

## Participatory Literacy Learning in an African Context: Perspectives from the Ombaderuku Primary School in the Arua District, Uganda

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**ABSTRACT:** This study documents the experiences of volunteer teacher research assistants in relation to pupils' interaction with parents, texts, and informal literacy practices in the community, and considers how these practices may enhance literacy instruction and production of local reading materials. The research site was located in the context of Uganda's mother tongue education policy, driven by a whole language approach to teaching literacy in one primary school in the Arua district. Locating the research in sociocultural and ethnographic perspectives on literacy, the authors use observation, document analysis, and informal interviews to capture the phenomena of interest in the project. Findings show that although pupils, parents, and community members engaged in informal literacy practices and interact with cultural resources and written texts including Information and Communication Technology (ICT) literacies on an everyday basis, such cultural resources, informal practices, and written texts outside the classrooms have not been adequately used to enhance participatory teaching and learning of literacy. Further, local materials development in the implementation of Uganda's current language policy was characterized by lack of local reading materials and declining literacy levels among pupils. The authors recommend building research, teaching, and materials development capacity for promoting various literacies including digital literacies and for enhancing authentic literacy instruction.

**Key words:** Authenticity, Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) Literacies, Literacy Instruction, Learning, Participatory Literacy, Home Languages and Literacies



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The complexity and multidimensionality associated with literacy, and the economically and politically motivated debate on the language and the effective approaches to its teaching, have been recurring themes in the development literature (Muzoora, Terry, & Asiimwe, 2014; Pearson, 2004; Perry, 2012). Although the most simplistic understanding of literacy has centered on one's ability to read and write, literacy can usefully be understood as a social practice and a means of communication between people in which its forms and meanings vary from one context to another and are contingent upon the actors making use of it and the social settings in which it is found (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Baynham, 1995; Cheffy, 2011; Prinsloo & Breier, 1996; Street, 1984, 2003). Literacy is now seen as a fundamental right for both children and adults (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2009-2014), and every effort needs to be made to study and understand its uses across culture, the process of its acquisition, and effective strategies for enhancing its teaching and learning.

In this study, we describe the experiences of volunteer teacher research assistants who participated in the Arua Pilot Project for Literacy Enhancement (APPLE) in Uganda. This project aimed to document teachers' perceptions about phonics and whole language approaches to teaching literacy in the students' mother tongue. We further sought to understand how pupils' interactions with parents, texts, and informal literacy practices in the community could be tapped to enhance literacy instruction and offer opportunities for the production of literacy teaching materials. Marshalling these resources may address the challenge of the lack of local reading materials in implementing the Uganda mother tongue education policy, which is mainly driven by the whole language approach<sup>1</sup> to teaching reading and writing in Ugandan primary schools.

Our study was guided by the three research questions:

1. What were the experiences and perceptions of teachers regarding the shift from phonics to a whole language approach to teaching

reading and writing under the mother tongue education policy in primary schools in Arua?

2. What cultural resources, informal literacy practices, and texts were available in the community for children to collect and bring to their teachers to enhance literacy teaching and learning, and to expand the local reading materials available to primary schools?
3. What other resources in the community were available to children to enable literacy learning?

### Topical and Theoretical Frameworks

In the following review, we first describe the background and context of literacy work generally and in Uganda in particular, and we then discuss sociocultural and ethnographic perspectives on literacy informed by Vygotsky (1978), with special emphasis on a *real literacies materials* approach, authentic literacy instruction, and the debate on phonics and whole language approaches.

### Literacy Learning in Uganda

The emergence of literacy can be traced to 8,000 BCE during the times of ancient civilizations, such as Egypt, Mesopotamia, and China. However, there has been no universally accepted definition of the term literacy. Traditionally, it had been understood to mean the ability to read and write print texts, which was assumed to be important for economic growth and development in a country like Uganda. This kind of literacy is normally measured in terms of the minimum number of years a person has had of formal schooling. This conception of literacy led the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to embark on the Experimental World Literacy Programme (EWLP) in many technologically developing countries such as Algeria, Ethiopia, Guinea, Madagascar, Mali, Sudan, and Tanzania in the 1950s and 1960. The 5-year EWLP was designed to

“pave the way for the eventual execution of a world campaign in the field of literacy.” [The

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<sup>1</sup> In our study, we drew from the views on the whole language approach that Bomengen (2010) offers, in which she describes it as the method teachers use to teach pupils to read by recognizing words as whole pieces of language instead of recognizing individual letters of the alphabet and letter combinations that are then decoded. When the authors contrasted the phonics approach they through which they learned to read some decades ago with the current whole language approach, the two approaches differed sharply in that the teachers who taught the authors had pupils learn vowels and consonants separately, then start combining them and eventually beginning to form words and sentences. The whole language approach has children start learning reading by focusing on a whole sentence instead of breaking it into easily understandable component parts that children find very difficult to decipher.

EWLP] was distinguished both by its selectivity (reaching one million adults in eleven countries) and by its stress on “functionality.” As Gillette notes, the central criterion in the program was narrowly oriented functionality—with major emphasis being given to industrial, agricultural, and craft training for men, and homemaking and family planning for women. (Arnove & Graff, 1987, p. 8)

Yet the program yielded disappointing results (Lyster, 1992; UNESCO, 2004). Since then, the traditional definition of literacy has been expanded within different literacy circles to include other aspects of life such as the ability to use language, numbers, images and other means to understand and use the dominant symbol systems of a culture (Christenbury, Bomer, & Smagorinsky, 2009). The inclusions were necessitated by the complexity and multidimensionality that characterizes literacy (Harris & Hodges, 1995).

