

New Literacy Studies: A Study of Literacy Practices in Middle Class Youth of Southern Punjab, Multan

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Keywords

- Brian Street
- David Barton
- Literacy Events
- Literacy Practices
- Southern Punjab
- Survey
- Case Studies

Abstract

This article aims at unveiling literacy practices of the middle class youth of Southern Punjab, Multan in order to assess the nexus between literacy, social class and culture. The study shows Pakistani youth acquire a range of literacies depending upon the situation they are in. The literacies thus acquired help shaping their outlook and worldview. The most prominent literacies as mentioned by the participants include: academic literacies, family literacies, oral literacies, social media literacies and Islamic literacies. Drawing on Street's Ideological Model of Literacy 'literacies' are explored to evaluate to what extent literacy practices may serve as tools for worldview and ideology formation. This theoretical exploration is complemented with a small scale survey with ten participants (5 females and 5 males) and two case studies. The case studies address if/to what degree Pakistani youth have appropriated socio-cultural literacy practices to function as self-reflective instruments. Young men and women between 18 to 24 years of age belonging to Southern Punjab, Multan participated in the study. Findings indicate that literacy practices can – and do – serve as ideology and worldview shaping tool.



1. Introduction

This study seeks to determine the potential ideological function of literacy practices beyond serving as the ability to read and write. In order to achieve this end, middle class youth of Southern Punjab, Multan has been focused on. Street's (1984, 1995) ideological model of literacy states the same interconnection between literacy, ideology and culture. According to this model of literacy, literacy always serves to impart ideology and requisite social values to the individuals. Social institutions (i.e. academic institutions, family, mosque etc.) have the most important role to play in this regard. Despite the growing interest in literacy studies in Pakistan, literacy as an example of the social practice has received little research attention in this regard. This study redresses this research gap in two steps. Drawing on Street's (1984) and Barton's (1994) concept of literacy studies, Southern Punjab's – specifically Multan's – literacy practices are explored to evaluate whether social literacies may serve as spaces for national, social, cultural and political opinion formation. This sort of research is really needed because common people of Pakistan do not really understand the difference between literacy and schooling.

The traditional idea about schooling and literacy corresponds to Street's (1984, 1995) Autonomous Model of Literacy (henceforth AML) which relates literacy to the ability of reading and writing. Street (1995) believes that this idea is based on faulty premises. It is actually Ideological Model of Literacy (henceforth IML) (see Street 1984, 1995) which has far reaching implications and provide backbone to the literacy imparting programs of a country. The working of ideological model of literacy makes the individuals what they are supposed to be. They develop a concept of (ideological) 'self' and ability of 'self-reflexivity' (Both AML and IML are defined in following sections of the paper). Thus, Cairney and Ruge (1998) are compelled to proclaim that "both theoretical and cultural knowledge of how to use cultural linguistic and sociolinguistic information" is needed to develop the literacy in the individuals in true sense of the word. Taking all these issues into consideration, this study aims to find the answers to following research question:

What are the dominant literacy practices of middle class youth of Southern Punjab Pakistan?

In order to find answer to this question, let get an idea about New Literacy Studies.

2. Literacy and New Literacy Studies

Literacy seems to be a common word and is part of our everyday vocabulary. Generally literacy, schooling and education are considered synonymous and are defined likewise, i.e. in almost similar terms. Actually defining literacy is not that easy because they are so many concepts associated with the term. UNESCO (1999) has provided a comprehensive definition of literacy which incorporates various theoretical insights related to literacy. New Literacy Studies (henceforth NLS) presents an untraditional outlook about 'literacy' and takes it as a social practice. NLS relates the literacy to time and space and identifies dominant and marginalized literacies in a given social set-up (see Gee 1991 and Street 1984). For example in Pakistani context, religious literacies are dominant and secular and liberal literacies are marginalized. Related to the idea of literacy as social practices are literacy practices and literacy events (see Heath 1983). Before proceeding further, lets us define literacy practices and literacy events. Heath (1983: p. 93) defines literacy event as

