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Adolescents' literacy practices in and out of school in Uganda

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Introduction

The literacy levels of adolescents in Sub-Saharan Africa are generally low. Global monitoring reports by UNESCO place Uganda's youth literacy levels at 89% (UNESCO UIS, 2021). while the Uganda National Development Plan-(NPD- III, 2020) marks the same at 74%. Although these reports indicate that there is an improvement in the literacy rates among the youth, they barely detail the reading and writing practices of the youth as observed in their school or home contexts. Socio-cultural and critical literacy theoretical lenses were applied to explore the literacy practices of adolescent learners in rural and peri-urban contexts in Uganda. Using a largely qualitative research approach, we explored teachers' understanding of literacy, implemented reading and writing circles to examine motivations for young peoples' reading and writing practices, and how reading influences their lived experiences. Findings indicate that teachers have multiple conceptualisations of literacy that are greatly oriented towards curricular guidelines and are not expansive enough, students engage in diverse literacy practices and write about their experiences in and out of school, they write about different themes depending on the audience and purpose of writing. Learners' motivation for reading is influenced a lot by the curriculum requirements for assessment and textbooks, as well as available time, text, access to reading resources and context, however we have found that religion and parents are key in influencing what students read or write in and out of school. Recommendations are made for provision of contextually-relevant multi-modal reading resources and pedagogical practices that bridge the boundary between schooled literacy and reading and writing practices and experiences of learners out-of-school.

This research project focused on the literacy practices of adolescents, which is an area in research that is often given less attention especially in developing contexts given that the focus is usually drawn to primary or beginners' literacy, and most especially learners' engagement with schooled literacy tasks (Henning, 2020). By the time learners join secondary school (ideally at age 12) they have acquired the basic reading skills like recognition of words and relating them to appropriate sounds, writing symbols, awareness of correct spellings, basic comprehension, and partial mastery of grade level writing skills. Such skills can enable learners to communicate and develop minimally but they can hardly engage using critical literacy skills. However, it can be argued that youth or adolescent literacy is a 'complex' terrain to analyze because learners interact with various texts both within and outside the school. They take part in numerous literacy activities most of which are self-motivated and may not directly relate to the school curriculum (Moje etal., 2008). In addition, the social reading context in secondary schools is unique because learners make personal literacy choices that are 'hidden' to the teacher or parent, creating a gap in the knowledge of what they read or more importantly whether they read.

Adolescents' Literacy Practices

Our study conceptualizes literacy as a social practice, historically contingent, culturally organized, and ideologically motivated (Moss, 2021; Heath 1983; Street, 1984). Therefore, the "*events*" and "*practices*" of reading and writing are culturally mediated activities, shaped by the social contexts in which they take place rather than discrete and decontextualized cognitive skills. To widen our understanding of learners' literacy practices, we therefore explore both in-school and out-of school literacy practices and engagement with literacy texts. Literacy, in the simplest terms, is the ability to read and write and is highly shaped by the discourses and practices of schooled literacy (Henning, 2020). However with changing times, contexts and modes of communication, literacy is defined variously. For instance, the National Literacy

> Trust (UK) defines literacy as "....ability to read, write, speak and listen well. A literate person is able to communicate effectively with others and to understand written information" (Cambridge Assessment, 2013). On their website, UNESCO defines literacy as follows:
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> > Literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society **(UNESCO website).**

The definition by UNESCO widens the horizon of understanding literacy beyond the skills of reading and writing though, to the learners' agentic constructions of their social world. These two concepts of reading and writing are at the center of understanding the concept of literacy. The definition also suggests that achieving literacy skills is a continuous activity that involves one's ability to participate meaningfully in society.

Reading and writing skills are major predictors of academic achievement and the current 21st century global trends require that adolescents should have advanced literacy abilities to enable them to negotiate the economic, social and political landscape (UNESCO, 2012). Stromquist (2005) writes, "... literacy skills are fundamental to informed decision-making, personal empowerment, active and passive participation in local and global social community" (p. 14). Adolescents' literacy practices revolve around their ability to: critique texts, make connections between texts and apply what they learn from text to their social contexts, and compose responses, stories and reports for different audiences (Thompson, 2012; Harmon et al., 2011; Moje et al., 2008). The National Council of Teachers of English-(NCTE, 2006) suggests that adolescents should be able to transfer literacy skills to other domains of their lived experiences. The International Reading Association (IRA, 2012) on the other hand proposes that a literate adolescent in the 21st century should be able to:

- Read a variety of texts including, but not limited to, traditional print text and digital (multimodal) text.
- Author [write] words and images in fixed domains as well as multimodal settings.
- Talk about a variety of texts with others, including teachers, peers, members of their own communities, and the larger world population.
- Interact with texts in discipline-specific ways within and across all subjects inclusive of, but not limited to, electives, career and technical education, and visual and performing arts (p. 2).

Hence, in addition to using the classroom and school spaces for reading and writing, students are also expected to widen their literacy spectrum to work with a variety of texts that may not necessarily relate to the curriculum. It is this extension of literacy practices that partly motivated our research to establish what the students read and write out of school and the reasons behind their choices. That said, teachers and the school context are the first literacy role models for students especially in developing countries since they provide the content and materials for them to read and write (Nambi, 2015). The teacher can play the roles of informer, guide, curriculum interpreter, instructional guide and examiner as they shape the literacy practices of their adolescent students. For teachers to achieve the aforementioned roles, they need to align their classroom instruction to learners' interests and needs which are naturally part of their sociocultural experiences (Alvermann, 2002; Irvin *et al*., 2007; Moje *et al.*, 2008; Snow & Moje, 2010) . It should also be noted that teachers on their part are also governed by the requirements of the school curriculum and hence they may struggle to strike that balance between the needs of the students and the curriculum (Nambi, 2018). Nonetheless, in Uganda, the secondary school curriculum emphasizes that the learning outcomes should clearly describe what learners are able to demonstrate in terms of knowledge, skills, and values at the end of each lesson. For instance, some of the learning outcomes state that: "*By the end of this Chapter the learner should be able to:* Write information and ideas about families and family life; Interpret graphical and pictorial representation of families; Apply all forms of personal pronouns in written and oral conversations; Identify how to interpret real life situations so as to be able to orally express likes and dislikes; …" (NCDC, 2020, p. 2).

The motivation for reading usually declines as students grow to become adolescents and start making major decisions on their priorities in life. In school, students are by default expected to read to fulfill the requirements of the educational cycle by reading and writing academic texts and this is commonly referred to as extrinsic motivation (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011; Dunston & Gambrell, 2009). However, there is usually a higher motivation for out-of-school literacy practices amongst learners because they engage with non-academic texts in their own contexts - intrinsic motivation (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011; Alvermann, 2008; Stevens & Bean, 2007; Alvermann & Wilson, 2007). Dunston and Gambrell (2009) argue that although adolescents continually engage in literacy practices out of school, their activities are often ignored since they do not align with the school syllabus and hence are termed as inappropriate. For example, they write "Parents and teens often do not see eye to eye on the value of digital literacies, and teachers worry that digital forms of communication ruin students' spelling and sense of grammatical correctness. However, adolescents use and extend their school literacy practices in positive ways when engaging in digital communication" (p.274). Whereas our project did not particularly focus on participants' engagement in digital literacies, we were keen to establish that link between in-school and out-of-school writing and reading practices and the motivations behind the same. Students motivation for reading can be indicated by a number of factors such as: their choice of texts that are not part of the syllabus; their preferences for particular titles/topics; dedication of particular time for reading; their ability to talk about what they read and write; their level of interest in what they read/write, *etc*." (Wilkinson, et al,, 2020; Dunston & Gambrell, 2009), and extrinsic motivation, such as family pressure..

Goldman and Snow (2015) aptly categorize the challenges that adolescents face as readers under the following subsections: 'the learners', 'the tasks', 'the contexts', 'the texts' and 'the pedagogy'. This categorization was essential for the current project because it helped us to approach our final objective in a systematic manner because the identifiers of the challenges are both the generic school-based and home based aspects. For instance, it was important to examine the challenges stemming from the learners as key agents because "some still struggle

to read words accurately, fluently, and with automaticity. This becomes an **insuperable** obstacle as they are expected to read longer, more complex texts containing more unfamiliar words…" (Goldman & Snow, 2015, p. 464). In the same sense, it was essential to determine the challenges related to the contexts (in and out of school) where literacy is practiced because "... schools serving students at risk of poor reading outcomes (for example, those from low-income homes, from families that do not speak the school language, from primary programs that have not provided adequate instruction) are typically even less likely to have well-prepared teachers and engaging or challenging curriculum and pedagogy" (Goldman & Snow, 2015, p. 464). Further, adolescents' texts, whether written or read, tend to become more complex and diverse as they advance in life and academic grades, hence their writing and reading skills are expected to progress in secondary schools (Snow, 2010; Moje et al, 2008). However, in contexts where literacy materials are limited such as Uganda, students may find it to improve their literacy skills, more especially the discourse structures and general vocabulary in advanced texts that are dominant in schooled literacy.

Adolescent literacy has attracted several interventions over the years as practitioners and stakeholders have become aware of the possible dangers of not supporting youth to continuously practice and improve their engagement with texts. For example, the EFA Global Monitoring Report provides guidelines on what works to improve literacy levels for youth especially in developing contexts (UNESCO, 2012). For example, multilingual structured pedagogy literacy interventions (Wawire *et al* 2023; Piper *et al,* 2018). Goldman and Snow (2015) argue that literacy does not stop at merely reading or writing a particular text, but rather adolescents should be encouraged to participate in discussions: "Classroom discussion is hypothesized to promote students' literacy skills via several routes: increasing engagement, building content knowledge presupposed by the text, revealing to students teachers' and classmates' alternative perspectives and interpretations, and providing opportunities for students to practice orally the language and thinking skills they need to apply in reading and writing" (p. 472). In this regard therefore, part of our project aimed at establishing the classroom strategies that teachers involved their learners in and how these were also reflected in their literacy practices outside the school context. Other interventions that have been adopted and adapted to improve literacy practices among adolescents include reading and writing circles (Sevgny, 2022; Stout, 2018; Graham-Marr & Pellow, 2016).

Application of socio-cultural lens to implement reading circles

Sociocultural theory posits that students learn writing based on motivation factors as well as the context, social expectations, and cultural norms (Prior, 2006), In secondary schools, this theory can help to explain how students' motivation and reading practices may vary between home and at school. More importantly, sociocultural theory predicts that students are motivated when they are provided opportunities to share their writing, collaborate on writing tasks, and learn from more knowledgeable others in writing (Vygotsky, 1978). These theoretical propositions are aligned with the key features of reading and writing circles that have been implemented in this study.