This expanded notion of literacy has led UNESCO (2006) to parse literacy into four discrete understandings, as: (1) an autonomous set of skills; (2) applied, practiced, and situated skills; (3) a learning process; and (4) a text. We focus on the improvement of the third component of literacy, one that extends beyond the walls of school classrooms. When we talk about literacy in our context, we borrow from the definition by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency cited in UNSECO (2006), which states that “literacy is about learning to read and write text and numbers and also about reading, writing and counting to learn, and developing these skills and using them effectively for meeting basic needs” (p. 158), which to us should not only be extended to adult learners, but permeate the walls of the formal primary school classrooms. This choice is based on the assumption that literacy can no longer be regarded as a single autonomous set of technical skills but rather must be viewed as a social practice that is integrally linked with ideology, culture, knowledge, and power (Rassool, 2009; Street, 1984, 2003). Literacy in this conception involves broader learning and the mastery of information to work within the knowledge (information) societies that UNESCO (2006) says will dominate the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Across the world, literacy is considered to be a human right (UNESCO, 1997, 2006), a lifelong and life-wide intellectual process of gaining meaning from a critical interpretation of written texts. Most of the technologically developing countries, including Uganda, have implemented programmes and policies related to Education for All goals such as Universal Primary Education (UPE), Universal Secondary Education (USE), and gender parity in education. The improvement of literacy levels in most of the developing countries such as Uganda through participation in UPE has been characterized by political decisions regarding the choice of language to teach literacy, the provision of local reading materials to facilitate literacy teaching and learning, and the strategies chosen to teach it. The decisions are sometimes not based on baseline assessment surveys, and as a result, pupils may not develop the required level of literacy abilities. Since the key to all literacy is reading development—a progression of skills that begins with the ability to understand spoken words and decode written words for textual understanding—those teaching literacy for both adults and children should, as Street (2011) and Rogers and Street (2012) argue, use ethnographic lenses (Kielmann, 2012) to enhance their understanding of the context in which the teaching and learning of literacy take place.

An ethnographic lens is important because reading development involves a range of complex language processes, including awareness of phonology, orthography, semantics, grammar, and patterns of word formation, all of which provide a necessary platform for reading fluency and comprehension within the broader sociocultural and political context (Pearson, 2004). Because of these complexities, we decided to conceptualize a study to document volunteer teacher research assistants’ experiences as regards their perceptions of the strategies they were using for teaching literacy and determining how the interaction among pupils, parents, and texts embedded in the communities could be tapped to respond to the challenges facing literacy development efforts among children.

### **Ugandan Political Landscape**

Geopolitically, Uganda is a small landlocked country located in East Africa. It occupies 236,040 square

kilometers (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2007). Its current population is estimated to be 35.8 million, of which over 80 percent live in rural areas. Uganda shares borders with Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the Republic of South Sudan. Historically, it was colonized by the United Kingdom and attained political independence on October 9, 1962. The foundation of much of the literacy and education work in the country was laid by Christian missionaries (Ssekamwa, 1997). Ssekamwa argues that the indigenous educational systems prior to this colonial education effort were constructed around tribal approaches “with aims, organization, content, methods of teaching, teachers and places where education was imparted” (p. 1). Education was not conducted abstractly in schools, but rather in situated daily life around the fireplace, in the fields, through storytelling and in other settings around which diurnal activities took place. All children participated as learners, and all adults were responsible for instruction. Rather than being a colonial imposition, however, the involvement of Christian missionaries came at the invitation of the King of Buganda (Kabaka Mutesa I), with English becoming the *lingua franca* of formal education early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These schools soon monopolized formal educational efforts in Uganda (Meinert, 2009).

Socioculturally, Uganda is a multiethnic nation with over 50 constitutionally recognized ethnic groupings, each speaking different languages (United Nations Development Programme, 2005). This linguistic plurality complicates issues in choosing the most appropriate language of instruction for teaching and learning literacy in school.

Socioeconomically, Uganda is one of the world’s poorest countries, with 67 percent of the population being vulnerable to poverty (Anguyo, 2013). HIV/AIDS affects 7.3 percent of Ugandans (Parliament of Uganda, 2013) and has remained a huge challenge for the population. Simultaneously, remarkable progress has been made in the area of education. Uganda’s government is on record for having implemented programmes that are in line with global efforts to realize goals of Education For ALL (EFA) and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) such as its Functional Adult Literacy (FAL), UPE, USE, and equal opportunity policy for girls. The UPE and USE have

significantly widened access to formal education for children. Critics have pointed out that some of the programmes such as the UPE, USE, and introduction of mother tongue education policy driven by a whole language approach to teaching have instead contributed toward the deterioration in quality and standards of education in the country.

Various reports have identified a variety of critical issues responsible for the decline in literacy levels of children in primary schools, with evidence for this amelioration found in a decline in performance of pupils in national assessments. The causes include high rates of dropouts among pupils, students’ completion of primary school without having acquired the expected literacy abilities, a sheer lack of local reading materials to facilitate teaching and learning of literacy in mother tongue, and the absence of a reading culture among the population (Abiria, 2011; Batre, 2009, 2010; Muzoora et al., 2014; Ssentanda, 2014; Uganda Rural Literacy and Community Development Association, 2007). We present some of these issues in the context of APPLE’s role in Ugandan literacy education.

### **APPLE in Ugandan Education**

APPLE was conceptualized in 2013 to be implemented in Arua District, North Western region of Uganda, with the support of the International Reading Association and the Pan African Literacy Leadership Programme. It was designed to respond to the challenge of declining literacy competences and abilities of children in the face of the efforts the government of Uganda has made to implement policies designed to reduce poverty such as UPE, USE, and the mother tongue education policy of Uganda, which were all meant to contribute toward increasing literacy rates among the population.

The context in West Nile regions for the teaching and learning of literacy presents many challenges to educators, as the region continues to recover from traumatic experiences of war and political turmoil that Uganda went through from the 1970s until mid-2006 (Brett, 1992). Despite some well-intentioned interventions, the rates of school dropouts among children in the region are still very high, with girls being the worst affected (Batre, 2009, 2010). The

Uganda Rural Literacy and Community Development Association (2007) and other media reports show that children completed seven years of their primary schooling without acquiring the literacy abilities expected of them; some could hardly write their names correctly. There is a weak reading culture among the population, which is worsened by a lack of libraries in rural areas, especially in primary schools.

