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Literacy Boost Rwanda

Literacy Ethnography Report

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The authors would like to thank all the families and other participants who took part in this research. Without their openness and willingness to share the thoughts, beliefs, personal stories and experiences, none of this research would have been possible.

Executive Summary

Introduction

In order for a child to become literate, it is essential that features of the child's environment (both in and out of school) support their literacy development. These features may include the physical spaces that the child lives in, as well as the beliefs, expectations, and practices around reading and writing that exist in these spaces. In an attempt to gain a deeper understanding of the role that literacy currently plays in the lives of rural Rwandan primary school children, an ethnography was conducted on the literacy habits, beliefs, and expectations of two children and their families. This ethnography addressed the following questions outlined in the research framework:

- What culture exists around reading in Rwanda?
- What are the beliefs, expectations, and practices around reading and literacy among parents, teachers, and other community members?

Data and Methods

Sample

Two rural Rwandan families from different areas within the same district, with daughters (Flora and Jolly¹) around 7 years of age and who had recently completed Primary One, were observed for a period of one week each. Sex was not a factor in selection, and two girls were randomly selected. These two families were randomly selected from a pool of 467 families who participated in the Home Literacy Environment Survey conducted in October 2013 who indicated that they would be interested in having an ethnographer spend time with their family in their home. For more on how this pool of homes was identified, refer to the Home Literacy Environment Baseline report.

Each of the girls' families signed a consent form to participate in the study in accordance with Stanford Ethics Board and Rwanda National Ethics Committee protocols, as well as Save the Children child protection guidelines.

Personnel

A Rwandan ethnographer, Dr. Michael Tusiime, was hired by Save the Children and trained on the requirements of the ethnography required by the Stanford University research team. Included in this training were specific occurrences, actions, and habits to observe, and topics of conversation to discuss, as well as the methods of collecting ethnographic data. Following data collection, the three co-authors then collaborated on the write up of this report.

Methods

Observations of Flora's family occurred every day for one consecutive week in each family (two weeks total). Dr. Tusiime did not stay overnight with the families due to space limitations and, more importantly, cultural issues that made the possibility of staying the night awkward and infeasible. The ethnographer collected data through observations, structured and non-structured interviews, casual conversations, field-notes and analysis of literacy-related artifacts. Interviews were conducted with each child's parents and other family members, neighbors, community members and local

¹ Both children are assigned pseudonyms

leaders. Observations were conducted in spaces the child frequented regularly including the local market, the local church, the child's school, trading centers, water collection centers and in the woods where children spent time playing and gathering firewood.

Key Findings

Print Material in the Environment

Flora's village had no overt written words on public display. The only printed material at Flora's home consisted of a small bible, a one-page prayer, two used mobile telecommunications network cards posted on the wall and one note book that Flora used only during school days. According to her father, "My children have never seen me read because we have nothing to read in this house." On another occasion, he explained, "I'd rather spend the little money I earn to secure them physical needs than buy them newspapers to read". Speaking about the lack of basic resources required to complete schooling, Flora's grandmother said, "Look around here and tell me if you can see anything that can support them in school."

In contrast to Flora, the living room in Jolly's house had a stack of books, pens, and pencils placed on one of the tables. Some of the books included the teacher's guides and photocopies of Kinyarwanda books for children. There were letters, words, and numbers written in chalk on a wall outside her house as well as on a window shutter.

Practices around Reading and Literacy in the Home

No reading or writing activities were observed in Flora's home. Flora's mother explained that children read or wrote "when it's time for school... no, they don't read here at home". When children in the community were asked when they read, they responded, "We read when we are at school; our teacher spans us if we fail to read. But we are in a school holiday now." None of Flora's daily activities, which involved fetching water, feeding her grandmother's cows, collecting firewood, cooking and caring for her younger siblings, involved the use of literacy skills. None of the adults in Flora's family were observed using literacy skills in their daily lives either. Flora's father, who had dropped out of school in Primary 2, expressed doubt in his ability to help Flora with homework since it had been a long time since he "had learned". Flora's mother, who had dropped out in Primary 4, expressed a lack of time and ability to help her children with reading and writing, saying "Sometimes I can help in writing words but I don't have time. I actually do not know much of what they study".

Flora's father asked his children to leave when he spoke with the ethnographer, saying that children should not participate in conversations between adults. This, coupled with his frequent absence from the home, hints at the possibility of a lack of regular conversations between the children and adult family members. For the most part, literacy activities seemed to be limited to the school. When asked when she read or wrote, Flora responded, "We only do homework when we are at school, or we do it with other children on our way from school"

The situation was quite different in Jolly's home: Jolly's father had brought chalk from school and had created a space on the outside walls of the house for his children to practice writing. Jolly had a planned homework time with her siblings as well as a time for unstructured literacy activities during the family's free time. The family often played cards together and engaged in conversations about various topics. When

they played, Jolly's elder sister wrote the names of the players and their points on a small piece of paper. At the end of the game, Jolly counted the final points and ranked the players according to their points. Jolly's mother said that playing cards with her children allowed her to know them individually and provide educational advice in the most casual way.

The Culture of Reading in the Home

Findings from data gathered in the two children's homes indicated a contrast: there was a low level of support for the development of literacy-related skills in the home of the first child, Flora, and a high level of support for the development of these skills in the home of the second child, Jolly. Flora's parents were subsistence farmers and crop sellers, whereas Jolly's father was a schoolteacher. From the view of the ethnographer, the amount of support each child received to pursue literacy activities at home appeared to be associated with:

- the education and literacy levels of the parents,
- the beliefs and attitudes around literacy among the child's family members,
- the existence of a literate, successful person in the child's circle of acquaintances,
- the distance to the local school and
- the amount of resources and time the family was able to put towards the provision of literacy-related items and activities.

While both of the children seemed interested in literacy activities and artifacts, Jolly, who received a high level of literacy support at home, exhibited greater literacy skill, more confidence in her literacy abilities and higher aspirations for her future life than Flora.

Education as important yet unattainable

"Every parent wishes well for their children, but parents are poor."

-Flora's Grandmother

Neither of Flora's parents explicitly expressed a desire for their children to develop strong literacy skills. While Flora's father expressed a desire to educate his children, he admitted that he would not be able to finance their education past primary school:

It is very expensive. I am worried they will end up being like many of their friends who have already dropped out of school.

Flora's mother expressed an understanding that knowing how to read would be helpful in remembering things, such as her child's age. She expressed frustration regarding the difficulty that her inability to read caused issues terms of purchasing items from the local market. At the same time, she spoke about children who couldn't move from primary school to secondary school because their parents were poor in educating them, saying, "Would you continue investing your resources in projects where you don't foresee profit?"

Flora's grandmother seemed to constantly express the challenges facing parents who could not afford to educate their children: "

Parents are poor; they cannot even afford educating their children. Children end up helping their parents to take care of goats or cows’.

In her conversation, she highlighted the fact that education seemed even less beneficial for daughters of poor families:

It is possible to see older girls who could be ready for marriage attending classes. They cannot get married and cannot study well. They waste their time.

However, on another occasion, Flora’s grandmother mentioned that being able to read would help children read signposts and find their way in Kigali.

While family and community members thought highly of individuals who were educated (the community leader expressed the amount of respect he received from others when his daughter completed tertiary education), it seemed as though the benefits of education were only experienced if a child completed their education, something which is often impossible given resource constraints. It seemed inevitable that Flora and her siblings would have to drop out of school following primary school and a community member voiced concern regarding students who dropped out, saying “Such children devalue manual work, yet they can’t get jobs in town. They end up being ‘troublemakers’ to the parents”.

The community leader emphasized the need for parents to stress the importance of literacy and education in general to their children and provide them with food and learning material despite financial difficulties. The leader said, “I know this community is poor but we parents can sacrifice to create a better future for our children.... At least we parents should be teaching our children how to read and write.”

Education as means to a better life

In Jolly’s house, except for the youngest child, everyone could read and write. Jolly’s mother informed the ethnographer that Jolly knew how to write her name before she started her pre-primary education and her elder siblings had taught her some basic letters of the alphabet. According to Jolly’s mother, “In this family, we do not tolerate any child who does not show effort in reading or in education in general.”

The family’s commitment to education may have been a result of the educational opportunities Jolly’s mother missed as a growing child. Jolly’s mother had dropped out of school in Primary 4 to tend to the family cows, while her brothers had continued to attend school. She admittedly kept her children awake at night to complete their homework, and allowed them to read books instead of completing chores. She believed that by learning how to read and write, and completing their education, her children would have a life that would be different from hers:

My brothers have good jobs and it’s because my father educated them. I strongly believe my children can also have a better life when they complete their education and that starts by reading.

Her father's discriminative behavior, in addition to the support from her literate husband, appeared to make this family distinct from most of the families in this neighborhood whose press for literacy was low.

The Culture of Reading in the Community

At the community level, in both cases observed, there seemed to be a low level of support for literacy development in the environment. A majority of the villagers were non-literate and many lacked the resources to finance their children's education. On one occasion, Jolly's mother explained,

Most villagers here are not educated. So when the school asks for anything however small, they tell their children, 'don't go back to school, I don't have that. I did not study but I am able to provide for you'².

There were barely any signposts in the villages and people were not required to read or write in order to fulfill their daily tasks, using instead a system of symbols (in the case of consumer transactions) and memorization (in the case of church prayers and community announcements). Overall, there was a general sense that reading and writing were activities that were limited to school and there were mixed opinions regarding whether these skills could be useful in daily life or to improve one's life situation. Among community members, apparent knowledge of the potential advantages of education seemed to compete with inherent resource constraints that prohibited families from sending their children to school or encouraging them to read and write. This was reflected in a comment made by a villager in Flora's community:

I would love to see my children go to school, but how can I take care of their siblings and be able to work for food and feed them? What would they eat after school?

According to one community member, the absence of fathers, either because they had abandoned their families, were possibly serving-genocide related sentence, or other reasons, compounded poverty-related deterrents to children's literacy skill development. The fact that homes were scattered along the hillside where Flora lived limited social interactions among children after school and ultimately minimized any literacy-related benefits this interaction could foster. Children who were required to help their families with domestic chores and arrived to school late either missed lessons or were sent home as punishment.

Beliefs and Expectations around Reading

Villagers referred to literacy and education interchangeably. Family members and those in the communities where the families lived indicated mixed beliefs regarding the benefits of being able to read. In the case of Flora's surroundings, there existed a view that while education and learning how to read may be useful in the short and long term, it was beyond the family's financial means to provide the resources necessary for children to achieve these goals. On the other hand, Jolly's family stressed the need for literacy skills and educational achievement and provided whatever resources they could.

²The original Kinyarwanda versions of these quotes are available in the full report.

Practices around Reading and Literacy in the Market and Stores

No printed material was used in the market or village stores. At the market, potatoes, beans and other food were sold in different sized baskets for different prices: the bigger the basket, the higher the price. Young children who were sent to buy items from the market paid for items from different pockets where the parents put different amounts of money for different items. The most important assets for the children in this transaction were a memory of which pocket had money for which item and whether the money was in exact bills.

The villagers had developed conventions using non-written symbols that conveyed meaning and significance to others. These symbols were often branches from a particular shrub or tree arranged in a specific way on the ground, and their presence indicated what sorts of goods were sold there. The words: ‘we sell local beer here’, ‘we sell avocados here’ or ‘it is prohibited to graze on this land’ had been codified into symbols that all local people could easily comprehend. A local schoolteacher observed that an education officer had suggested the use of conventional writing to advertise products and services but the idea had faded since it was not ‘contextually friendly’.

Practices around Reading and Literacy in the Church

In general, church traditions and norms did not require reading. During the church mass that Flora’s family attended, except for the priest and two people who read the first and the second readings, the congregation predominantly recited prayers, sang, and listened to the priest’s sermon. The congregation was not asked to open their bibles and did not receive announcement brochures. The children left to play outside during mass.

Practices around Reading and Literacy in the School

Although children were on holiday from school at the time of the observation, comments made by children and adults in the community indicated that school was the main space where literacy activities took place. However, according to Flora’s father, when children who helped tend to household chores in the morning arrived to school late, they either missed the lessons or were punished for being tardy and sent home. One child found in the community shared,

We are tenants in someone’s land and my mother wakes up early to go and work for food. I start school in the second shift at 12 pm. Sometimes, it rains for long hours and mother is not able to complete her task and doesn’t bring food. I then have to go to school hungry. Sometimes, she comes late and by the time food is ready, it’s very late. When I reach school late, teachers punish for being late... I decided to drop out of school.

Conclusion

The ethnography reveals two very different cases of the role of literacy in the lives of rural Rwandan children.

On the one hand, while there is some understanding that being literate has the potential to lead to an improvement in life, parents like Flora’s who are non-literate and struggle to make ends meet, may be unable to finance their children’s education and purchase literacy materials given the extremely low resources available to them.

They also cannot afford time to support Flora's literacy development in non-monetary ways. A lack of experience with literacy and the absence of a model of success associated with the development of literacy skills may lead parents to deemphasize the need for literacy skill development among children. Schools may lend books to students during the school year but they do not do so during holidays for fear books may be damaged or lost. For this and other reasons, homes may have little to no print material present. Parents are absent from home most of the day, and being non-literate themselves may not feel confident in being able to help children with reading or writing at home. Reading is an activity that is thought of as limited to school. This limits literacy related activities that take place in the child's home. Given the heavy load of work that children are expected to share with the family and the distance between homes in certain rural regions, opportunities of interaction and practice of literacy skills among children who attend school together are slim.

In the larger community, an alternative form of literacy, consisting of a system of symbols and memorization, are used in lieu of conventionally printed signs and announcements during daily activities. The coupling of literacy with education in the minds of villagers may be problematic: The impression of education as "an investment that gives no returns" unless completed, something that may be outside parental means, may cause successful reading acquisition to be thought of as beyond a family's reach as well. This in turn engenders low expectations and aspirations for the future.

In contrast, in the case of Jolly's family, where at least one parent is literate and several older siblings attend school, there are examples of successful readers within the family. Further, the family is earning enough of an income to provide basic reading materials. Given both the materials to read and the older readers to emulate, reading plays a somewhat larger role in the child's life. Children like Jolly may be provided with multiple opportunities for interaction with reading, through exposure to print material in the home, reading and writing with family members and playing games that require literacy skills. Jolly's mother, as a woman who dropped out of school in Primary 4 but is passionate about the education and development of literacy among her children, appears to be a driving force in terms of their reading skill development. In situations like these, family members, as well as the children themselves, seem to exhibit higher aspirations for the future. However, there is some indication that Jolly's family stands out as an exception to the general trend in the village.

