social practice through the following statements: (1) Literacy is best understood as a set of social practices which can be inferred from events which are mediated by written texts. An example of a social practice is shopping where there are different literacy events where text has a role such as making a list, reading the label; (2) There are different literacies associated with different domains of life. This means that there are different practices for different contexts. In literacy studies, it was shown that reading and writing are done differently in the home, in school and at work; (3) Literacy practices are patterned by social institutions and power relationships and some literacies are more dominant, visible, and influential than others. This means that how literacy is valued, taught and measured is determined by those who are in social and political power. This also includes who have access or do not have access to literacy (Barton 2007); (4) Literacy practices are purposeful and embedded in broader social goals and cultural practices. Reading and writing is done and is integrated in the everyday lives of the people; (5) literacy is historically situated and literacy practices are dynamic and changing; and (6) literacy practices change and new ones are acquired through processes of informal learning and sense making (i.e. to solve problems, for personal growth or change, accessing information to expand interests and knowledge, assert or create identity).

Clearly, literacy is a product of people's social and cultural contexts and can be understood and made visible through a framework that takes a social view of literacy and looks specifically at people's understanding, values, beliefs and ideas about how literacy is carried out in their everyday lives.

Literacy practices are "particular ways of thinking about and doing reading and writing in cultural contexts" (Street 2001) and refers to behavior and how reading and writing is defined, used and valued in the socio-cultural context of the people. It is what people do with literacy. It includes domains, settings,

activities, and artifacts. These practices are shaped by social, cultural, economic and ideological factors (Street 2001; Barton and Hamilton, 2000; Purcell-Gates, 1995) and include beliefs, values, attitudes, feelings and relationships associated with texts (Street, 1993). Literacy practices can be studied and described in two ways; (1) the observable reading and writing practices, and (2) the attitudes, values and social meanings of these practices (Barton and Hamilton, 1998).

Practice can be characterized through the following statements: 1) It is a recurring goal-directed sequence of activities using a particular technology and a particular system of knowledge; 2) It is socially developed and patterned ways of using technology and knowledge to accomplish tasks; and 3) It is directed to socially recognized goals and makes use of a shared technology and knowledge system (Scribner and Cole, 1981). This implies that a practice consists of the everyday ways people accomplish and get things done using knowledge and resources available within their context. Also, practices are cultural in nature when these are followed by most members of the group and can be regulated or restricted by the mainstream culture in order to maintain the status quo. Often, literacy practices of families from non-mainstream cultures differ from those of mainstream families.

Literacy practices have several elements. These are: (1) the hidden participants, the people or groups of people involved in the social relationships of producing, interpreting, circulating and otherwise regulating written texts; (2) the domain of practice within which the event takes place and takes its sense and social purpose; (3) all other resources brought to the literacy practice including non-material values, understandings, ways of thinking, feeling, skills and knowledge; and (4) structured routines and the pathway that facilitate or regulate actions, rules of appropriacy and eligibility, who does/doesn't, can/can't engage in particular activities (Hamilton, 2000).

Literacy events are concrete evidence of literacy practices. These are "actions or sequence of actions involving one or more persons in which the production of and or comprehension of print plays a role" (Anderson & Stokes, 1984). These events occur in social context. These may be a regular repeated activity in which literacy has a role. An example of this is in making a shopping list.

Literacy events are composed of the following elements: 1) participants or people who can be seen to be interacting with the written text, 2) settings or the immediate physical circumstances in which the interaction takes place, 3)

artifacts or the material tools and accessories that are involved in the interaction (including texts), and 4) activities or the actions performed by participants (Hamilton, 2000).

An important factor in the study of literacy practices is the use of texts during reading and writing events. Texts are ideological, which means that they constitute thinking, behavior and ideas that people have about the world and its peoples and are embedded in a context of a situation and come from sets of beliefs and assumptions about the world (Mckenna & Richards, 2003). These are also evidence of peoples' social and literacy practices (Kucer, 2009) and are shaped by social practices (Fairclough, 2003). Likewise, texts can have different roles and interpretations depending on the context in which it was used (Bakhtin, 1981).

