

# RESEARCH DIGEST



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# **“What I Feel in My Heart”: Literacy Practices of and for the Self Among Adults with Limited or No Schooling**

By Perry, K. H., & Homan, A.

(2015). *Journal of Literacy Research* 46(4), 422-454.

## **Background and Theoretical Framework**

The purpose of this study was to understand the literacy practices of individuals in Africa and the Americas who had between one and seven years of schooling. The questions investigated included: "In what literacy practices do adults with limited or no schooling engage for personal fulfillment? and (2) What do these practices reveal about the nature of literacy for individuals who are often characterized as illiterate?" (abstract, p. 422). Viewing literacy as a social practice, the authors performed a cross-case analysis of 13 purposively selected case studies that included information from 98 individuals from the Americas and Africa. These 13 case studies were part of a larger 24 case study called the Cultural Practices of Literacy Study (CPLS), where the authors collected case data on how literacy is practiced in different cultural contexts.

Engaging in literacy for personal purposes includes literacy activities “related to personal expression, self-understanding and/or identity” (p. 424). Reading or writing for personal purposes is “often overlooked in favor of examining literacy practices related to work or family obligations” (p. 425). This study is important because “understanding what real people do with texts . . . is essential” to understanding literacy (p. 426).

The theoretical framework, literacy as a social practice, is a sociocultural approach to literacy that suggests that literacy occurs “within social and cultural contexts and within power relationships”

(p. 426). Literacy is not something that one *possesses*, but it is rather something one *does* within the context of social relationships between people and within communities rather than solely within the person (Barton & Hamilton, 2000 as cited in Perry & Homan, 2015). For example, writing a journal entry is an individual event but that practice can be connected to a larger goal such as leaving one's legacy.

The social practice theoretical framework has been used by researchers who examine communities that are considered to be low literate. "Functional literacy" has been used to describe these communities (p. 425). In the United States, this term has been "conflate[d]... with basic literacy skills" (p.425). In truth, a functionally literate individual can effectively read, write and perform mathematical calculations well enough to function in his or her community (UNESCO, 2005 as cited in Perry & Homan, 2015). However, functionally literate individuals are still viewed as low literate and often seen as unworthy (St. Clair & Sandlin, 2004 as cited in Perry & Homan).

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*In what literacy practices do adults with limited or no schooling engage for personal fulfillment?*

## **Methodology**

The authors used two methods of cross-case analysis to analyze the 13 cases. In the analysis of a case, researchers closely examine the particular case for patterns whereas using the variable case method, the authors look for themes between cases (Miles & Huberman, 1994, as cited in Perry & Homan, 2015). Participants in 13 of the 24 cases in the Cultural Practice of Literacy Study (CPLS) database met the study criteria. They were 18 years of age or older and they had less than an 8<sup>th</sup> grade education or equivalent. The researchers recognized that individuals could develop ample literacy skills using these criteria so they looked more closely at participants' statements about their educational experiences to ultimately determine inclusion in the sample. For example, those who had six years of education but who struggled with reading and writing or had gaps in their education were retained in the sample while others who had six years of education but who did well with reading or writing were not retained because the researchers did not consider this person to be low literate. There were two types of respondents. "Focal participants" participated in interviews and could have also been observed by researchers. Non-focal participants were not interviewed. Instead, focal participants either described non-focal participants' literacy practices or researchers observed non-focal participants' literacy practices at community events. Case study participant locations include five cases from Oaxaca, Mexico. Other case locations included two cases from Vancouver, Canada,

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Sudanese families and Spanish migrant farmer worker families in Michigan, and single cases from Bolivia, Puerto Rico, and Uganda, Africa.

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*A second theme discussed how particular circumstances curtailed participants' literacy practices.*

## Findings

In the initial data analysis, the researchers looked for literacy activities that participants did in the “social activity” realm (p. 434). They found domains such as entertainment and spirituality. Purposes for engaging in literacy included: “(a) literacy-related purposes (e.g. “to help children read”), (b) spirituality (e.g. to thank God”), (c) entertainment (e.g. “to imagine cooking different dishes”), (d) personal/artist expression (e.g. “to reflect on life and personal relationships”), and (e) community participation (e.g. “to organize a social event”) (p. 435). To understand and analyze the context of each participant’s literacy practices, the researchers constructed a narrative for each participant that consisted of the person’s background including formal schooling, literacy practices, and the respondent’s beliefs about her/his literacy abilities. Then the authors looked across cases to find themes.