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1 Introduction

In order for a child to become literate, although there is still some debate in academic circles, it is generally accepted that it is essential that features of the child's environment (both in and out of school) support their literacy development (Snow Burns, & Griffin, 1998). These features may include the physical spaces that the child lives in, as well as the beliefs, expectations, and practices around reading and writing that exist in these spaces. In an attempt to gain a deeper understanding of the role that literacy currently plays in the lives of rural Rwandan primary school-aged children, an ethnography was conducted of the literacy practices of two children and their families.

Data collection for the ethnography followed a theoretical framework of the Home Literacy Environment first put forth by Hess and Holloway (1984). In the following report, we present the findings of the ethnographic data collection and then use this theoretical framework to discuss these findings in the discussion section.

This study examined the following questions:

- What culture exists around reading in Rwanda?
- What are the beliefs, expectations, and practices around reading and literacy among parents, teachers, and other community members?

This ethnography, commissioned by Save the Children, serves as part of the research underpinning Save the Children's Advancing the Right to Read programme in Rwanda. It complements a Reading Assessment, Teacher Survey and Observation, and Home Literacy Environment Survey conducted by Stanford University in cooperation with Save the Children, Umuhuza, and the Rwanda Education Board. This collection of studies presents a mixed methods approach at understanding the current situation of reading and writing in one district of Rwanda. These studies will also serve as baselines to track the change over time in response to intervention. While the other studies are designed to better address this question of change, the ethnography is designed to qualitatively enrich our understanding in relation to the two research questions.

2 Personnel

2.1 The observer

Dr. Michael Tusiime (hereafter MT) earned his educational doctorate in Curriculum Development and Leadership from Northern Illinois University. Through coursework and research assistantships, notably at the Literacy Lab in Northern Illinois University, MT honed his qualitative research skills. His dissertation entitled "Toward Democratic Education and Transformation Learning: An Examination of Students' Experiences at Kigali Institute of Education—Rwanda" proved his interviewing prowess.

It was not only MT's professional training that made him the ideal observer. Perhaps his strongest asset was his childhood in Rwanda. Having been raised in a rural area, MT knew before hand the most crucial details about village life. This connected him with the observed families, especially when they realised he was proficient using the village terminologies, proverbs and mannerisms. One grandmother complemented MT for not being so urban-mannered like other people "bize amashuri bafite n'amafaranga" (*who are educated and have money*). This familiarity with the rural

context provided critical entrée into the village and home life of the participating families.

2.2 The co-authors

Elliott Friedlander is a doctoral candidate at the Stanford Graduate School of Education. He also earned a Masters in International Education Administration and Policy Analysis from Stanford, during which time he conducted a study on the impact of the provision of mother-tongue storybooks on learning outcomes of early grade students in Lesotho. His two years living in rural Lesotho, working as a secondary school teacher as part of the U.S. Peace Corps gave him unique insight into the learning challenges that children face from low home literacy environments. His professional work at Save the Children, focused on encouraging families and communities to better support their children's cognitive growth and learning.

Saima Malik is a third year doctoral student in the Developmental and Psychological Sciences program at the Stanford Graduate School of Education. She holds a Masters in Teaching with a specialization in Elementary Education and a Masters in International Education Policy. She gained extensive experience teaching and assessing early grade literacy skills as an elementary school teacher in the United States. She also served as Research Development Coordinator for Save the Children in Islamabad, Pakistan for a year where she analyzed data and developed reports for the School Health and Nutrition team and the Education team within the Emergency Response and Recovery Program. Having been an early grade educator, Saima is interested in the teaching and learning of early primary grade students, particularly those living in rural settings in situations of adverse poverty following the experience of conflict or disaster. She is particularly interested in the role that parents and families play in helping children to cope with these challenges.

2.3 Collaboration between the research personnel

Elliott Friedlander originally designed the study, part of a larger research project called Literacy Boost in Rwanda: A randomized control trial” and trained MT on the specifics of the Literacy Boost project and possible points of interest within the home and community around reading, writing, and literacy. This included specific occurrences, actions, and habits to observe, and topics of conversation to discuss. During this training, a rough sketch of observation protocols and guidelines were established, which will be further elaborated below in the methods section. Using field notes and an initial draft report written by the first author, the team of authors collaborated to produce the current report.

3 Methods

The observer collected data through observations, structured and non-structured interviews, casual conversations, field-notes and analysis of literacy-related artifacts. MT also took photographs to supplement his notes. MT gathered extensive notes, separated data thematically, and compiled the key findings and evidence into a draft ethnography report.

3.1 Observations

The approach to observations began with understanding the child's sociocultural and economic “niche” (Gallimore, Weisner, Kaufman, & Bernheimer, 1989; Weisner, 1984). The observer used an activity-settings-model approach (Gallimore & Goldenberg, 1993) to his observations to understand this niche. In this approach,

MT noted the activity taking place, the setting in which the activity was occurring, who was taking part in the activity, the motivations behind the activity, and the shared cultural understandings, perceptions, and norms within the sociocultural niche in which the activity occurred.

Observations of two children over one week each took place during November and December of 2013. Data were collected daily from approximately 7:30am to 6:00 pm from Monday to Saturday of the week in which the family was observed. On Sundays, the observer gathered data from 7:30 am 2:00 pm. Sunday evenings were set aside to review notes and reflect on the weeks' experiences in the field. Late evening observations were not possible due to logistical challenges and the geographical location of the area. The observer did not stay overnight with the families due to space limitations and, more importantly, cultural issues that made the possibility of staying the night awkward and not feasible.

In order to triangulate data from home observations, the observer visited key places in the village outside of the participants' homes. MT conducted observations in spaces that each child frequented regularly including the farmers' market, the local church, the child's school, trading centers, water collection centers, in the woods where children spent time, played and gathered firewood, the monthly village-wide communal work projects (called *umuganda*) and the village meetings that followed *umuganda*. As these places were part of the overall environment that shaped the children's daily life and aspirations, the practices, transactions and discussions that took place here offered a glimpse into factors that may impact the development of literacy-related skills in the life of a rural Rwandan child.

3.2 Interviews and casual conversations

The observer spent the week with the study child, observing their activities and speaking with them about their lives. MT also conducted structured planned interviews with both parents of the two children observed. This was in addition to the unplanned discussions and exchanges he had with them whenever they were at home, especially in the morning before they left for work or in the evening when they returned. He also conducted planned and unplanned interviews and held casual conversations with several neighbours, community members, neighborhood youth and local leaders. His questions sought to solicit the interviewees' perceptions of ways in which village activities may have related to literacy practices.

3.3 Participant selection

Two rural Rwandan families from different sectors, with daughters around 8 years of age and who had recently completed Primary One, were observed for a period of one week each. Sex was not a factor in selection, and two girls were randomly selected. Budget constraints, time limits, and data analysis considerations limited the sample to two families. As with any ethnography or detailed, in-depth qualitative study, the findings from this report can only be said to apply directly to the two families and communities in which the study was conducted.

Potential participants were identified following home literacy environment interviews, part of a larger research project called Literacy Boost: a Randomized Control Trial. This project involves two treatment conditions and one control condition. For more on this project, contact the authors. The two families were randomly selected from a pool of 466 total possible families. One family was

selected in control condition, and the other family was selected from one of the treatment conditions in the broader randomized control trial. Picture 3.3 below contains a map of Rwanda with the province and district in which the children lived highlighted.



Picture 3.3: Map of Rwandan Provinces with Northern Province in pink and Gicumbi District in Red

3.4 Structure of this report

We present below data collected during these two weeks in three distinct sections. To set the scene, Section 4 describes the families and the features of their surrounding environment not directly related to literacy. Section 5 describes the home literacy environment of the families, including the amount and types of text as well as the press for achievement, the value placed on literacy, and interactions using both oral and written words³. Following this, Section 6 presents an expanded view of the community literacy environment surrounding both families. Section 7 discusses these findings, summarizing and incorporating them into the existing research literature. Finally, Section 8 offers some personal reflection and conclusions.

4 Participant Description

4.1 Participant description

Flora's family, including her mother, father, grandmother, aunt and two siblings, along with several community members participated by being observed and interviewed during the study. Similarly, Jolly's family, including her mother, father, six siblings and an employee of her parents, as well as community members participated in the study. Each family signed a consent form to participate in the study in accordance with Stanford Ethics Board, Rwanda National Ethics Committee, and Save the Children's child protection protocols. All names in this report are pseudonyms to protect the identity and privacy of the participants.

³These features of the home literacy environment loosely represent the 5 dimensions specified by Hess and Holloway (1984). These will be discussed in detail in the Discussion section.

4.1.1 Flora's Family and their Environs

Flora's extended family, all of whom lived together, consisted of seven persons living in two small houses built in the same yard on an isolated hillside. One house belonged to Flora's parents and the other belonged to Flora's grandmother who lived with her chronically ill daughter, Flora's aunt. There were five people in Flora's nuclear family: Her father, her mother, herself and her two younger siblings. Flora said she was 9 years old and her siblings were 7 and 5 years old. Flora's parents were in their early forties. Her grandmother was unable to estimate her age but Flora's father estimated her to be in her early eighties. Flora's mother dropped out of school in Primary 4 and her father barely completed Primary 2. He had dropped out of school during the Genocide and did not resume his schooling following the Genocide. Her father earned a living through subsistence farming, crop selling, and tending to his mother's zero-grazed cows. These are cows that are mostly reared in a built shelter, fed with cut grass and other fodder and not grazed on firm land. The subsistence farming required him to work in the fields with his wife. Flora reported that she hated the crop selling business as it caused her father to be absent from home.

Asked when her father returned home from selling crops, Flora responded: "Biterwa niyo bapimye, iyo bapimye ava kwisoko agaca mukabari. Hari igihe asanga twaryamye. Kyeretse iyo ari umunsi woguhinga aza kare" (*It all depends on whether there is beer. From the market, he first goes to a bar. Sometimes, he comes at night and finds us asleep*). When MT interviewed Flora's father, he confirmed part of Flora's statement by saying:

Kuba mugiturage biragoye. Ubuzima bwaha ntibutwemerea kuba murugo. Wahaba se abana bashonje, iyo ntagiye mwisambu mba najyanye imyaka mwisoko. Nurugendo rudufata amasaha nkabiri kumaguru. Dutaha bwije rimwe narimwe tugasanga abana na nyina baryamye. (*Living in the village is stressful. What we need to survive demands that we spend many hours outside our homes. If I am not in the field cultivating, I am in the market selling crops. Travelling to the market takes us about 2 hours walking. Sometimes, the children and my wife are asleep by the time I arrive home*).

Flora and her siblings spent most of the day performing chores and the only persons at home most of the day were her grandmother and aunt. Flora's mother left the house at 7:30 a.m. to work on small fragmented pieces of land on the hillside that the family owned and used to grow crops. She returned home at about 5:00 p.m. during the farming season. Both of Flora's parents spent most of the day working outside the home and the children hardly saw their father as he left for work before they awoke and returned late at night.

Flora's homestead was situated on a steep hill. It took a fifteen minute walk from the nearest driveable road through a narrow, steep trail to reach Flora's home. The home was composed of three rooms, the parents' bedroom, a living room, and a small room that served as the children's bedroom. The living room in Flora's home doubled as a storage room. There were four tall sacks placed in one corner that contained beans and cassava flour that Flora's father bought and re-sold for a small profit. The only remaining small space in the room accommodated four wooden chairs. The short living room walls were plain. It is to this room that Flora, her brother and MT escaped from the scorching heat of the mid-day sun after fetching

water down in the valley. It was also in this room where Flora's 5 year-old brother often sat on her lap and cried during the week's observation

Flora's mother informed MT that they didn't have light at home. Since Flora's home had no reliable source of light- there was no electricity or lantern- all activities stopped as soon as it got dark. Since it got pretty dark without any lighting system, most families in the neighbourhood went to sleep very early.

When travelling to the house, one had to watch very carefully where one stepped because the slightest mistake could cause one to tumble down the steep terrain. The trail actually meandered to avoid the steepest parts of the hillside. The house was tiny and isolated on the hillside. Small windows and a lack of sufficient light made the inside of the house look quite dark. The house did not have electricity or running water. The distance from Flora's home to her school was approximately 2.5 miles.

4.1.2 Jolly's Family and their Environs

Jolly was eight years old. A total of ten people lived in Jolly's home, including Jolly— her six siblings, her mother, father and an unrelated adult male. The latter helped with domestic chores and was paid for his services on a monthly basis. Two of Jolly's siblings had graduated from tertiary institutions and were looking for jobs at the time of the observation. Two of her other sisters were students in the middle Primary grades, and two others were in secondary schools. Jolly was scheduled to join Primary 2 at the beginning of the year 2014. Jolly's mother studied until Primary 4 and was a housewife and committee member of the sector council. Since this committee advised and oversaw local administrators for administrative activities, she commanded a relatively high level of authority. Jolly's father was a Kinyarwanda teacher in the primary school Jolly attended, as well as a national examiner for the Kinyarwanda primary leaving examinations. Jolly's father spoke French and some English. Her mother was able to read Kinyarwanda. Everyone but Jolly's younger, 6 year-old sibling could read Kinyarwanda. Her siblings in secondary school could also read English and French. Jolly's father was away from home during the observations, on work related to the primary leaving examinations. The observer only met him and had a conversation with him on the last day of the observation. Jolly's home was built within an Umudugudu⁴. The house was accessible by a driveable-road so a car was able to stop in front of the house. It was a wooden house plastered with clay soil and appeared clean. It could be classified as a semi-permanent structure. It was about three times the size of Flora's home and the rooms had good ventilation. Behind the main house was another separate house that was not inhabited. Jolly's mother explained that they built it to store crops during harvest or to house visitors. The house was surrounded by fruit trees. In the same yard, there was a cow-shelter where four cows were zero-grazed next to water catchment points. These were wide underground cemented trenches where rain water collected and was used in the home as well as for cows to drink. The distance from Jolly's home to her school was about half a mile and it took Jolly less than 10 minutes to walk to school.

4.2 Differences between the participants' villages

The two girls and their families lived in dramatically different contexts when taking into consideration neighbors and other villagers. Jolly's village was located in an Umudugudu. This is a new settlement concept that the government of Rwanda

⁴ Umudugudu is a Kinyarwanda word that means a planned settlement.

embarked on roughly 15 years ago to promote effective land use and provide basic infrastructure to the community. In the Umudugudu, low cost houses are built in a planned area for people to buy or be resettled for free. Usually within the proximity of such a planned settlement, there is a school (depending on the population size, it may be both a primary school and a secondary school), water and sometimes electricity, retail shops and other related infrastructure. In Jolly's village, it was not uncommon to see between four and ten children playing and singing together or simply roaming around. This was in sharp contrast to Flora's village that offered less opportunity for social interaction, as houses were isolated on hillsides. Jolly's village also had two retail shops that sold a few basic items, meaning that children did not need to walk long distances to purchase basic items like soap and salt. The village was accessible by road and children did not necessarily have to travel the same narrow trails that Flora followed to school.

