

Guiding Literacy Practice: Context Matters

**Local-global tensions in African literacy policies: Towards
an asset perspective of literacy**

A policy review paper

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Abstract

In the context of educational globalisation and increasing control and dominance of supranational organisations in educational governance, African countries have faced a new level of tension about whether their educational policies should follow the global educational models or seek solutions to their multifarious problems by promoting local indigenous literacy practices. Using an asset perspective as an analytical lens and critical policy sociology as a methodological approach, this paper analysed key educational policy documents produced after the 1990s for improving literacy practices in African countries. The analysis found that the deficit perspective in education that was started in the colonial period and institutionalised during the structural adjustment period continued to shape literacy policies and practices even after the global educational movements such as Education for All. The paper concludes with an appeal for developing contextually relevant literacy policies and programs through an asset perspective; and finally, provides some directions for further research especially for those interested in exploring African educational and literacy policies.

Key words: asset perspective, deficit perspective, international assessment, knowledge economy, literacy policy

Introduction

African countries have been the focal point in the international policy discussions, conferences and consultations organised in the context of global education movements, especially Education for All (UNESCO 2000) and Education 2030 (Incheon Declaration 2015). The reports of such discussions and consultations have emphasised the importance and urgency for providing literacy and lifelong learning opportunities for the most marginalised group of people of those countries. Scholars (Barrett et al. 2015, Brock-Utne and Mercer 2014, King and Palmer 2013, Mason 2013, Regmi 2015) have examined how such global educational movements evolved and what the implications of the educational agenda of those movements are for the educational policies and practices of African countries. However, there is a dearth of literature with a focus on how the idea of literacy is constructed in the global educational policy discourses and what implications such discourses might have for the literacy practices of African countries.

Before the 1970s literacy practices of African countries were shaped by colonialism. Scholars (Preece 2009b, Ubah 1980, Yates 1984, Zachariah 1985) who explored the history of African educational practices argued that the Western education system including the selection of particular languages as medium of instruction (Parry 1999) dominated indigenous educational and literacy practices of the African communities during the colonial period. For example, Ubah (1980) studied the educational practices of Igbo people (the indigenous community of Nigeria) between 1900 and 1960 and argued that the education system started by colonial rulers had no



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intention of promoting local knowledge or providing young people with opportunities to engage in productive activities; rather the colonial education system aimed at strengthening colonial rule through mass schooling neglected indigenous literacy practices. The neglect of indigenous practices prevented African indigenous people to develop their potential and ‘participate fully in the wider society’ (Bélanger 2011, 81).

In the mass schooling introduced by the colonisers in countries such as Nigeria (Ubah 1980) and Congo (Yates 1984) young people in schools were disciplined to make them believe that everyday learning practices (Lave and Wenger 1991) of their homes and communities (Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti 2005) were inferior to what they were learning in the school. People of the culturally rich countries such as Nigeria started to see their knowledge systems and cultures through a deficit perspective (explained below) and encouraged their children to pursue Western education. As a consequence, the schools established by Western colonisers were regarded as a sole authority of knowledge (Archibald 2008). Since the source of knowledge was no longer the elderly people the young people who attended the schools had every reason to follow their teachers but not their parents because the latter neither held Western forms of knowledge nor power to communicate with colonisers.

During the 1950s and the 1960s many African countries were freed from the grip of colonial rule (e.g. Sudan 1956, Ghana 1957, Congo 1960, Nigeria 1960, Sierra Leone 1961, Kenya 1963, and Mozambique 1975) and great celebrations of independence were marked in the history of those countries. The people just freed from colonisation had high aspirations of living a quality life. In that context ‘educational expansion was a cause, a war cry, a catalyst for economic development, a leveller of hard set social inequalities’ (Coombs 1968). The focus on education was reflected through an increased percentage of school enrolment, higher levels of participation in adult education, and increase in teacher recruitment and literacy programs. However, in 1967 at the International Conference on the World Crisis in Education at Williamsburg the participants raised a serious issue that showed a seamy side of educational expansion (Zachariah 1985). The report of the Williamsburg Conference (Coombs 1968) challenged the relevance of the Western model of education for the countries of the global South including the impoverished countries of sub-Saharan Africa. What went wrong with the educational policies and the philosophy on which those policies were grounded? To be more specific, why did not the same educational policies and practices that helped Western countries to be industrialised work for African countries?

There could be several explanations of those questions. The practice of ‘educational policy lending’ from the West that started during colonial period (Yates 1984) placed the poor countries at a disadvantage because the educational policies were designed to fit quite different aims and circumstances of industrialised nations of the West. The policies fulfilled the aims of those industrialised nations at earlier times – as Western Europe’s recovery through Marshal Plan ‘was widely reputed to be a near miracle’ (Zachariah 1985, 3) – but as the time and context changed they became obsolete and dysfunctional for African countries. In fact, such educational systems



deprived rural areas of their best potential development leaders by draining bright and ambitious young people away from the countryside into the cities and developed countries of the West.