After looking within each transcript for themes, the researchers looked across cases for themes. The authors listed the major theme and provided the literacy portrait of one individual followed by quotes from other cases to provide examples that particular type of literacy practice in several participants’ lives. The major theme was that participants used literacy practices to *cope with life* and the challenging situations they faced. The case of Raul, imprisoned in Oaxaca, Mexico, was discussed. At the time of the interview, Raul was training to become a tailor. He described his childhood home as one where reading occurred. Raul wrote poems inside the soccer balls he sewed as part of his job in prison. His writing helped him escape from the realities of prison. Others imprisoned participants wrote poems and songs and read fiction and non-fiction books as a means of escape.

In addition to using literacy as a diversion, participants used it to face their problems. Individuals read the Bible to find answers to their problems. Others journaled to work through issues such as problems with family members. Several respondents did not see this personal writing as “real writing” (p. 440).

Last, participants engaged in literacy practices for enjoyment or relaxation. Catalina thought she was a poor reader but she enjoyed reading. She sought help from a friend to improve her literacy skills so she could more effectively help her children with their homework. Catalina also watched movies in English and read the Spanish subtitles and she read comics while preparing meals.

A cross-case analysis revealed that respondents valued oral traditions.

Reliance on oral traditions in individuals with poorer literacy skills has been documented (Purcell-Gates, 1995 as cited in Perry & Homan, 2015). However, there are other reasons for oral traditions such as “storytelling, passing along family history, or engaging in religious experiences” (p. 445). Reliance on oral language is also common in communities of people who are oppressed. Particular communities might have a long tradition of telling oral histories.

A second theme discussed how particular circumstances curtailed participants’ literacy practices. Working long hours and caring for children prevented respondents from having time for activities such as reading. The cost of reading and writing materials was prohibitive for some but others thought that writing letters was cheaper than calling friends and relatives.

Participants’ perceptions of their literacy abilities affected their goals. Many equated lack of formal schooling with their poor literacy. Others differentiated between school literacy practices and what they did on their own. Still others had positive experiences with literacy in school. Several were motivated to learn to read to understand the Bible in “Christian contexts, such as Mexico, Nicaragua, and parts of Sudan” (pp. 448) but literacy for religious purposes was not common among Canadian First Nations people.

## Conclusion

While there is much to commend about this research study, including its global scope, there are limitations. First, the authors included participants who had between one and seven years of primary schooling. It would have been helpful to know the literacy skills individuals possessed. Testing individuals and assigning them levels of literacy proficiency as described in the *OECD Outlook: First Survey of Adult Skills* (2013). For example, those who are assessed below level one can locate basic information in a text and “Only basic vocabulary knowledge is required, and the reader is not required to understand the structure of sentences or paragraphs or make use of other text features” (p. 64). Testing and labeling those below a particular level as “low literate” may have provided a more consistent method for documentation of literacy skills. Instead the researchers relied on the number of years of primary schooling and participants’ self-reported confidence concerning their literacy skills. Second, while the inclusion of data from non-focal participants increased the number of respondents in the study, secondhand reporting of literacy practices and researcher observations seem less desirable than conducting personal interviews with participants. Third, the authors refer to “literacy practices of and for the Self” (p. 422) and also having learners engage in literacy practices “related to … self-understanding and/or identity” (p. 424).

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Self and identity are not necessarily synonymous and clearer definitions of each term would aid in understanding.

Identity theory defines individuals as having many identities or roles that comprise a stable Self (Serpe & Stryker, 1987). The salience of a person's identity depends on how many contexts in which that identity is acted out. For example, a person with a very salient identity as a teacher may teach in many social groups and contexts and may refer to herself as a teacher often. Investigations into how to increase the salience of the literacy identity of the low literate is in order.

This study's findings have implications for literacy education. Accountability standards for literacy are based on preparing individuals for college and for careers with little emphasis on learners' personal goals. Some literacy programs do not consult the learners about their own objectives. These goals should be considered when planning programs. Personal literacy practices such as journaling, free writing, or having book clubs can "encourage development of personal literacy practices" and help individuals "make sense of their lives" (p. 451). In addition, it is important to acknowledge the many literacy activities in which low-literate students engage on a daily basis. They need to know literacy is not necessarily equated with the number of years one has attended school but that literacy activities and learning occur in informal settings.

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