Quite a number of educated people lived in Jolly's village. For instance, Jolly's neighbor had two sons who studied at a university (in addition to Jolly's own eldest sisters as well). In comparison to Flora's village, Jolly's village offered a broader wider social and better economic environment that seemed to provide her a relative advantage. In comparison with Flora's home, Jolly's house was very accessible and located in the centre of the village where houses stood close to each other.

4.3 Children's chores, work, and play at home

Flora had a significant amount of daily chores to do by any standard. Her mornings began with her mother reminding Flora of the activities that Flora would be responsible for during the day. After an occasional (but not daily) breakfast of cassava or beans and potatoes with her mother, Flora's would travel the steep slopes down the valley to fetch water for both her own and her grandmother's households. The journey from Flora's home to the water canal took over one hour, sometimes longer depending on how many people were waiting to fill containers at the water canal. During the observation time, she carried a four-litre container up the hill. At the time of the observation, she had cut one of her fingers while cutting grass for her grandmother's cows so could only use one hand to carry the container instead of alternating between both hands. Her five-year-old brother joined her and carried a three litre container. Flora said she made this trip approximately four times, twice to bring water for their home and twice for their grandmother's home, meaning hours everyday were devoted to solely fetching water. The hill was so steep and difficult to walk on, it is hard to imagine the children traveling to the water source and back four times daily and still being able to do other domestic work at any age, much less their very young ages.

After collecting water, Flora helped with cutting grass and moving around the woods to collect tiny dry eucalyptus trees as fire-wood for cooking. Flora used this kindling to make lunch when her mother was away cultivating or weeding crops in the field. On days when her mother did not take her youngest child to the fields, Flora was responsible for taking care of him. Flora's father confirmed that her activities were the same during school days except that she had to wake up much earlier so that she could complete her chores before going to school. The observation occurred during holidays and even during these holidays MT noted that there was barely any time left for Flora to play, read or participate in any other literacy-related activities. There is likely no such play during school days either. Over the course of the week, Flora never really engaged in any activities that could be called 'playing'.



Figure 4.3a. Children walking uphill with small water container. Even during school days, Flora’s father said, “benshi mu banyeshuri bagomba kubanza kuvoma amazi mbere yuko bajya kwishuri. Amasaha bakabaye bakoreha gusoma bayamara bakora imirimo yo murugo bamwe muri bo bakagera kwishuri bakerewe” (*Most of the children have to collect water before starting their long journey to school. What could be time spent reading is spent doing mostly domestic work and some reach school when reading lessons have ended*).



Figure 4.3b. Flora’ bundle of dry sticks (firewood) that she collected in the woods. It is a difficult chore given that it could take an hour or so to collect the amount seen in the photograph.

Jolly, in contrast to Flora, was spared the task of fetching water during the observation period. Her mother said that the family had invested in water tanks so that the children could have ample time to play and read. Many children in the area spent an incredible amount of time going down to the valley to fetch water. Due to the water tanks, Jolly and her siblings were spared this chore. Other chores included, washing dishes, going to the nearby garden to harvest beans, washing clothes and

providing minor help with in house tasks such as sweeping, dusting, and arranging the living room. On average, Jolly spent about 150 minutes a day doing these chores.

In contrast to Flora, Jolly played cards with her family and generally played with other children for about five hours a day. At times, Jolly's friends would come to her house and the children would sing and dance to traditional marriage songs. Jolly's family was very interactive –on many occasions, the children, both young and old, played cards with their mother and invited MT to play. When they got bored playing cards, they made a circle and sang. Two of the four songs they sang involved counting from one to ten and some other coded messages about a teacher's advice to school children about discipline.

5 The Home Literacy Environment

While the individuals interviewed in both villages voiced similar concerns regarding challenges facing successful literacy acquisition (and educational attainment) by children in their communities, observations in the homes of the two children revealed two contrasting pictures about the role that literacy played in daily life. In this way, the study helps bring to light the fact that the amount of literacy support provided to children at home may vary drastically (based on many factors) within the same community and this may have implications for children's literacy development.

5.1 Written Words in the Home

5.1.1 Written Words in Flora's home

There was minimal evidence of any written materials or any reading activity (planned or random) in Flora's home. The only printed material at home consisted of a small bible, a one-page prayer, two used mobile telecommunications network cards posted on the wall and one note book that belonged to Flora and was used only during school days, according to her and her mother. The prayer belonged to Flora's aunt. At one point during the observation of the family, the aunt requested for the observer to re-type this prayer for her since she had been keeping it for about 20 years. The paper had been laminated for protection but the dirt on the outside cover made most letters illegible. It needed to be washed before it could be re-produced.

When asked how often she reads the laminated prayer, the aunt said, “najyaga ndisomaga buri gihe ariko muri iyi minsi ndishyira hafi n'igitanda” (*I used to read it quite often but these days, I keep it next to my bed*). Although MT agreed to type, print and laminate a new copy the prayer for her, the contents were not quite child-friendly. For instance, in one section it read “Uzavuga iri sengesho ntabubabare azagira kwisaha ye ya nyuma.. kandi uzavuga iri sengesho ntabwo azigera yicwa n'ubumara bwinzoka” (*Whoever reads this prayer will not have pain at the hour of her death... and that whoever reads this prayer will not die of snake bites*). With the exception of Flora's notebook, the few written materials present in the home were not intended for children's use or reading development.

In one of the discussions during the week, Flora's mother expressed that the biggest challenge facing Flora's reading was a lack of books to read.

Urabona, nubwo tuvuge babona igihe cyo kuruhuka nta bitabo babona byo gusoma...ashobora kuba yasoma nyuma yo kuvoma ariko nta bitabo bihari. Nanjye nashoboraga kuba namwigisha ariko mba mfite akazi kenshi. Biga ibintu ntazi. Ntabwo nzi igifaransa n'icyongereza. (*You see, even if they had*

ample time to rest, they would not have books to read...She [Flora] would be reading after bringing water but there are no books).

Her father elaborated that parents lack materials to read and they struggle to be reading role models to their children. According to him, parents in this region did not have newspapers to read and most did not have printed books. At one time he mentioned that his children had never seen him read anything. He said he would rather spend money on securing physical needs for his family than buy any materials to read.

With no books visible in the home, one day Flora surprisingly asked, “Urashaka kureka ikayi yangye?” (*You want to see my book?*)” MT responded that he would like to see her books, not realizing that she was referring to *one book*. Flora began to search for the book eventually asking her brother to help as well. She went to her parents’ bedroom and failed to locate the book. After a few minutes of searching, Flora found the book jammed between two sacks of beans.

The covers of the book were torn from the effects of rainwater during her walk from school. To replace the book covers, her father had improvised paper from used cement bags. The inside of the book reflected the need for more reading and writing materials. Most of the pages had been torn out of the book. Letters and numbers were squeezed on the very few remaining pages. “Ese wandika inyigisho zose mur’iyi kayi” (*So, you write everything you learn at school in this book?*) “Yego, papa yambwiye kwandika i Kinyarwanda kumpapuro z’imbere, icyongereza kuzinyuma n’imibare kumpapuro zo hagati” (*Yes, my father told me to write Kinyarwanda at the front pages, English at the back and maths in the middle pages*). This was Flora’s only book.



Figure 5.1.1a. This was Flora’s only book. She could not find the books she used in the past. She used the same book for Kinyarwanda, Maths and English. It took her a few minutes to find this book.

During the week with Flora, she mentioned a book that she had enjoyed reading in the past. According to Flora, this was a Kinyarwanda book that she had borrowed from her school and returned when the holiday began, since the school authorities feared that the books lent out might be destroyed or lost by students over the holidays.

N'igitabo k'ikinywanda. mugihe gitandukanye kubanyanyeshuri batandukanye kuberako ibitabo bihari bidahagije Bajya bakintiza kwishuri ariko ibiruhuko byatangira tukagisubiza kwishuri. Abayobozi b'ikigo Banga ko twakyangiza cyangwa tukabita mubiruhuko. (*It's a book in Kinyarwanda. Books are borrowed by students at different times because we only have a few copies. We get it from school but we return it when we break for holidays. The headmaster fears that we might destroy or lose the textbooks during the holidays*).

Flora requested that MT buy her the same book that she had borrowed from school before holidays began, but she could not remember the title and nor clarify the primary level for which the book was used. Her mother could not help clarify the dilemma either. When asked whether she had ever seen the book, Flora's mother responded, "Nakibonyeho nka rimwe ariko snibuka neza uko gisa" (*I saw it once and I cannot exactly remember what it looks like*). Although Flora said she had had the book at home for almost the entire semester, her mother said she had only seen it once and did not recall what it looked like.

During the week spent with Flora and her family, there were no spontaneous instances of reading and writing. It was only after prompting Flora that MT discovered her writing and reading capacity. After putting her brother down for his midday nap one day, MT asked Flora whether she wanted to write anything in his book. He had been using a blue note book for field notes and she had shown interest in it. "Ngiye kwandika rimwe kugera kw'ijana nongere nandike izina ryangye" (*I am going to write from 1 to 100 and then write my name*), she responded with excitement.

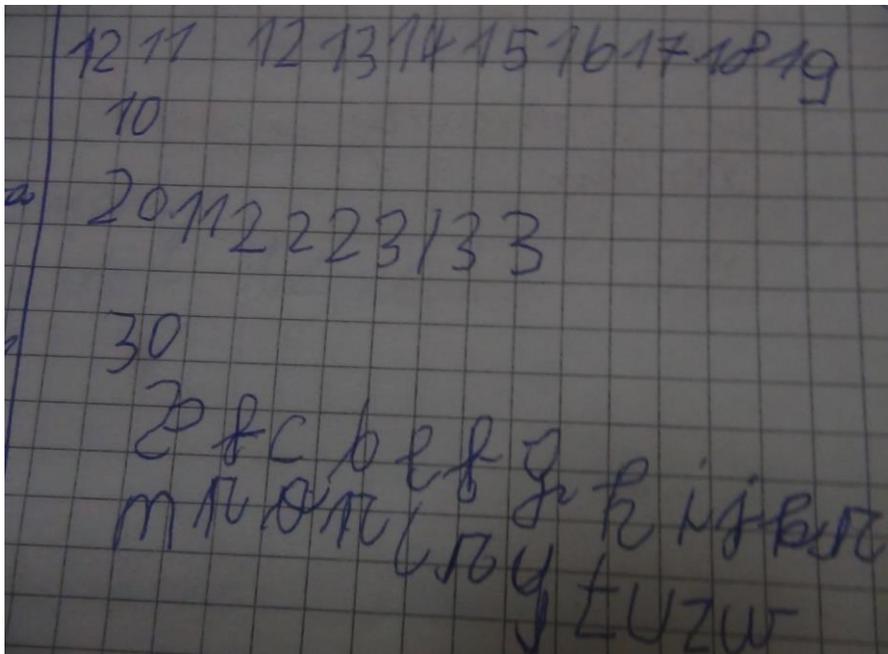


Figure 5.2a. Flora had completed her second year of schooling: one in a pre-school class, another in Primary 1. When MT asked her if she'd like to write something, she wrote numbers and letters in his notebook. When writing, Flora had a difficult time differentiating between the letters of the alphabet and writing digraphs or trigraphs (e.g. 'cy', 'ng').

MT gave Flora his book and a pen. Whereas MT could read what she was writing, she demonstrated a lack of confidence in her writing and asked MT several times, “Ibyo nandika nibyo?” (*Am I writing correctly?*).

5.1.2 Written words in Jolly’s home

The most copious amount of print in Jolly’s home was found in the family’s living room. There, on a table in the corner, were a stack of books, pens and pencils. Some of the books included the teacher’s guides and photocopies of Kinyarwanda books for children. Books were written in an assortment of languages, including Kinyarwanda, English and French. Books were both professionally printed as well as photocopied and bound by Jolly’s father, who did this photocopying for his children to have books to read at home.



Figure 5.1.2a. A stack of books, water bottles and a reading lamp placed on one of the tables in the living room. The presence of such books might send a message to children about the value of literacy and that of education.

The presence of packaged and/or manufactured foods in the community presented another example of print in Jolly’s environment. One day, Jolly’s mother gave her money to go buy a powdered drink mix called ‘super dip’. Jolly, however, could not read the English language instructions, and used only half the prescribed amount of water.



Figure 5.1.2b. Packaged foods were another source of print material found in childrens' homes and communities. Since she was unable to read the instructions in English on the packet, Jolly used only one litre of water to dilute the juice instead of two as recommended. When MT alerted her about the error, her mother said she had not read the package but the juice tasted sweeter when only a little quantity of water was used.

To some of the young children in both communities, a book full of notes was a “used” book and subsequently perceived as less valuable than a new note book, one in which there was space for children to write. The same was true in Jolly’s home -- much of the ‘used’ notebooks were disregarded or held in lower esteem. For instance, Jolly’s mother said that her husband made photocopies of schoolbooks at a huge cost so that their children could have books to read. Some of these used photocopies and used notebooks were not kept, but rather repurposed as tissue paper for use in the latrine. As this was a poor community, this is understandable given the scarcity of basic items. While some families may use plant leaves in lieu of tissue paper, in Jolly’s family, notebook paper was in use. One of the lingering questions is if and how this use of paper and written words is interpreted by young children.

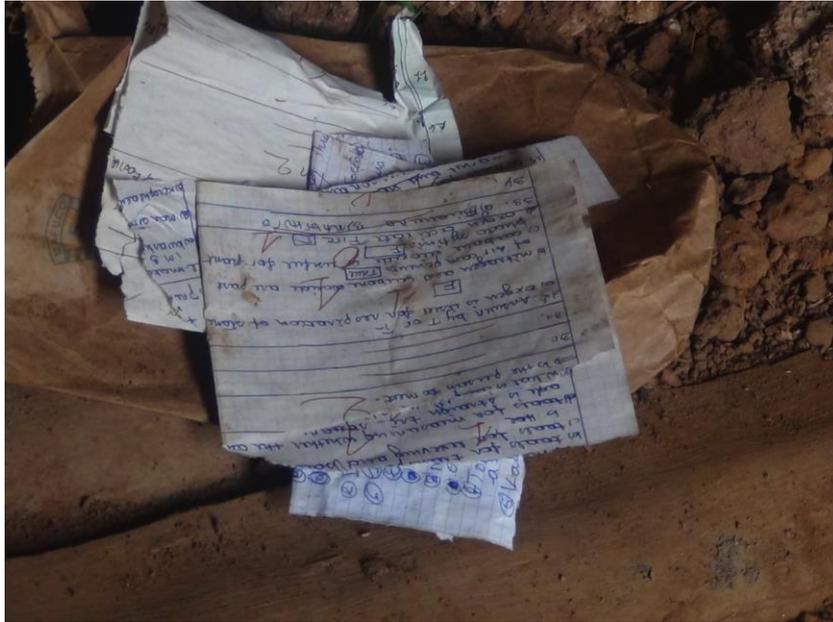


Figure 5.1.2c. Used print material placed in unusual places. A stack of papers from used schoolbooks lie on a latrine floor for use as tissue paper. It remains questionable whether such practices send conflicting messages to children about the importance literacy materials.