Moreover, even though African countries formally ended the colonial rule they could not form a strong domestic economic base by creating infrastructure and jobs for their young people. In the context of increasing oil crisis of the 1970s, the debt of African countries to international banks increased (McMichael 2012). A new international strategy emerged for managing the debt in the early 1980s in the name of the structural adjustment programs. As a result, African countries were forced to cut budget in social sectors such as health and literacy as a condition for receiving structural adjustment loans. According to Lind (2005, 52), as the World Bank became ‘the major player in education policy-making in countries undergoing structural adjustment...the existing budgets and education ministry departments of non-formal adult education and literacy were dismantled’ in countries like Ethiopia, Mali and Mozambique. The World Bank argued that such programs had ‘a poor track record’ in terms of ‘the benefits and costs of literacy programs’ (World Bank 1995, 90) hence literacy related programs did not receive funding. Some African countries such as Ethiopia, Ivory Coast, Kenya and Tanzania had organised programs and campaigns to fight illiteracy during the 1960s and 1970s. Bélanger (2011) notes that at the continental level, African ministers of education held ‘five regional conferences to develop basic education and literacy’ between 1961 and 1982 (p. 84): in Addis Ababa (1961), Abidjan (1964), Nairobi (1968), Lagos (1976), and Harare (1982). However, during the 1980s literacy programs suffered in terms of funding and the neglect of educational policy makers in the South, especially in African countries.

The review of educational practices of African countries during the 19th century suggests that Western donors and policy advisors had a misconception that educational policy would work irrespective of contexts and circumstances. Building on this historical overview of African literacy this paper aims to explore what perspective(s) of literacy has dominated literacy policies and practices after the Jomtien World Conference in Education (UNESCO 1990). Even though the colonial legacy still operates in different forms, in current decades, international organisations such as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (see Sellar and Lingard 2013), the World Bank (Brock-Utne and Mercer 2014), multinational corporations and philanthropic foundations (Verger, Lubienski, and Steiner-Khamsi 2016) have been influential in shaping the educational policies and practices of African countries. Hence, this paper focuses on whether the literacy policies championed by supranational organisations have constructed a new form of colonialism (Wickens and Sandlin 2007) or they have opened up new avenues for developing contextually relevant literacy policies and programs. Despite the strong legacy of colonialism and the structural adjustment rationale, the governments of African countries have committed that they would develop educational policies and programs according to the contextual realities of African communities (see the final part of UNESCO 1998). Therefore, it is important to examine whether the African authorities have limited those agendas only to policy rhetoric or there is any substance in those commitments.



Analytical and methodological framework

Because of the global educational movements such as EFA (UNESCO 1990, 2000) and Education 2030 (Incheon Declaration 2015) education systems around the world are converging towards a common goal: producing human resources required for the global capital market by promoting the human capital form of education (Bonal 2002, Becker 1975, Schultz 1981). In this context, an increasing number of studies (Ball 2012, Sellar and Lingard 2013, Mundy and Menashy 2014, Verger, Lubienski, and Steiner-Khamsi 2016) have been undertaken to explore how supranational organisations such as the OECD and the World Bank have shaped educational policies and practices of their member countries. However, those studies have mostly focused on the developed countries of the West hence the findings do not help much to understand whether African countries have fully accepted Western models of human capital education, which is globalised through global educational movements such as EFA, or whether those countries have resisted the Western models of education to promote local literacy practices. As Biesta (2006) notes, since the policy documents produced by these organisations have a strong ‘agenda-setting’ function the policy makers working at national level should ‘be aware of the assumptions, implications and intended and unintended consequences of such policy discourses’ (p. 169).

To examine what perspectives of literacy are promoted after the 1990 Jomtien Conference this paper analyses key policy documents produced by the supranational organisations (UNESCO 1990, 2000, Incheon Declaration 2015, World Bank 2002, 2003) and national governments of African countries such as the Action Plan of Education Sector Development Program 2016-2020 of Ethiopia (MOE Ethiopia 2015), the Education Sector Strategic Plan 2010-2020 of Ghana (MOE Ghana 2012), the National Education Sector Plan 2014-2018 of Kenya (MOE Kenya 2014) and the Education Sector Plan 2014-2018 of Sierra Leone (MOE Sierra Leone 2013). For this analysis, the paper uses critical policy sociology and an asset perspective of literacy as methodological and analytical frameworks respectively. Critical policy sociology has been increasingly used by educational policy researchers (Gale 2001, Ball 2012) to explore the extent to which educational policies and practices of individual countries are influenced by global policy discourses constructed at supranational policy spaces such as the OECD, the World Bank and UNESCO. While this paper aims at critiquing the policy discourses of supranational agencies it has no intention to romanticise all local practices of African countries that may be discriminatory in terms of gender, race and class. Furthermore, the paper has no intention to safeguard national governments of these countries. More studies may be required (which is beyond the scope of this paper) to understand how corruption, unaccountability of national governments towards the hardships of their own citizens and their failure in institutionalising democracy and peace have affected development as well as literacy efforts in African countries.