Reading circles are peer led discussion reading groups that can also be referred to as Literature circles (Furr, 2004; Daniels, 2002). Reading circles are traced to the work of Daniels (2002) who worked with other teachers to document their experiments with literature circles whereby they used the approach of book clubs or reading groups in their secondary school classrooms. Book clubs were traditionally associated with adult readers in society (USA) who used to meet on prescribed days to talk about the texts (mainly novels) that they were reading. Daniels (2002) and his group adapted the approach for their classes but they were not very successful since

students often failed to talk about what they had read (Furr, 2004). Furr (2004) modified the key aspects of Daniels (2002) literature circles for his EFL classes in Japan as shown in the image below:

Daniels (2000) – key aspects for literature circles	**Furr (2004) key aspects for ELF reading circles**
• Students *choose* their own materials. • *Small temporary groups* are formed, based on book choice. • Different groups read *different books* • When books are finished, *readers share with their class-mates*, and then form new groups around new reading • Groups meet on a *regular, predictable schedule* to discusstheir reading. • Students use written or drawn *notes* to guide both theirreading and their discussion. • Discussion *topics come from the students* • Group meetings aim to be open, *natural conversations about books*, so personal connections, digressions and open-endedquestions are welcome. • The teacher serves as a *facilitator*, not a group member orinstructor. • Evaluation is by *teacher observation and student self-evaluation.* • A spirit of *playfulness and fun* pervades the room.(Daniels, 2000: 18)	• Instructors select materials appropri ate for their student population. • *Small temporary groups* are formed, based on student choice or the Instructor's discretion. • Different groups are usually reading the same text • When books are finished, *readers may prepare a group project and/or the Instructor may provide additional information to "fill in some of the gaps" in student understanding* • After the group projects or additional instruction, new groupsare formed, based on student choice or the Instructor'sdiscretion (p. 5-6)

The major changes made by Furr (2004) revolve around the role of the teacher who is expected to select reading materials for students because they (teachers) are in a better position to choose appropriate texts depending on the language learning needs of the non-native speakers of English. This approach largely resonates with our setting in Uganda whereby the teachers play a critical role in providing access to reading and writing materials for their students. Simms (2010) through 'The Reading Agency' (https://readingagency.org.uk/resources/2075/) suggests guidelines on the practicalities of reading circles, especially the roles that the different members have to play during this activity. Roles such as leader, summariser and connector are assigned to different members and this was very useful for the current project during the grouping of the students for the reading and writing circles. We adapted the ideas from Daniels (2000), Furr (2004) and Simms (2010) for this research to create guidelines for the reading and writing circles.

It is against this backdrop that we explored the literacy practices of selected adolescent learners in Uganda in a bid to attract attention to what young learners read and write in Uganda and how this may influence their personal and societal development.

The research-team worked in two schools. One of the schools is a refugee host secondary school located in a rural area (Kikuube District) with students from the host community which is one of the largest refugee camps in East Africa. The second school is located in Wakiso, a semi urban district in Uganda.

Research Objectives

The overall objective of this research was to explore the literacy practices of young people in Uganda, with specific objectives:

1) To establish teachers' understanding of literacy in the context of their students' experiences.
2) To determine motivations for young people's reading practices in and out of school.
3) To examine if teachers' views of literacy are similar or different from policy documents for the purpose
4) To examine how adolescents in Uganda perceive how reading influences their lived experiences in the community
5) To find out the challenges that affect young people's reading practices in Uganda

Research Methodology

We mainly employed a qualitative research approach under the symbolic interactionism paradigm which offers that meaning is made through human interaction with the research context (Crotty, 1998; Gray, 2014). Under the symbolic interactionism research approach, we use methods such as observation, interview and documentary evidence to collect data about how participants use available materials in their context in order to explore the meaning behind their interactions in relation to literacy.

Social interaction in the school context was viewed in the form of engagement with the teachers and learners in the two selected schools through interviews and focus group discussions and observation of their use of literacy materials, content and curriculum in general (Crotty, 1998; Cohen *et al*. 2011; Bryman 2012), and analysis of students' written text from the writing circles.. Participants were also observed interpreting and modifying their reality depending on how they interacted with each other, with the literacy materials and with us the researchers. In this way, symbolic interactionism suggested a continuous presence of the researchers in the field in order to observe the different forms of interaction, modifications and the possible meanings that participants attach to them.

The Research Sites

This project was carried out in Uganda in two selected secondary schools for ethical reasons named St. Jude Secondary School and Ngong Senior School. St. Jude SS is located in Wakiso District in a peri-urban area. This school was selected because it was readily accessible in terms of availability of literacy materials and the teachers of literacy had a wide range of experiences since most of them had been teaching for a period of over ten years. In addition, St. Jude SS is located in an area where it was easy for us to pilot the research instruments and we were able to engage with some of the key informants several times as we made relevant changes in the study tools. Ngong SS on the other hand is located in a very rural area but we chose the school because most of the students are refugee students and we were interested in establishing their literacy practices in the 'new' host-country context. In Uganda, refugee students are integrated in the mainstream national education system, and use the language of instruction of the host

nation for learning, reading and writing. This makes them vulnerable in terms of their literacy practices because most of them need extra support to cope with the new educational context. We wanted to establish the challenges that the students in Ngong SS faced as they learned to read and write using a different language and the support they had in this 'new' setting.

Research Phases

Phase One

We sought ethical clearance from the Uganda National Council of Science and Technology-UNCST and a letter of introduction from the Principal, College of Education and External Studies, Makerere University which we used to access the schools that participated in the study. We sought extra permission from the relevant gatekeepers to access the school in the refugee settlement. Although the head teachers had already written to agree to work with us (during the CODE application process), we requested them to sign informed consent forms before they helped us identify teachers of English and Literature to work with in their schools. The teachers also signed consent forms to show their willingness to participate in the study after holding general meetings with us.

During this phase we developed and tested the research tools: open ended questionnaire, interview protocols, observation guide, documentary analysis guide. The research tools were discussed with our mentor who helped us enrich them as per our objectives. For instance, suggestions to separate the two skills - reading and writing so that we prepare the two sets of data collection instruments to address each skill separately. For example separate interview instruments for reading and writing were developed and administered.

We held initial interviews with some of the teachers and also administered open ended questionnaires. We requested for and received copies of the reading texts that the students often used and these were used to enrich the content in the research instruments such as interviews. This initial interaction with the participants helped us determine and sort out the useful activities such as selection of learners and other teachers for the project. With the guidance of the teachers for example, we decided to focus on the Senior Four class since they were the most advanced in their literacy practices. Phase one took place between April and June 2021 although some of the activities overlapped to phase two.

Phase Two

As a continuation of the activities from phase one we conducted interviews with the teachers to establish their general perspectives of what and how their learners read and any support or perceived challenges that they may face when teaching literacy. We started with St. Jude SS and had detailed interviews with five teachers and one administrator. We participated out of school contexts because schools in Uganda were closed due to COVID-19. The teachers shared with us some of the relevant texts that were available for students to read and the topics that they usually wrote about. We enlisted the teachers to help us identify the classes that we would work with and categorize them into two groups - for reading and writing. The teachers administered the open-ended questionnaires amongst the selected groups of learners via online media (they were teaching their students via online resources during COVID-19). The questionnaires served the purpose of gathering students' thoughts about literacy and we used the responses to fine tune some of the questions we prepared for the group interviews. Thus our data analysis started early on as we interpreted the initial interviews with teachers and the questionnaires. This phase was extensive, covering approximately five months from June to October 2021, and some of these activities were repeated in Ngong SS.

Phase Three:
Between November and December 2021 we worked with our mentor and CODE coordinator to prepare the mid-term report which we submitted in early January 2022. The refined research tools were also submitted and included as part of the report. Schools in Uganda were fully opened in January 2022 after the COVID-19 lockdowns. We had to adjust some of the dates for the activities especially in Ngong SS which is a hard to reach school. We had not received feedback for the questionnaire from this school since they hardly held any online classes. Between January and June 2022 we repeatedly visited the schools to: interview the teachers we had not accessed in phase one; monitor the administration of questionnaires in Ngong SS; visit and take stock of the available literacy materials and spaces; hold group/FGDs with students that were identified by the teachers; collect documents - especially students' written work; working with the class teachers to administer/monitor the writing circle content); and observe the reading circles (St. Jude SS).

Phase Four
Between the months of July and August 2022 we transcribed the interviews and group discussions as we continued with the iterative analysis of data. We also consolidated the data we had accumulated over the period of field research. Altogether we had data in form of:

- Transcripts from the interviews with teachers, school administrators and FGDs with learners
- Data from questionnaires
- Notes from observation of the school contexts - libraries and classes
- Field notes
- Learners' written texts from the reading and writing circles –
- Textbooks read by students
- Policy documents - syllabi and curriculum

The data was organized according to the way it could help us address the research questions before we started the final steps of data analysis around the month of September 2022. We also made a final visit to the schools to crosscheck and validate some of the data with the respondents. However some of our final engagements with the participants were via telephone conversations. Between January and February 2023 we prepared our report for final submission.

Study Participants

The participants for this project included:

- 2 headteachers
- 1 school administrator (Head of English Department at St. Jude SS)
- 6 teachers of English and Literature
- **200** students (filled the open ended questionnaire divided into two groups for reading and writing)
- 40 students participated in FGDs and reading and writing circles (selected from the 200 students above)

Data Collection Instruments

The symbolic interactionism research paradigm adopted for this study generally requires researchers to continuously interact with the research participants through the use of qualitative methods such as interviews, FGDs and observation. Symbolic interactionism offers that meaning is made through human interaction with the world and it provides the following essential principles:

- People interpret the meaning of objects and actions in the world and then act upon these interpretations.
- Meanings arise from the process of social interaction.
- Meanings are handled in, and are modified by, an interactive process used by people in dealing with the phenomena that are encountered (Gray, 2014, p.24).

In light of this project, objects or symbols were the artifacts such as students' books and other instructional materials that were used at the time we collected data. We wanted to establish how the learners' continuously interacted with these materials in order to get an understanding of their literacy practices. Thus we used the following research methods to collect the data:

Interview

- 2 detailed interviews with the headteachers of the 2 schools
- 1 interview with the HoD
- 6 individual interviews with teachers of English and Literature
- 8 telephone interviews (these were spontaneous interviews to fill the gaps in the data)

Focus Group Discussions

- 8 FGDs with groups of five students (4 for reading, 4 for writing)
- We adapted Goodman, Watson and Burke (2005) the 'Burke Reading Interview Modified for Older Readers" model for the FGDs with students

Open -ended questionnaires

- 200 open ended questionnaires for learners (100 reading, 100 writing)

Observation

- Observation of spaces and practices
- Libraries
- Classrooms
- Reading and writing circles

Documentary evidence

- Examination of available literacy materials e.g. Magofu….
- Library materials
- Analysis of Students' written texts from the writing circle

Ethical Considerations

The issue of ethics could not be overemphasized in this research project because some of our targeted respondents were considered vulnerable participants since they were below the age of 18 and others were refugee students. Simons notes that "participants should not feel let down, 'at risk', or disempowered" (Simons, 2009, p.97). In this project we considered ethics in terms of issues of access, confidentiality, anonymity and informed consent of the participants and we undertook the following steps to observe the confidentiality of our participants.