As if those challenges were not enough, the mother tongue education policy has been characterized by a shift in method of teaching literacy in lower primary classes from phonics to whole language approaches that we found have complicated children's literacy development (Abiria, 2011). This challenge follows from the enforcement of the mother tongue education policy known as the "thematic curriculum," which frames the learning of children in grades 1–3). In this approach, most pupils, especially those in Primary 1, have not interacted with texts and cannot easily differentiate and understand the letters of the alphabet and make meaning out of them when combined to make words. It therefore gets practically difficult for such pupils to understand the whole sentences they are assigned to read.

Additionally, local reading materials for teachers to implement the mother tongue education policy are lacking, and many of the teachers themselves cannot speak their mother tongue very well, meaning that they cannot effectively use it to teach literacy to the pupils. The Lugbara language teachers' predicament is even made worse by a lack of orthography for the language (Batre, 2012). All of these challenges require looking for remedies beyond the conventional ones, including tapping sociocultural resources and informal practices in the communities. In the spirit of the current shift in conceptualization of literacy along the lines of sociocultural and ethnographic perspectives (Nirantar, 2007; Perry 2012; Rassool, 2009; Street, 1994, 2011) and taking into account issues of mediation, literacy externalities, *physical proximity, and social distance* (Maddox & Esposito, 2013), teachers of literacy in formal primary schools should

explore the potential of involving children, parents, and community members in attaining effective and authentic literacy instruction, which will in turn facilitate the realization of the EFA goals.

APPLE was conceived and implemented amidst these challenges. Our study was therefore a deliberate attempt to: (1) explore volunteer teacher research assistants' perceptions of the literacy teaching strategies they were using; (2) understand and document different cultural resources as well as informal practices in the community; and (3) document how the involvement of children, parents, and members of the community in collecting texts embedded in homes with which they interact on daily basis to improve literacy instruction, learning, and the

development of relevant local reading materials. We hoped to understand which of the two literacy teaching methods—phonics or whole language—would motivate pupils and enable them more easily to develop the reading skills and competences expected of them at those levels of education. We believe that our findings would go a long way to inform policy and practice regarding the development of relevant mother tongue literacy instructional materials and teaching literacy in Uganda.

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### A Sociocultural Perspective on Literacy

Our research was designed to address the challenge of declining children's literacy levels in the context of current UPE and lack of relevant local reading materials in the implementation of a mother tongue education policy in Uganda. The debate on the "reading wars" concerned identifying the most efficacious strategies for teaching and learning literacy, a disagreement that has never been definitively resolved (Abiria, 2011; Johnson, 2001; Krashen, 2002; LeDoux, 2007; Muzoora et al., 2014; Pearson, 2004; Scribner & Cole, 1978; Ssentanda, 2014; Wagner, 1989).

What remains salient is that literacy is a dynamic, complex, multidimensional phenomenon for which

continual study is required (Harris & Hodges, 1995; Lyster, 1992). Literacy is understood as a critical factor in learning (Smagorinsky, 2014). Although the traditional and dominant view on literacy has concerned the ability to read and write relative to the number of years one has spent in formal schooling, literacy is now increasingly recognized and understood as a social practice of people whose forms and meanings vary from one context to another, are contingent upon the actors making use of it, and are a function of the social setting in which it is found (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Cheffy, 2011; Street, 1984, 2003).

It is important for those trying to understand and establish effective strategies of enhancing the teaching and learning of literacy to take into account the emerging sociocultural and ethnographic perspectives on literacy foregrounded in the work of Vygotsky (1978; cf. Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Perry 2012; Prinsloo & Brier, 1996; Street, 1994, 2003). Indeed, this view of the significance of out-of-school experiences in teaching and learning literacy is emphasized by Perry, who argues that current research efforts should focus on

understanding the ways in which people use literacy in their everyday lives, finding ways to make literacy instruction meaningful and relevant by recognizing and incorporating students' out-of-school ways of practicing literacy, and decreasing achievement gaps for students whose families and communities practice literacy in ways that may differ from those in the mainstream or in positions of power (p. 51).

Like others arguing in this tradition (e.g., Moll, 2000) Perry asserts that when school is conducted so that is disassociated from how people use literacy practices in their daily lives, school may become an alienating place for those whose literacy usage does not correspond to the means by which literacy is taught and evaluated through education.

Cheffy (2011) conducted a study in a rural area of northern Cameroon where most adults described themselves as illiterate. The study revealed a complex picture in which three languages were used in different ways and in different domains of life. The

profile of the literacy practices associated with these languages was found to be correspondingly complex. Cheffy recommended that it is important for the organizers of literacy programmes to aim at improving literacy among adults by being conscious of the varying language and informal literacy practices in their locality and to design teaching programmes that respond to the learning needs of people in a contextualized manner so as to approach literacy through the means they value. Rassool (2009) adds that literacy is now more generally regarded as a social practice that is integrally linked with ideology, culture, knowledge, and power (cf. Nirantar, 2007; Rogers & Street, 2012). Literacy should be viewed as a related set of activities that community members engage in while operating within their daily worlds.

Rogers (1999) recommends the use of *real literacies material*, which Jacobson, Degener, and Purcell-Gates (2003) call *authentic literacy instruction materials*. Jacobson et al. argue that learners benefit more from using local authentic materials than using ones that are a step removed from their real lives. Authentic materials are useful for learners of all levels and categories (Lanilo, 2007). Purcell-Gates, Degener, Jacobson, and Soler (2001) studied Adult Basic Education (ABE) and English as Second Language (ESL) students and found that, when learners used authentic materials inside the classroom, they were more likely to engage in literacy activities outside the classroom. For example, if students were to express an interest in improving nutrition, having them read authentic materials such as food labels in class helps to increase the likelihood that they will also read such labels at the supermarket.

Abiria (2011) explored cultural resources as pedagogical tools for language education in two primary schools in Uganda and found out that cultural resources travel from the community settings where they are traditionally performed to new sites in the classrooms as hybrid forms ranging from strong (retaining a large number of key elements from their place of origin) to weak (with limited elements from their place origin). The role adults play in scaffolding students' use of such cultural resources is crucial.