To analyse policy documents, especially for examining how the idea of literacy is understood in the global as well as the national contexts the paper uses an asset perspective of literacy which entails that literacy policies and programs should focus on what people ‘have’ learnt through their everyday practices (Lave and Wenger 1991, Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti 2005) and



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through their struggles for living in hardships and poverty; rather than only focusing on what they ‘do not have’ (Aikman et al. 2016) or are not able to learn. There is a growing body of studies in the areas of school curriculum (Zipin 2009), health literacy (Chen, Goodson, and Acosta 2015), school-community partnership (Valli, Stefanski, and Jacobson 2016), methods of instruction (Crawford-Garrett 2016, Jaffee 2016) and critical race theory (Yosso 2005) that critique the deficit perspective and appeal for an asset perspective of education. Review of those studies and some others (Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti 2005, Archibald 2008, Lonsdale and McCurry 2004, Parry 1999) reveals that the deficit perspective of literacy has the following key underlying assumptions:

- a. The deficit perspective sees the difference between the Western dominant form of education and the epistemologies of the Southern populace (in terms of their thinking, understanding and learning through their everyday practices in their lifeworld settings) as the deficits of the latter.
- b. The deficit perspective sees the knowledge and skills required for the global job market as the only valid form of knowledge and neglects the indigenous literacy practices followed by the Southern populace. Hence, the goal of literacy is tied in with the agenda of helping individual countries to become competitive knowledge economies.
- c. The deficit perspective blames individuals (and not the institutional arrangements such as lack of funding for literacy programs as per the real needs of them) for the lack of literacy skills and failure to compete in the job market. Hence, literacy programs often do not receive funding from national governments as well as international donors.
- d. The deficit perspective promotes some limited forms of educational practices that can be measured by using standardised tests. Because of this assumption the idea of literacy is equated with ones’ ability to read and write in selected languages because other forms such as critical literacy are difficult to test or measure.

A number of studies (Archibald 2008, Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti 2005, Lave and Wenger 1991, Pitikoe 2017, Lind 2005, Preece 2009b, Ubah 1980, Zachariah 1985, Zipin 2009, Preece and Hoppers 2011, Yates 1984) have found that the promotion of local and indigenous practices is more important than Western mass education system based on human capital assumptions (Becker 1975, Schultz 1981) for finding sustainable solutions of the problems faced by the people of the global South. Several scholars (Robinson-Pant 2004, Asselin and Doiron 2013, Norton 2014) have explored international issues and agendas associated with literacy and provided a robust analysis of international literacy policies and practices. These scholars have advocated for more indigenous forms of education that value African language, culture, and the lifeworld sustained by African communities. Building on those studies, in the following section, the paper presents key findings of this analysis followed by a brief discussion.

Analysis and findings

The three key findings of this analysis are: (a) the deficit perspective has led to the continuous neglect of literacy programs in African countries while devising educational plans and policies;



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(b) literacy is taken as a tool for making African countries competitive knowledge based economies; and (c) the understanding of literacy is limited to ones' ability to read and write that must be measurable through standardised testing systems. In this section as well as the next one, these findings are discussed in light of the review of scholarly literature and the analytical framework presented above.

Deficit perspective and neglect of literacy

Even though the EFA global educational movement (that began in 1990 and continued until 2015) helped to bring millions of children to school it neglected literacy in terms of providing funding for literacy programs and developing literacy policies according to the contextual realities of African people and their communities.

The 1990 Jomtien Conference, which was attended by 1,500 participants including delegates from 155 governments and 150 I/NGOs, recognised that 'more than 960 million adults, two-thirds of whom are women, are illiterate, and functional literacy is a significant problem in all countries' (see Preamble of UNESCO 1990) and declared that all people have right to education hence they would 'provide universal primary education and eliminate adult literacy' (UNESCO 1990, Preface). It is interesting to note here that even if the Jomtien Conference report (UNESCO 1990) recognised that the agenda of literacy was neglected during the structural adjustment period of the 1980s, the problems and challenges faced by African countries and their special needs for literacy programs were not identified. In fact, the word 'Africa' was not mentioned even a single time in the outcome document of the Jomtien Conference (UNESCO 1990).