Another example of an unexpected use of used print material was revealed when Jolly shared that some neighbourhood men would come to ask for pages from books to use as cigarette rolling paper. When asked whether Jolly gives her old schoolbooks to the men, she replied, “Yego, hari igihe tuyabaha bakaduha chikareti” (Yes, we sometimes do, they buy us chewing gum in exchange).



Figure 5.1.2d. In a poor community where educational resources are scarce, the value attached to literacy might be indicated by the effort to preserve the few materials available. However, at one point during observations, Jolly destroyed a page from her sister’s book while her mother looked on indifferently. This lack of an effort to preserve the notebook seemed strange, given the family’s emphasis on the importance of reading. This could be a distinction between printed materials (photocopied or professionally printed) for children to read versus materials that children create for study. Once those studies conclude, these materials may be regarded as

‘finished’ and therefore of no further use (i.e. they may contain print but are not regarded as ‘reading’ materials).

In addition to notebooks and professionally printed material, printed words could be found on a chalk-wall created by Jolly’s father on the side of their home. On this wall, children scribbled letters and words using the chalk her father would bring home.



Figure 5.1.2e. Writing and reading space on the outside on the house wall. Jolly and her age mates occasionally used this wall to practice their writing and reading skills. Their father provided them with chalk and their mother oversaw their “writing competitions”.

There were more written words to be found in an unusual place around the house. This unusual place was directly on the house, outside of the chalkboard space that Jolly’s father had created for the children. These particular words were found on the front window shutters of Jolly’s family house.



Figure 5.1.2f. Writing on the window shutters at Jolly’s house. When MT later met Jolly’s father and asked him his views about the writing, he responded that it was definitely not appropriate to write on the window but that he was happy they wrote correctly.

Jolly and her siblings displayed an interest in reading and learning on several different occasions during MT’s observation of their family. On one occasion, Jolly

asked, “Umusaza tumwita dute mucyongereza” (*What do we call an old man in English*). She was far from shy and in fact very inquisitive when asking questions. While her mother was being interviewed, she removed a notebook and pen from MT’s bag without his knowledge and started writing: “Uyu mugaboyaje hano arimoguhamagaraterefone. Arimokuvugana na mama. Yaje kurebakodukubagaga” (*This man who came here was talking on phone a few minutes ago, now he is talking with my mother. He came here to find out whether we are calm and disciplined*). She did not separate the words but still wrote them correctly. She also spent about 20 minutes reading the field notes written in English and Kinyarwanda. Although she did not understand MT’s shorthand and did not know English, she reminded him, “ujye ugerageza gushyira inyajwi imbere y’ingombajwi” (Always try to put vowels next to the consonants). This was an indication that she was paying attention to the letters. She asked the observer how to pronounce the words, “NIU HUSKIES” which were printed on the sweatshirt MT was wearing. Jolly was able to identify each letter but could not read the words. These activities and inquiries indicated an active interest in reading and writing.

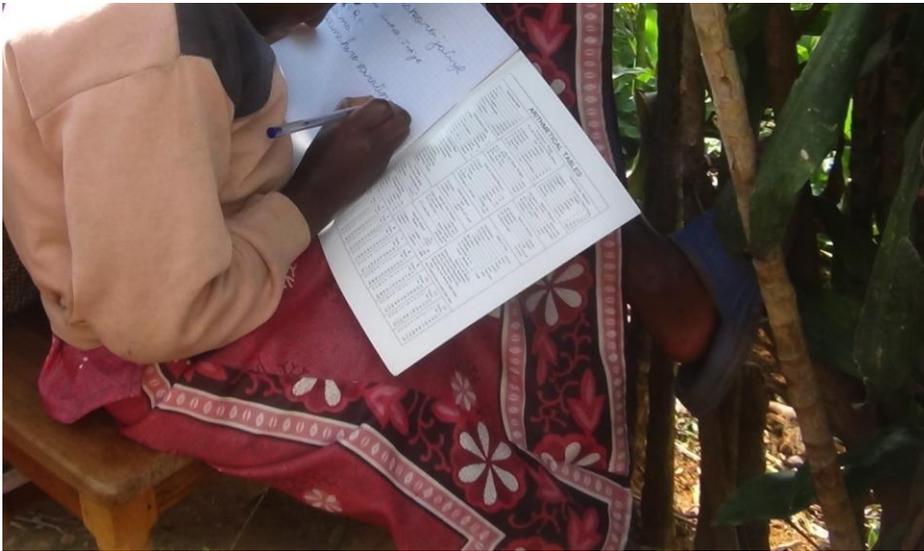


Figure 5.2b. While her mother was being interviewed, Jolly removed a book and pen from MT’s bag and wrote some sentences.

When they played cards—their favourite leisure activity—Jolly’s elder sister wrote the names of the players on a small piece of paper and each player’s game points next to their names. At the end of the game, Jolly counted the final points and ranked the players according to their points. When MT pointed out to Jolly that her counting might be incorrect, she confidently replied that she could count from 1 to 20 in Kinyarwanda and also in English. She proceeded to count in one language and then the other. Her counting was flawless in comparison to the other children around her who tried to count.

At another point in the week, it emerged that Jolly’s mother’s own frustration in her lack of education transformed into the creation of reading and writing time for Jolly and the neighbors’ children. At that time, Jolly was cleaning and polishing her shoes. Jolly’s mother, ever interested in her children’s education, told Jolly to stop: “Jya gufata ingwa wigishe bagenzi bawe uko bandika amazina yabo, ibisigaye ndabyoza” (*Go get chalk and show your friends how to write their names, I will clean the remaining part for you*).

5.2 The family's role in a child's learning development

As with the difference apparent in the print environments in the household, there was also a marked contrast between the roles that parents and family members played in Flora and Jolly's learning development.

5.2.1 The role of Flora's family in her learning

Flora's mother dropped out of school in Primary 4 and expressed concerns regarding her ability to help Flora on reading related tasks. When asked if there were dedicated times for Flora to read and write, her mother responded, "Kyeretse iyo bari kwishuri, oya ntabgo bajya bandika iyo bari murugo" (*Maybe when it's time for school, no they don't read here at home*). She further elaborated, "Hari ubwo namufasha kwandika amagambo ariko ntamwany amba mfite Arega ntabwo mba nzi neza ibyo biga" (*Sometimes I can help in writing words but I don't have time. I actually do not know much of what they study*). When asked whether Flora's father gets to spend time with his family, and if so, whether he helps Flora with her homework, Flora's father replied, "Kyeretse iyo nje kare yenda tukajyana kwahirira inka. Arega ibyokwiga nanjye mbiheruka kyera sinzi niba namufasha nyabyo" (*Maybe when I come home early and we go to gather the cow's feed together. As for homework, it's been a long time since I learned. I don't think I can help much*).

In a later conversation, Flora's father clarified the role he saw for himself, and for all parents, in their children's education, "Inshingano yambere y'ababyeyi mugufasha umwana kumenya gusoma, n'ukumwohereza ku ishuri." (*The most important role of parents in the child's ability to read is to send him/her to school*). "Na none bagomba gushakira abana ibitabo" (*Of course they should also provide children with books*). When prompted about what parents can do at home, he replied, "Urebye, abo ushobora gufasha ni byiza kubafasha, nko kubaha igihe cyo gusoma" (*Well, for those you can help, it is also good to help, like give them time to read*). When asked whether this happened in his family, he responded, "Urabona, ntabwo dufite amashuri ahagije kandi umwanya munini tuwukoresha dushakira abana icyo kurya. Abana bacu biga cyane cyane gusoma bivuye ku ishuri". (*You see, we are not very educated and we are very busy looking for what to feed the children. Our children mostly learn to read from school*). MT further asked what he thought should be done to promote reading and writing. Flora's father's response was that children should be given notebooks and handbooks, and that parents should combine efforts with teachers.

MT also asked Flora whether her father helped her with her homework and she replied, "Oya, aza nijoro atinze, ntabwo amfasha umukoro" (*No, he comes at night; he doesn't help me with my homework*).

5.2.2 The role of Jolly's family in her learning

In Jolly's household, except for the youngest child who was six years old, everyone was able to read and write. Every child who was old enough to attend school did attend school. Jolly's mother said that Jolly knew how to write her name before she started her pre-primary education. Her elder siblings taught her some basic letters of the alphabet. A conversation with Jolly's mother revealed the incredible emphasis this family placed on education and reading. According to her, "Ntabwo mur'ururugo twihanganira umwana ugira ubunywewe mugusoma cyangwa kwiga muri rusange" (*In*

this family, we do not tolerate any child who does not show effort in reading or in education in general).

Occasionally, Jolly and her siblings competed to see who wrote letters and numbers correctly, using the chalk and the chalkboard—wall that her father had constructed. Jolly’s mother occasionally joined to correct their mistakes and told them, “Uwakoze ikosa wese ejo azabe yamenye kurikosora” (*By tomorrow, everyone who made a mistake should be able to correct it*). Jolly’s mother explained, “Sinjya mbakosora, abatabizi babaza bagenzi babo, ibyo bituma banaba inshuti bamenya umwe hari ikyo amariye undi. Inyigisho batanga iki ziki gihe nanjye sinzizi. Imyaka maze ntiga yangize ingaruka.” (*I do not correct them; those who don’t know usually ask their friends who know. That way, they even create some form of friendship and appreciate that they can depend on each other. I don’t know much of what they study these days. Many years without writing have affected me negatively*).

5.3 Familial Beliefs and Expectations around Reading

During interviews and conversations, villagers in both communities visited referred to literacy and education interchangeably. Family members and those in the communities where the families lived indicated mixed beliefs regarding the benefits of being able to read. In the case of Flora’s surroundings, there existed a view that although education and learning how to read may be useful both in the short and in the long term, it was beyond the family’s financial means to provide the resources necessary for children to achieve these goals. In addition, Flora’s grandmother seemed to voice to a traditional belief that education may not be as important for girls if the goal was to get married. In contrast, Jolly’s family (particularly her mother) stressed the need for literacy skills and educational achievement as a means to improving one’s situation in life and provided whatever resources they could for their children to be able to do so. In addition, Jolly’s mother was a strong advocate of education for girls and provided her daughters with every opportunity to succeed academically.

5.3.1 Education as important yet unattainable

Family and community members in both of the girls’ villages thought highly of individuals who were educated, but it seemed as though there was a belief that the benefits of education were only experienced if a child completed their education, something which was seen as impossible given resource constraints.

On one occasion, Flora’s mother expressed frustration and regret about what her children may become in the future.

Twebwe mugihe cyacu twacirishizaga amasomo tukarongorwa. Nubwo tubayeho ubuzima bugoye ariko byibuze dufite udusambu tubasha guhingamo. Ntamasambu aba bana bazabona. Abantu muri iki gihe babeshejweho nimishahara ariko iyo mishahara babasha kuyibona aruko bize. (You see, during our days, we would drop out and get married. Although life is so challenging, at least we have small pieces of land to cultivate. There will be no land for [the children]. People these days live on salaries but salaries are earned after people have been educated).

Although she did not know her own father’s level of education, she said that he was very eloquent and respected in the village. “Nari kuba umuntu wize iyaba yaritanze

nk'uko twitangira abana bacu” (*I could have been an educated person if he had sacrificed like we are sacrificing for our children*), she said. One particular sacrifice that emerged during the discussions with her was the fact that she and her husband had to sell at least one of the family's cows to pay for their children's education. She acknowledged, however, that since they had fewer resources than her father had, their children were unlikely to complete their education regardless of this sacrifice.

A female visitor from the community added that her uncle's children were educated and she did not think that her children would ever have opportunities similar to those of her uncle. “Umwe muribo aba Ikigali aho yigir akuba umuganga” (*One of them stays in Kigali [the capital city of Rwanda and symbol of affluence] and is studying to be a doctor*). Such comments illuminated the kind of contradiction that was common among poor families—an apparent knowledge of the overall advantages of education and the inherent resource constraints that prohibited them from sending their children to school or encouraging them to read and write. While this contradiction also existed in Jolly's community, it was not particularly true within Jolly's family. That is, Jolly's parents would not recognize or admit that any resource constraint would stop their children from becoming educated.

Flora's grandmother also seemed to acknowledge the benefits of receiving an education. On one occasion, Flora's grandmother mentioned that being able to read would help children read signposts and find their way in Kigali. She complimented MT's looks and said it was because he was educated that he was tidy. “Kwiga ni byiza, abantu bize bashobora kugura imyenda myiza bakanabaho ubuzima bwiza” (*Education is good, people who are educated can buy good clothes and live a good life*) she said. “Nifuza ko n'abuzukuru banjye biga neza bakazaba abantu bakomeye” (*I wish my grandchildren would also receive a good education and become important people*). On another occasion, she asked MT what level of education he had acquired. He told her that he had completed a college education and she said, “Bizagenda gute ngo n'aba bana bazagere kur'urwo rwego, rwose turifuza ko biga bakaba abantu bakomeye”. (*How do you think these children will also reach that level, we really want them to be educated and become important people*). When MT said it was possible, she looked at him and said, “Se waba bana n'umukene. Sinzi niba azabasha kubarihira amashuri ngo barenge icyiciro cyambere” (*Her [Flora's] father is poor. I don't think he will be able to educate them past primary education*).

In this way, Flora's grandmother often expressed the challenges facing parents, such as Flora's, who could not afford to educate their children:

Kyera abana barigaga bakamenya gusoma nyuma bakabona akazi bagafasha ababyeyi babo, ariko ubu abana bakora ibintu bitandukanye. Ababyeyi n'aabakene; ntibanabasha kwigisha abana babo. Usanga ahubgo abana bafasha ababyeyi babo kuragira ihene ninka. Byibuze imyanda ituruka kumatungo itanga ifumbiro bityo imyaka ikera abana bakabona ibyokurya. (*In the past, children would learn to read and get jobs and help their families, but children these days do different things. Parents are poor; they cannot even afford educating their children. Children end up helping their parents to take care of goats or cows. These produce manure to fertilize the fields and get enough to eat*).