We went through the steps of obtaining permission from the various gatekeepers at the different levels of data collection. As noted earlier we sought permission from the Uganda National Council of Science and Technology-UNCST after presenting our proposal and study interests to them. In addition, we presented our proposal to the Principal, College of Education and External Studies, Makerere University who gave us letters of introduction to the research contexts as members of staff - this was very important because we had to go to cross several

districts to access a hard to reach school - Ngong SS. In addition, the letter from the Principal was helpful when accessing the settlement where the refugee hosting school is located.

We explained the objectives of the research in great detail to the teachers and administrators and invited them to ask any question about the same before they signed the informed consent. We requested for their permission to audio record the interviews and to access their students' work. Also, we explained to them that pseudonyms would be used in the final report and subsequent publications. All the data we collected was protected on our personal password protected computers and while the written notes from observations of the school contexts were stored in files that only the researchers and research assistant had access to.

We were cognizant of the fact that our research activities could easily interfere (Cohen et al., 2011) with the school activities especially considering the fact that we wanted to observe the students' literacy practices in their natural form during some of the activities such as reading circles (Crotty, 1998; Gray, 2014; Bryman 2012). Hence we took extra effort to visit the schools after making phone calls to establish the time that was usually agreeable to the participants in order to minimize the possible interferences in their daily activities. Our activities in the two schools were staggered to enable us to meet different participants according to their convenience, for instance some of the teachers at St. Jude had to participate in the training of the new competence based curriculum off campus for lengthy periods of time.

Finally, we shared our initial thoughts about the data through general informal discussions with some of the participants before we concluded our fieldwork. This was a great opportunity for us to validate the data with the participants and hopefully it was beneficial to them because they got to hear some of their learners' thoughts about what they read and write at school.

Analysis of Data

The research methods generated data in the form of documents, field notes and transcripts from recordings, pictures and filled open ended questionnaires. The data is summarized below:

Summary of the data

Interview	Observation	Documentary evidence	Questionnaire
• Nine transcripts (from interviews with six teachers of English and Literature, two head teachers and one Head of Department)	• 4 observation schedules of reading circles lesson schedules • 2 library schedules • Field notes	• English and Literature teaching syllabi • Teachers' schemes of work • Teaching timetables • Textbooks • Field notes • more than 100 written written	• 200 open ended questionnaires from students

• Eight transcripts from the FGDs with students • 10 brief transcriptions from episodic interviews; • Field notes		pieces from students (compositions, brief descriptions etc)	

The analysis of data was a continuous iterative process that started immediately when we began collecting data as per qualitative research methods (Flick, 2018). We listened to the interview and FGD recordings and read the data repeatedly during and after data collection which enabled us to find patterns related to students' literacy practices even when we were still in the field. We used dedoose to transcribe the data and as we reviewed the transcripts we immersed ourselves into the data. Data from the different methods was compared consistently and organized the data according to how it seemed to address the research objectives (Scott & Usher, 2011; Seale, 2008; Simons, 2009). However the data was quite extensive and we adopted Miles *et al's*. (2014) data analysis strategic steps namely: data condensation; data display and drawing and verifying conclusions. Data condensation helped us to reduce and organize the big volumes to a workable state through "selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and/or transforming the data" (Miles *et al*., 2014, p. 12).

Key concepts derived from each research question were used as the basis for selecting and focusing data under different categories. Data from the different methods was compared continuously to establish recurrent patterns. The questionnaires provided insights into participants' perceptions towards literacy through the recurring phrases that related to the research questions. Reflections emerging from reading the data from the transcribed interviews led to the formulation of themes in view of how it related to the research questions. We analyzed the themes further in line with the literature and substantive theories and this enabled us to refine the emerging findings.

Findings

In this section we present the findings to address each research objective. We use direct quotations from the data to enrich authenticity of the findings.

Teachers' understanding of literacy in the context of their students' experiences

At the time of our research in the schools, the teachers in St. Jude SS were teaching the following texts to their various Literature classes: *The Trials of Brother Jero* by Wole Soyinka, *Voice of the People* by Okiya Omtatah Okoiti, *Recipe for Disaster* by Lillian Tindyebwa and *Grief Child* by Lawrence Darmani. For the students who were not offering Literature in Senior Three and Four their reading experiences were mostly concentrated on the passages from the English language textbooks and the major ones that they used were *English in Use* and *Head Start.* On the other hand Literature was not offered as a subject at Ngong SS and thus the students mainly relied on the English language curriculum for their reading and writing materials and topics. Although these texts are referred to in these findings, we do not provide

an extensive description of their contents here because our focus was on the general literacy practice in and out of school which were diverse and did not necessarily focus on singular texts.

In this section we mainly rely on the analyzed interviews we had with the teachers to describe their understanding of literacy and how they align the same to students' experiences. The two major sub-themes that emerged from the data relate to their interpretation of the curriculum and students' literacy needs.

All the six teachers who participated in the study defined literacy as the ability to read and write although it was clear that some of them attached other aspects such as learners' ability to interpret and analyze texts were also visible in the data. It was also clear from the data that the teachers' understanding of literacy was informed by the curriculum in terms of what the students should be able to do with the texts they read or write. Below are some texts from the data to this effect:

> *The capability of any person to read and write, and maybe to functionally do it, not just reading and writing but also going ahead to appreciate both what is written and what they can write, what is read, listening to it and also what they can read themselves.* ***Tr. A, St Jude SS***

> *Literacy is the ability of the learner to read and write and count, but there are many dynamics that come to play in applying a curriculum. For example, the classrooms have so many learners, a class size of 45 learners is accommodating 100 learners, a good number of learners will not develop the literacy competences, in a class, this large class is affecting, learners' attention and concentration is low.* ***Tr. B, St Jude SS***

> *We follow the curriculum, for example I teach Senior Three paper one which is about writing. I go to the syllabus and also use the information from workshops, for example I attended one [workshop] in Hoima recently, the examiners came and they told us what was supposed to be covered. They tell us what to teach in reading and writing.* ***Tr. Y, Ngong SS***

The submissions above suggest that teachers have an awareness of the standard definition of literacy, with dominance of the schooled literacy dimension, but they also note the importance of orienting learners to the importance of becoming literate. For example,

> *Literacy is broad, and it is the understanding of what the context is all about. The learner needs to know why they should be literate. It leads to reading, listening, learning, and a lot.* ***Tr X, Ngong SS***

The quotations above are in agreement in what the curriculum and general literature on what literacy is and perhaps its use to the learners. The teachers' understanding of literacy and the learners' experiences is in terms of what the learners can do with the literacy skills they learn (from the curriculum), for example as submitted by Tr A, from St. Jude SS learners are expected to use the literacy skills they acquire elsewhere as they find what they can read by themselves. By following the English Language Curriculum (NCDC, 2020) teachers, would be able to implement contextualised activities of integration. However, teaching to the test and limited teacher agency to orient their pedagogical practices may affect the use of contextualised approaches.

However, data from documentary evidence showed that the Lower Secondary School English language syllabus offers topics that provide opportunities for learners to explore their personal experiences during their reading and writing experiences. For example, some of the topics include: "personal life and family; finding information; at the market; children at work; experience at secondary school; leisure and celebrations" (NCDC, 2020, p.20). Thus the school remains a focal point to determine what learners read and write in and out of school. One of the teachers emphasized that some of the topics the learners write about include: "*They write about personal life, relationships, sports, school life, music, family experiences etc, in composition writing*" (Tr C, St. Jude SS). Another teacher noted as follows: "*Learners write about their personal life, managing sickness, such as cough and flu at school, birth-day celebrations, loss of relatives and managing grief"* (Tr X, Ngong SS).

The teachers' conceptualization of literacy beyond the ability to read and write and their understanding of the learners' experiences and language needs corroborates other writers who argue that literacy skills especially for adolescents naturally do embed other skills such as fluency, critical analysis and effective communication (Luke & Freebody, 2003; Hikida et al., 2019; Wyse et al., 2010). Thus , even if some of the teachers expressed concerns to the effect that they were not in position to access learners' literacy experiences out of school (see below), their content knowledge through the lenses of the curriculum can partly enable them to guide their learners' literacy achievements.

> *I do not know what they read or write when they go back home. Being refugees many of them have different places they call home, e.g. their home countries, the camps in the settlement and some of them even run away and live in urban areas. But many of them do not write or read when at home e.g. when I give them homework they come back without doing it.* ***Tr Y, Ngong SS***

> *I don't know what happens in their homes but through experience I know that some of them read but the majority do not read. Because of the challenges they face, some of them from here they have to go and look for what to eat so by the time they accomplish the whole day, they don't have time to read until the next morning when they come to school.* ***Head teacher, Ngong SS***

Motivations for young people's literacy practices in and out of school

Data from the analysis of the thematic focus of students writing extracts from the writing circles shows differentiated thematic focus and motivations when writing to peers and when writing to a community audience. The school curriculum and educational requirements appeared to be the number one extrinsic motivators for the learners' literacy practices both in and out of school. The findings we present in this section are largely derived from data from open ended questionnaires, interviews with teachers and documentary evidence. The motivations from within the schools ensue from the need to perform well in school and national tests and examinations for some students while others emerge from the need to receive rewards as noted by the students below during the FGDs:

> *We have tests every week and academic assemblies in which students below the average are punished and well-performers are given gifts and bursaries. So we have to keep reading our notes.* ***Student, St Jude SS***

I usually read a lot when we are going to do examinations and we have many subjects, not just English. But we read as we discuss with my friends because for me I do not know many things in english. ***Student, Ngong SS***

We have MDD [music, dance and drama] at this school and I write poems for my house. The best house is rewarded, that is why I write. But I write just simple ones [poems]. ***Student, St Jude SS***

I am in the Literature club and we read poems and books during competitions. We are also responsible for the school magazine with our patron Miss …. We write for the magazine but we also encourage students to write short stories and other stuff to put in the magazine. ***Student, St. Jude SS***

There is no doubt about the fact that the need to perform excellently in learning assessments drives the participants to read and write as shown in the quotations above and this is the expected norm in all educational settings. Rewards are also great motivators for their literacy practices, however few students are involved in writing clubs. Literature in English is an optional subject in secondary schools in Uganda and this further limits the number of students who participate in extra reading and writing activities besides doing the same for examination purposes. The schools have taken measures to ensure that their learners read and write by introducing rewards for good performance and punishments against those who lag behind. Other measures include compulsory debate clubs as submitted by the head teacher at Ngong SS:

One, we encourage them to use English language because when they use English language through that practice they are developing their language skills. In fact we even developed debating where every child is a member of that club and recently I told the club patron to ensure that each and every person debates at least within a given time. They set the motion and then make sure they get those [learners] who will be debating and with that I think it has helped their literacy. ***Head teacher, Ngong SS***

Reading is difficult, some students only read when they are compelled or due to certain circumstances or in line with the syllabus. ***Head of Department, St. Jude SS***

The data from the open-ended questionnaires also revealed that the motivation to read for the adolescent participants was rooted in school-related access to reading materials, since most of them responded that they read textbooks they borrow from the school library or class notes even when they were out of school. For instance, one learner wrote "I read textbooks, I borrow from the school library to make me remember what we learnt at school" **Student, St Jude SS.** When asked about the materials they want to read during the reading circles, students mainly mentioned texts that are provided by the school or or under the Literature syllabus, for example, *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens, *Wuthering Heights* by Jane Austin, *Harry Porter*, *Alien Woman* by Ocen Lawrence, *A Cowrie of Hope* by Binwell Sinyangwe, *Voice of the People* by Okiya Ontaltal, Grief Child by Lawrence Darmani, Betrayal in the City by Francis Imbuga, Oliver Twist by Charles Dickens, Recipe for Disaster by…*Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe, *Arrow of God* by Chinua Achebe, *Horn of my Love* by Okot P'Bitek and *The Lion and the Jewel* by Wole Soyinka. One of the factors that can explain the reliance on the school for motivation to read is the fact that the education system in Uganda is said to be examination oriented (like most countries in Sub-Saharan countries) whereby learners barely find time to read anything else outside the national syllabus (Odama, 2018; Imbova, 2017; Parry, 2010; Magara & Batambuze, 2005). Another factor could be the reading and writing

materials in Uganda, like in most developing countries, are quite limited and hence learners have to largely depend on materials that they obtain from the schools and that are recommended by the National Curriculum Development Centre (Nambi, 2018; Magara & Batambuze, 2005).

The analyzed data from interviews with teachers further revealed that some learners are motivated to read materials that offer both visual and audio support. This suggests multimodal literacy whereby learners read beyond the printed word to view and interpret images that can enhance their understanding of texts (IRA, 2012). The teachers commented as follows in relation to their learners' multimodal literacy practices:

> *They like reading materials which also have photographs, they are so much more movie oriented than textbooks. They cannot read a big novel, they need simple reading materials.* ***Tr Ngong SS***

> *They want reading materials with some photos, they need to be guided, and to learn that it is important for them to learn how to read.* ***Tr Ngong SS***

> *Learners are motivated to read materials with photos, and even there should be a guiding person to tell learners that it is important for them to read.* ***Tr Ngong SS***

Furthermore, teachers submitted that learners are motivated to read and write materials that relate to their personal experiences. At this point we note the merging of 'out of' and 'in' school experiences to impact on the learners' literacy practices. Some of the textbooks the learners read at school can easily relate to their experiences as shown by the documentary analysis we carried out. The teachers had this to say:

> *Books related to their experiences, as long as they are not 500 pages, they are motivated to read books about their experiences ……the books are sometimes too big, they need simple reading materials like novels, magazines and newspapers.* ***Tr Ngong SS***

> *They mostly want to read and write stories that are to be marked.* ***Tr St Jude***

Some of the topics of the stories the teachers were reading with their students at the time of the study include: 'Politeness in Language', (Head Start: Secondary English, Form 3, p.13); 'The Town' (Integrated English: a course for Ugandan Secondary Schools, Students' Book , p.46), 'A Careless Cook' (Practical English 3, p.13) and 'Senegal's Plan to Banish Hunger' (Progressive English for Secondary Schools 3, p.43). All these stories readily align with learners' possible experiences, for instance, they are required to be polite when addressing elders whether at school or outside school as indicated by the school mission of St. Jude SS. In addition, cooking is one of the chores adolescent girls and boys participate in in Uganda and therefore the story about a careless cook cautions them on the possible repercussions in case one prioritizes games over their responsibilities in the kitchen. On the other hand, hunger is a generic issue of concern in many African contexts and this particular theme falls under the theme of agriculture in the textbook. Thus, for most of the learners especially from conflict and vulnerable contexts (Ngong SS) this story could resonate quite well as a way of addressing the hunger problem. Finally, the story about town experiences sits well with the learner participants in this study because although none of the two schools was located in the capital city of Uganda, they are both situated near trading centers that have similarities with what is presented in the story. All these stories in the different books are illustrated with images that can easily motivate learners to read them as mentioned earlier. For instance 'The Town' is accompanied by the

image below that depicts the nature of many African towns that are not necessarily sophisticated but accommodate all activities such as trading, transportation and negotiating.

Figure 1: The Town illustration, Integrated English: a course for Ugandan Secondary Schools, Students' Book , p.47

On the other hand, religion was a recurring theme in what motivates the learner participants' literacy practices in and out of school. One of the schools where we carried out this research is based on the Catholic religion foundation and this was visible in the structure of the activities and some of the artifacts in the school. During the FGDs most learners in St. Jude SS submitted that they read the Bible on a daily basis whether in or out of school. To some of the learners, the Bible seemed to offer comfort and guidance whereas others thought reading the Bible was the right thing to do as shown by some of quotations below:

> *I love reading the Bible. It is all about religion and it is enjoyable to read because it helps in comforting me. Sometimes I share the stories from the Bible with my mum.* ***Student, St. Jude SS***

> *I read the Bible. I need to read it because at school I never have time to read it and so that I can ask God for guidance and protection. Student, St. Jude SS*

> *I like reading the Bible and other books to make me remember what we learnt at school and to ask for forgiveness from God in [sic] what I did. Student, Ngong SS*

> *I read the Bible because I want to know more about God and see how it can teach me something that can help me in my life. Student, Ngong SS*

This intrinsic motivation to read the Bible was common among the participating learners and whereas the environment of the school may have contributed to its emergence, some of the students noted that they read the Bible because that is what their parents read at home. For example this student from Ngong SS said that: "I read the Bible with my father at home everyday". This could suggest that reading the Bible was a routine practice in their home. It was not clear what kind of verses or stories were read in the Bible or the length of these texts they read. Nonetheless, it can be argued that the Bible was a material that helped them practice literacy skills out of the school context. That said, a few students pointed out that they were motivated to read novels and other materials that they accessed free online. This was true of students from St. Jude SS which is located in a semi urban setting. Some of the materials they mentioned include: *Hellbound With You* by KazzenIX; *Married to the Bad Billionaire* by Pooja Pathak; *The Crown's Obsession* by Ash Knight; *The CEO Who Hates Me* by Eustoma Reyna and *Act Like a Lady, Think like a Man* by Steve Harvey. All these novels can be accessed online and the particular group of students from St. Jude SS who read these books shared that sometimes they had access to the Internet while at home, something that started during the COVID-19 pandemic when they used to have online lessons. This could imply that accessibility of materials partly motivates the literacy practices of the learners when they are out of school. In addition, the underlying theme in all the novels (except for the last one) is that of love or relationship. This theme is particularly of interest to the adolescent readers and hence a motivating factor for them to practice their literacy skills.

Furthermore, an analysis of the activities and documents from the writing circles revealed that the student participants were motivated by the events in their experiences at home when they write their compositions at school during their English language lessons. This again is an example of how the learners' experiences out of school can be integrated in the school activities. For instance one of the teachers noted as follows when asked about what his learners write about when at home:

> *Celebrations, social celebrations, traditional ceremonies, family, what concerns them from the families where they come from, they bring out what happens to them in their social life**,** write about stories that were told to them by their parents, life in congo, how they ran away from Congo, how they suffered, they want to write about what concerns them.* ***Tr, Ngong SS***

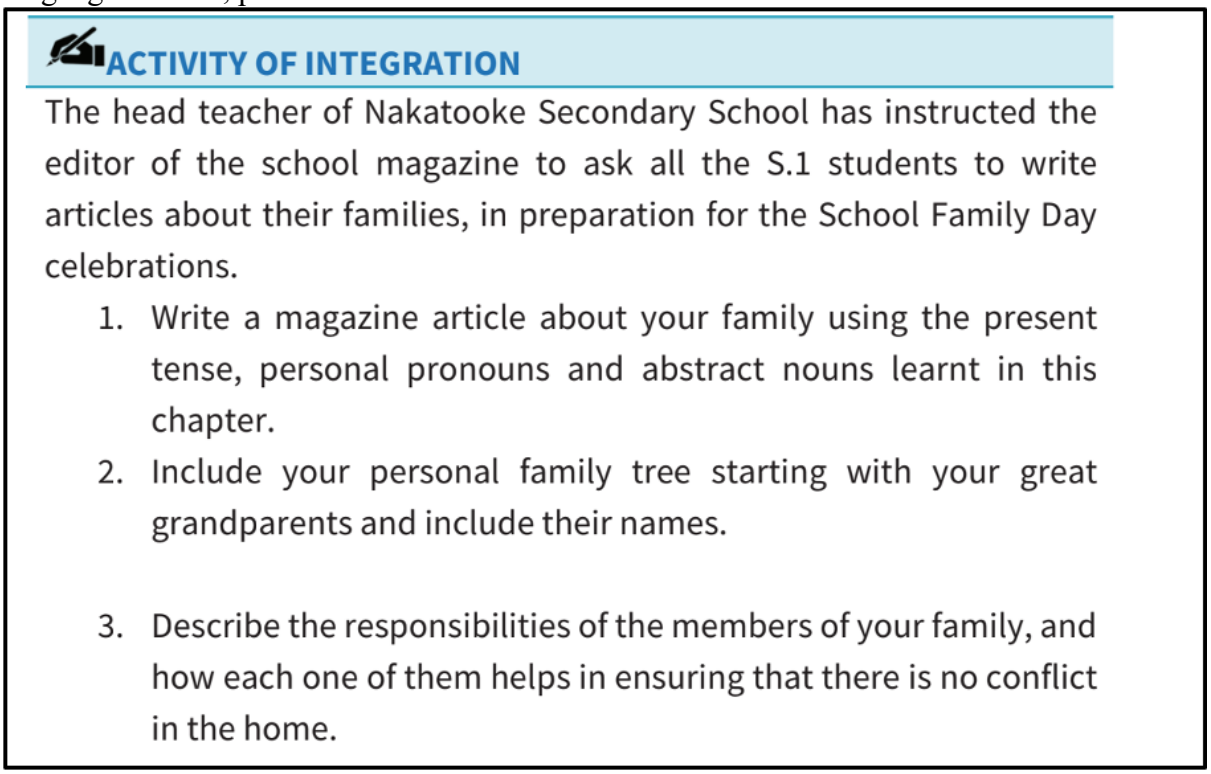
We come again to this point in the next section when we discuss teachers' perceptions of literacy align with those of their learners and the policy because of the similarities between the two themes.