“any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of participants’ interactions and their interpretive processes”. Some of the examples of literacy events are given by Barton and Hamilton (1998): “writing in some notebook or register, talking to someone about such writing, reading a map, telling a story, reading weather patterns etc”. The ways literacy events are utilized by a particular culture can be termed as literacy practices. Simply put, literacy practices are what people do with the literacy. Adapting Barton’s conception (1994), following characteristics of literacy practices can be identified:

- Literacy practices can be individual (e.g. how an individual utilizes literacy in her/his own peculiar way)
- Literacy practices can be social structures (how a social group utilizes literacy).
- Literacy practices are abstract values and rules such as beliefs, and models disseminated through literacy events.

2.1. Autonomous and Ideological Models of Literacy

As a result of researches in NLS, Street (1995) came up with the ideas of Ideological Model of Literacy (IML) and Autonomous Model of Literacy (AML). AML equates literacy with the improvement in cognitive skills of the illiterates and links literacy with better economic prospects. This can be taken as a sort of cultural appropriation of literacy, and universalization of Western conception of literacy (see Street 1995). ILS on the other hand relates literacy with socio-cultural practices and declares that homogenization of literacy is based on faulty premises. Thus, ILS assumes that the nature of literacy depends upon sociocultural conditions and resultant needs of the people.

3. This study

3.1. Defining middle class

Since, the representative sample of this study comprises middle class youth of Pakistan, it is imperative to define middle class of Pakistani society. According to a fairly recent estimate made by daily newspaper The News in 2017 the estimated lowest income of a middle class family in Pakistan stands at 50000 PKRs and the population of Pakistan’s entire middle class stands at 50 million (see Adil 2017). This study also adheres to this definition of middle class of Pakistan.

3.2. Research participants

In order to carry out this research, an open-ended questionnaire was distributed among thirty students of the Department of English, Bahauddin Zakariya University Multan. Out of them only ten students showed willingness to participate in the study. Out of these ten respondents, two (one male and female) showed keen interest in the study and give detailed and comprehensive answers to the questions. Therefore these two were selected as case studies for this research.

4. Data analysis

4.1. Literacy types

The data reveals that literacies could be categorized into different types depending upon distinct domains and/or social institutions where they occur. The few of the broader categories of the literacies which were identified in the current research include:

1. School literacies
2. Home literacies
3. Literacy: a leisure Activity
4. Oral literacies
5. Media literacies
6. Religious literacies
7. Social Media literacies

In the present study, the terms ‘literacies’ and ‘literacy practices’ have been used interchangeably because the concept of ‘literacies’ actually alludes to different ‘literacy practices’ which assume different shapes according to time and place.

On following pages, all of the literacies mentioned above will be discussed in detail with reference to our two case studies. Owing to ethical considerations, full names and addresses of the participants have not been revealed.

4.2. Case studies

MD (Male)

MD is a Masters student of English literature (4th semester) at Bahauddin Zakariya University Multan. Unlike other respondents, he took interest in the study and shared detailed information about his literacy history. He provided extended answers to the questions given in the questionnaire. MD belongs to the lower middle class of Pakistan. He father owns a cloth shop and is a religious man. When asked to explain briefly about his family, MD wrote:

My father is a hard worker and open hearted man who bore great losses but never lost heart. My mother is a house-wife. She is highly skilled in her household affairs.

(Throughout the article, the actual words taken from the respondent’s handwritten notes are quoted).