Flora's grandmother had seen many children drop out of school and did not believe that her grandchildren would continue past secondary school. Overall, the family exhibited low hope that their children would continue schooling past primary school and low expectations of what their children would do without an education. This belief system and the low level of aspirations seemed to affect the emphasis the family would otherwise have placed on promoting literacy activities. Local villagers appeared quite disillusioned about their children's ability to continue school due to poverty. Flora's grandmother's statements could have had a great impact on Flora's aspirations for herself, given that her grandmother was the adult Flora spent the most time with during the day. During another conversation with Flora's grandmother, she said:

Ndorera nawe mur'urugo umbwiye niba hari ikintu cyafasha aba bana mu mashuri. Buri mubyeyi aba yifuriza umwana we ibyiza ariko ababyeri barakenye. Abana bata amashuri igihe runaka (abakazasubirayo aruko ababyeyi babonye ibikoresho). Birashoboka rwose kubona abana babakobwa bakabaye bubatse, bajya kwiga. Ntibubatse ariko ntibaniga neza. Bapfusha ubusa igihe (*Look around here and tell me if you see anything that can support them in school. Every parent wishes well for their children, but parents are poor. Children drop out and then somehow go back to school [when the parents have found more resources to send them back to school]. It is possible to see older girls who could be ready for marriage attending classes. They cannot get married and cannot study well. They waste their time.*)

Flora's family's belief system, attitudes and aspirations about literacy were continuously communicated through family conversations. At one point during the discussions, Flora's father lamented, "Twakoze ibyo dushoboye byose kohereza aba bana mwishuri ariko sinkeka ko tuzabasha kubigisha bakarenga amashuri yisumbuye. Birahenze cyane. Mfite impungenge ko amaherezo bazamera nkabagenzi babo benshi bacishirije amashuri" (*We have done our best to send them to school but I don't think we will be able to continue educating them when they finish primary school. It is very expensive. I am worried they will end up being like many of their friends who have already dropped out of school*). Flora's father said this in the presence of Flora who was attentively listening to MT's conversation with her father. Statements like these indicated that, even with five years remaining to complete her primary school education, Flora's family had given up on the possibility of secondary school. Whether such an explicit remark affected Flora's individual motivation to read and have high educational aspirations is only conjecture with the data on hand⁵.

⁵ Local superstitious beliefs may have also played a role in non-literate families' views regarding literacy. Flora's chronically ill aunt believed that her illness was due to witchcraft, apparently from a jealous neighbour. According to her, "birorshye abantu kukuroga. Abantu bagira ishyari. Ugomba kubitondera cyane cyane iyo ubona utera imbere mu bucurizi cyangwa mumashuri" (*It is very easy for people to bewitch you. People simply get jealous of others. You have to be a careful if you are successful either in business or school. Some people are just evil*). On the last day of the observations of Flora's family, her mother brought MT the consent form she had signed when MT arrived on the first day. "Hari umuntu wambwiye ko imibare ya telephone itangira na agateranyo ari iya shitani" (*Someone told me that these telephone numbers that start with a plus (+) are satanic*). She said this pointing to the US numbers (beginning with '+1') that were written on the consent form. MT spent about fifteen minutes explaining the telephone code that different countries use and how they start with a plus sign.

5.3.2 Education as means to a better life

In contrast to Flora's family, Jolly's family expressed much more optimism and sounder examples of precisely how education leads to a better life. For instance, when asked about the role of education in village life, Jolly's mother responded,

Hari urugendo rurerure kugera ku isoko. Kandi isoko rirema rimwe mucyumweru, umuntu agomba kwandika kurutonde ibyo ari bugure kugirango atibagirwa akazabibona hashize ikindi cyumweru. Jyewe nandika urutonde rw'ibyo mpaha ariko nabonye abantu bagenda bakagaruka bagasubira mw'isoko kubera akantu gato bibagiwe. Ni ngombwa na none gusoma amakuru mubinyamakuru no kumenya ibigenda biba mubaturanyi no mu Rwanda muri rusange (*There is a long distance to the market. And we only have one market day every week, one has to make a shopping list so that he or she doesn't forget to buy a certain item and has to miss it for another week. I make my shopping list but I have seen people go back just for a small thing they forgot. It is also important to read newspapers and know the current events around our neighborhood and Rwanda in general*).

A closer look at the educational background of Jolly's mother revealed that while she missed the opportunity for an education herself, she truly believed that education was key to achieving a better life for oneself. She voiced a strong desire not to let any of her children miss out on being educated and experience the same problems she had:

Sinakwiyumvisha ukuntu abana bangye bazagira agahinda nkakanjye nibakura. Ntakyo nahindura kubyambayeho. Simbasha gusubira mwishuri mfite imyaka 50. Ariko abana banjye bagomba kuzabara indi nkuru itandukanye n'iyanyje na papa. [amarira amuzenga mumaso]. Papa aherutse kunsaba imbabazi kuko yampejeje mukazi kokuragira nkiri umwana migihe basaza banjye bo yabashyize mumashuri. Jye nacishirije amashuri ndi mu mwaka wa kane njya kuragira inka. Papa yarazi ko narongorwa ngasiga umuryango ugyereranije nabasaza banjye bari kuzangora bagatura hafi bakagura umuryango. Ibi rero birambabaza mba ngirango ntihazagire uwo bibaho mu bana banjye. Hari igihe mbatinza bicaye ninjoro bakora devwari. Nizera ko nibakura bazamenya impanvu yuko kubaraza amajoro. (*I can't imagine my children expressing the same frustrations when they grow. It's over with me; I cannot go back to school when I am 50. However, my children should be able to tell a different story. Not the one I tell about my father [she sobs and becomes teary- I offer some consoling words]. My father recently asked me for forgiveness because he assigned me to graze cows when I was young while all my brothers attended school. I dropped out of Primary 4 to take care of the family cows. He believed I would get married after all and leave the family as compared to my brothers who he thought would marry and still live close to him and keep the family lineage alive. That still hurts me. I don't want my children to ever have the same feelings. There are times I keep them awake on their homework. When they become adults, I hope they will understand why I raised them this way*).

During an hour long interview with Jolly's mother, the phrase, "Nshaka ko bagira ubuzima butandukanye nubwangye" (*I want them to have a life different from mine*)" appeared 10 times.

Jolly's mother continued, "Hari igihe abana banjye bampenda ubwenge. Iyo bashatse kutajya kuvoma amazi bafata amakayi yabo bagasa nkaho bari mugusoma. Baba bazi ko ntabakura mu kwiga. Ubgo nyine hakaba ubwo mbihoreye nkajya kuvoma kuko ibyo nabibasezeranije" (*Sometimes my children play tricks on me. If they want to avoid going to fetch water, they hold their books and pretend to read... they know that I can't get them off this activity. I end up going to fetch water myself because I have promised them exactly that*).

It appeared that Jolly's mother has channelled her energy toward providing for her children what her father did not provide for her. At one point in time, she said,

Sinshobora kwifuriza umwe mu bana banjye kumera nkanjye. Nzakora uko nshoboye mfashe abana banjye umunani bige kandi nabibwiye n'umugabo wanjye. Nifuza ko abantu babona ko mpa agaciro kwiga. Abo tuvukana bose barize, bintera kubabara nkashira imbaraga zanjye mugufasha abana banjye kwiga. Nkora ku buryo batangir'ishuri ku myak'ine cyangw'itatu. (*I can't wish any of my children to be like me. I will struggle to educate my eight children and I have told this to my husband. I want people to recognize that I value education. All my siblings are educated. That makes me feel bad that I am not and I transfer my energies to educating my children. I make sure they start school at four or three years old*).

Jolly's mother used her own personal experience to motivate her children. She plainly told them that "Yakabaye ari umuntu ukize iyo aza kuba yarakomeje amashuri" (*she could have been a well-off person had she pursued an education*). Her father's discriminative behaviour, in addition to support from her literate husband, appeared to have contributed to this family being quite distinct from most of the families in their neighbourhood whose press for literacy was low.

5.3.3 Attitudes and beliefs about girls' education

Interviews and observations in both communities indicated a traditional belief that educating girls was somewhat less important than educating boys—this traditional belief seemed to be challenged in contemporary times in Jolly's family while it seemed to subtly persist in Flora's family.

Jolly's mother dropped out of school in Primary 4 and she had not consistently attended school before that. She explained that when she attended school, she would have to drop out mid-semester sometimes to take care of her father's cows. According to her, at that time, her father thought this work with the cattle was “byari bifite agaciro kuruta kwigisha umukobwa wabaga azajya gushaka hanze ntagire icyo amarira y'ungura umuryango” (more important than educating a girl who would leave the house to marry and contribute nothing to the wellbeing of the family). Such a perception has historically affected the development of literacy practices among young girls and it might be one of the barriers to literacy in contemporary times as well—especially in this rural part of Rwanda.

Flora's grandmother often made remarks that reflected a culture that traditionally had not placed much emphasis on education and early literacy practices, particularly for girls. Flora's grandmother expressed concerns that “ abakobwa ntibiga bihagije kuburwo babona akazi kabahemba ariko nanone batarigishijwe bihagije kuburwo baba abafasha bashoboye kuba bakora neza imirimo yo murugo cyane cyane iyo mu cyaro” (*girls have not been educated enough to get paid jobs but have also not been trained for the demands of an ideal house wife in the rural area like doing manual work in the field*). When explicitly asked about the importance of reading for her granddaughter Flora's grandmother responded:

Mama wacu yateguraga amata, agatunganya amavuta akanaboha uduseke. Gushyingira umukobwa uzi ibi byose byaheshaga ababyeyi ishema. Ntabgo ishema wariheshwaga namashuri. Ubu mfite impungenge ko uyu mwuzukuru wanjye. Ntamukobwa ugihabwa agaciro kuko azi akzi twakoraga cyera. Agaciro ugahabwa namashuri mensi wize ariko urabona ko tudakize kuburwo twabasha kumwigisha bihagije. (*Our mother used to prepare milk, make cheese and weave baskets. Marrying off a daughter who had such skills earned respect for parents. It was not about education. I fear for my granddaughter of course. Society no longer gives value to such skills. It's all about education but we are not rich to provide that education*).

5.4 Children's Future Aspirations

Both girls had drastically different aspirations for their future.

When MT asked Flora what she hoped to become after completing her education, she answered with an innocent, shy look on her face, “Nzajya kuvoma amazi, jye nokwahirira inka za nyogokuru ubwatsi, nje nogutashya (*I will fetch, water, cut grass to feed my grandmother's cows and collect firewood for cooking*). Flora did not see a future for herself outside of her current circumstances. Her mother laughed at Flora's response, indicating that what she had said was something funny but not surprising. Flora's aspirations were shaped by what she had seen others do and what she currently did day to day—predominantly domestic work.

On the other hand, children in Jolly's home voiced very clear professional goals following the completion of their education. During playtime at Jolly's home, Jolly and her family talked about one uncle who was a doctor and another uncle who was a radio presenter. On one occasion, they took turns saying what professions they would pursue after they had completed their education. Some of the professions shared were a doctor, a nurse, a teacher. Jolly also contributed the profession of a radio presenter. In the middle of the conversation Jolly's mother pointed to Jolly's sister and said: "Uzatwara indege kugira ngo ujye uduterera amafaranga uri mukirere" (*You will be a pilot so that you drop your money when you are flying above our house*). They all laughed at the thought of a fearful person being a pilot. According to Jolly's mother, they knew they could not have these professions "Keretse barize, keretse bazi gusoma no kwandika" (*unless they are educated, unless they know how to read and write*).

5.5 Homework during the school term

On one occasion, MT asked Flora at what time of day she usually did her homework during the school term. "Tuwukorana n'abandi bakobwa munzira dutashye" (*We do it on the way from school with other girls*). When MT asked her why the children did homework on the way from school, she said that some of her friends were clever and they all did it together. When MT asked Flora's mother whether she brought any work home from school, she responded that she never knew whether the children had received homework unless she saw Flora working on it.

Jolly's mother, in contrast, mentioned that during school days Jolly had daily planned homework time with her siblings. Apart from this planned homework time, there were also unstructured literacy activities, such as playing cards or writing with chalk on the wall, during the family's free time. So while Jolly was about the same age as Flora, Jolly enjoyed a relatively large amount of free time in her day.

5.6 Child dialogues and exchanges with parents

Another factor that could be a potential obstacle to the development of literacy development in this village was the lack of interaction between parents (particularly fathers) and children. In both families there appeared to be some hesitancy particularly around verbal exchanges between the child and the father.

Like most other families in Jolly and Flora's region, Flora's family was a typical traditional family where parents, especially male parents rarely interacted with their children. In fact, during the seven days MT spent with members of Flora's family, he saw her closely interact with her father only once. It was one morning when it had rained and everyone had converged in the living room. Every time MT attempted to speak with Flora's father, he sent his children away. Even when MT assured her father that they could continue the conversations in the children's presence, her father insisted, "ntabgo ari umuco mwiza, abana ntibakagombye gusangira ibiganiro nabanti bakuru" (*It's not good manners, children don't have to be involved in the discussions with adults*). This experience was informative as it indicated a cultural assumption regarding the roles of children and adults.

As stated earlier, playing cards was a favourite pastime in Jolly's family. Apart from the fun, Jolly's mother appreciated it for other reasons. She said that playing cards with her children allowed her to know them individually and provide educational advice in the most casual way:

Nkunda gukina amacarita n'abana bangye. Bituma ntagira irungu cyangwa ngo njye kunywa cyangwa ngo ndyame kunywa. Bituma nasabaana nabana bangye nkamenye nibazo bafite mumashuri nkabasha kubagir ainama. *(I love playing cards with my children. I don't get bored and go to the local bar to drink or even sleep during the day. It is also an opportunity to bond with my children and know the details about their educational problems and provide help).*

When asked about which educational problems her children shared with her during these card games, she responded:

Hari igihe batinya gusaba umutware wangye amakayi cyane cyane iyo bazi ko ntamafaranfa afite. Banyisanzuraho kurusha uko bisanzura kuri se kuko jye nkina nabo cyane. Ubgo urumva ko mba mbaye umuhuza hagati yabo nase. Mpita mbwira se ko hari udafite amakayi tugashaka uko dukemura ikibazo. *(Sometimes they fear to ask for new book from their father especially when they know he doesn't have money. They are freer with me than they are with their father and this is because I play with them. In such a case, I am like their emissary to their father. I immediately let their father know one of them doesn't have notebooks and we resolve the problem together).*

While different in nature from the gap that seemed to divide Flora and her father, we see evidence in Jolly's home as well of a reticence in discourse between fathers and daughters in these two villages.

6 The Community Literacy Environment

While quite a number of educated people lived in Jolly's community, overall there seemed to be a low level of support for literacy development in the environment of both children observed. Based on observations in both villages and interview responses of individuals in both communities, a majority of the villagers were non-literate and lacked the resources to finance their children's education.

6.1 Reading, symbols, and literacy in public spaces

In MT's observation of the villages, locals seemed aware of the inconveniences not being able to read and write may cause, but had devised ways to successfully overcome their literacy-related inefficiencies.