Teachers' views of literacy policy vs. adolescents' perceptions of literacy and their lived experiences

The Teachers

In this section we combine the findings for objectives three and four under one theme because of the way the two objectives feed into each other according to our analysis of the data. Although teachers and students are on different ends of the learning process (givers and consumers of knowledge - although this concept is changing with the competence-based curriculum), they do have meeting points whereby the subject content from the curriculum and delivered by the teachers has to match the learners' experiences and expectations. According to what has been presented so far we have seen the meeting points of this relationship in the way the materials such as textbooks are designed and also in the way learners depend on the

school context to make decisions in their literacy practices. The English language subject in particular presents several opportunities for learners to integrate their experiences in the content they learn at school. For example, when students are taught the rules of writing compositions then they are often given topics to choose from to write about their experiences from their own communities. The activities of integration (if emphasized by the teachers) are one of the avenues that learners' experiences can blend with the syllabus and textbooks (policy documents). An example below from our documentary analysis of the NCDC curriculum illustrates this point whereby the students are expected to use the knowledge about the English language - tenses, pronouns and nouns - to write about their families.



ACTIVITY OF INTEGRATION

The head teacher of Nakatooke Secondary School has instructed the editor of the school magazine to ask all the S.1 students to write articles about their families, in preparation for the School Family Day celebrations.

1. Write a magazine article about your family using the present tense, personal pronouns and abstract nouns learnt in this chapter.
2. Include your personal family tree starting with your great grandparents and include their names.
3. Describe the responsibilities of the members of your family, and how each one of them helps in ensuring that there is no conflict in the home.

Figure 2: Activity of integration, NCDC (2020), English Teachers' Guide, p. 11

Data from interviews with the teachers largely revealed their understanding of the English language teaching policies and they often cited examples from the same. However, some of them were of the view that the policy would be difficult to implement effectively due to lack of sufficient materials as discussed in the section that follows. In spite of that, the activity of integration in Figure 2 above shows that the learners have an opportunity to practice their literacy skills out of school by engaging their family as they locate information about their personal backgrounds. The teacher from St Jude SS below analyzes the challenges related to the English syllabus:

> *I give them books such as English in Use, and contemporary books, but I find a problem with the new curriculum, we are currently reading, the thematic concerns in their [learners'] contemporary generation are becoming irrelevant, there are thematic concerns that are arising, for example, a single parent family is becoming a new normal, families are falling apart, because of the constant… and pressurizing the man in society, the girl child has been promoted for the last 30 years, men are disenfranchised, men are the ones more in prison, the policies need to be revised to equalize access opportunities for boys.* ***Tr, St Jude***

In the extract above we notice that whereas the teacher understands the requirements of the policy, he nonetheless goes ahead to engage with it to point out the weaknesses in the syllabus by acknowledging the changing nature of society such as the family structure in Uganda that is evolving to embrace single parenthood while others are extended families . The Teacher also relevantly points out the 'unfairness' of promoting the girl child over the boy child that is proving to be detrimental to the family structure. This teacher can indeed be applauded for this keen observation by relating the policy to the realities in the Ugandan community. Another examination of the syllabus shows that the policy makers omitted the emerging family structure, by including the extended family and excluding the single parent family in the syllabus. For example, "Families are usually beyond the nuclear one. Ask learners if they remember what they learnt about nuclear and extended families in Social Studies at the primary level. Ask them to write down two differences between nuclear and extended families and share with a partner" (NCDC, 2020, p. 3). Another teacher from Ngong SS observed as follows: *We follow books that NCDC guides us to use for the curriculum, they send many books, and, if its corruption you choose newspapers that have issues of corruption. We rarely choose books outside the curriculum, the students have 12 subjects, so they students have no zeal for reading, all the time they are reading for those subjects" (Tr, Ngong SS).* It can be argued that the teachers who participated in the study had a relatively high level of understanding of the policy (curriculum) and they often utilized the available resources to implement it which as a result contributed to learners' literacy practices with dominance to schooled literacy dimensions.

We probed the participants further to establish how they supported the learners to relate the syllabus to their literacy practices and personal experiences in and out of school. Some of the teachers and headteacher noted as below:

> *They mostly write about celebrations, christmas parties, weddings, birthday parties, traditional ceremonies, the second would be about families, first of all they bring what is happening to them, you know these are refugees, they write stories that they were told to them by their parents, the refugees used guns, they see their parents hitting each other using whips.* ***Teacher, Ngong SS***

> *Okay there are those ones that you see that their life reflects what they have really read, like the ones I have talked about, the Jehovah witnesses you find when they are here the way they behave is different from the rest. So you find somebody is behaving in a Christian way and I believe because of the material they read it affects them positively. There are also those that are leaders and they read literature related to leadership. You find that their lifestyle at home is basically in that line for example when you want mobilization you find them there.* ***Headteacher, Ngong SS***

> *They must be doing what concerns them. I cannot say they read or they do not read- except if they have borrowed books from the school library, they read about their subjects. In the camps they used to read magazines about refugee social life, and sometimes, they would bring them to school. Nowadays they have telephones, so they want to use social media. At school they write under instruction, what I know at home, they can write about anything, they can even write about you, the teacher.* ***Teacher, Ngong SS***

The trauma suffered by the refugee students in Ngong SS definitely manifests itself in their in-school writing as depicted in the quotations above. The students who practice the Jehovah religion carry what they read into their behavior and literacy practices at school. On the other

hand, teachers at St. Jude SS indicated that learners also read and wrote about their personal experiences in and out of school. It was interesting to note the contextual differences that impacted the personal experiences that their learners wrote about, that related to the broader community and national challenges, and problems affecting communities, marking a shift from personal life to community related issues. For example:

> *They write about challenges youth face in the community such as rape, sexual harrassment, unwanted pregnancies, and sexually transmitted diseases, accidents due to reckless driving and poor roads, deforestation.* ***Teacher, St. Jude SS***
>
> *Developments and problems of living in slums due to lack of planning for the city. They make various suggestions for living in a clean city and clean environment in the community,* ***Teacher, St. Jude SS***
>
> *Learners also write about the need to support and provision for marginalized groups for example providing food, clothes, medication, safety items to disabled, albinos, orphans and homeless children.* ***Teacher, St. Jude SS***

A documentary analysis of the documents confirmed that all the topics that the students write about in the quotations above are valid within the context of the secondary school English syllabus which recommends topics such as: "personal life and family, children at work, environment and pollution, urban and rural life, travel, anti-corruption, human rights, gender and responsibilities, identity crisis, patriotism, relationships and emotions, culture, globalization, etc" (NCDC, 2020, pps. 19-20). Moje *et al*. (2008) and Moje (1996) argue that multiple contextual cultures and subcultures within and outside of school impact on adolescents' literacy practices and the examples above are a clear illustration of how some of the teachers are not blindly following the policy document but rather they accommodate the students' contribution to the learning process by focusing on what they know from their personal experiences. The learners from a semi urban context, St. Jude SS would definitely have better access to newspapers, national and global issues hence their ability to widen their focus from the personal to communal themes.

The Learners - reading and writing circles

Learners in both schools participated in reading and writing circles that were monitored on a larger part by the teachers and a smaller part by the researchers. For instance, we worked with teachers to decide on the writing topics to ensure that we keep in line with the school syllabus. The purpose of the circles was to establish how well the students can work in groups, to monitor the challenges they faced in their literacy practices and to analyze the similarities between their in and out of school literacy practices. The reading circles, on the other hand, included activities for students to read some texts on the Literature in English syllabus in groups while observing the guidelines we adopted from Angie Simms (2010) https://readingagency.org.uk/resources/2075/ that included the following:

- "The Leader" – facilitates the discussion, preparing some general questions and ensuring that everyone is involved and engaged.
- "The Summariser" – gives an outline of the plot, highlighting the key moments in the book. More confident readers can touch upon its strengths and weaknesses.
- "The Word Master" – selects vocabulary that may be new, unusual, or used in an interesting way.

- "The Passage Person" – selects and presents a passage that they feel is well written, challenging, or of particular interest to the development of the plot, character, or theme.
- "The Connector" – draws upon all of the above and makes links between the story and wider world. This can be absolutely anything; books, films, newspaper articles, a photograph, a memory, or even a personal experience, it's up to you. All it should do is highlight any similarities or differences and explain how it has brought about any changes in your understanding and perception of the book.

The learners who participated in the reading circles were then involved in FGDs whereby the questions that were adapted from Goodman, Watson & Burke (2005) the 'Burke Reading Interview Modified for Older Readers" model. The students at St. Jude SS in particular participated in reading *Grief Child* by Lawrence Darmani that was being taught to the Literature class at the time of our study while the ones from Ngong SS basically relied on an extract from an English language textbook since the school did not teach Literature.

Given the brief background above, in this section we report the findings holistically to establish the partners and relationships between learners' perceptions of literacy, the community and the policy. We do so by sharing verbatim what was said and written by the learners during the reading and writing circles and the FGDs.

The majority of the students acknowledged that many of the texts and other materials they read at school could relate to what was happening in their societies. Although some of the situations in the texts were not experienced directly by the participants, they could easily take a snapshot of similar events in their communities. *Grief Child* in particular as the title suggests is a novel about emotional and physical suffering and perseverance all of which are experienced by a child of a young age (a summary of the novel can be found here https://www.google.com/search?q=grief+child+chapter+1). Some of the participating students confirmed that the novel spoke to their communities in several ways. For instance they could relate to the main character, a young boy named Adu because of his age; they could also appreciate the grief of losing both parents at young age since they knew of orphans in their school and societies; the suffering he undergoes at the hands of his aunt was also a common phenomenon among youngsters and finally his perseverance and belief in God for guidance talked directly to their own religious orientation. They gave the following statements when asked about how they related the novel *Grief Child* to their community:

> *For example, the story in the Grief Child book is related to my community in some ways. Some children at our neighbors place do not stay with their parents and the uncle does not pay school fees for them like that character Adu in the book.* ***Student, St. Jude SS.***
>
> *Some students in our school lost their parents during COVID-19 and the lockdown did not come back this term. But for them they were not living in the village like Adu and his family.* ***Student, St. Jude SS.***
>
> *Yes the boy Adu is guided by religion and at the end he manages to overcome his problems. He is a believer like me because I pray for good grades and for my parents and friends. I believe in God just like Adu.* ***Student, St. Jude SS.***