Between 1990 and 1999 several conferences and consultations were organised and the role of literacy for the development of African countries was emphasised (Preece 2009a). For example, in the 7th annual conference of the Ministries of Education of African Member States (MINEDAF) held in Durban in April 1998, the Education Ministers committed for 'an expanded role for education which should be a lifelong process, a continuum which transcends schooling systems and which focuses on the building of a learning society, taking full advantage of what technology, appropriately adapted, can offer' (UNESCO 1998, 2). They argued that 'this will be a reformed vision of education that de-colonises the mind and liberates the individual for full citizenship' (ibid). Ideas such as building of a learning society and taking full advantage of technology were adopted by the national educational policies (MOE Ethiopia 2015, MOE Ghana 2012, MOE Kenya 2014, MOE Sierra Leone 2013) formulated between 2000 and 2015.

In 2000 the international community met in the World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal and reaffirmed the vision of the World Declaration on EFA adopted by the Jomtien Conference. Building on the regional consultations held in six regional conferences, including sub-Saharan Africa Conference held in Johannesburg in December 1999, the Dakar Framework for Action identified HIV/AIDS, early childhood education, school health, education of girls and women, adult literacy and education in situations of crisis and emergency as areas of major concerns and



formulated new set of EFA goals (see Foreword of UNESCO 2000). Unlike the Jomtien Conference, the Dakar Framework declared that the ‘heart of EFA lies at country level’ and recommended that ‘states should strengthen or develop national plans by 2002 to achieve EFA goals and targets no later than 2015’ (ibid). The Framework recognised that ‘the challenge of education for all is greatest in sub-Saharan Africa’; therefore, ‘priority should be given to these regions and countries’ (UNESCO 2000, 9).

The African regional report produced by the Johannesburg Conference (see pp. 24-34 of UNESCO 2000) envisioned that ‘education shall prepare people to take control of their own destiny, liberating them from dependency and endowing them with initiative, creativity, critical thinking, enterprise, democratic values, pride and appreciation of diversity’ (p. 27). The report notes that for improving the quality of education each country should ‘redesign curricula and teaching methods accordingly to make them relevant to the cultural environment’ (p. 28) of the students; hence, ‘education policies must be anchored to African reality’ (p. 30). A critical reading of the report, however, reveals that some of the underlying assumptions of deficit perspective—that celebrates Western ideas of progress and prosperity—have shaped the discourse of the report. For example, in the Preamble the report highlighted that ‘education is the sine qua non for empowering people of Africa to participate in and benefit more effectively from the opportunities available in the *globalised economy of the twenty-first century...the opportunities offered by new information and communication technologies*’ (p. 26) [emphasis added].

Critical analysis of policy documents produced by international organisations shows a gap between the rhetoric and the reality. While about 60% adults were found not able to even read and write only two EFA goals (UNESCO 2000) targeted the adult population: Goal #3 (Ensuring that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life-skills programmes) and Goal #4 (Achieving a 50 per cent improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women, and equitable access to basic and continuing education for all adults). The Millennium Development Goals (MDG)—a set of eight goals with much wider significance than EFA goals—were adopted in September 2000 at the Millennium Summit of the United Nations. Following these global initiatives, the key policy documents (MOE Ethiopia 2015, MOE Ghana 2012, MOE Kenya 2014, MOE Sierra Leone 2013) produced by the governments of African countries have recognised the importance of adult literacy in development. For example, MOE Ethiopia (2015) explicitly mentions that ‘the high level of illiteracy in the adult population is a barrier to achieving development goals’ (p. 19).

Despite the importance of adult literacy for securing progress towards achieving all the MDGs, the Millennium Summit did not include adult literacy related goals. Evaluation reports (UNESCO 2015) show that this particular goal was not achieved: ‘there are about 781 million illiterate adults’ (p. xiii) worldwide. The report noted that ‘the rate of illiteracy dropped slightly from 18% in 2000 to an estimated 14% in 2015’ but did not make towards the full achievement



(p. xiii). The EFA and MDG initiatives brought some positive outcomes in terms of increasing enrolment rates at primary level, reducing child mortality rate in the countries like Ethiopia (MOE Ethiopia 2015) but they failed ‘in addressing education in a holistic and integrated manner’ (UIL 2014, 7). One of the reasons behind this failure is that while prioritising the most achievable goals such as increasing enrolment rates at primary level, some of the crucial agendas especially those related to adult literacy were given almost no consideration.

The 2015 Global Monitoring Report (UNESCO 2015) found that even though some of the previously set goals such as increasing the knowledge of HIV and AIDS were somehow met, sub-Saharan Africa lagged behind in several literacy indicators: as of 2012 almost 29 million (the global total is 58 million) children of primary school age were out of school; about 61% of women were not able to read and write; in Guinea and Niger over 70% of the poorest girls had never attended primary school in 2010; and unlike in other regions of the world out-of-school adolescents increased in sub-Saharan Africa since 2000. Although the challenges faced by sub-Saharan Africa became a new policy rhetoric during the EFA (2000-2015) initiatives, the international community did not set any differentiated goals nor did they provide any specific support measures for helping those countries achieve those goals. In fact, funding for education in sub-Saharan Africa significantly declined after 2002 (see United Nations 2015a).