Texts are key cultural tools in mediating the constructions of shared meaning in human interaction (Vygotsky, 1978) and become venues for social exchange of meaning (Halliday & Hassan, 1985) because it involves interaction between people (Maybin, 1994).

People deal with a variety of written materials in the pursuit of their daily activities and these texts contain information on how reading and writing practices are perceived, valued and used.

Culture is a determinant of meaning. Each culture gives differing value and status to being able to read and write and the meaning of literacy will vary for different communities. Meaning changes as it is read in different contexts (Derrida, 1978) and defined as to how it is experienced and used in everyday practices (Bernardo, 1995). According to symbolic interaction theory, "humans create symbolic worlds through their interactions and that these in turn shape human behavior. Meanings are based on cultural symbols and social values, which are communicated through verbal and nonverbal interactions." (La Rossa & Reitzes, 1993).

Cultural and social practices of a family are key considerations in the development of family literacy programs. The family plays a very important role in influencing literacy meanings and ideas that an individual may have. Families are important resources. The "household fund of knowledge" include practices and knowledge that have been accumulated over the past years that are important for the families' day-to-day activities (Moll, et. al, 1992). It is in the family context that children learn the power and pleasures of literacy.

This study investigated family literacy in the context of migration, particularly among Muslim Filipino families.

The Study

Purpose

In order to guarantee the usefulness and effectiveness of literacy programs and activities among migrant Muslim Filipino families, there is a need to know their literacy practices in the context of their culture thus this study sought to answer the following questions: What are the literacy practices and meaning of these literacy practices among migrant Muslim Filipino families?

Research Design

This study made use of the ethnographic method of research. Ethnography allowed the researcher to have an intimate look at the participants' literacy practices in the context of their culture. Multiple methods were used to gather data such as participant observation, interview, collection of texts, and artifacts related to reading and writing in homes thus allowing the researcher to describe, analyze and interpret literacy practices of a group of people including meanings attributed to these practices (Purcell-Gates et al, 2004).

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Participants for this ethnographic study were migrant families from Lanao del Sur and had lived at the Islamic Center for a period of three (3) to five (years). The researcher made use of snowball sampling where researcher's known contacts from the community were asked for referrals. Three (3) urban poor Maranao families with extended household and had children who were studying and were not studying were chosen to be part of the study. Also, both parents were present at home. Table 1 presents a summary of the sample demographics.

Table 1. Profile Summary of the Participants

Profile	Abdullah Family	Mostapha Family	Manda Family
Number of years in the community	4	3	5
Average income	3000-5000/mo.	12,000-16,000/mo.	15,000-20,000/mo.
Number of household members	9	6	7
Number of in-school children	3	2	2
Number of out-of-school children	2	1	1
Extended family members	2	1	1

Instruments

The following instruments were prepared and used by the researcher to determine the literacy practices and meanings of these practices:

1. *Researcher.* In ethnography, the researcher becomes the research instrument for collecting data (Mertens, 2010). Prior to the study, I have been involved in teaching literacy classes in Muslim communities since 2002 and in the research site since 2007.
2. *Fieldnotes.* Field notes were kept to document and determine naturally occurring literacy events of families at home and to establish the domains of these literacy practices. An observation guide was used for this purpose.
3. *Interview transcripts.* The interview schedule was used to guide the researcher during the interview. Two interview schedules were prepared, one for the parents and another for the children.
4. *Texts.* During the observations, the researcher noted all uses of print by family members present in the homes. Texts used during literacy activities were photocopied and photographed. A collection guide was used for this purpose.
5. *Artifacts.* These included any piece of material connected with the reading and writing practices at home. Artifacts were photographed to help clarify what happened during the literacy event and to provide insight as to participants view or perception of the said event.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection for this study relied upon participant observation, interviews, collection of texts and artifacts. Data collection was done for three (3) months, from May to August 2011. The researcher visited each family's home an average of three (3) to four (4) days a week for an aggregate one-week routine of activities.