ST (Female)

ST is a BS (English) 8th semester student at Bahauddin Zakariya University Multan. She filled in the questionnaire with great interest and provided detailed answers to all the

questions. She told, she loves writing diary and keeping a record of important incidents of her life. She believes diary writing is a very fruitful way to improve and enhance one's language skills. ST belongs to a family of upper middle class in Pakistan. Her father runs a business and brother is associated with Pakistan Air Force. Her parents started living in a separate family system after spending twenty years in a joint family house. So, sharing her experiences and observations of a joint family system ST stated:

“I remember when I was little, we used to live in a joined family house. We were fifteen cousins. There was always hustle and bustle and a kind of festivity in the house. Of course, you have to go through difficult times too when you live in a joint family”.

In the following sections of the paper, different types of literacies will be discussed with these two case studies.

a. Academic literacies

According to International Reading Association and the National Council of Teachers of English in the United States (2006), middle and high school teachers must teach their students how to improve their literacy (i.e. reading and writing) skills in addition to their course contents. Unfortunately, school teachers in Pakistan do not make a concerted effort to help students enhance their knowledge and language skills (see Hashmi et al 2019). In the current report, both respondents claimed that no attempt was ever made at their schools to fulfill their expectation regarding quality educational. They said that their mentors never taught them anything other than the content of their course books, which they believe does not follow international standards. Their teachers never suggested a book or gave a talk on a subject other than the course book. According to ST:

“Sadly, I do not possess an awesome educational history. At Rajanpur, the region I come from, there were no high quality educational institutes. Consequently, I did my matric from a government high school a public sector institute. Teachers were first class but this is not the same when it comes to their proficiency in English.... They never suggested me anything or any book that was not included in our syllabus. Some instructors made no effort to finish the syllabus”.

Correspondingly, MD is of the view:

“In Schools, teaching methodology encourages cramming. Our educational system lacks resources and skill”.

MD and ST mentioned following literacy practices dominant at their academic institutions:

- Reading course book
- Written Class Work
- Cramming the lesson

They further reported that at high school, learning activities are impacted by teachers and peers. Many students prefer to share schooling activities with peers and are compelled to study as a result of peer pressure. MD recollected memories about peer pressure during his academic career.

“I started reading good books because one of my friend always mentioned great names like Ishfaq Ahmad, BanoQudsiya, Stephen Cohen etc. He recommended me to study Stephen’s seven habits of highly effective people and Dawn newspaper. I don’t remember any other friend reading or recommending others some good books”

Similarly, ST commented:

“My friends always recommended me to read some good stuff. One of my friends recommended me to read Bano Qudsiya’s Raja Gidh and Ishfaq Ahmad’s Gadariya”.

b. Family literacies

In literacy development of children, family and the home environment have a great role to play. Rogers, Marshall and Tyson (2006) observe how families play the most significant role in the failure or success of the students at school (cited in Lee, 2009). Cairney and Ruge (1998) are of the view that home literacies are dependent on school literacies to a large extent. And the latter appears to have a noticeable impact on the former. They identified four objectives of literacies at home and classroom, which are:

- Establishing and maintaining relationships
- Getting and disseminating information
- Pleasure or self-expression
- Skill development

b.1. Establishing and maintaining relationships

Generally, people in their lives establish and maintain various social associations, connections, and relationships. MD believes that at home, parents not only play a vital role but also influence the literacy practices of children. Bedtime stories are one of such literacy practices, which he believes, serve to bring mother and child closer to each other and to strengthen their relationship.

- “Bedtime stories (very helpful in maintaining a gentle bond between a mother and her child). Then he said that he started reading religious books at home to make her father happy.
- “‘TAUSEEF’ and ‘SIRAT-UN-NABI’ are the books that my father likes and suggests me to read. Literary practices are also a source of bringing friends together and maintaining a good relationship among them both at school and home”.
- “My only best friend recommends me different books to read. Other friends never suggest any book to read and explore”.
- “My father taught me how to offer prayer. I practiced it with one of my friends.. I learned it at a very young age”.

ST also talked about oral literacies which she got from her parents. Her parents taught her in a very good way how to maintain various relations in a joint family system:

- My mother taught me to take care of others' feelings and to respect others. She rigidly prohibited me from hurting anyone, as she said that "this life is too short, and don't waste it in hating others".
- (I have learned from my Dad) respect your relatives. Always help and love them and never expect anything from them.