Deficit perspective and competitive knowledge economy

The policy documents produced by both supranational organisations (OECD 1996, World Bank 1995, 2002, 2003) and African governments (MOE Ethiopia 2015, MOE Ghana 2012, MOE Kenya 2014, MOE Sierra Leone 2013, UNESCO 1998) are guided with an assumption that the major goal of literacy is to prepare African countries to become competitive knowledge economies.

The idea of bringing African countries within the framework of the global economy started during the structural adjustment period in the 1980s. The deficit perspective injected by the European colonizers was institutionalised during the structural adjustment period that not only slashed the budget for literacy programs but also created a new policy discourse that almost eliminated the importance of literacy from both national and international policy agendas. The main goal of structural adjustment programs was to enable poor countries to repay their debt and insert their fragile economies to the new international economic order characterised as the competitive knowledge economy (Carnoy 1995, Bonal 2002). As per this goal, the request for the funding of every development programs required economic justification (World Bank 1995); that is, to obtain structural adjustment loans educational programs must show tangible economic benefits in their ‘cost-benefit analysis’. Since the investment in literacy did not show tangible economic returns, as Lind (2005) noted, literacy programs ceased to operate because of funding cuts both from the governments and the lenders. The structural adjustment policies had adverse consequences on the economies of African countries (Carnoy 1995, McMichael 2012).



Review of scholarly literature (Vavrus 2005, Shandra, Shandra, and London 2012, Craig and Porter 2003) shows that during and after the structural adjustment period African countries were neither able to have full participation in the global economy nor able to address the problems related to poverty, inequality, poor health and illiteracy. Those studies have identified several limitations of structural adjustment policies such as privatisation of government assets as well as budget cuts in public sectors such as education and health. Despite such research findings that consistently show these limitations the structural adjustment rationales have continuously guided educational policies of African countries. For example, the Education Sector Plan of Sierra Leone for 2014 to 2018 ‘is fully aligned with...the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP)’ (MOE Sierra Leone 2013, 15) recommended by the World Bank. It is important to note here that each country requesting concessional loans from the Bank and the International Monetary Fund are required to prepare PRSPs as recommended by those financial institutions. Scholars (Ahmed 2013, Elkins and Feeny 2014, Craig and Porter 2003) who examined the PRSP policies have found that the structural adjustment policies are re-implemented in the name of PRSP.

Analysis of Sierra Leone’s Education Sector Plan (MOE Sierra Leone 2013) is particularly important not only for understanding how supranational organisations such as the World Bank shape loan¹ recipient countries’ educational policies and plans but also for understanding how they constrain the understanding of literacy to mere reading abilities. For example, the Plan (MOE Sierra Leone 2013) argues that illiteracy (which was found about 58% in 2010) is ‘a hindrance to the socioeconomic improvement’ hence it urges the government should establish literacy centers ‘to ensure an increasing number of adults *learn to read*’ (p. 30). The report further argues that ‘knowledge of science [which it aims to impart through literacy programs] is essential for survival in the modern world’ and helping the country ‘to achieve middle income status by 2035’ (p. 42). The idea of literacy and the importance of science is inadvertently juxtaposed in another policy document (see pp 15-16 of MOE Ghana 2012), which argues that adult literacy classes should include studies into cause and effect, relations between entities, and enabling industry and other sectors of the economy by technological development.

While these policy documents highlight the desire for equipping people with scientific, industrial and technological knowledge and skills, the importance of literacy is not taken for empowering local communities, especially underprivileged groups of people such as women; rather the major aim of literacy initiatives has been for ‘achieving lower middle-income economy status by 2025’ (MOE Ethiopia 2015, 19). Furthermore, countries like Ghana assume that ‘improved literacy...is extremely good value for money’ (MOE Ghana 2012, 13). In light of the analytical framework presented above, it is important to note here that even though literacy is inevitable for the economic development of any country, the way it is understood in the African policy context—that is catching up with other developed countries of the West by immersing them in the globalised economy—is an outcome of deficit thinking. Given the protracted problems and

¹ Sierra Leone’s Education Sector Plan 2014-2018 aims to fill the budget gap of about USD 381 million from donors (see page 65 of MOE Sierra Leone 2013).



challenges of African countries the idea of benefitting from the ‘globalised economy’ may not be helpful unless a strong national economy is created first. In this respect, the paper argues that the ambition of immersing African countries into the competitive global knowledge economy (OECD 1996, World Bank 2002, 2003) promotes a deficit perspective.