Since local resources and literacy materials exist within the communities, we borrow from Saraswathi

(2012) and Rogers and Horrocks (2010) to argue that communities surrounding schools are full of adults whose heads are not blank sheets or empty vessels to be filled with new knowledge from outside. Having children interact with these elders and their literacy tools in an effort to learn literacy based on texts embedded in communities will be a useful strategy to tap on their prior experiences and informal knowledge and skills they have. This situated learning is important, Rogers and Horrocks (2010) argue, because adults who find themselves in a learning situation have a particular background and associated experiential prior knowledge, known in the literature as *funds of knowledge* (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) and *banks of skills* that they are often unconscious they possess, but could be drawn on for purposes of enhancing children's literacy learning through texts embedded in home environments.

### The Tools of Literacy

Much has been written and continues to be written on literacy. However, the available materials on literacy tend to focus on adult learners. Efforts that have tried to involve pupils and their parents in search of solutions to address the challenges of declining literacy rates among children and enhance local reading materials development are rare. Abiri's (2011) findings are aligned with the current shift in understanding literacy from sociocultural and ethnographically based perspectives that needed to be promoted locally. Our study therefore offers a rare opportunity to assess how a community can engage with pupils attempting to learn literacy in their mother tongue under the complex sociolinguistic, cultural, political, and economic factors that have underpinned the context of literacy learning in Uganda.

Our study assumes that literacy learning is fundamentally associated with social practices of people in their everyday activities. We draw on Scribner and Cole (1978), Street (1984, 1994, 2011), Barton and Hamilton (2000), Rogers (1999), and many others, who argue that experiences outside formal classrooms are equally important for literacy learning. We view as axiomatic that literacy is social in origin, immersing our perspective within the emerging sociocultural and ethnographically based perspectives

on literacy. This perspective has been greatly influenced by the theory of social constructivism that considers the teaching and learning of literacy as both a social and integrated process in which *scaffolding*, commonly associated with scholars such as Rogoff (1990) and Bruner (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976), working from a Vygotskian (1976) foundation, plays a crucial role. This metaphor refers to the temporary support provided to learners to reduce the complexity of a task.

We use the scaffolding of authentic and real literacies materials (Verenikina, 2008) as the main conceptual and/or theoretical practice to underpin our research, given that the development of writing and reading is, according to Wagner (1989), "fostered by meaningful social interaction, usually entailing oral language" (p. 8). Scaffolding is widely considered to be an essential element of effective teaching, as many teachers to some extent use various forms of instructional scaffolding in their teaching. Scaffolding helps in bridging learning gaps, that is, the difference between what pupils have learned and what they are expected to know and be able to do at a certain point in their education cycle (Laniro, 2007).

Laniro (2007) links the concept of scaffolding to the use of what Jacobson et al. (2003) refer to as *authentic materials* and what Rogers (1999) calls *real literacies materials* for literacy instruction. Laniro argues that even if the student cannot read every word of a parking ticket used as an authentic material, the teacher can scaffold his or her reading skills and minimize the difficulty of the text by helping with vocabulary words and teaching scanning skills. These materials may include print, video, and audio texts that students encounter in their daily lives. Others examples cited include change-of address forms, job applications, menus, voice mail messages, radio programs, and videos.

We anticipate that as pupils get involved with their parents and communities in collecting various texts and literacy materials from homes, the volunteer teacher research assistants would provide successive levels of temporary support that would help pupils reach levels of comprehension and skills acquisition that they would not be able to achieve without assistance (see Verenikina, 2008). We expected that

the support strategies would become incrementally removed when they were no longer needed, and the volunteer teacher research assistants would gradually shift more responsibility over the learning process to the pupils. In this way it is possible that pupils would be able to learn reading and writing in their local language and at the same time contribute toward building the stock of locally produced reading materials.

## Method

### The Intervention

We held in workshops organized for teachers, teacher trainees, parents, and members of the community to educate them about the role of sociocultural resources and texts embedded in people's homes that could be collected and used to aid literacy pedagogy and to enhance local reading materials development. With permission from the District Education officer of Arua District, we shortlisted, interviewed, and selected six volunteer teacher research assistants from six primary schools. We held two-day intensive discussions with successful teachers regarding:

1. the ongoing debates on the literacy learning, language related issues, and the reading wars (see Abiria, 2011; Johnson, 2001; Krashen, 2002; LeDoux, 2007; Muzoora et al., 2014; Pearson, 2004; Scribner & Cole, 1978; Ssentanda, 2014; Wagner, 1989);
2. sociocultural and ethnographic perspectives on literacy teaching and learning (Jacobson et al., 2003; Laniro, 2007; Purcell-Gates et al., 2001; Rogers 1999); and
3. real literacies and authentic literacy materials as a preparation for the teaching (Nabi, Rogers, & Street, 2009; Nirantar, 2007; Perry 2012; Street, 1984, 1994, 1995).
4. the basics of social research.

Thereafter the teachers were assigned to teach 50 pupils in lower primary classes in the Ombaderuku Primary school. The instructions were carried out in *Lugbarati*, the dominant local language in the area. Ombaderuku Primary school was chosen because of its central location in the Sub County. The 50 girls and boys purposively selected were randomly divided into two groups and taught reading and writing in different

rooms using phonics or whole language approaches. The children were taught twice a week on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 10.00 AM–12.30 PM for a period of four months. Each group was assigned three volunteer teacher research assistants to make sure that while one was teaching, the other two were observing and recording what the children were doing. The pupils were then told to report to their teachers or come to school with texts they found in their homes, which the volunteer teacher research assistants recorded. The teaching was required to be participatory and learner-centered.

### Data Collection

We immersed our study in a mixture of an interpretive and a constructivist paradigm, which Kelly (1999) says leads one to adopt qualitative and participatory research approaches. Our selection of an interpretive paradigm and qualitative approach guided us to choose a case study oriented exploratory design described in Mitchell (1984) to arrive at a rich description of the volunteer teacher research assistants' experiences, perceptions, assumptions, and attitudes regarding the literacy teaching strategies, the available sociocultural resources, and the texts embedded in the communities. By understanding the processes by which a participatory approach to involving pupils and parents collecting everyday texts in the communities, we thought we could enhance literacy instruction, learning, and materials development in primary schools. Our inclination toward sociocultural theoretical perspectives on literacy led us to adopt ethnographic methods such observations, review and analysis of documents, and informal interviews with teachers, pupils, and parents to understand issues involved in teaching literacy in primary schools.