ST always remains connected with her Mom. To show, what this relationship with her mom means to her, she contributed a passage on mother-child relationship from Mirza Adeeb's book "Matti ka Diya".

"My mother protected me whenever my father punished me. One day, I wonder what would be the reaction of my father if my mother ever hit me. I decided to disobey my mother. I did not pay any attention to her when she asked me to purchase some yogurt from the Bazar. While eating meal, when she gave me some gravy, I demanded more. She asked me to sit on a stool to eat lunch. I disobeyed her again and spread a sheet on the ground and ate on it. My tone was rude. I was pretty sure, my mother will smack me today. But to my amazement, she took me in her arms and said: Dilawar, my beloved son, is everything fine? What bothers you my child? I burst into tears at that moment".

b.2. Literacy for pleasure/or self-expression

Literacy not only gives expertise and the wisdom but also provides opportunities to rejoice. Both MD and ST use their learning skills not only to satisfy themselves but also to express their feelings and emotions. Expressing his interest in writing poetry MD said:

"I write Urdu poetry for expressing my feelings. This gives me happiness and I feel satisfied. I continuously write about the things I feel connected with. I want to investigate and reinvestigate the sensations of this worldly life and the life hereafter through reflection and occasional meditation".

Discussing how his literary practices in teenage aided him to relieve his suffering and bitterness, he said:

"Pubescent proved out to be a turning point in my life. I was hopeless and in exasperation, I was in search of some emotional writing that would help me come out of depression. Stories of victorious and gratified people were my focus of interest."

ST shared similar experience. She resorts to diary writing for relief whenever she is in pain and stress:

"I write down my feelings and emotions in my dairy, whenever I am in pain and miss my home, but on the very next day when I feel good I tear that page off my diary. I don't want anybody know how I feel about them."

b.3. Accessing or exhibiting information

It may be pertinent to address this and the subsequent section fall under already discussed section 'academic literacies'. However, literacy as a means of accessing and dissemination information is being examined here as it is also included in Cairney and Ruge's (1998) four

objectives of literacies. According to Oxford wordbook of English (2005) ‘to literate’ means possessing knowledge and proficiency. As it is the commonly consented meaning of the term literacy, our respondents also believe the same. They report that following literacy practices at school and home are the most significant tools to get and disseminate information:

- Reading textbooks,
- Perusing journal articles
- TV and
- Internet

Remarking on the usage of Internet MD informed:

“I access the website to introduce myself to popular news trends and up to date information....”

Stating on his favourite TV show he said:

“Most of the stuff telecast on sports and National Geographic channel is appreciated by me. Because these TV channels express how nature toils and makes us toil”.

Likewise, ST added:

“(My parents) demand that I read newspapers every day. My dad suggests me to read the paper daily and remain up-to-date and aware of current affairs”.

b.4. Skill development

The respondents believe that it is a misconception that getting a degree will ensure them a bright future and a good job. They added, our young people seem to have no proper sense of direction, as far career planning is concerned. Thus, ST remarks: “I don’t know how beneficial my degree can be. I joined Department of English because I could not get admission in a medical college. Now, I plan to do CSS after having completed my degree. I don’t know whether my degree would help me to prepare for the CSS exam or not.

Similarly, MD disclosed that he is not getting education for developing any technical skill. He rejected the idea of association between knowledge and employment opportunities stating: “Education is not for obtaining some post. Rather I think education is something which brings about spiritual and moral transformation in a person”

c. Oral literacies (Oracy):

Walter J. Ong in his book *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (1982) speaks about the alteration of oral culture to written culture. He talks about how, when and why written words are used in communication and in the transition from orality to literacy how basic shift happens in an individual’s thought. In Pakistan, due to oral culture different social and cultural customs and inherited values are passed on to young generation through the verbal communication. This research confirms that different experiences, life principles and beliefs of the people are received from parents or grandparents in the form of advices,

anecdotes and social practices. hb has learnt a lot from his parents. Though his guardians are traditionally literate, they have been giving best conceivable social preparing and information to their son. Recollecting the values and life standards he has been learning from his mother since his childhood ,he commented:

“My mother does not have bookish information. She possesses real knowledge about family and home management. My mother keeps on advicing me how to move within the society”.