The narratives above from the students at St. Jude SS are testimonies to how the text *Grief Child* may relate to the participants' lived experiences. However, some students were of the view that the novel was 'difficult' to read and the events therein were quite removed from their

realities. For instance some students pointed out the setting in the novel is in a rural area where the family engages in agricultural activities for their livelihood. Our own documentary analysis of the novel showed that the sights and sounds presented in the text could be something that is unfamiliar to some of the students, especially considering the fact that many of the students in St. Jude SS come from urban or semi-urban contexts. For instance the opening of the book reads as follows:

> *It was midnight. The little village of Susa slept in darkness in the heart of the forest farms, among the tall trees. The mahoganies and sapeles stood tall in the dark sky, providing a canopy over the village and deepening the density of the pitch dark night… Drifting into sleep, Adu was gripped by a nightmare. He was in the forest, all alone overwhelmed by fear. Then the leopard sprang...To be chased by an animal in a dream was a bad omen. Someone's life was in danger. (Darmani, 1991, p.9)*

The setting in the forest deep down in the dark village and Adu's nightmare forecast the fear, danger and suffering that the main character experiences in the text. Although some of the participants were of the view that they could not relate to such events, many learners in Ugandan secondary schools could easily associate with the rural setting because this is the most common picture of homes in Uganda. Further documentary analysis revealed that the language of the novel *Grief Child* is another aspect that made the novel suitable for the adolescent learners because it was accessible to them as second language students. Accessibility of the language of literary texts is an important factor to literacy practices of adolescents otherwise they would not be able to interpret the materials (Thompson, 2012; Harmon et al., 2011; Lawrence, Rabinowitz, & Perna, 2008). Whereas some students indicated that the text was hard for them and they were seen using dictionaries during the practical reading circles, the majority of them on the hand did not have significant challenges in understanding the language of the novel *Grief Child.* Actually several students used adjectives such as 'easy', 'enjoyable', 'simple' and 'interesting' when describing the language in the novel during the discussion session of the reading circles. Thus it can be argued that the language accessibility of texts can be described as a motivating factor for learners to read; but it also adds value to the way they perceive and relate texts to their lived experiences. This also implies that for literacy practices 'in' school such as the reading of literature texts to be effective, the teacher's role is key in guiding learners to appreciate the linguistic aspects and interpretation so that they are to move from the simplicity of just being able to read the words on paper to being critical readers as expected of their age group (Snow & Moje, 2010; Stevens & Bean, 2007).

That said, some learners were deeply concerned about the major theme of the novel *Grief Child*. As the title suggests, grief is a major motif in the novel with the main character Adu, a young boy, losing all the people he loves dearly to be left an orphan in the care of a hostile relative. Grief begins from the coincidental break of a bough from the tree that crashes Birago and her daughter to death. This grief builds up from the time Nimo (Adu's father) sees the bodies of his wife and daughter and totally breaks down. The whole village of Susa is downcast with grief as they mourn this tragedy in one family. With time the family attempts to continue with their routines but it is not long before Nimo the head of the family also dies in a freak river accident when the log he was holding on to survive the strong water current suddenly gives way and he drowns. The author writes as follows about this tragedy:

> No one in Susa, not even the oldest man in the village, could remember a time like this. Here was a family, almost wiped out. People refused to believe that this could happen in their own village. To some it was like a dream, they would soon wake to find it gone. But the reality hung over the village like dark clouds. It was a tragedy, a sorrow, a

> menacing omen. It could not be true. Such things didn't happen in real life. Maybe they happen in distant lands; but not so close to them. Yet an almost empty house reminded them that Nimo and all but one of his family members were no more. So ominous was the situation that people thought of Adu as the last victim waiting to be slaughtered by whatever malevolent hand had caused all this. Then Adu would follow his father, mother and sister into the world of the dead. Extract from *Grief Child* (Darmani, 1991, p.86)

Adu's tragedy is felt and suffered by the whole village! One cannot but wonder how this young person was able to pull himself up and decide to live as opposed - the whole village expected that he would join his dead family. In doing so he breaks from the social subculture (Vygotsky, 1978) to pave his own way to survival. Although Adu manages to overcome some of the grief he experiences (even at the hands of his guardian aunt Goma) through education and religion, the overall description of suffering and loss of hope that he and the entire village of Susa undergo seems to have impacted the way some of our participants responded to the novel with some learners calling a very pessimistic view towards life, e.g. "How can everyone in the family die? Me, I do not like the novel because that boy is young like us and what if something like that happens to one of us?" Much as this could be termed as an escapist attitude towards the novel, it is an example of how reading circles can support students to air out their alternative views about the text (Furr, 2004). We used Furr's (2004) aspect for reading circles to select a material for learners to read in groups. The material we selected is from a Senior Three textbook and it is titled 'The untiled land'. The story is about a 'lazy' wife called Wanjiku who fails to attend to her husband's gardens - she prefers to take a nap as opposed to tilling the land. The husband, Mwangi, was especially disturbed by this lazy behavior because he had paid a hefty dowry for her and now he felt cheated because it was only his land in the village that was not attended. Mwangi's thoughts are as follows:

> Mwangi remembered the cows and goats he had paid her father as dowry. The marriage feast surpassed any he had ever seen, or even heard of. Is this the wife he had married, the woman he had paid so dearly for? Was she created only for child-bearing? What was she for? (….p. 62)

We selected this story particularly to test learners' critical literacy abilities to engage with the text to comment about possible engendered issues therein that may be reflected in their societies (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011). The responses from learners (Ngong SS) however seemed to be simplistic reflecting the complacent cultural roles assigned to women as shown below:

> *For example, the story in 'the untilled land' story is related to my community today because some women are too lazy that they cannot take care of their duties like Wanjiku, who goes to the farm and falls asleep, and some men are so hardworking and caring like Mwangi who was herding his cattle but took time to go and see what his wife was doing.*
>
> *From what I read, I have learnt to be hard working, and considerate, for example, from the story 'the untiled land' I learn that, despite the high dowry paid, all was a waste, because the woman was lazy.*
>
> *I have learnt not to be lazy as Wanjiku was, that she failed to till a piece of land and just slept. I also learn that there should be equal distribution of work in the family, and that… one should fulfill their responsibilities in time.*

I have learnt that I should correct anybody in wrong, because Mwangi did not tell his wife what she was doing wrong, but instead just started regretting.

I have learnt that I should be hard working so that I can support the loved ones around me,...I want to be helpful.

It is true that laziness is a vice and that it should not be encouraged. However the learners who give the responses above seem to gloss over the underlying issues of gender roles and spaces in society. Mwangi's internal regret for 'paying' so dearly for a wife that could not dig his garden is something that should have raised more concern for any critical reader of the passage. The third student above hints on the need to distribute work fairly in the family and in this way they divert from the dominant ideology of culturally assigned roles in society. In this regard, an opportunity is missed by the learners to widen their literacy skills to a deeper level even during their discussions in the reading circles.

Writing

The teachers related the learners' writing practices to their home or personal experiences. Most of them shared that although there were cases of students who wrote about politics, it was easy to see that in school the learners chose to write about those stories that impact them directly whether at school or outside school as shared below:

In terms of writing preferences generally, learners like to write about relationships, the next would be politics, the third theme is stories of personal hygiene because they are now in adolescence and are experiencing adolescence symptoms, however, I also interest them to themes related to rules and regulations, I also bring in themes on morality. ***Teacher, St Jude SS***

Boys enjoy reading and writing about sports and politics, while girls enjoy reading and writing about relationships. ***Teacher, St Jude SS***

When it comes to writing they have their stories to write, they can write a dialogue, personal stories, about a topic you have given them to write. ***Tr Ngong SS***

They sometimes do free writing, about their personal life, life at home, life at school, sometimes with no sense about love, some write about their context, could be about family, especially the children who have had trauma about wars in Congo, they write about their context. ***Tr Ngong SS***

Celebrations, social celebrations, traditional ceremonies, family, what concerns them from the families where they come from, they bring out what happens to them in their social life, write about stories that were told to them by their parents, life in congo, how they ran away from Congo, how they suffered, they want to write about what concerns them. ***Tr Ngong SS***

As noted earlier, the learners' social contexts influence what they write about in schools. Their choice of topics as shown above actually do reflect what the NCDC language curriculum recommends e.g. the topic of 'celebrations' (NCDC, 2020). On the other hand, some learners shared that the socio-political atmosphere in the country also influenced their writing choices. In this way, the learners seem to move away from writing about topics that relate to personal

experiences such as wedding celebrations to issues that address social concerns. Some learners mentioned that they were interested in writing about youth unemployment, corruption and failed medical facilities. When asked about what they would write about in relation to the youth learners had this to say:

> *As youth we have so many plans for the future, and great ideas on how we can develop our country, more so societies, first of all education of the young generation, the future doctors, teachers, mothers and many others.* ***Student St Jude***
>
> *Youth unemployment and need for hands-on skills, youth skilling and means of addressing youth Unemployment through youth projects such as coffee planting, apiary, acqua-culture , for example…as we all know, 90% of the youth in our country are unemployed.* ***Student St Jude SS***
>
> *Need for young voice and representation to improve the social services, youth sports and entertainment, to develop youth talent.* ***Student, Ngong SS***
>
> *Youth immigration support especially in terms of orientation to migration, risks, challenges and opportunities, and how they can be prepared for work safely.* ***Student, Ngong SS***

These students' writing practices demonstrated in the writing circles and interviews with teachers indicate that students' writing-out-of-school can be for diverse purposes and audiences, and context, these purposes include expressing and understanding oneself (Johnson, 2017); engaging civically and organizing (Bean & Dunkerly-Bean, 2016; Haddix et al., 2015); communicating with friends and loved ones (Lam, 2009); improving their craft (Padgett & Curwood, 2016). Out-of-school writing is important for the ways in which it allows students to contextualize, write for meaningful purposes , for audiences beyond their teachers. In this study, learners have written to various audiences, including, peers, parents, local government officials. During the writing circles learners were tasked to brainstorm on certain topics and later discuss during the FGDs their processes and choice. Some of the writing topics they had to choose from (in their groups) included the following:

1) Use between 500-600 words to describe one person in your family that you admire most.
2) Write a letter to a friend in another school telling them about your experience at school during term One.
3) Imagine that you want to campaign for a youth leadership position in your society, write a speech that you would deliver to your electorate.

Although the students wrote individual responses to the composition questions above in the books that we provided, they first brainstormed in their groups about aspects such as: the use of idioms, paragraphing, admirable qualities in a person, choosing the appropriate vocabulary etc. The first question points them directly to their families and almost 80% of the participants chose to describe their mothers as the persons they admire most. The examples below are snippets of some of what the students wrote and through them we can visualize the characters they create of their mothers. The physical descriptions of height and color in the first paragraph in all their compositions do indicate that they follow a particular structure probably taught to them by their teachers and also discussed in the writing circles. The students write confidently and use grammatical structures as is expected at this level (Senior Three 16-17 years old), for example, the third student appropriately uses the idiom 'the apple of my eye' to show her

extreme admiration of the mother and this was visible in several compositions. Another enduring theme in the compositions is 'religion'.