When examining numerical literacy, the kinds of transactions that Flora's father conducted in the marketplace were conducted without the use of print. Potatoes, beans, and other food items were sold in different sized baskets for different prices. Bigger baskets indicated a higher price. Transactions were smooth and not complex. Sugar was pre-measured and packed into different containers that represented one kilogram, half a kilogram or a quarter of a kilogram.

Non-reading children who were sent to buy things from the market paid for items out of different pockets where their parents had placed different amounts of money. Rather than the ability to read, the most important asset here was the memory of which pocket had money for which item or whether the amount was in exact bills.

Flora's mother elaborated on these unconventional shopping strategies that parents used when they sent children to buy items in the local market:

Biragoye iyo abana cyangwa abantu bakuru batazi gusoma. Iyo ushatse kugira ibyo ugura, ubanza kuvunja amafaranga ukayashyira mumifuka y'imyenda itandukanye ukanabwira umwana ikyo ari bugure ku mafaranga ari muri buri mufuka. Rimwe na rimwe abana bibagirwa aya mabwiriza batari bagera mwisoko cyangwa se bakibagirwa ikyo wabatumye kugura. Bashoboye kwandika ibyo bagur akugapapuro byabafasha. *(It is tough when children and adults don't know how to read. If you want to send children to buy items, you need to split your bills and put separate amounts into different pockets and repeatedly tell him which pocket has money for a given item. Sometimes children forget before they reach the market and miss an item. Writing a shopping list would solve such a problem).*

MT became curious about the shopping strategy that Flora's mother narrated so one evening as he walked from Flora's home, he decided to stop and have a conversation with a group of children at the roadside market. After buying them some biscuits, MT asked one of the young boys, who seemed to be about nine years old, to remove his hands from his pockets so that he could hold the biscuits and become aware that he had money in his pockets. Just as Flora's mother had described, the young boy had different amounts of money in each pocket for soap and salt. The amount in each pocket reflected the precise amount for the two items he had been sent to buy. The boy explained that his father had to look for small bills since he [the boy] did not know how to count and his father did not trust the traders. Also, the boy had to remember which pocket had money for salt and which had money for soap. MT decided to observe the boy from a distance. When the youngster returned, he had the two items. It is not clear what would have happened if these items had decreased or increased in price, nor what the young boy would have done had he been sent to purchase items whose prices were determined by haggling.

Just as the villagers had devised ways to conduct financial transactions without the use of printed words or numbers, an alternative strategy was used in lieu of product advertisement outside local shops. Although the village contained no signposts apart from one pointing to the local church, the local people had developed conventions using non-written symbols that conveyed meaning and significance to others, much in the way that a signpost for a store would tell you what the store sold. These symbols were often branches from a particular shrub or tree arranged in a specific way on the ground, and their presence indicated what sorts of goods were sold there. For instance, the words: 'we sell local beer here', 'we sell avocados here' or 'it is prohibited to graze on this land' had been codified into symbols that all local people could easily 'read'.

Young children grew up in an environment where these symbols were used prevalently and so were able to easily recognize the local symbols and understand what they stood for. This became apparent one hot afternoon when Flora's mother told MT she was thirsty and he offered to buy her a sorghum-based drink known as *Ikigage*. MT walked to the trading centre with Flora and her young siblings. As they approached the trading centre Flora's young brother excitedly shouted, "hariya barakigurisha, hariya barakigurisha" *(They sell kigage there, they sell kigage there)*, his hand pointing to a bunch of leaves stuck on the outer walls of a small house.

Indeed, when they entered the house, they found a woman who told them she had drink for sale. MT later learned from the tradeswoman that she could have used a different kind of leaf for a different kind of drink and the children would not have had any trouble understanding the nuance. “Bakuriye aha, bityo rero bazi ikyo buri cyatsi gisobanuye” (*They have grown up here, they are part of the community and they know the meaning of the symbols we use*), she said.



Figure 6.1a. In the local community, this type of leaf –*Umuhate*, conveyed the message, “Aha tugurisha ikigage” (*We sell sorghum brew [Ikigage] here*). This leaf was a locally constructed symbol that symbolised the presence of Kigage. We are left with the question, what effect such symbols had on the children’s perception of the importance of words? This photograph was taken in Flora’s neighborhood.



Figure 6.1b. Another symbol that meant “Aha tugurisha urwagwa” (*We sell banana brew here*). Children were very proficient in interpreting these symbols. This photograph was taken in Jolly’s neighborhood.

Children in this neighbourhood were proficient in interpreting symbols. Such symbols were common on houses in the trading centres. It was common for parents to send their children to buy items and remind them to look for particular types of symbols rather than to look for written words. However, these symbols were not taught in school. What was taught in school were letters of the alphabet and words.

This sparked MT’s interest in what the literate locals thought about such symbols. He conducted an interview with a primary school teacher who lived near the trading

centre. MT had met the teacher before and had a casual conversation with him. When MT met with him the following day, his main question was, “Ubona gukoresha ibi bimenyetso bitari inyugute bibangamira bite cyangwa bigateza bite umuco wogusoma?” (*How do you think the use of such symbols promotes or hampers the reading culture for young children and the population in general?*)? He replied:

Ubajije abaturage wasanga hafi ya 80% muri bo batazi gusoma. Bamaze igihe kirekire cyane bakoresha aibi bimenyetso, kuburyo ari umuco batapfa kureka. Navugako hari ubwo byagira ingaruka kugaciro ko kumenya gusoma ariko nibintu ntahita nemeza. Navugako yenda bakabaye basimbuza ibi bimenyetso amagambo. Umuyobozi w’uburezi yigeze kugira abacuruzi inama yogukoresha amagambo kwamamaza ibikorwa byawe kurusha uko bakoresha ibimenyetso. Ibi ariko ntibyashobotse kuko ntibijyane nubumenyi bwabaturage. Jye nunva hakoreshwa amagambo n’ibimenyetso kugira ngo abana bamenye gusoma ariko nabaturage nabaturage batazi gusoma badatakara. (*You could inquire from the locals and find out that about 80% of adults cannot read. They have used such symbols for decades or centuries and it’s a practice they cannot easily give up. Children also observe such symbols as they grow. I would say it might affect the value they place on literacy but I am not sure about that. Maybe they should replace symbols with words. An education officer one time suggested that all traders should use conventional writings to advertise their products and services but the unpopular strategy faded because it was not contextually friendly. I think it’s good to use both words and symbols—at least for the benefit of young children but also for the non-readers in the community.*)

As the teacher and MT walked out of the trading center where they had met, he laughed and said, “Dore nanone, hariya bagurisha avoca, umwana uhajya wese aba azi ikyo ari buhasange- avoca” (*There! Another surprise for you! They sell avocados here and every child who comes here receives an avocado.*)”



Figure 6.1c. Even without the ability to read words, the children knew where to buy specific items. Here, avocado leaves hung on a tree branch in front of a small house: a sign to inform by passers that avocados were sold here.

Another important public space in the village was the church. As Flora's family was quite religious—every evening before MT left their house, Flora's grandmother said, "Umubyeyi ugira ubuntu nyina wa Yezu akuyobore" (*Flora our gracious mother, Mary mother of Jesus guide you*)—he specifically wanted to observe the extent to which their worship traditions and church practices incorporated literacy skills or practice. MT visited the church on Sunday, arriving earlier than most villagers who travelled by foot from different hillsides.

The end of month mass convened all interested villagers from smaller neighborhood churches. There was a signpost pointing to the church (mentioned earlier) at the junction where the road that led to this church separated from the main church. Inside the church were wooden chairs arranged in three rows. As it was a parish, it was quite big. It had the capacity to seat about three hundred people, and on this particular Sunday there were about four hundred people present.

Overall the church traditions and norms did not overtly require reading on the part of the parishioners. For instance, the congregation was not asked to open their bibles, nor did they receive announcement brochures. It was a typical Catholic mass, with the priest leading the congregation. One person approached the pulpit and read the first and second readings. MT saw only two people with small bibles in their hands. They kept these closed. The congregation predominantly recited prayers, sang and listened to the priest's sermon. The priest did not encourage the congregation to read verses in the Bible or prayers from a book. Perhaps the priest was aware that a significant number of his congregation did not know how to read. However, there was no call for reading even for those few who may have known how to read.

The children sat next to their parents for about half of the service, at which point most of them went outside. MT followed them and found a significant number of children playing in the church yard. He asked two of the children what they were

doing outside. They said, “Twananiwe nuko duhiramo gusoka tugakina” (*We are tired; we decided to come out and play*). Most of the children’s play involved running after each other or simply hanging out under the shade of trees. When mass was over and all the Christians left the church, MT entered to look for any evidence of written materials inside. He found a few books and folders shelved on a dusty shelf at the back of the church. The dust seemed to indicate that this material had not been used recently.



Figure 6.1d. Books, binders, boxes and a calabash sit on the shelves of one of the main churches in the area. Apparently, this was the only common place in the church where written materials are/were once kept.

At the end of mass, the congregation listened to announcements. MT did not observe anyone writing down notes about these announcements. He later encountered the person who was making the announcements and asked him how sure he was that the attendees would remember the announcements since no one wrote them down. The announcer seemed amazed by MT’s question and said, “Bibifata mumutwe kubera benshi ntibazi gusoma kandi n’ababizi ntacyo bafite bandikiraho amatangazo” (*They rely on their memory because most of them don’t know how to read and those who know don’t have notes where they write the announcements*). After MT left the person who had made the announcements, he turned to Flora’s mother and asked her, “Nyibutsa, murusengero batanze ayahe matangazo” (*Remind me, what were the announcements made in church*)? She asked another person who was travelling with them and luckily, this person remembered most of the announcements. MT later learned from another parishoner that even some of the children who were undergoing baptism lessons relied on memorizing prayers, the Ten Commandments and other church-related teachings.

Jolly’s church was similar to Flora’s in its lack of reading materials. There were no books found in the church. One of the church attendees informed MT that the priest kept the churches books in his room where they were safeguarded, and to which MT did not gain access.

6.2 Poverty and attitudes towards education

The high levels of poverty experienced by families in both communities studied seemed to limit parents’ ability to provide basic literacy resources to their children.

In addition, given that many children worked to help their families financially, the opportunity cost of educating a child was perceived of as being too high. Although an individual who had completed tertiary education was thought of highly in the communities studied, those who tried but were unable to continue past primary or secondary school were thought of as ‘troublemakers’-individuals who were neither fit for a professional job nor manual labor. Hence earning an education seemed to be a high benefit, high-risk endeavour in the communities studied.

6.2.1 The demand for education

There were several instances during the observations that the demand for education on the part of community members was apparent. When the village leader in Flora’s village announced the planned construction of a new kindergarten, the villagers applauded loudly. MT overheard one community member whisper to his friend, “Niba babishaka nzabaha ikibanza kugirango bubake ishuri hafi y’urugo rwanjye...abana banjye bazaba bakize urugendo rurerure” (*If they want, I will donate land to them so that the school is constructed close to my home. My children will have been saved the long journey*).

Similarly, the village leader in Flora’s village stressed the importance of parents making sacrifices in order to educate their children.:

Ababyeyi bagomba gukangurira abana babo akamaro kokumenya gusoma no kwandika n’ako kwiga muri rusange. Bagomba kujyana abana babo mumashuri bakabaha ibyogufungura ndetse nibikoresho byomumashuri. Ese wabonye uriya muyobozi waje munama yabaturage nta karamu kandi azi ko ari buze kwandika? Buriya n’imyumvire mibi. Ababyeyi benshi bohereza abana babo kumashuri ntamakayi yogusoma ntanamakaramu yokwandikisha. Nzi ko hari ubukene ariko ababyeyi bakombwa kwigimwa byinshi kugira ngo abana babo bazabehe neza mugihe kizaza (*Parents should sensitise their children on the importance of literacy and education in general. They should enroll their children into schools and provide food and learning materials. Did you see the other leader who came to a village meeting without a pen, well knowing that he would have something to write? It’s a bad attitude. Most parents send their children to schools without reading and writing materials. I know this community is poor but we parents can sacrifice to create a better future for our children*)

6.2.2 The opportunity cost of education

Even though parents in both communities may have wanted for their children to receive an education, a lack of basic resources necessitated children working along with parents so that the families basic needs were met. In these cases, the opportunity cost of education was too high for families to choose to prioritize education.

Flora’s mother mentioned the names of other children on the hillside who did well in primary schools but never crossed to secondary school because their parents had spent all their resources to educate them and became poor. Rhetorically, she asked, “Ese wowe wakomeza gushora umutungo wawe kubantu utabona inyungu zabyo?” (*Would you continue investing your resources in projects where you don’t foresee profit?*). Parents’ aspirations for their children were affected by what they referred to as “Igishoro gikabize kidahwanyeye ninyungu zitagaragara” (*huge investments in education*) in exchange for “*returns they did not foresee*”). In reality, what they

referred to as an investment mainly included the domestic work that the children had to forgo when they attended school. In general, these were very poor parents who depended on subsistence agriculture. The elder children, especially the girls, were responsible for babysitting their young siblings during their mother's absence from home. A neighbour who found MT in conversation with Flora's mother alluded to the challenges faced by parents in the village in educating their children. "Nkunda kubona abana banjye bajya kwiga, ariko nanone nabasha nte kurera barumuna babo nkanabasha kubashakira ibibatunga? bafunguriki se bavuye kwishuri?" (*I would love to see my children go to school, but how can I take care of their siblings and be able to work for food and feed them? What would they eat after school?*)



Figure 6.2.2a. In search of a better life during the holidays. Children buy farm produce and travel long distances to re-sell at a small profit. According to the local leader, “inyungu nkeya ariko zavuba zima abanyeshuri birengagiza inyungu zirambye zituruka ku kumenya gusoma” (*Such small but immediate profits overshadow the projected profitability of literacy. This trend leads children to permanently drop out of school. Pro-literacy, according to the local leader, likely fades amidst life's challenges. Children do not see literacy as important in the performance of such odd businesses.*)

MT asked Flora's father whether he had the capacity to purchase reading material for his children. He replied:

Uyu mukobwa wangye atuma mporana impungenge. Kugira ngo akoze amashuri bizansaba ko ngurisha isambu yangye. Ariko nanone iyi sambu niyo nteganyaho umugabane wa basaza be. Mva imuhira sa kumi nebyiri nkagaruka gufata ifunguro rya kumanywa nkasubira gukora. Ngaruka mu ma sa kumi nebyiri nkaryama mu ma sa moya. Umunsi wose mba ngerageza kubashakira ibyabatunga. Ubwo rero udufaranga twose mbona ntubaguriramo ibyabatunga kurusha uko nabaguriramo ibinyamakuri byogusoma. Abana bangye ngirango ntanumusni numwe bari bambina nsoma kuko ntabintu ngira byogusoma imuhira. Niyo nakabigize urabona ko turyama kare. Nta mashanyarazi tugira ntanamatarara. Mugiturage turyama na kare kugira ngo tuze kubyuka kare tujye mumasambu. Ntagikoresho nakimwe kyogusoma dufite murugo... nemera ko abarimu nababyeyi bagomba gufasha abana gusoma, ariko ntabushobozi bafite bwokugura ibisabwa. Ino turi abakene. dufite ibikoreho byogusoma” (*I am concerned*)

about my daughter. If she has to continue her education, I will have to sell a piece of my land, but this is the land that I am keeping for her brothers' inheritance [Traditionally girl's do not inherit land in Rwanda]. I leave home at 6 am, come back at mid day for a meal and then go back, and then come back exhausted at 6pm and ready to sleep at 7pm. During the whole day, I am struggling to provide them with physical needs like food. I'd rather spend the little money I earn to secure them physical needs than buy them newspapers to read. My children have never seen me read because we have nothing to read in this house. Even if we had, we sleep as soon as it becomes dark. We don't have electricity or lanterns. But you see, in the village, we sleep early because we have to also wake up early to go to the fields. Of course there is nothing at home to read ...I believe teachers and parents should help children read, but they have no capacity to provide all that is necessary. This is a poor community).