To analyze literacy practices among the families, the researcher identified patterns in the data through coding and theme analysis using the theoretical and conceptual framework in the study. The researcher identified each literacy event represented in the data, occurring in both field observations and interviews. For each event, the researcher coded the reading and writing events. From the initial analysis, values and attitudes of participants toward these literacy events were analyzed thus establishing the literacy practices of the participants.

To examine the meaning of these literacy practices among the families, interview transcripts were read and reread and notations were made (Barton & Hamilton, 1998). Repeated words used by the participants which signify meaning for these literacy practices were highlighted. Significant words were clarified through informal conversations. Artifacts that were used during the literacy events were also considered as a basis for analyzing the significance of their literacy practices. Table 2 shows an example of how data analysis was done for a literacy event.

Table 2. Example of Data Analysis for Literacy Event

Literacy Event	Literacy Practice	Domain	Use/ Purpose	Language
Asyah gets the worksheet from the cabinet and flips through the pages. Stops on page 7.	Initiated reading of worksheets without prompting from family members.	School	To develop reading fluency - educational	Filipino for the worksheets; Maranao for interaction
She sits on the floor and starts reading the printed words	The technique in reading was to read the words in sequence.			

beginning from the top, using her point finger to guide her in reading the words.				
Her mother, Asnifah, joins her and points to the word being read by Asyah.	Mother engaged in her daughter's reading activity. She had time to help Asyah read.			
Asyah continues to read. Reads a word incorrectly. Mother corrects her by repeating the word. Asyah reads the word correctly.	Repetition as a strategy for learning the words. Mother's role as a teacher			

Results and Discussion

Families' Socio-Cultural Context

The families' world revolved around the house, school and mosque. Two families, Abdullah and Mostapha, had young children who were studying in a nearby public elementary school. In the school where they were studying, seventy percent (70%) of the population were composed of Muslim students.

In 2004, the Department of Education (DepEd) came out with the standard curriculum on Islamic education for elementary public schools and private Madaris. This was implemented in the school year 2005-2006 in public schools with large percentage of Muslim students. Lessons on Islamic values and Arabic language were offered starting from Grade 1 to Grade 6. Central to the families' religious practice was their performance of their obligations as part of the Islamic faith. For the families attending the ritual prayers and reading the Qur'an is an assumed responsibility that every Muslim needed to perform. With the Manda family, learning Islamic values and Arabic language through the Madrasah was a choice that the children can make as two of them have graduated from college. One is already working in Saudi Arabia as a nurse and

her context required her to engage more in activities that involved the use of English. Also, she worked twelve hours a day. Others in the Manda family did not have time to study in the Madrasah since their time was mostly spent in public school. This affirmed the studies made by Barton (2007) that with increasing age and educational attainment, family members were able to choose for themselves within the cultural set-up what can make them achieve their goals.

The fathers in the three families worked as street vendors. Haron shared a small stall with his relatives. This was located near the Golden mosque which allowed him to stay in one place while the two fathers sold their merchandise while walking through the streets or by laying their wares along busy streets. Because of the nature of their work and to avoid confiscation of their products by the officers of the Manila Metropolitan Development Authority (MMDA), they had to be vigilant and alert all the time. Income from selling goods was unstable and whatever money earned was used for rental, food and utilities. Availability of water and electricity was a big challenge for the Mostapha and Abdullah families. They were at the mercy of the people who supplied their water and electricity which was illegally tapped. The main possessions of the families were television and DVD players. Among the three families, the Manda family had more disposable income, which allowed them to buy a laptop and reading materials not connected with school or religion.

In the families, the women took care of the literacy needs of the family. The women took the role of a teacher, ensuring that young children were able to fulfill requirements so that children can succeed in school. Their socio-cultural context affected the way they performed their everyday practices at home, school and work, confirming Street's (2001) view that families' socio-cultural context affect the way literacy is used by people.