Earlier in this presentation, we noted that religion seemed to influence the students' literacy practices especially at St. Jude SS, and the examples below suggest that it is not only the schools that are responsible for this background, but the parents also play a major role. The students below, for instance, describe their mothers' commitment to religion and the fact that they even go ahead to explain further what is read in church when they get home. One student writes that "When it comes to loving God, she has gone to another level. I think I can compare her to the nuns" (Student, St. Jude SS). Thus, it can be argued that the mothers can and do play a role in motivating the learners' literacy practices whether directly or indirectly as shown in the examples below. They can do this by providing the literacy material (topic) and by guiding their children to particular directions for reading and writing, e.g. when they read the Bible, the children could also learn to read the same or any other material that they may choose.

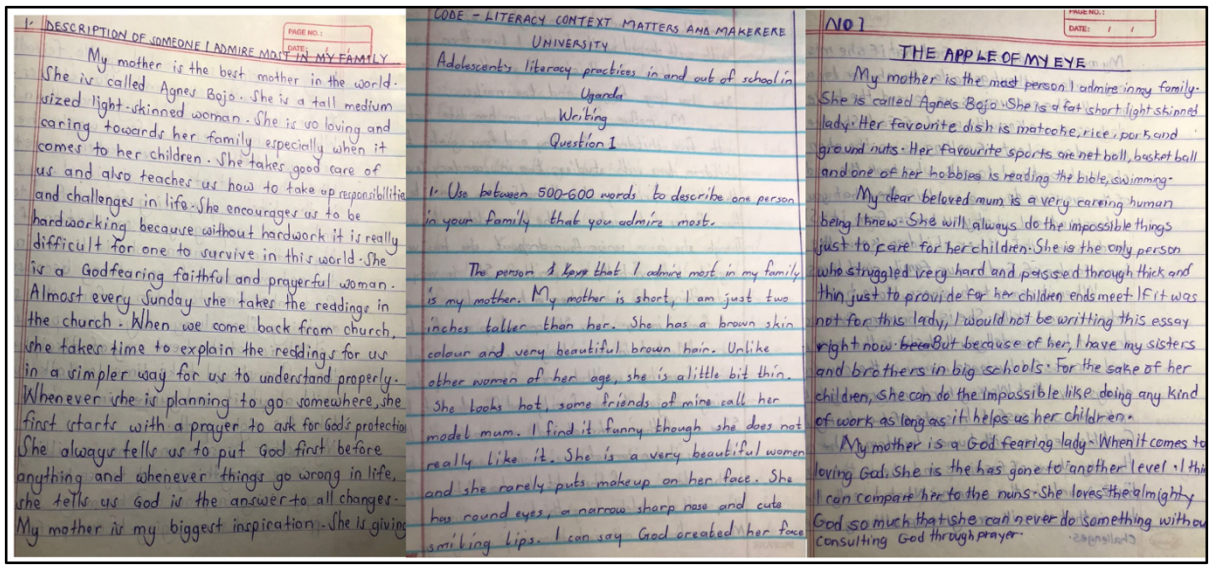


Figure 4: Examples of students' compositions from the writing circles, St. Jude SS

The students' compositions - the letters and speeches from the above excerpts have roots from the writing circles, are all indicative of how learners integrate their lived experiences in their literacy practices. The awareness of their 'out' of school experiences and how they can integrate their prior knowledge with the content they learn at school (Vygotsky, 1978). The writing circles in this case served the purpose of setting the stage for them to be able to support each other with the formalities of writing. This is not to say that the learners did not have knowledge about how to write, but rather it is to emphasize that supportive learning events/activities such as group work can effectively lead to improved learning. The learners in this regard supported each other as peers.

Challenges that affect the participants' literacy practices

Goldman and Snow (2015) categorize the challenges adolescents face in their literacy practices relating to 'the learners', 'the tasks', 'the contexts', 'the texts' and 'the pedagogy'. The challenges we present here broadly fall under these categories and we rely on analyzed data from FGDs, interviews with teachers, excerpts from reading and writing circles and surveys. The challenges largely revolve around lack of materials to read, poor reading

environment, overcrowded classrooms that affect their reading posture and concentration; and text complexity as cited by some learners.

Most of the challenges that emerged from the analyzed data related to contextual factors such as noisy backgrounds, home chores and social media. These challenges appeared to run across the borders of 'in' and 'out' of school settings as indicated in the data. The sociocultural theoretical perspective that has so far informed this presentation suggests that the environment, especially the linguistic context surrounding the child plays a major role in determining what and how they learn - in this case, what they read and write (Vygotsky, 1978). Moreover, Waldfogel (2012) documents that the gaps in literacy among adolescents can partly be explained if parents do not create the conducive environment for their children to read and write at home. She argues further that some factors, some of which are socioeconomic, at home can contribute to widen the literacy gaps even at school. One of the teachers at Ngong SS commented as follows when asked about the challenges that these students may face while reading and writing at home: *"Learners have a lot of housework, the moment they go back home, they are involved in business for survival, taking stocks such as flour for sale in the market on a daily basis, agriculture produce, …sometimes education is perceived as a barrier to work"* (Teacher, Ngong SS). The socioeconomic factor explaining the need for survival does not seem to affect literacy practices only but education in general according to this teacher. Moreover Ngong SS is a day school and this implies that in addition to walking to and from school the students had to do extra movement to sell merchandise away from home thus making it difficult for them to focus on any literacy activities. Some of our student participants commented as such when asked about the challenges they faced when reading and writing for both school and leisure purposes:

> *I can't even read a paragraph without being interrupted by someone at home. It is very hard to concentrate since there are many distractions, like television, my phone, and yet am reading a print- copy.* ***Student, St Jude SS***
>
> *I also faced the problem of poor concentration, because I had so many distractors, because each time I decided to read, I would be caught up by the television or my friends which greatly affected the number of books I would have read.* ***Student, St Jude SS***
>
> *Lack of enough time, much of the time I have responsibilities of taking care of siblings, house chores, and managing home activities like cooking, washing clothes.* ***Student, Ngong SS***
>
> *Poor environment for me to concentrate when writing, and interruptions from my playful young siblings when shouting at home.* ***Student, Ngong SS***
>
> *A lot of distractions at home that could not make me concentrate, for example television, phones, the environment at home was not conducive for me to do the work like the noise made by my young siblings.* ***Student, Ngong SS***
>
> *For example, during the course of writing this assignment, I have not had ample time to fully write all my assignments, both class and personal, that I was given this holiday. This is because I had to go to work at my Father's work place, and come back late and tired in the evening. However, I did everything possible to make sure my writings must be done, since it's also my hobby.* ***Student, St. Jude SS***
>
> *Social media too diverted my attention, I loved chatting with my friends, and watching videos, tit-tok and youtube. These took most of my time, and by the time I could finish*

watching, I would be tired, and end up sleeping, so the time was limited. ***Student, St. Jude SS***

The students are in charge of some of the challenges mentioned above e.g. they can control the time they allocate to television and youtube, whereas the other challenges such as household chores are beyond their control. Nevertheless, there is need to appreciate that considering the nature of the sub-skills attached to the development of literacy, especially for adolescents, the said challenges to literacy can actually be viewed as some kind of advantages that can even advance the students' literacy practices. For instance, by engaging with the phone and social media technologies the students are engaging in digital reading and writing practices of some sort. Several earlier studies highlight the need to understand the multimodal nature of literacy for example, audio, visual and other sources of communication and how they can enhance learners' literacy levels (Pahl & Rowsell, 2012; Lankshear and Knobel, 2011; Lewis & Wray, 2000; Kress & Van Leeuwen 1996). Thus although the students themselves view their interaction on social media as a challenge to their literacy practices, it can equally be viewed as a means of enhancing the same irrespective of what they read or write. On the other hand, activities such as housework and minding their siblings are ingrained cultural practices within the African setting that are difficult to shelve for the sake of literacy practices. One could call for moderation of such activities but these submissions are from FGDs and literacy circles with the students and as researchers we did not access their homes to establish the extent to which these activities impacted on their reading or writing choices.

In addition, the data also revealed that most of the students did not seem to have role models that could guide them on what to read or write especially in their home settings. When asked about the people who read or write continuously in their homes, some students shared that no one reads or writes much in their homes. Yet for the few that had people in their homes who read they said that they focused on the bible or on newspapers while others had siblings who read different materials, e.g. "My young sisters read pictured storybooks at home" (Student, St. Jude, SS), "No one reads at my home" (Student, Ngong SS). This factor goes hand in hand with the issues of availability of reading and writing materials for students. Newspapers and the Bible can provide relevant reading and writing content such as current affairs and spiritual matters, but there is need for a variety of materials especially in consideration of the learners' interests and ambitions (IRA, 2012). The students said the following in this regard:

Lack of materials for me to use when writing, like a table and chair, and lack of light for me to practice at night.

There is no exposure to books and other reading materials that could provide aid as I was writing the different activities. I would even find myself short of words, because writing a composition of three hundred words about a family member I love most is very difficult for me. Lack of guiding books for me to practice, and lack of help from experienced people. Spelling problems and meaning caused by lack of a personal dictionary.