The three methods were complemented with some photographs captured during home visits and observations of the field activities in the course of the implementation of the intervention. The researchers and volunteer teacher research assistants also followed the children to their homes and engaged their parents in discussing materials their children reported or brought to the teachers as follow-up to the interactions with children in the school. Since it is a common practice in qualitative research to keep

records of every event in the field, we took detailed field notes on texts, cultural resources, and informal practices we observed in the homes, and thoroughly edited them at the end of every day. With permission from the individuals involved in the research, we audio-recorded all of the interviews and transcribed them later for analysis. With consent from the villagers, we captured some of the evidence of those factors we were interested in via digital camera.

We sought to ensure rigor and trustworthiness (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006) through various means, including member checks, interviewer corroboration, peer debriefing, prolonged engagement, negative case analysis, confirmability, and bracketing as detailed in Lincoln and Guba (1985). As is the practice in qualitative research, we maintained reflexivity journals, which Saladana (2009) also calls analytic memos. These notes later helped us to reflect on the patterns, themes, and concepts that were emerging from the data we were collecting (Creswell, 2007). In conducting our observations, analysis of documents, and informal interviews, we made sure that we adhered to all the protocols involved in negotiating access into the community and other gatekeepers (Campbell, 2012). The huge volume of data we collected led us to the phase of data reduction we have described below.

### **Data Reduction**

As discussed in Smagorinsky (2008), the end of data collection normally produces an “amorphous mass of data” (p. 397) that cannot be of any use unless reduced to meaningful units of analysis. We thus endeavored to (a) tease out the experiences of volunteer teacher research assistants, pupils, and parents regarding their interactions in the course of teaching and learning literacy; (b) find out their assumptions, perceptions, conceptions, and misconceptions about teaching and learning; (c) carefully observe what each party in the research was doing with regard to learning and teaching of reading and how they were doing it, both in class and in the homes or in the community; and (d) capture through digital camera evidence of texts embedded in the community, informal learning practices, and other factors that could inspire pupils to easily learn reading and writing skills. Our

collection yielded an overwhelming volume of data that we reduced via tabulation and through use of percentages, number, and words, providing ourselves with a more manageable version of the data that sense in terms of the research questions of the study.

This process of playing with the raw data, which Smagorinsky (2008) describes as reducing data from an emergent mass to a systematically organized set from which a subset can document representative trends, helped us to eliminate some data that were not making sense in terms of what we were looking for in learning and teaching of literacy. At other times it confirmed what was available through other data. The process of playing with the data involved coding them to help us see the emerging categories, patterns, and potential themes. This process also guided our identification of themes and the connections we saw between the themes, thereby leaving us with meaningful and manageable data sets for our analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

Data for our study were analyzed using pragmatic qualitative research techniques. Since we immersed our study in an interpretive and constructivist paradigm, we employed a mix of qualitative techniques to analyze our data, a process commonly known as observer impression or thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process involved using an eclectic approach in which data are continually analyzed with a special focus on issues that best matched the research questions. According to Chilisa and Preece (2005), as soon as the data collection process in qualitative research starts, so must data analysis. They further argue that “unlike in quantitative research, where the data analysis starts at the end of the data collection, in qualitative research, the analysis is tied to the data collection and occurs throughout the data collection, as well at the end of the study” (p. 172).

For our case, as soon as we commenced data collection, we started by coding our data into categories and later reduced them into meaningful components as described above. Coding is an interpretive technique that both organizes the data and provides a means to introduce the interpretations

of it into certain quantitative methods, which required us to read the data over and over again and demarcate segments within it at different times throughout the process (Boyatzis, 1998; Chambliss & Schutt, 2010). In our case each data segment was labeled with a "code" (a short phrase) that was meant to help us understand how the associated data segments informed our research questions or did not fit with them. We identified such anomalies and eliminated such data segments that never made sense in the analysis stage.

We made use of the questions that guided the coding of our qualitative data described in Saldana (2009), inquiring into the following issues:

- What were people (that is, teachers, pupils, parents, etc.) doing?
- What were they trying to accomplish both in class and at home in terms of learning and teaching reading?
- How were they doing what they wanted to do?
- What specific means or strategies were they using to realize their goals?
- How did the teachers, pupils, and parents talk about and understand what was going on as far as teaching and learning reading was concerned?
- What assumptions were they making about learning and teaching of reading in the school?
- What assumptions did we bring into the study as far as learning and teaching reading and writing are concerned?
- What did we see going on in the classrooms, homes, trading centers, etc.?
- What did we learn from detailed notes we took in the course of the data collection?
- Why did we arrive at some conclusions we drew about teaching and learning reading and writing in schools, etc.?

In doing so, we summarized the frequencies of the codes, discussed the emerging similarities and differences in related codes across distinct sources, and compared the relationship between one or more codes to guide us in drawing our conclusions.

Our analysis of the data we collected followed the six steps in thematic analysis described variously in Boyatzis (1998); Fereday & Muir-Cochrane (2006); Virginia & Clarke (2006); and Chambliss, and Schutt (2010). The six steps we followed included: (a) familiarizing ourselves with our coded data sets to determine patterns that were emerging; (b) engaging in data reduction, which entailed collapsing the massive forms of data into labels and creating code categories for ease of analysis; (c) combining codes to make themes that accurately depicted data; (d) determining how the themes were supported by the data and related to the sociocultural theoretical perspectives we adopted to guide our study; (e) defining themes emerging from the data in terms of aspects we tried to capture; and (f) writing the report with focus on which themes were contributing towards understanding what was going on within the data through member checks which led us to what Chilisa and Preece (2005) call a thick description of the phenomenon of interest to us.

Our intervention, which provided basis for this study, only lasted for a short period (six months) and our study was based on a very small sample (one primary school of 50 pupils). The purpose of qualitative case studies is not to have large samples whose results should be generalized, but rather to attain a thick description of the phenomenon of interest the researchers are looking for in the study. Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) argue that there is little reliable guidance on what sample size is needed for a thematic analysis, but sometimes decisions in qualitative designs are made in the course of the study, given that their designs are not rigid.