Moreover, as the Education Sector Plan of Sierra Leone demonstrates, in African countries, literacy is continuously understood as an ability to read and write (Benavot 2015) but not as a continuum and a more comprehensive vision of education that can help to solve multifarious problems faced by African people. As noted by some African scholars (Preece 2009a, 2011, Preece and Hoppers 2011), no attempts at national levels are made to provide functional as well as critical adult education opportunities (Freire 1970) to those marginalised adults. Those adults need a more comprehensive approach to adult education and literacy that helps to enhance their capabilities so as to enable them to critically analyse their day-to-day problems and find solutions through local means. In this respect, the paper argues that taking literacy as a tool for creating a competitive knowledge economy is neither a realistic nor a contextually suitable approach for African countries.

Deficit perspective and testing regime

Analysis of policy documents shows that the latest version of the deficit perspective in education started after the 1990s when large-scale international assessments—such as the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)—that originated in the OECD contexts started to be a global phenomenon shaping the educational systems of African countries through a standardised testing regime (Addey et al. 2017). While those assessments including UNESCO’s Literacy Assessment and Monitoring Program (LAMP) may have some merits in comparing African countries, ‘measurement of literacy’ within this testing regime has promoted a deficit perspective. Supranational organisations such as the OECD (OECD 2016) and the World Bank (World Bank 2003) are recommending that the national governments of African countries to follow the global testing regime. Analysis of national policy reports shows that African governments have institutionalised the testing regime not only at national level but also at regional level by establishing institutions such as the Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (known as SACMEQ). For example, Kenya’s National Assessment Systems for Monitoring Learning Achievements (NASMLA), which works in partnership with the SACMEQ, aims at improving the quality of education by focusing on ‘measurable learning outcomes...especially in literacy’ (MOE Kenya 2014, 17). In the context of the SDGs 2030 (United Nations 2015b) and Education 2030 (Incheon Declaration 2015), a new program called PISA for Development (OECD 2016) is designed for measuring the learning outcomes of developing countries.

As a major objective of the testing regime is recommending developing countries and international educational partners to make educational plans and policies based on statistical



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evidences, the PISA for Development will be used to allocate funding for the educational programs designed to achieve the SDGs. While the results of the large-scale assessments might be helpful for measuring the competitiveness of the Western countries characterised as knowledge based economies (OECD 1996, World Bank 2003) this kind of testing regime is not suitable for African countries whose economies are based on agriculture, animal husbandry such as herding (Pitikoe 2017) and other local traditional and indigenous practices. An in-depth ethnographic study undertaken by Maddox (2014) to explore how the LAMP operated in Mongolia identified limitations of large-scale literacy assessment. Maddox found that some of the test items used in the LAMP were originally developed for the IALS for use in the OECD countries, which failed to test the real ability of Mongolian people but helped to legitimise the deficit. Maddox argues that,

This is an example of a high stakes assessment since not being able to fill out a simple application form is frequently cited in the media as evidence of poor levels of adult literacy. That illustrates how a sense of deficit and crisis can be developed from literacy assessment data to legitimise neoliberal policy interventions – framing respondents as potential wage labourers in need of training (p. 485)

Maddox indicates that the international large scale assessment regime stems from psychometrics, a branch of positivist ‘science concerned with evaluating the attributes of psychological tests’ (Furr and Bacharach 2014, 9), that helps to ‘quantify inter-individual or intra-individual differences’ (p. 7) without considering the social contexts responsible for bringing such differences. Similarly, another study conducted by Serpell and Simatende (2016) to understand how such tests are perceived by Zambian parents, teachers and administrators found that as such tests were ‘developed by Western authors based on research with Western subjects and addressed to Western audiences’ (p. 2) they ‘fail to respond to some enduring cultural preoccupations of many parents, educators and policy makers’ (p. 1). The analysis of recent policy documents (MOE Ethiopia 2015, MOE Ghana 2012, MOE Kenya 2014, MOE Sierra Leone 2013) reveals that the testing regime has been the de facto educational strategy for African countries. For example, the Education Strategic Plan 2010 – 2020 of Ghana mentions that the country’s status in the TIMSS as a major indicator of its quality education and argues that the ‘international assessment’ of ‘actual proficiency in literacy and numeracy at basic education level is matter for serious concern’ (MOE Ghana 2012, 9).

Similarly, the idea of quality education in countries like Ethiopia is understood in terms of the average score of students learning achievements. While such scores might give some insights for the purpose of making comparisons, the standardised testing conducted at the national level cannot explain why certain groups of people (for example, those speaking marginalised languages as their mother tongue and those in abject poverty) fail to achieve higher scores. It is important to note that the Action Plan for the Education Sector Development Programme 2016 – 2020 (MOE Ethiopia 2015) aims to assess ‘all national examinations to ensure compliance with new curriculum content materials (p. 20). However, as noted above, this initiative will not help



much without contextualising the curricula and the contents of instructional materials to the local realities. As the education policies of the countries like Ethiopia follow a deficit perspective the increasing use of technology (see MOE Ethiopia 2015, 21) and English as the medium of instruction are seen as major solutions of their educational problems, without considering the issue of digital divide (Norton 2014) that perpetuates the status quo.