6.2.3 Respect associated with educated children

In a predominantly illiterate community, a parent whose child received an education past secondary school gained the respect and admiration of other community members. The local leader in Flora's village said: "Nikunyungu zababyeyi kuba abana biga (*It is for the good of the parents that children get educated. See how short I am? But I am well respected because my daughter completed tertiary education.*)"

However, there was some concern among villagers for children who reached secondary levels but then dropped out and did not finish their course of education. A community member voiced this concern regarding students who dropped out, saying:

Abo banyeshuri basuzugura akazi gasaba gukoresha amaboko kandi batabasha kubona akazi mu mugi. Bakunze rero guteza ibibazo kubabyeyi babasaba amafaranga ngo yo gutangiza imishinga iciriritse kandi bazi ko ababyeyi umutungo bawumaze babarihira amashuri." (Such children devalue manual work, yet they can't get jobs in town. They end up being 'troublemakers' to the parents--asking money to start small business from parents who have spent all their resources to educate them in the first place.)

Although the press of literacy achievement was high in Jolly's family, the culture of reading observed in her community was similar to that in Flora's village. Here too, poverty seemed to play a leading role in deterring children from being able to achieve academically.

According to Jolly's teacher, poverty was an important factor hindering children's literacy development in the community. Children from rich families had access to materials and lifestyles that encouraged or favored literacy practices. In his opinion, "abana babakire ubagereraniye n'ababakene ntabwo bakora akazi ko murugo kandi kararusha cyane" (*rich children, when compared to poor, are not exposed to child labor and its exhausting conditions*). Her teacher thought that physical exhaustion caused absenteeism and fatigued children to such a degree that they had no stamina to read after working the whole day. He said that in his experience, poor children had no time to do homework and were always poor performers. He added,

“Imiryango ikennye nanone ntifite ibiryo bihagije byoguha amabana. Abana bashonje rero iyo baje kwishuri barasinzira. Ntabgo umwarumu abasha kwigisha nkuwo mwana kwandika no gusoma” (*poor families also don't have enough food to feed their kids. Often, such children come to school hungry and fall asleep in class. As a teacher, you cannot effectively teach reading and writing to such a child*).

Jolly's teacher asked MT to consider a scenario where parents went out to work for about 600 Rwandan francs (less than a dollar) a day to buy food and came home without anything. According to him this occurred in the village when it rained and parents were unable to finish their assigned portion of work and had to return home without food for the children. “Ntabwo wakwizerako abana baturuka muriyo miryango bifuza kwiga gusoma no kwandika. Wabyizera?” (*You probably would not expect children from such families to even have the motivation to learn to read and write, would you?*) he asked.

Given that Jolly's family stood out as different than most other families in terms of their encouragement of literacy development among their children, MT engaged in a conversation with Jolly's mother regarding their level of commitment towards the children's education. Her mother indicated that they had sacrificed their resources to educate their children:

Mbere aha byadusabye ko tugurisha inka kugira ngo twishyure minerivare. Haribgo twigunga abayobozi bamashuri kugira ngo batwemerere twishyure mu bice. Basaza banjye bafite utuzi twiza kubera ko Papa yabishyuriye amashuri. Nizera ko abana banjye bazagira imbere heza nibarangira kwiga kandi kwiga bibanzirizwa no kumenya gusoma. Ubu ntabgo ari nka kera aho abana bacishirizaga amashuri ariko bakabasha kubona ibibatunga biturutse mu buhinzi. Ikyizere mfite nuko abana banjye bagira amanita meza kandi batari no mumashuri meza. (*In the past, we have had to sell one of our cows to pay schools. Sometimes we have to request school authorities to allow us to pay in instalments. My brothers have good jobs and it's because my father educated them. I strongly believe my children can also have a better life when they complete their education and that starts by reading. This is not like in the past when children would drop out of school and still earn a living by subsistence farming. The good thing is that my children have good grades even when they are not in the best schools*).

Jolly's father shared that he had tried everything possible, including being friends with school authorities so that they would not send his children home in times when he was trying to get the children's school fees and uniforms. He emphasized that the school authorities were quite understanding if they knew a parent was genuinely poor but committed to paying school fees at a later date.

Jolly's mother blamed the low press for achievement among parents in the community to ignorance rather than poverty by expressing the following:

Abaturage benshi bo muri aka gace ntabgo bize. Bityo rero iyo ishuri hagize ikyo risaba ababyeyi iyo iba intandaro yababyeyi kubuza abana gusubira kumashuri. Ababyeyi bakumvisha abana ko bo batize ariko babashije kubarera. Ibi bituma

mbabara cyane. Hari igihe ishuri riba ryatumye abanyeshuri ikintu batabasha kubura nk'isuka cyangwa umupanga wo gukupa ibatsi barangira bakabisubiza murugo. Ibi ntamubyeyi byakananiye. Kyeretse ari amahirwe make ababyeyi babona mu kwiga cyangwa bakaba baracitse intege nyuma yo kubona abandi bana baretse kwiga. *(Most villagers here are not educated. So when the school asks for anything however small, they tell their children, 'don't go back to school, I don't have that. I did not study but I am able to provide for you'. That makes me sad. Sometimes it's something as small as bringing a hoe or machete to school to clear the bushes and then take it back home. Every parent can afford these. But they are either ignorant of the advantages of school or they simply have lost hope of school after seeing other children in the neighbourhood drop out.*

6.2.4 Food, work, and time for learning

During observations of Flora's family, MT considered whether the children's low motivation for activity during the day might have been due to hunger. From observation, the quantity and quality of the children's lunch was not sufficient to sustain them considering the amount of physical work they did, much less to provide them with enough energy to spend reading and learning.

Most of Jolly's community members were subsistence farmers. From a conversation MT had with Jolly's mother, he learned that the available land was small and had been overly cultivated. Those who had cows fertilised their plots with organic manure from the cows' waste. Carrying manure to the plots was mainly a child's activity. Children as young as nine years old were frequently observed carrying baskets of manure to the field. Some of the fields were up to an hour away from the home, and might be visited three times a week on average, more or less depending on the season, so this appeared to be a daunting task for young children. Even if children's parents were to encourage them to read, this amount of domestic work would probably leave them with little time to do so.

As he walked around both Flora's and Jolly's villages, MT saw quite a number of unkempt children roaming aimlessly along the road. Children as young as eleven were doing all sorts of manual work in the fields or fetching water during the hot afternoons. On one occasion, MT decided to have a conversation with four of these children. Only one of them still attended school. The other three had dropped out of school and moved around working for money to buy food. Some of the children had elder family members at home who depended on them for financial support.

When MT asked one of the boys why he had dropped out of school, he responded:

Nta Papa ngira [Yaba yarapfuye cyangwa atamuzi]. Na Mama ntasambu agira. Tukodesha isambu nuko Mama akabyuka ajya guca inshuro. Jye natangiraga kwiga sa sita. Hari igihe invura igwa mama ntabashe gusoza ikivi nuko ntibamuhe ibyokurya. Bituma ngya kwishuri nshonje. Hari n'igihe aza atinze nkatagereza ko ibiryo bishya nuko nkagera kwishuri nakerewe abarimu bakankubita. Ubu naretse kwiga. *(I do not have my father [could have died or simply doesn't know him]. My mother also does not have land. We are tenants in someone's land and my mother wakes up early to go and work for food. I start school in the second shift at 12 pm. Sometimes, it rains for*

long hours and mother is not able to complete her task and doesn't bring food. I then have to go to school hungry. Sometimes, she comes late and by the time food is ready, it's very late. When I reach school late, teachers punish me for being late... I decided to drop out of school).

A local teacher later confirmed this information.



Figure 6.2.4b. A young school dropout boy walks home with his hoe after a day's work. The parents' press for achieving in education seemed to be influenced by their constant pre-occupation with providing children with the immediate physical needs. Some children also expressed how difficult it was to attend school when hungry.

6.3 Other factors interfering with children's literacy learning opportunities

6.3.1. Education and literacy as synonyms

In almost all of the interviews and conversations MT had with Flora's family, parents discussed literacy and education as synonyms. Even when MT tried to bring discussions back to reading and writing, parents said "Uburezi burahenze" (*Education is very expensive*). Therefore, it seemed that any frustration and hopelessness the parents associated with education transferred to their attitudes and aspirations towards the promotion of literacy as well.

6.3.2 Non-reading parents & the importance of siblings

MT spoke with a village leader in Flora's village after the Umuganda meeting, at which he communicated a number of items to the villagers. The leader expressed the frustration felt by parents who could not read or write and the need for adult literacy programs. When asked about the role literacy played in his area, he said:

Wowe mbgwira wabonye abandika amatangazo nubundi butwa twatanze ari bangahe? ninkaho ntanumwe wandikaka. Ibintu bimwe nabimwe tubabgira biba bireba ubuzima bwabo. Ariko ikibabaje bambwe bibagirwa tukimara kubabwira.... Bamwe nabamwe ntibabasha no kwiyandika kurutonde rwabitabiriye inama. Kutamenya kwandika bituma batigirira ikizere. Nukuri dukeneye gahunda zokumenya zigenewe abantu bakuru hamwe nibikoresho

byadufasha kumeya gusoma (*Just tell me how much communication was given to community members and how much of it they wrote for records. Almost none of them wrote anything. Some of the things we communicate directly concern their wellbeing. Unfortunately, some of them forget just after we have told them... Some of the parents cannot write their names on the attendance sheet. It affects their esteem. We really need adult literacy programs that have enough teaching materials*).

When MT asked him what materials he would suggest for an effective literacy program, he mentioned that there was a similar program in the community that had not lasted very long.

Twigeze kugira gahunda igamije kwigisha abantu bakuru gusoma ariko ntiyatinze. Twari dufite umwarimu umwe afite amakayi ibitabo bibiri byonyine yakoreshaga. Twe abanyeshuri ntitwari dufite amafanga yogufotokopiya ibi bitabo. Twacitse integer tuva muriyo gahunda. Nuko yahagaraye. Birababaje iyo abana babaza ababyeyi ibibazo bikabanarira gusubiza kubera yuko batazi gusoma. Byibuze twe ababyeyi twakagombye twigisha abana bacu kumenya gusoma no kwandika. Abana biza uburyo ababyeyi babo baba batazi kwandika no gusoma. (*We had an adult literacy program a few years ago but it did not last long. We only had one instructor and he had only two books that he used. The rest of us did not even have any money to photocopy the two books. We got bored and left the program. That was the end of the adult literacy program. It is so sad when children ask questions but their parents cannot answer because they are illiterate. At least we parents should be teaching our children how to read and write. Children wonder how their parents can be illiterate.*)

During time with Flora's family, there were instances when the challenges of being unable to read and write became apparent. On one such occasion when MT casually asked Flora's mother about her daughter's age, she first said that Flora was 9 years old but later that she was 8 years old. She guessed her daughter's birthday and said that she did not remember well. "Waba waranditse amatariki yavukiyeho?" (*Do you have written records of her birth?*) MT asked. He learned from her that there were no written records of children's birth dates in the family—Flora's mother said they forgot to write down the exact dates.

Jolly's father mentioned that most of the children who were literate in their community were those who had elder school-going siblings. This was so because elder siblings helped them with homework and shared books they had used in their classes.

6.3.3 Single-parent households

The fact that many households on the hillside were single parent households may have also had an impact on children's literacy and educational achievement. Just like most other parts of Rwanda, some of the families in this region were headed by single mothers whose husbands had either died in the Genocide, were serving Genocide related sentences, or were simply absent from the family. The latter could be attributed to the fact that historically, the region in which Flora and Jolly live tolerated polygamy. While Flora's father was present in the family, the fathers of some children in the neighbourhood were not present. A girl who frequently joined Flora's family when the children danced and sang said that her father did not live at

their home but at another woman's house. The girls' mother recounted that she was raising four children singlehandedly. She said she did not have land but relied on cultivating neighbours' lands in exchange for food, and that her husband cohabited with another woman with whom he had three children. Given that the oldest daughter of the woman was nine years old, this meant that her husband had seven children under the age of nine years. "Dufite ikibazo muri aka gace, abagabo bamwe bataye abagore babo. Abandi barafunze kubera ibyaha bya jenocide. Twifasha abana ntagifasha" (*We have problems in this region; some of our husbands have left us. Others are in prisons serving Genocide-related sentences. We raise children alone without help*).

Considering that these families were living under extreme poverty, the absence of one parent from the home likely had a huge impact on children's ability to enrol in school and learn how to read and write. That is, children from such families likely lacked the kind of support for reading and writing that one might find in families with two parents. That is, regardless of parental motivation, the lack of one parent significantly increases family poverty. The opportunity cost of sending children to school becomes prohibitive, the cost of providing reading and writing materials in the home too great, and because children would have very limited time available to engage in reading and writing activities during their day due to time spent on chores and labour. It was also common for the first child in the family to drop out of school and take up the role of a missing parent in raising his or her siblings. Such a family situation appeared to reinforce illiteracy in families and in the community as a whole.

6.3.4 Lack of regular interaction with peers

The settlement patterns in the region might also negatively influence children's learning opportunities. Whereas children in densely packed neighbourhoods, such as Jolly's, may have close interactions with other children after school, families in Flora's village lived in houses that were far apart and scattered on hillsides – quite inaccessible and apparently lonely for children. If social interaction with peers contributes to the development of literacy skills, then children living in areas such as Flora's area are at a disadvantage because interactions with other children outside of school were quite minimal. However, it should be noted that research findings in the developed world on peer effects are mixed in terms of the relationship between peer effects and reading acquisition.