### Findings

The following four themes were identified across the data: (a) volunteer teacher research assistants' experiences and perceptions of the phonics and whole language approaches; (b) sociocultural resources and informal literacy practices in the community; (c) texts embedded in the community; and (d) other literacy learning-related inspirational factors children reported in the community.

## Teachers' Experiences and Perceptions on Literacy Teaching Strategies

In Uganda, children in rural areas go to school starting at age of six or seven. In this study of students in Primary grades 1–3, the students' ages ranged from 6–10. Our interviews with the six volunteer teacher research assistants, observation of their interactions with pupils in the two classes, and informal discussions with some of the pupils showed that all the teachers were frustrated by the shift from using a phonics approach to adopting a whole language approach to teaching reading and writing under the mother tongue education policy. The teachers perceived the policy shift as a waste of time. Our observations in the whole language class showed that the pupils were really struggling with reading as compared to the phonics class.

One of the teachers told us that the major problem with the whole language method was that of starting with the children from the unknown, which contradicts the principle that emphasizes that learning should begin from the known and move gradually to the unknown (Cohen & Cowen, 2008; yet see Egan, 2009, for a dissenting view). Five out of the six volunteer teacher research assistants found whole language approaches problematic due to the lack of literature in the *Lugbarati* language, the inadequate training of the teachers to prepare them to teach in mother tongue, and the inability of some teachers to speak the language fluently. Most of the pupils indicated that they found it very difficult to read sentences when they were unable to identify and combine the letters, which to them was the easiest way to learn how to read.

## Community's Sociocultural Resources and Informal practices

Regarding the local cultural resources in the communities, our field visits and observations revealed that all homes were endowed with a variety of untapped sociocultural resources and informal literacy practices. These texts and practices have potential for enhancing literacy learning and teaching efforts in primary school, but had been ignored or underused by literacy teachers as effective pedagogical tools. Some of the cultural resources and informal

practices we found included communal local crafts making, storytelling at fire places, encouraging children to read together in groups, singing songs with literacy messages, and decorating walls and traditional crafts using various colors in homes. Some of these events and practices in which people were interacting with texts are depicted in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Photographs showing Lugbara traditional crafts, children engaged in tradition dancing, children singing song with their own designed letters of the alphabet, reading in groups.

## Texts Embedded in the Community

Evidence from what pupils reported or collected from home revealed that every family was rich in texts, with which all household members directly and indirectly interacted in their everyday activities. Such texts included campaign posters with photographs of politicians, sitting or living rooms decorated with newspapers that had texts and pictures on them, religious documents, voters' cards, medical forms from health units, texts written on doors by immunization officials, Christmas messages printed on walls as decoration, dates written on walls to remember when the houses were constructed, letters from family members, and measuring quantities of goods such as food in heaps instead of using standard measures such as kilograms. Examples of some of the documents from families' home lives are depicted in Figure 2.



Figure 2. Photographs of a woman who claims to be illiterate surrounded by religious texts; texts written on doors; a house decorated with Christmas and New Year messages; and a date recorded on a wall.

One day we visited a woman in her sixties and found her seated on her neat compound reading the Christian *Holy Bible* (see Figure 2). She stood up and smiled broadly as she welcomed us warmly to her home. “You have a very beautiful compound,” we remarked. “Thank you, I always try to keep it clean to avoid some diseases spread by house flies,” she replied. When we looked around the homestead, we saw some figures written with chalk on her door and wondered who wrote them and for what purpose. When we tried to find out, she replied, “I did not write it myself.” “Who wrote it?” we inquired. “I have two grandchildren I take care of. One day one lady and two men came from the health center to drop some medicine in the mouths of the children, and they were the ones who wrote those figures,” she explained. “Why don’t you rub them away from your door?” we asked. “No, no, I cannot clean them. They remind me of what happened,” the woman explained while nodding her head in disapproval. “What do you remember about those figures?” we further asked. She replied, “I remember two ticks on the door. I was told the first tick represented the first time the visitors came to drop the medicines and found the two children around, and the second tick represents the second time the visitors returned and gave the children more drops of the medicine.” We asked, “Can you read them?” She turned her face away and said, “I can’t read, I never received education to read.” “But we

found you reading when we came!” we said. “Yes, I was reading the *Holy Bible* in my language, and that is the only text I can read,” she said.

When we approached the next home, we were struck by a date that was written with mud on one of the walls of the house. The relatively old grass-thatched house belonged to another elderly woman. When we approached her, she tried to kneel down, but we stopped her. In Lugbara culture it is characteristic of village women to kneel down for visitors, especially males, as a sign of respect. When we inquired why the date was on the wall, she turned her face down and shyly replied, “We use it to remember the date when the house was constructed.” This means of record-keeping was not taught in school, but was instead a local practice. There were many other texts we saw in other homes, such as the one conveying to all Christians a Christmas and New Year message (see Figure 2), a sort of text that made homes convenient places for children to learn literacy.

### Other Literacy Learning Related Inspirational Factors in the Community

During our home visits we decided to assess other factors that could help children to learn literacy. We noted a pattern where most children were coming to trading centers to watch films, leading us to look for artifacts that attracted their interest in the community. Through interviews and our informal interactions with pupils in their homes, we learned of cultural tools that children thought would enhance their literacy learning efforts. The common ones they mentioned included computers, mobile phones, audio-visual games, internet, and some education television channels. When asked about the possible TV channels they would be interested in, the majority of the children mentioned channels such as National Geographic and NatGeo World, which they said they cannot access but were told by other kids were very good for learning purposes. The urge to access computers was expressed by pupils from a primary school that housed a Community Library for members of a women’s group called Queens of Heaven, who requested to learn computer skills from a Local Nongovernmental Organization (NGO) that trained communities in how to use their mobile computer

laboratory. Figure 3 depicts the enthusiasm of the school's pupils.