Similarly, MD has learnt a lot from his father as well:

“My father teaches me, never give up, never resist taking challenges and keep your mind free in whatever circumstances you are in”.

Our other respondent ST also shared some interesting details about oral instructions and training she got from her parents:

“I have learnt from my elders to respect others. They continuously instruct me: Never expect anything from others. Leave everything to Allah”.

d. Islamic literacies:

The research participants provided valuable feedback regarding the role of religious literacies in their lives. Following religious literacy practices have been listed by the respondents:

- Learning how to offer prayers
- Practicing how to recite Holy Quran
- Reading stories from Holy Prophet (PBUH)’s life
- Reading sayings of Holy Prophet (PBUH) and his companions

Given below are the extracts from the questionnaires of both the respondents giving us an idea about their Islamic ways of living.

MD:

“When I was in 5th class, Molvi Sahib taught me how to recite Holy Quran. I am still weak in recitation. Holy Quran tells the tales showing us the path if righteousness. As far as Namaz, my father taught me how to offer prayer. I practiced the rituals with one of my friend.

ST:

“Alhamdulillah, a Qari Sahab taught me how to recite the Holy Quran. I completed my first recitation of Holy Quran at the age of six and a half. The QariSahab occasionally put his turban on my heard and called me Imam. This was his technique to teach me how to offer Namaz. Once I read in a book Allah loves his worshippers and loves when they raise their hands for dua”.

e. Media literacies

In the words of Silverblatt (2001) media literacy includes a range of literacy practices involving visual and verbal media. For example print media, film, photography, radio, TV etc. Now let us have a look at the media consumption in our two case studies:

MD:

Now let us have a look at the media consumption in our two case studies:

MD:

“I like comedies because they entertain me. TV ads are also very interesting nowadays. I would like to share a quote from a TV Ad: “I have weak memory thereby am not able to see the forms only shadows which most of the time dwell in my heart and mind”.

ST:

“I like to watch moralistic and Islamic stuff on TV”.

f. Social Media Literacies

Social media platforms are one of the most effective literacy event in this age of computer-mediated communication. Social media discussions offer as much literacy practices as face-to-face discussions or even more than face-to-face discussion. Much research has been done on the language of social media (see Zappavigna 2012). However, most of these are concentrated on participation, observation, recording and interviewing (Lindlof and Taylor 2011). Social media literacies are unique in the sense that they provide us the material which discloses people’s understanding of and feeling about the world and construction/perception of reality around them. The resourceful research must be ready to pay close attention to the most effective way in which literacies are imparted to the people on the social media. The same was confirmed by the research participants in this study. The participants told that they consider social media platforms as spontaneous expression of the literacy practices that derive from the specific configuration of the context categories within certain literacy events. Sharing the sort of social media literacies, the respondents gave varying responses:

MD did not share any particular literacy he acquired from the social media but he admitted that he loves to post comments on the Facebook:

“Posting Jokes and funny anecdotes is my hobby. A majority of people on the Facebook look opinionated and rigid and I don’t want to bother them and myself with serious comments”.

ST on the other hand wrote down two of her Facebook posts in the questionnaire. One of them is joke and other one is philosophical:

Sardar to Patha: ye sent message kia hota hai. Pathan: Khocha tum to bilkul akhrot hai. Sent message hota hai sent wala message.