Literacy Practices

Literacy practices among the families had similarities and variations. These practices were shaped by the families' socio-cultural context, economic and ideological factors. The family members' attitudes towards literacy differed. For some, engagement in literacy was pleasurable but for others it was a burden.

Typical among the families were literacy practices that were related to the practice of their religion. Through the influence of religious teachers and the

belief about after life, children were required to attend Madrasah class, which was offered both in the mosque and in the school where the children were studying. Children engaged in the reading and writing of Arabic scripts thus aligning themselves to the cultural expectations of the people around them (La Rossa & Reitzes, 1993). The Madrasah training is tied up to the aim of Muslim education which is to instill Islamic values and create an emotional attachment to Islam. That is why engagement in religious literacy meant identifying themselves as Muslims who submit to the will of Allah. Also, these practices strengthen their identity as Muslims. Prominently displayed in the homes of the families were posters of Arabic scripts. This was influenced by the belief that reading these words in Arabic brought “blessing to the family.” This showed that families were concerned with the well-being of family members. Families also had Gregorian and Islamic calendars which was used for scheduling their ritual prayers during Ramadan. Reading materials pertaining to their faith were supplied and regulated by religious teachers. Since the domain of religion was influential and visible in the homes of the family, they acquired materials that were connected to their faith. With limited income, some of the families could not access reading materials other than those that were loaned by the school, found in the community or those that were freely given.

School-related literacy practices were also commonly seen in the families. Children who went to public school spent their time fulfilling requirements of teachers from school by doing their homework and school projects. These data show that participant families’ literacy practices were patterned by social institutions such as school and religion and by relations of power as pointed out by some researchers (Street, 2001, Barton and Hamilton, 2000, 2007).

Variations in literacy practices in the home domain occurred as a result of each family’s different personal and educational context. In the Manda family where members had higher educational attainment, engagement in literacies went beyond the school and religious domains. They acquired reading materials for enjoyment. Reading these materials enhanced their growth as persons and allowed them to become “good” Muslims. Insights and lesson learned through reading of these materials helped them to respond to difficult situations in an acceptable manner. These show that the Manda family valued their Muslim faith even though they read “materials” not connected with their Islamic faith; they viewed reading as pleasurable, and they felt good engaging in these practices. These results resonate with Barton and Hamilton’s (2007) argument that in studying literacy (2007) values, attitudes, feeling, taste and practices should be considered. Table 3 shows the summary of family literacy practices.

Table 3. Summary of Family Literacy Practices

Literacy Practices	Uses	Domain
Homework	Educational	School
Reading and writing DVD titles	Entertainment	Home/Work/ Entertainment
Reading and writing messages on Facebook and cell phone	Socio- Interactional	Home/Work
Reading novels, pocketbooks, magazines, newspapers	Entertainment/ Educational/ News-related	Home/ Entertainment
Letter/Word identification	Educational	School
Reading and listing of products	Instrumental	Home/Work
Reading of Qur'an and religious materials and writing Arabic scripts	Spiritual	Religion
Writing cell phone numbers	Interactional	Home
Writing of diaries and appointments on calendar	Instrumental	Home
Filling up financial forms, writing date and amount of loan payment	Financial	Home
Number puzzles	Educational	School
Posting Arabic scripts	Instrumental	Home

Meaning of Literacy

For the migrant Muslim Filipino families, the meaning of what is written or read and the meaning of reading and writing is shaped by their socio-cultural context. This resonates with the theory of symbolic interaction, which says that meanings are based on cultural symbols and social values (La Rossa & Reitzes, 1993). Meaning of literacy also changes as it is practiced in different context (Derrida, 1978). For the families in the study, meaning was determined by the following:

1. *Identity*

Most of the participants identified themselves as “Muslims”. When talking about the practice of reading the Qur’an, they would say “kasi Muslim kami” (it’s because we are Muslims).