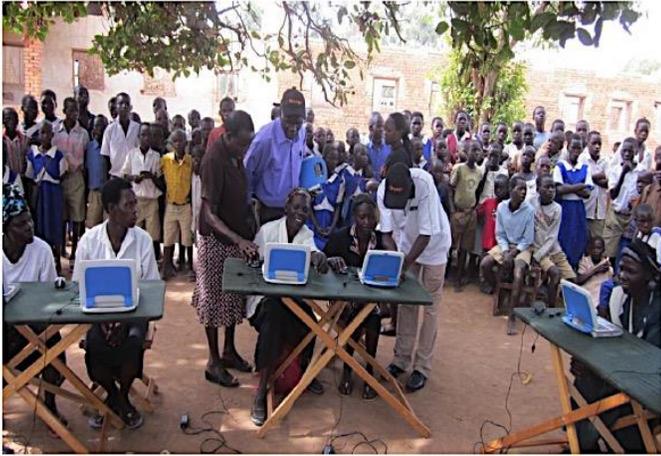


Figure 3. Primary school pupils react to women's participation in computer training in Yumbe District.

### Discussion

The experiences and perceptions of teachers on phonics and whole language approaches yielded familiar results. The complaints registered by the teachers relating to lack of literature in the *Lugbarati* language, inadequate training of the teachers to prepare them to teach in mother tongue, and the inability of some teachers to speak the local language fluently, were similar to findings of studies conducted elsewhere. They helped to reaffirm concerns Batre (2010), Abiria (2011), LeDoux (2007), Ssentanda (2014), and Muzoora et al. (2014) highlighted while articulating the strengths and shortcomings associated with the whole language approach and debates surrounding the issue of mother tongue education policy. The study's contribution comes from demonstrating the challenges involved in trying to teach and learn literacy in *Lugbarati* under the new language policy in Uganda. The findings regarding this particular issue may help to inform policy makers and programme managers and could cause them to seek measures to address some of the problems that have emerged.

We came across many sociocultural resources and informal practices in the community that were new to our context. All the homes we visited had some form of cultural resource that could potentially offer

fruitful opportunities for aiding the teaching of literacy at various levels (Abiria, 2011; cf. Moll, 2000). Similarly, there were informal practices among the people we observed that could also be used to facilitate the teaching of literacy. We came across instances where women elders were making traditional crafts, which offered others the chance to learn without necessarily being in a formal classroom. In some instances we saw children engaged in learning literacy through traditional dancing, and in others teachers had the children use local materials to develop the letters of the alphabet and use them to learn literacy through singing.

Scholars have discussed how some people have come to learn literacy and numeracy informally in the community and have been able to use them to perform complex tasks that ideally would require formal literacy (e.g., Nirantar, 2007). The case of the woman who was able to read religious texts without formal education is one such example. Many of the sociocultural resources were largely untapped. Ugandan literacy teachers have not been able to draw on such resources and local practices in their literacy pedagogy. We attribute this phenomenon to the failure by the society to recognize informal ways of learning and over-concentrating on formal literacy practices that tend to disadvantage those with no formal schooling. We strongly believe that such resources and informal ways of learning should be used to improve literacy instruction in primary schools.

Evidence from what pupils reported or collected and brought to the volunteer teacher research assistants as texts embedded in their homes revealed a rich array of texts with which all household members either directly or indirectly interacted in their everyday activities. These artifacts included religious texts, voter cards, marriage certificates, texts written on walls, newspapers used as wall decorations, and campaign posters. While such materials have been used effectively to teach literacy in other parts of the world (Jacobson et al., 2003; Laniro, 2007; Rogers, 1999), we were unable to identify any serious efforts to use such authentic literacies materials for teaching literacy in Uganda. This oversight raises a warning bell: Programme managers and policymakers must

begin to take advantage of such texts in the community.

Our study has documented other factors that could inspire and motivate children to learn literacy, especially their interest in accessing digital literacies, which raises the issue regarding the role of ICTs in the current knowledge-based economies. ICT tools now offer rich opportunities for learning, and their absence in rural areas is synonymous with a denial of a right to learning. Since we witnessed that the majority of the pupils flock to trading centers to watch films, we feel that it could be possible to design some literacy programmes along the lines of what attracts their interest in the community, and this opportunity would enhance their literacy learning. This critical point needs the government's attention.

### Challenges, Lessons and Implications

In this section, we present some of the limitations associated with the approach adopted in our study, point out some of the recommendations and/or lessons from the study, and highlight the implications for policy and practice for teaching and learning literacy in Uganda.

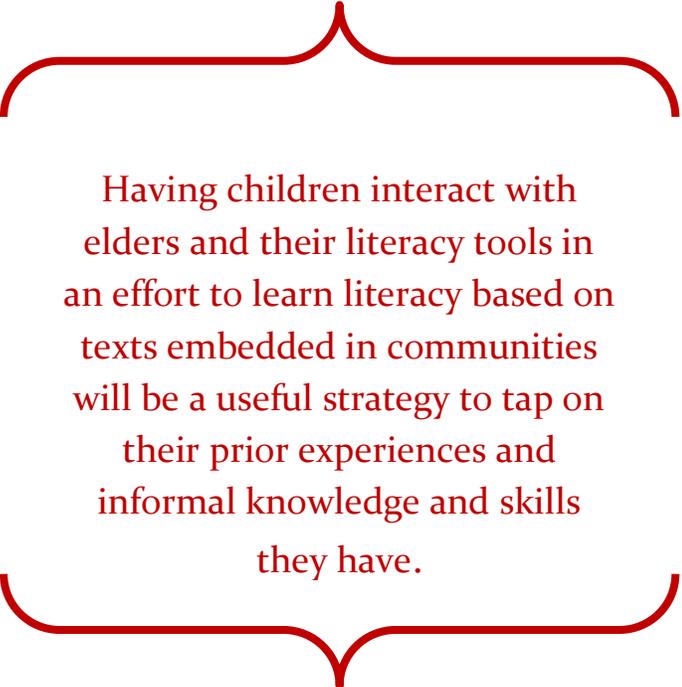
**Challenges.** Our first challenge associated with the study is that it was crafted out of an intervention of six months, which only left us with four months to try to understand the phenomenon. Our main aim was to attain a rich description of the experiences of the volunteer teacher research assistants with regard to issues of teaching and learning literacy. We believe the study has uncovered issues that offer opportunity for further investigation using other methods.