5. Conclusion

Summing up, this study though limited in scope provides a clear idea about literacy practices of Pakistani youth. Different reasons embedded in a given sociocultural milieu give rise to preferred literacies and literacy practices. Though, AML can be observed at the surface level of instruction but IML is always in operation subtly behind this visible surface veil. In the case of this research, it can be observed that school literacies do serve to provide traditional Western literacies (i.e. AML) to the children. But it is IML which complements the goals set by AML. This is so, because a particular literacy practice assumes certain temporal and spatial significance. Moreover, literacies do not remain stagnant. They keep on changing and fluctuating within changing times and spaces. For example social media platforms were unheard of some fifty years ago. Now, Facebook and Twitter are so powerful that they have changed the dynamics of accessing and disseminating information in Pakistan.

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Appendix 1
Questionnaire: Literacy Practices

Section 1: Background Information of the Respondents

Name:

Academic Qualification:

Age:

Gender:

Nationality:

First Language:

Place of Origin:

Give a brief introduction of your family background.

Section 2: Literacy Practices of Respondents:

• **Part 1**

1. What sort of books do you like to read?
2. What sort of things do you like to write? What particular writing practices please you?
3. Did you learn anything from a book or short story?
4. Did you acquire any job/particular skill/future planning related literacy?
5. Are you satisfied with the content of textbooks you studied at school?
6. Would you please share the procedure of instruction at your schools and colleges?
7. Do you believe the teachers should provide some information other than textbooks in the classrooms?

• **Part 2**

1. What is the most important thing that you learnt from your mother?
2. What is the most important thing that learnt from your father?
3. Were you habitual of bedtime stories in your childhood? Do you like this activity? If yes, why?
4. Did you develop reading habit in your childhood? If yes, what did you read?
5. Did you develop reading habit in your adolescent/ teenage? If yes, what did you read?
6. Did your parents ever recommend you to read anything? If yes, what particular thing they did they recommend?
7. Did you siblings/ cousins recommend you anything to read? If yes, what particular thing did they recommend?

• **Part 3**

1. Did you learn how to offer prayer? When and from whom?
2. Did you learn how to recite Holy Quran? When and from whom?
3. Did you recite Holy Quran regularly?
4. What particular thing/book was recommended to you by your Moulvi Sahib/ religious instructor?
5. Why did you learn from that?
6. What role did you parents play in your religious education?
7. What role did you family traditions play in your religious education?

• **Part 4**

1. Do you like to go for netsurfing/ facebook/ chatrooms? If yes, what sort of conversation do you like to have?
2. What sort of social media messages do you like to send and receive?
3. Share something you posted on a social media platform?
4. Did you learn anything from some television program?
5. Share some important TV program/show/character/ movie that you like the most. And also state why you do like it?
6. Did anything that you watched on TV or in movies prove out to be beneficial for you in your personal life?
7. Share some particular thing that you watched on TV and got benefited from it.

Appendix 2
A brief introduction to respondents

Sr. #	Names of Respondents	Academic Qualification	Gender	Nationality	First Language	Place of Origin
1	ST	BS (English) 8 th Semester	Female	Pakistani	Urdu	Rajanpur
2	MH	BS (English) 6 th Semester	Female	Pakistani	Urdu	India (Delhi)
3	ZS	BS (English) 6 th Semester	Female	Pakistani	Sirayeki	Multan
4	LT	BS (English) 8 th Semester	Female	Pakistani	Punjabi	Shorkot
5	UV	BS (English) 6 th Semester	Female	Pakistani	Punjabi	Bahawalpur
6	MD	MA English (4 th Semester)	Male	Pakistani	Sirayeki	Multan
7	MI	MA English (4 th Semester)	Male	Pakistani	Sirayeki	Multan
8	FA	MA English (4 th Semester)	Male	Pakistani	Sirayeki	Jehaniyan
9	MZ	MA English (4 th Semester)	Male	Pakistani	Punjabi	Multan
10	M N	MA English (4 th Semester)	Male	Pakistani	Sirayeki	Multan