A key message of this analysis is that the testing regime—in which results are drawn on average scores and rankings to construct political narratives that legitimise reform or the status quo between high and low achievers—stems from the deficit perspective. The focus is always on ranking African countries in terms of their educational performances and opening ‘window for policy reform’ (Addey et al. 2017, 439). As the African people are tested on educational contents that are beyond their community contexts (Maddox 2014, Serpell and Simatende 2016) there is always a high chance that they perform low, which is interpreted as their deficits. The potential limitation of testing tools used in such assessments are not questioned; rather the performance difference between African countries and the rest of the world is assumed as the problem, which becomes justification for recommending new educational policy reforms. This new version of the deficit perspective based on the testing regime is, in a sense, appears as a new manifestation of colonialism (Wickens and Sandlin 2007). Given the nature of African literacy practices especially their non-measurable forms of knowledge and skills, it is important to note here that this new version of the deficit perspective has the most adverse consequences in developing contextually useful literacy programs in African countries.

Discussion: towards an asset perspective of literacy

A key finding of the analysis of policy documents produced after the 1990s is that literacy policies formulated by both global organisations and African governments have aimed at providing temporary patches to fill the deficit rather than finding sustainable solutions of their problems. African countries are compared with Western countries in terms of literacy, enrollment and dropout rates and the former are positioned at the bottom of international benchmark. Based on those statistical evidences, interpretations are made to show a number of deficits at individual, societal, and national levels. Those policies appear to be ideologically correct but as they are not based on the contextual realities of the African people and their communities they fail to address their needs and potentials. This analysis found several limitations of such comparative analysis and generalised (or de-contextualised) interpretations of such findings.

In light of the analysis presented above, this paper appeals that more researches are required not only to critique the deficit perspective but also for developing literacy policy and programs through an asset perspective. Some of the questions useful for this kind of research may include: Do the contents of the literacy programs begin with what the people of a particular community already know? Do the literacy learners feel that the literacy programs in which they participate value their knowledge, skills, and experiences that they bring from their families and communities? For this, rather than focusing on the potential differences between the African



people and their Western counterparts, literacy programs should view the families of ‘working-class or poor communities...in terms of their strengths and resources as their defining pedagogical characteristic’ (Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti 2005, x).

In this respect, the African people (who are considered illiterate simply because they are not able to verbalise written words or not able to express themselves through written script), their experiences, their knowledge and skills required for undertaking traditional practices and the strategies they have used to sustain their lifeworld should be taken as the unrecognised repositories of situated knowledge (Lave and Wenger 1991). Literacy programs informed by an asset perspective of literacy should begin from such unrecognised repositories of situated knowledge. Given the diversity in African cultures and languages it is not always easy to develop literacy programs in the native languages. For example, Afaan Oromo (spoken mostly in Ethiopia and Kenya) has limited alphabets and complex word formation whereas Amharic and Tigrigna have many alphabets but short words. Policy makers should take those issues into consideration while developing literacy programs. Given this complexity developing literacy programs through an asset perspective is not an easy task, however, it is extremely important to choose this direction to address the contextual needs and potentials.

The asset perspective of literacy should challenge and revert the deficit perspective of literacy to value people’s capacity to communicate, to rationalise and think critically as the primary building blocks of literacy programs. Looking through the Freirean lens, an asset perspective of literacy can be conceptualised as a process of conscientization (Freire 1970) that reorients literacy practices to the cultural contexts of the learners. The acquisition of skills and understanding developed through this process should ‘enable individuals to recognise and challenge the unequal political, social, cultural, economic contexts which govern their lives’ (Lonsdale and McCurry 2004, 8). This broader framework of literacy allows local indigenous practices, traditional occupational practices, household choruses, and traditional practices of treating patients by using herbal medicines to be included in the literacy programs.

The asset perspective of literacy takes the local culture and the idea of the lifeworld (Zipin 2009) as a major point of departure from the deficit perspective of education. Unlike the deficit perspective that tends to see African literacy practices through the Western gaze of human capital rationale, the asset perspective of education and research should focus on ‘the multiple and contingent relations and practices of people in situated lifeworld contexts, and the meaning and values they construct therein’ (Zipin 2009, 319). As Zipin notes ‘complex knowledge and expertise emerge in family and community resistances, resiliencies and other creating copings with difficult material and cultural conditions of poverty and otherness’ (p. 322).