Language was used to identify themselves. During interviews with participants, they mentioned “salitang Muslim” (Muslim language) as their choice of language and in interacting with family members they said “Minumuslim namin” (We speak in Muslim language). This meant that they used their ethnic language in communicating within their own community and with family members. In their religious practice they also used this term to mean the Arabic language, constructing their identity as part of the Islamic faith. The families’ meaning of literacy served to confirm their cultural distinction from the dominant society in which they are a part of and strengthened their ties with their cultural group.

The families identified themselves first and foremost as Muslims. The use of Arabic and Maranao language was closely connected to their identity as Muslims and their behaviors such as performing their obligatory ritual prayers using Arabic words from the Qur’an manifested their cultural peculiarities as Muslims within a dominant “Christian” society.

2. *Domestic chores vs. literacy chores*

For many of the participants, engagement with literacy was done when they have accomplished their household chores. Most of them said:

“Pag tapos na ang gawain” (After chores were finished)

“Pag wala nang ginagawa” (When I am not doing anything)

Homework was usually done during evenings when the family has finished their obligations at home.

3. *Social role of language*

Choice of language was dependent on their social relationships with others. In school and work, most of them used Filipino as people would not understand them. Filipino was used as a means of surviving in school and in work as exemplified by a participant who needed help with Filipino language while selling DVDs. Many of them used different oral and

written codes depending on who they were interacting with. This was also true in the study of Doronila (1994) among Muslims who used different languages for different contexts. Her study revealed that Filipino and English had negative meanings but for this study Filipino and English had positive meaning for the migrant Muslim Filipino families. These languages were seen as tools for improving their economic life and for gaining employment

Conclusions

It was clear from the data that migrant Muslim Filipino families' literacy practices were rooted in their own understanding of reading and writing events. In the literacy events, the families brought their own particular views, beliefs and attitudes. Using Heath's (1986) definition of literacy events as occasions which involved interaction with text and Hamilton's (2000) explanation of the elements of literacy events which include the participants, settings, texts and artifacts, activities or actions performed by the participants including families' concept and social models, the literacy practices of the families were drawn out. Although the three families came from the same group and similar in terms of their socio-economic status, their literacy practices differed from one another. Also within these families, family members exhibited different literacies.

The use of media such as TV, DVDs, internet, cell phones shaped most of the families' current literacy practices. These showed that families adapted and adopted practices that they deemed useful.

Implications and Recommendations

The results of the study showed that Muslim Filipino families have particular practices that are unique to their own culture such as engagement in religious literacies. It is therefore recommended that:

1. Teacher education should include in its agenda opportunities for discussion regarding students' ideas and beliefs about literacy. This can help educators and literacy developers understand their biases and negative assumptions about students who come from non-mainstream groups.
2. Schools should consider Muslim Filipino families' socio-cultural context in designing a curriculum that is sensitive to their needs. Pedagogies and

curriculum should be designed in such a way that they connect with the real and situated uses of literacy in Muslim Filipino families' homes.

- a. These families supported and maintained literacy practices which were patterned by social institutions and power relationships. Families mimicked school and religious literacies and strategies in learning. Therefore, it is recommended that Muslim Filipino families should be given opportunities to have a voice in these relationships by enhancing and strengthening their capacity to communicate their views, ideas and perceptions, and feelings about these practices.
- b. Also, families incorporated into their literacy practices media technology which enhanced their literacy learning. Therefore, it is recommended that teachers and literacy developers work together with families and students in constructing activities that will integrate the use of digital technology in enhancing their literacy practices and in expanding their learning strategies through the use of educational media.

2. For Future Research

Many of the families in the study encouraged and supported their children to engage in literacies connected with the school and religious domains. Children were required to conform to these existing relationships and assimilate practices that were deemed to enhance the development of the children. Data suggest that the participants' feelings about the practice of literacy should be considered. Therefore, further research is recommended on the affective aspect of literacy practices. Also, well-being and development of the children must be studied in terms of literacy.

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