Secondly, the field of literacy is not attractive to many people, and most governments do not give it the serious attention it requires in terms of funding and

training. This problem is reflected in the minimal level of support the field of literacy in Uganda receives, a paucity of attention that negatively affects its teaching and learning. Last, but not least, from the standpoint of conventional formal education, literacy is an asset that is only acquired from a formal classroom. As a result, the idea of promoting literacy learning outside the formal classroom does not sell at all, because people's literacy practices acquired informally do not count in the eyes of the society. Therefore, what we are recommending to facilitate the teaching and learning of literacy is unlikely to receive support from various circles in Uganda. This limited conception of literacy does not align with Uganda's global ambition to attain the EFA goals and other Millennium Development Goals and represents a challenge to overcome in the realms of policy and everyday literacies.

**Lessons learned.** This study has generated a number of lessons that could guide efforts to respond to the challenges related to teaching and learning literacy. We conclude that:

1. Most of Uganda's policies and programmes, such as the mother tongue education policy, are merely copied and pasted from prior policies, probably as a result of political pressure, without a thorough assessment of the local conditions and contexts that could help inform policy makers in their design of interventions to respond to the needs of the target population.
2. There is much emphasis on structure and standards in literacy teaching, learning, and materials development, which influences policy makers and programme managers to ignore the richness and diversity that characterize the world of literacy.



Having children interact with elders and their literacy tools in an effort to learn literacy based on texts embedded in communities will be a useful strategy to tap on their prior experiences and informal knowledge and skills they have.

Policymakers thus concentrate more on the formal acquisition of literacy than on practice and usage, leading to a gap between policy and research-based literacy theory.

3. All rural homes are very rich in cultural resources, informal learning practices, and texts that make them convenient sites for literacy learning, but such opportunities have not been adequately explored because of the focus on dominant literacy practices, which make people discount the value of literacy practices acquired informally outside the classroom.
4. Many Ugandan children are now attracted to audio visual technologies whose content is not designed to be educational, as evidenced by the number who go to watch films in trading centers. We believe that a deliberate effort to use such information and communication technologies to mediate literacy learning for children in rural settings would most likely help them to learn literacy more readily.

**Implications.** We believe that the following implications are available from our study of Ugandan literacy practices:

1. Government, policy makers, and programme managers need to finance the construction of local capacity to address challenges facing the literacy sector. This investment should include instituting enabling policies that make access to literacy a right; stepping up efforts to conduct action-oriented research in various aspects of literacy to take advantage of the diversity of cultural resources, practices, and texts embedded in the community to enhance literacy learning and teaching; and developing infrastructure such as community libraries and community learning centers equipped with the necessary ICT tools to increase access to information and knowledge for all in rural settings. Investing in research could greatly help minimize the temptation of cutting and pasting policies without thoroughly assessing the local needs of the people targeted by specific interventions.
2. Policymakers and programme managers should appreciate the dynamism and diversity that characterize the world of literacy and downplay the current focus on rigid structures and standards that

characterize literacy teaching, learning, and materials development.

3. The opportunity offered by the richness and diversity in the world of literacy should be seized to concentrate application, practice, and uses of literacy, rather than the superficial forms of acquisition presently emphasized in schools.

### Conclusion

This study focused on the exploration of volunteer teacher research assistants' perceptions regarding the approaches to teaching literacy they are currently exposed to, documentation of the sociocultural resources in the communities that could be used as pedagogical tools to aid literacy teaching and learning, and the consequences of deliberate efforts to involve pupils, parents, and members of the community in collecting texts embedded in homes and with which children interact in their everyday lives. Teachers may draw on the available cultural resources and local practices to improve teaching and learning of literacy among children in primary schools. The lessons documented have potential for addressing pupils' current literacy developmental levels and the lack of relevant local reading materials being experienced under UPE and the implementation of a mother tongue educational policy in Uganda. The study raises four issues of concern in promoting literacy for pupils under the mother tongue education policy in Uganda: teachers' concerns and dissatisfaction with the whole language strategy to teaching literacy; inadequate use of sociocultural resources, informal learning practices, and texts in the community to aid literacy teachers; the focus on rigid structures and standards in literacy learning; and lack of capacity to engage in continual action-oriented research to understand the emerging dimensions of literacy appropriate to the challenges posed.

Serious and sustainable investment in building local capacity for effectively conducting research in new dimensions of literacy using ethnographic lenses to understand the local contexts of the community, teach literacy, and develop relevant local reading materials to aid literacy instructions in primary schools is urgently needed to address the challenge of the lack of locally relevant literature for teachers to facilitate the teaching and learning of the Lugbara language. The capacity

building should also stress the issues of training in the newly approved Lugbara orthography, which appears to be too complex to be grasped by the teachers. Attempts to seek solutions to children's inability to develop the required literacy competencies should extend beyond classrooms and include establishing as well as supporting community learning centers in line with the Oakyama 2014 commitment (Kominkan-Community Learning Centres International Conference on Education for Sustainable Development, 2014) to support learning of all forms to promote sustainable development.

Efforts should be made to encourage more empirical studies in the field of literacy to enable people to understand the dynamic, complex, and diverse nature of the field of literacy so as to ensure that all forms of literacy count, irrespective of which sites they were acquired from (Street, 1994, 2003, 2011). Considering the motivational role that ICTs plays in children's learning,

policymakers need to promote multiple literacies, including digital literacies for rural schools. Effective strategies for inculcating a reading culture among the population, including setting up community libraries and community learning centers as well as equipping them with various ICT-related tools, need to be sought as a way to increase access to information by all members of the community to effectively function in the current information and knowledge based economy. The main advantage of approaching literacy teaching and learning from a social utility perspective, foregrounded in authentic real literacies materials, is that the approach will lay deliberate emphasis on practice and uses of literacy rather than on the parroting of a language in school. By focusing on seeking solutions to challenges associated with teaching and learning beyond the formal school classrooms, it will be possible to make a significant contribution toward the attainment of universal Ugandan literacy, as it will focus on everyone in the household and community.

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