Some of the elements of asset perspective—such as linking ‘numeracy and literacy skills to livelihoods’ (MOE Ethiopia 2015, 17), ‘creating a learning society’ (p. 36), ‘expanding parental education through exercising indigenous knowledge’ (p. 79) and making adult literacy ‘a vehicle for transformation and empowerment of individuals and communities’ (MOE Kenya 2014, 54)—have been mentioned in the policy reports but a critical analysis of such documents shows that no



concrete actions are taken to actually integrate the elements of an asset perspective in educational policies and action plans. Rather such policy rhetoric is mostly connected with the idea of ‘illiteracy’ (understood as one’s inability to read and write) among adults, which is problematic for developing literacy policy through an asset perspective.

Conclusion and directions for further research

Analyses of educational policy documents reveal that the deficit perspective has continuously shaped the literacy policies and practices of African countries from the colonial period dominated by the European countries to the current era of educational globalisation championed by supranational forces. The nature of the relationship of the past (colonisers and colonised) and of the present (as international organisations and their member countries) has changed but the deficit perspective used to see African people and their communities has not changed. In a sense, it appears that identifying deficits through comparison has increased with the increasing trend of international large-scale assessment in the context of global educational movements such as EFA and Education 2030. The quantification of qualities and measurement of non-measurable literacy practices are the recent consequences of deficit perspective of education.

In light of the analysis and discussion presented above, this paper provides selected issues for further research, especially for those interested in exploring African literacy policies and practices. Firstly, in the context of the SDGs the international community has recognised EFA including adult literacy as a fundamental human right: we ‘reaffirm the vision and political will reflected in numerous international and regional² human rights treaties that stipulate the right to education and its interrelation with other human rights’ (Incheon Declaration 2015, 5). International community has declared a new educational goal for 2016-2030 period: ‘Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all’ (United Nations 2015b). Until the declaration of the SDGs 2030 and Education 2030 lifelong learning had never been proposed as a global goal for education. This is a turning point in the history of international education because in the past it was the notion of EFA, basically universal primary education (MDGs #2) and basic literacy (EFA Goal #4) that dominated the educational policy discourses of African countries (Preece 2011). Hence, it is important to explore what understanding of literacy is promoted in the current discourse on lifelong learning and what implications such understanding might have for the sub-Saharan countries. Further studies can be directed to explore whether there have been any consecrated efforts towards the development of contextually relevant adult literacy policy and programs for African countries.

² Article 27 of The African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights adopted in Nairobi in 1981 states that (1) every individual shall have the right to education; (2) every individual may freely take part in cultural life of his community; and (3) the promotion and protection of morals and traditional values recognized by the community shall be the duty of the state’ (see <http://www.humanrights.se/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/African-Charter-on-Human-and-Peoples-Rights.pdf>)



Secondly, literacy initiatives such as those led by the Canadian Organization for Development through Education (CODE)³, African Library Project⁴, Centre for Promotion of Literacy in sub-Saharan Africa⁵, African Storybook Project⁶ and many others have focused on African contexts by providing reading materials in several African languages. However, such project initiatives have neither been included in national plans nor even recognised by supranational organisations while formulating global goals such as the SDGs. Hence, it is important to explore not only with regard to how these initiatives are contributing towards empowering local African communities but also for examining why the agendas of these literacy initiatives have not been integrated in African national policies. Studies of this kind will help both for identifying the commonalities of several project initiatives (since many of them appear to have similar focus) taken by non-state actors such as NGOs and finding the limitations of national literacy policies.

Finally, since the independence of African countries during the 1950s and 1960s there has been continuous advocacy, mostly by African scholars and sometimes by the national governments⁷ for preserving and enhancing positive aspects of African ‘cultures, traditions, values and ways of life’ through education (see UNESCO 1998). However, there is a dearth of critical studies to understand whether there have been any initiatives at the community level to implement such visions of education. As the case of Sierra Leone demonstrates (where the national literacy programs helped only 7.4% youths and adults to be able to read and write) national literacy programs (MOE Sierra Leone 2013) have continuously failed to reach the underprivileged groups of people. In this respect, it is important to examine why literacy programs have continuously failed to enable adults even to read and write. Is it because the contents of literacy classes are not according to the need, interest and contextual realities of them? This line of inquiry can highlight community based development initiatives as well as exemplary works done by local communities and their indigenous leaders towards promoting asset view of literacy.

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³ <https://www.codecan.org/>

⁴ <https://www.africanlibraryproject.org/>

⁵ <https://agoracenter.jyu.fi/projects/capolsa>

⁶ <http://www.africanstorybook.org/>

⁷ For example, the National Education Sector Plan 2014-2018 of Kenya states that ‘programmes and strategies have been specifically designed to ensure that the Kenyan context determines Kenyan solutions to Kenyan education needs by Kenyan processes’ (MOE Kenya 2014, xxii)



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