Contextual challenges were also visible in the 'in' school setting, whereby participants said that the classes were overcrowded and sometimes the materials were not readily available. It should be noted that English, the subject which provides various opportunities for literacy practices, is simply one of the many subjects that students offer in secondary school in Uganda. Thus their attention is split amongst various content areas not to mention other school projects such as sports, music, dance and drama. For instance the participants below describe the challenges relating to the accessibility of materials 'in' school:

Denial of access to some books at school has been my number one problem, because I get that chance of reading from school so when I am denied the books, I do not get enough chances to read, reading materials are not accessible, I live far away from the book centers and transport was a major let down to attain the books. ***Student, St Jude SS***

Our library is not all that good, at times it is closed. You give them work, you come next time and they tell you the library was locked, they end up losing interest in reading. Maybe you should visit the library and see for yourself. ***Teacher, Ngong SS***

I find it difficult to find the whole book when am reading, poor reading conditions, leading to lack of concentration, because my class is too crowded, I have a poor sitting posture, and also a poor reading posture, having less time to read and having less books to read. ***Student, St. Jude SS***

The 'in' school contextual challenges affecting the learners' literacy practices are compounded by the limited time and some of the teaching strategies selected by the teachers. The excerpt below is from an interview with a teacher at Ngong SS:

Interviewer: *How often do you teach reading to your Senior Three class?*
Teacher: *Honestly it is very hard to teach them stories because time is not there.*
Interviewer: *What do you mean time is not there?*
Teacher: *The periods, like you have only 80 minutes in class, in those 80 minutes you have to teach the learners like now we have groups, they form groups and the learners have to teach themselves. They come and write a story basing on what they have read and you have to go and mark that story. But going to class and giving them the whole story, we do not have computers to print. Even if we have the passage, reading and discussing the whole passage takes a lot of time.*
Interviewer: *So are you saying that you do not teach reading?*
Teacher: *We don't teach reading but sometimes we use very very short stories. Like we give them two brief paragraphs, they read and explain what they have understood.*

Besides the time factor stated in the exchange above, the teacher's choice to teach reading by using only two paragraphs for 17 year old students is telling of the pedagogical gaps in this situation. The group reading and writing promotes interactive learning, but the teacher in this case seems to be limiting the exposure and interaction of the learners with the reading texts. As argued earlier, as the students progress in school, their reading tasks become more complex so that they gain the skills to work meaningfully with texts in the real world (Harmon et al., 2011; Thompson, 2012; Goldman & Snow, 2015). A documentary analysis of some of the texts that the teacher used in class showed these were selected at random from the English textbooks or newspapers and only parts of them were used in class (a paragraph or two). The students were mainly tasked to find the meaning of new words and told to read the rest of the story during their free time. Meanwhile the same teacher had this to say about students' reading practices "They do not want to read alone, they want to read with the teacher all the time, if I give them something to read they come back to class without having done the work" **(Teacher, Ngong SS).**

The other challenges related to the learners' English language competences and their interest in reading and writing. Most of the compositions we received from the writing circles and the responses to the passages from the reading circles suggested the students at St. Jude SS were above average and many of them could be ranked as excellent writers. However, most of the students at Ngong SS had challenges with the English language mainly because of their linguistic background as pointed out by the teacher below:

The language is a big challenge, there are many languages spoken in the camp where learners live and at school for example, they speak Swahili, Congolese languages such as Kinyabwisha, Arabic from the South Sudan refugees, and Rwandese, Swahili and French. Yet, at school we tell them to use English, telling them to read and write in English is like limiting their socialization. ***Teacher, Ngong SS***

The students who use the languages described in quotation above could actually be proficient in their chosen or native language (Language of their country of origin) but given the fact that English is the official language and language of instruction in Uganda, as their host-country, the teachers (and even the researchers) could not establish their levels of competence of the said languages. This complexity of having to adopt the host nation's language is a major setback in the refugee students' literacy practices because it implies that they have to learn English in order to catch up with the other students. However, the teachers shared another challenge related to these students' readiness to learn English in particular and other subjects in general. The teacher shared as follows:

Most of our learners are refugees and they are often taken abroad. So you find they have no interest in school or literacy for that matter, they are here because they are supposed to be here. You see them here appearing at school and then the other week many are absent. Maybe the national students try to study but the others know that they are going abroad to work and get money. Other students say they shall go back to Congo and study Kiswahili or French. Here we are teaching them a new language and they also get confused. ***Teacher, Ngong SS***

It is true that refugee persons are often taken by international organizations such as UNHCR to resettle in other countries. However the language complexity/challenges that these students face may mean that they do not get to learn much from the Ugandan secondary school curriculum. Their performance in examinations is often poor as the teacher says: "*Sometimes we get distinctions like one or two, but the failures are many*" Teacher, Ngong SS. The teacher's submission above also suggests that the students are in school as they wait for other events to happen so that they can go to a better place - the school is a stopgap for them as they prepare or wait either to go back to their home countries or to be shipped abroad. Thus this attitude makes them miss the opportunity of improving their literacy skills which could actually be very useful to them when they resettle elsewhere.

The other personal challenges affecting the participants' literacy practices emerged from the learners' own perceived weaknesses, such as lack of knowledge of how to access literacy materials, lack of dictionaries and limited resources to buy the materials as shared below when asked about the challenges they faced when carrying out the writing and reading circles activities:

I also faced a problem of ignorance, in that besides from the school library, when I go home, I do not know anywhere else to get novels, books, magazines, or anything else to read. Student, ***St Jude SS***

I faced a challenge of poor narrative sequence, as all I was writing could not flow and I found myself delaying to complete the assignments. There are added spelling errors because I did not have a dictionary to use as my reference book. At times, I wrote different words portraying different meanings for other meanings and this hindered my writing because if someone read my script, they could think that, I was in one way or

the other insulting them because one letter missing in a word or writing a wrong spelling could give one's composition a different meaning. ***Student, St. Jude SS***

I also faced the problem of money to buy certain novels, the books were too expensive, which makes them difficult to acquire, because I could only read a few books, since no one was willing to lend me their books. ***Student, Ngong SS***

The content in some books is very difficult and tricky,, with a lot of vocabulary from the books I read, some words are complicated. ***Student , Ngong SS***
Expensive internet data at home, yet I also lack time at school due to the time table being fixed. ***Student, St. Jude SS***

The challenges we have presented in this section do match some of what is submitted in a number of other studies (Goldman & Snow, 2015; Salinger, 2011; Snow & Moje, 2010; Moje et al., 2008; Stevens & Bean, 2007; Santa, 2006). However the contextual setting of the schools, St. Jude SS and Ngong SS, in the current study do provide a unique snapshot of the Ugandan situation especially in the school that is hard to reach and where the students have multiple linguistic backgrounds. Many classrooms in Uganda have students who speak different mother tongues but the situation in Ngong SS was singular because the students had multiple second languages in addition to their mother tongues. This in turn heightened the teachers' task of teaching English because it meant that they had to start from a lower level in order to accommodate these students' language needs. Again, the challenges discussed here are also paradoxical in the sense that the reading materials are available in the schools but accessibility for the students is difficult thus hindering their literacy practices.

Conclusions and Recommendations

From these findings we note that teachers' have multiple conceptualisation of literacy, however, largely oriented towards national curriculum guidelines, and are not expansive enough to integrate students' perspectives and interests in everyday life, this limits their agency for contextualised pedagogic practice. On the other hand, students are motivated to write about their experiences in and out of school, and write about different themes depending on the audience and purpose of writing. Learners' motivation for reading is influenced a lot by the curriculum requirements for assessment and textbooks, as well as available time, text, resources and context, however we have found that religion is a major influencer in what students read or write in and out of school. This aligns with Moje et al's (2008) earlier findings that what students read out of school may not directly relate to the curriculum but it reflects on their personal choices and needs. The parents can also be role models in directing their children's literacy practices because we have seen that the students who read the Bible tend to have parents who do the same.

More importantly, it is enlightening to discover that most of the participants engage in diverse literacy practices. This was more especially so in the school found in the semi-urban location because the students had more access to reading and writing content and were even better placed to carry out a more meaningful analysis of the text. Questions may remain about whether what students read and write on social media can still be categorized as worthwhile literacy practices because of the unconventional nature of such models of communication in schooled literacy. This scenario creates a number of issues, for instance it is considered unethical to request for learners' conversations or chats because they are confidential, hence what they read or write on social media largely remains a mystery to us as researchers. Though it was noticeable in the findings that the students themselves considered their activities on social media as a challenge. Does it mean that the students do not appreciate the powerful role that

technology can play to enhance their literacy practices? On the other hand, most schools in Uganda do not allow students to own technological devices and hence the students could 'culturally' regard whatever they read and write on social media as negative. That said, ICT is highly recommended by the new secondary school language competence-based curriculum and therefore the gap lies in how its affordances can be utilized to support the development of reading and writing practices.

The study also proved that there are many meeting points between the policy documents such as the curriculum and the textbooks used by the teachers and the students' lived experiences. This is a very significant point because in contexts such as Uganda where the students mainly rely on materials from school to read and write, the aspects at school should not be so foreign and or decontextualised from what students know (Nambi, 2015). Some of the school content may emotionally distress the students (e.g., *Grief Child*) or may be above their experiences (e.g.,the untiled land) but also could be learning moments for enabling students to stretch their imaginations. The curriculum is flexible enough for learners and teachers to integrate their experiences and this is an opportunity that could be utilized through the activities of integration, so that even the students who cannot read or write at home get the chance to bring their experiences to school. The compositions from the writing circles, for instance, showed us the vital roles that mothers play in their literacy practices, suggesting that interventions for developing learners' reading and writing practices should involve parents and should use contextualised approaches.

We recommend that the meeting point between the curriculum and the students' experiences needs to be nurtured intentionally by the relevant stakeholders, especially the teachers. The teachers were a constant presence in our study who almost had all the answers in regard to what the curriculum is about, the materials they use, the nature of their schools and their students. The teachers even chose the Literature books for their classes depending on their own teaching experiences. Although, much as some literature recommends that adolescents should be provided with opportunities to practice reading and writing skills in areas that they want to develop without their teacher attempting to co-opt the content of that writing (Curwood, Magnifico & Lammers, 2013), we recommend that teachers should be providing intentional support roles towards the improvement of learners' literacy practices by integrating learners experiences out-of-school in their pedagogical practices. In our work with teachers to develop some of the activities for the reading and writing circles in our study, we observed that with their participation and guidance we received high value responses from the learners. With gentle and outcome oriented guidance from the teachers the learners can continue with their literacy practices even at home complemented with some level of provision for reading resources either accessed from school or home. Our experience with reading and writing circles in this study showed that despite some challenges (such as some learners not participating in the group work or failing to contribute) the students benefited from discussing key ideas about the stages of writing and this in a way helped to create communities of readers and writers.

Reading and writing materials should be put in the reach of the students. Traditional book management practices in schools of keeping the book under lock and shelf while the learners are left without reading resources should be abandoned and adopt book-in-the -hands of learners practices. Again, the teachers could play a key role by intervening to ensure that their students access the materials. For instance, the dictionary is a very useful material for second

language learners, dictionaries could be made accessible by placing them permanently in the classrooms. Placing materials within the reach of the students is a move that requires several procedures to be undertaken to ensure that they can be used for an extended period of time. The students may need to be trained on how to handle and respect the said materials without taking such extreme measures and punishments. In addition, the materials need to be sorted to ensure that they meet the language competences of the learners, while at the same time leading to linguistic growth. For example some of the reading materials at Ngong SS were from donors from various countries and they did seem to 'talk' to the students' world in any way, hence de-contextualised materials.

Finally, our project was not a comparative study in any way. However the differences in the students' literacy practices between the semi-urban and rural contexts were glaring. Hard to reach educational contexts such as Ngong SS call for particular attention and support of both the teachers and learners in order to minimize the gap in access to educational resources of the learners and to create equal opportunities for developing reading and writing competences. More research needs to be done in regard with possible interventions to address the language problem for refugee students (and other vulnerable students) who join the education system in Uganda at different age levels, and broadly, host country education settings. It is exclusionary education and pedagogic practice, to let refugee students sit in class and learn using a language that is quite new to them, far different from the language of instruction from their country of origin. For schools such as Ngong SS that are predominantly occupied by refugee students, bridging language courses would go a long way in preparing refugee learners to learn using the English language.

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