6.3.5 Reading limited to school

According to Jolly's teacher, there were few tasks in the region that would require someone to know how to read, stating, "Ntiwabyemera, kubana bamwe babona inyandiko ku ishuri honyine." (*You won't believe that for some children, school is the only place where children see written words*). That is, the teacher explicitly stated that some children never encounter written words outside of the school, so that the ability to read is useless in their daily life.

There seemed to be a general sense among children in both communities that reading was an activity limited to school. In one conversation with Flora, she said, "Dukora 'devwari' gusa iyo turi kw'ishuri kyangwa tukayikorera munzira n'abandi bana iyo tuva kwishuri. (*We only do homework when we are at school, or we do it with other children on our way from school*). Similarly, other children in Flora's village seemed to have internalised that reading was an activity done at school. When MT asked a few children at the water pump "Musoma ryari" (*When do you read*), they were

quick to express, “Dusoma iyo turi kwishuri; abarimu baradukubita iyo tunaniwe gusoma. Ariko ubu turi mubiruhuko” (*We read when we are at school; our teacher spans us if we fail to read. But we are on a school holiday now*).

6.3.6 Access to school

While Jolly enjoyed a relative short work to school, as did her neighbors in the Umudugudu in which she lived, Flora did not live in a densely populated area with a school close by and hence was not as lucky as Jolly. It took an hour to walk to Flora’s primary school from her house. This required crossing two valleys on a narrow path covered with tall grass on both sides, and a large portion of the walk was uphill. It was quite a tiring walk and it was difficult to imagine young children walking the journey on a daily basis. As Flora’s father said, “Nanone dufite amashuri make cyane kandi dutuye mur’aka gace dutatanye. Nubwo Leta yakubaka amashuri mur’aka gace, abana bahigira ntibaboneka. Abana bacu bagenda urugendo rurerure kuburyo bager’aho bakang’ishuri”. (*We also have very few schools and we are sparsely populated. Even if the government built a school in this area. It wouldn’t have enough children. So, our children really travel long distances and end up hating school*).

The distance from homes to school was definitely one issue that had affected literacy levels in this community. Children dropped out early before they learned how to read, or they waited to start school until they were strong enough for the long journey to school but by then it was too late to learn with the rest of the children. In the meeting that followed *umuganda* in Flora’s village, one of the local leaders informed the community members that one of the projects that was to be funded by community-submitted money was building a kindergarten. The main reason for this decision was that young children were travelling long distances and getting tired and discouraged from continuing school.

Flora’s father echoed this concern in explaining the challenges facing families who wished to send their children to secondary school:

Mumushuri yisumbuye ya NYBE⁶, ababyeyi bishyura amafaranga 2700 ya minerivare na 5000 bya iniforome. Iyo uteranjeho ayibitabo, ababyeyi bacika integer. Nanone, natamashuri yisumbuye atwegereye. Kugira ngo abanyeshuri bagere kumashuri yisumbuye bibatwara amasaha hafi abiri. Nikure cyane kandi ababyeyi ntayandi mafaranga bafite yokubakoshereza utwumba twokuramo hafi yayo mashuria kumashuri yisumbuye. Nubgo turimo kugerageza kwigisha aba bana bato, ibi biduca intege. Ntakizere dufite ko bazarenga umwak awagatandatu (*In secondary school [NYBE] parents pay 2700 Rwandan Francs (RWF) for school fees and 5000 RWF for uniforms [Approximately \$4 and \$7 US dollars, respectively]. When you add on the cost of books, parents get discouraged. Also, there is no secondary school around here. To reach the*

⁶ NYBE- Stands for Nine Year Basic Education. In this system, two post primary classes are built on a school premises that formerly hosted only the primary section. The rationale was for children who used to drop out after primary six because of the long distance to secondary school and the costs involved. With 9 years of basic education, these children can have a smooth transition to at least two more years of secondary school.

closest secondary school takes students about 2 hours walking. That is too far and parents don't have extra money to rent places to stay near the schools. It is so frustrating even as we struggle to educate these young children. We don't have hope that they will go past primary six).

6.3.7 Student absenteeism and tardiness

Failure to attend school due to long queues at the water source and other forms of child labor were common in the children's villages. On one occasion, Flora mentioned her struggles fetching water in the morning before going to school. She said "Iyo ngiye kuvoma hakagira umwana ufite ingufu asimbuka umurungo ndamwihorera kuko mvuze hari ubwo yankubita. Ngomba gutegereza hakaba ubwo bituma nkererwa kwishuri nkasanga inyigisho yogusoma yarangiye". (*When a strong child jumps the line on the water canal, I don't complain because they may beat me up. So I have to wait and then sometimes, I reach school late and find the reading lesson finished).*

Flora's father also mentioned that most children were absent from school most days and this affected the rate at which they learned how to read and write.

Abanyeshuri bamwe bagera kwishuri sa kumi nebyiri na mironko ine nitanu kuko bagomba kuvira murugo kimwe nababyeyi babo bagiye mu mirima. Aba banyeshuri rero bagera kwishuri kare cyane bakabura ikyo gukora mugihe bategereje abarimu. Iyo bagira ibitabo byogusoma bagakoresheje uwo mwanya bagasoma. Ikindi cyiciro nicyabana bangana nunukobwa wanjye. Aba babanza kuvoma amazi bakahirira ninka [kubazifite]. Aba rero bakunze guhanwa kubera ko bagera kwishuri bakyerewe. Ibi nabyo bitera bamwe gucishiriza amashuri. (*Some children reach school at 6:45 am because they have to leave home when their parents leave to go work in the fields. This category of children keeps idle as they wait for their teachers. If they had books to read, they would use that time to read. Another category is that of older children like my daughter [Flora] who has to fetch water and feed cows before they go to school. This latter category is sometimes spanked or sent back home for being late. Therefore, some children end up dropping out of school).*

6.3.8 Exploitation of children's literacy skills

Another interesting finding shows the value that certain people place on literacy in an exploitative light. Jolly's mother said that there were some traders in the community who were not able to read but were exploiting boys who could read for business reasons. As she said,

Hari umucuruzi uciriritse mur'aka gace ugiye kuzatoma abana babiri bareka kwiga. Ntabgo azi gusoma abityo agatuma aba bana ngo bajye kumurangurira. Ntakyoyabasha kwigurira ubwe cyane iyo gisaba kumenya kwandika no gusoma. Abana bana bazi gusoma ariko ababeshyeshya udufaranga bagasiba ishuri inshuro nyinshi. N'umugabo mubi cyane. Yakabaye yishyura umuntu mukuru akareka gutesha abana amahirwe yabo. (*There is a small-scale businessman in this community but at least two children are almost leaving school because of him. He does not know how to read and he pays these two boys to go shop for him. He cannot understand what to buy especially if it involves reading and writing. These boys are*

somehow literate. He pays them small monies for their services and they miss school all the time. I think this businessman is a bad person. He could pay another adult and not waste young child's opportunities).

7 Discussion and Recommendations

7.1 Discussion

This study provides a rare, in depth look at the range of reading, writing, and other literacy practices that can occur in village life in rural Rwanda. Dozens of international assessments provide broad, generalizable findings on reading skills of students in primary school, but few if any studies in the developing world trace out the different, detailed community and home practices elucidated by this ethnography. This elucidation of the different ways that reading, writing, and literacy take shape in rural Rwandan life is hence extremely valuable. Rather than reporting on simply the number of letters a child could identify, the ethnography exposes the experience of children at home and in the communities.

The selection of the two participant families was completely random. That random selection fortuitously provided in-depth looks into two very different cultures of reading, writing, and literacy in two families from the same overarching Rwandan culture. Despite the difference in the home literacy environment of Flora and Jolly's homes, there was a common 'poverty' in the literacy environment in their wider communities. Research from the United States has produced similar findings: in a community that was deemed to have a poor community literacy environment, there was still very great variation in home literacy environments. Hence, assumptions about home literacy practices based on community literacy environments must be made very carefully if at all (Reese, Thompson, & Goldenberg, 2008). This finding seems to hold true as well in the two homes visited in this study – despite a common dearth of community literacy practices and activities, the home literacy environments can vary dramatically and may diverge greatly from the quality of the community literacy environment.

Perhaps even more critical than the home and community literacy environment is the physical environment in which Flora and Jolly are situated. In addition to the low quality of Flora's home literacy environment, the immediate demands of Flora's physical environment – the long walk for water repeated 4 times per day, the hour spent collecting kindling each day – leave little or no time for reading related activities or even simple playtime. Further, the physical isolation of Flora's home, on a sparsely populated hillside far from her school may further interfere with learning possibilities due to a lack of resources and interactions with other people.

The Home Literacy Environment (HLE) is not simply the availability and use of reading materials. As Hess and Holloway (1984) outline, it is made up of five dimensions: the availability and use of reading materials, the value placed on literacy, the press for achievement, reading to children, and the opportunity for verbal interaction. The following discussion points tie to these five dimensions

First, the *amount of reading material in the home* differed dramatically, as did parental agency in creating materials. Jolly's father, a school teacher, went out of his way to ensure that Jolly had reading and writing materials, from photocopying children's books to creating a chalkboard space for Jolly and her siblings to practice

their writing and drawing. In contrast, Flora's family had few resources and little initiative to provide or create the same sort of opportunities for Flora. Even if they had, it is not clear that Flora would have time to enjoy them given the requirements of her daily routine.

The next two dimensions, *the value placed on literacy* and *the press for achievement* are inextricably linked in the week long observations. Over the course of the week's observation, it was clear that Jolly came from a family that extremely valued literacy, and was well supported educationally and had very motivated and supportive parents who would ensure she capitalized on learning opportunities. In other words, they had high aspirations, high value of education, saw the relevance of literacy acquisition and had the capacity to support Jolly. Flora's family, on the other hand, did not understand the potential role they could play in Flora's learning beyond purchasing books and sending Flora to school. Further, the lack of reading materials in Flora's home is evidence of both the poverty of Flora's home and the undervalued status that literacy has in Flora's home.

The contrast between Flora's and Jolly's families echoes work by the sociologist Dr. Annette Lareau (2011). In her work, she describes a clear difference in families that support the natural growth of the child (i.e. tending to children's basic needs for health, shelter, food) versus the parenting approach of concerted cultivation (i.e. growing a child's talents through organized activities and attention to their growth). Families that display characteristics of natural growth tend to come from more socio-economically disadvantaged groups, while those that display the characteristics of concerted cultivation come from higher socio-economic status (SES). It is interesting to note that Flora and Jolly do not come from dramatically different levels of SES, yet the parenting styles displayed do differ dramatically. That said, while both come from relatively low SES backgrounds, Jolly's father is a teacher, while Flora's father survives through mainly subsistence farming, so while both may be deemed to be of low SES backgrounds, in relation to one another, Jolly likely comes from a higher SES. The implications here are that the knowledge of the importance of providing for not only a child's natural growth but cognitive growth as well is crucial to children receiving the maximum benefit of their education.

The fourth dimension that Hess and Holloway describe, *reading to children*, was not one that was directly observed in either family over the course of the week. While it is reasonable to assume this never happens in Flora's family given the lack of materials and the low value placed on literacy, it is likely a more frequent occurrence in Jolly's family, given that her father spends time and money on photocopying storybooks. However, without direct observation of this dimension, it is difficult to determine the extent to which it happens, if at all.

Finally, we again see dramatic differences in the fifth dimension of the home literacy environment, *the opportunity for verbal interaction*. When the observer tried to engage Flora's father in discussion, Flora was instructed to leave the room as it is not appropriate for children to speak with adults. This lack of verbal interaction may limit Flora's vocabulary and language growth, thereby making reading growth more difficult. Jolly, on the other hand, is actively encouraged to speak with her mother and describe her feelings and thoughts. As Hart and Risley (1995) found, children who are exposed to more verbal interactions from the earliest of ages tend to have

greater verbal abilities and reach language milestones sooner than children who are more deprived of verbal interactions.

Outside of the HLE, this research illuminates the different forms that literacy may take in village life in Rwanda. Literacy is not only reading words on a page and the ability to take meaning from symbols on a page. Rather, literacy is a form of social interaction, and in the same way the people interact in multiple ways, so too are there multiple literacies. This idea comes directly from the scholarly work of Brian Street and others in *New Literacy Studies* (Street, 1995). Without the presence of a large population of readers, villagers in both Jolly's and Flora's communities have developed different methods, customs, and norms to express meaning and convey messages. A banana leaf or piece of a sorghum plant indicate the different 'local brews' available for sale. Whether this alternative form of symbolic expression may interfere with children's reading growth is not immediately clear and needs further investigation. The authors know of no research that explicitly addresses this question.

7.2 Recommendations for improving literacy in Flora and Jolly's community

There is first a need for the provision of basic literacy material, such as books, notebooks, pens and pencils in the homes of young children. In resource constrained areas and situations there are other ways to create these materials from the local environment. In addition, it is recommended that some awareness activities be conducted with communities and especially families of young children regarding the potential benefits of developing literacy skills, and the importance of preserving literacy materials for the purpose of reading and learning from them. It is important that literacy be understood as a skill that is relevant and can be beneficial to life in the local village, potentially improving efficiency and effectiveness of daily activities (such as writing shopping lists, reading prayers during church and writing down pertinent information during community meetings) as well as potentially improving future reading and learning outcomes.

There is some indication of a demand for basic reading skill development for parents and community members as well. However, as the experience that community members reported having, without the basic resources required to carry out such an endeavor successfully, interest and attendance may dwindle over time.

Parents, specifically parents who are not literate themselves, should be introduced to activities that help children acquire reading skills and do not require the parents to be readers themselves. They should be encouraged to participate in these activities with their children at home, using whatever time they are able to spare. Reading skill development can be introduced into activities in which the family is already participating, providing children exposure to and practice with these skills without taking away from time that is required to help with household chores. In communities where parents may not be present in the home during the day, other family and community members could be encouraged to participate in reading activities with young children.

A fundamental challenge, however, is that many parents might see literacy as largely irrelevant for their children's future well-being. As a result it is unlikely that there will be sufficient press from the home for children to engage in activities that promote literacy development. Interventions must include not only getting literacy

resources, materials, and suggested activities into the homes, but also strategies for enhancing parental motivation by, e.g., demonstrating the benefits of literacy and formal education more generally to children's and families future success and well-being.

Finally, schools should be encouraged to provide a space for children who arrive late because they are required to assist their families in the mornings so that children who are coming from low resource families do not miss out on the opportunity to learn. Schools need to be cogniscent of the challenges some children face in attending school regularly and on time and need to be supported to develop a range of strategies that will enable them to better support these children.

8 Conclusion

The ethnography reveals two very different cases of the role of literacy in the lives of rural Rwandan children. On the one hand, while there is some understanding that being literate has the potential to lead to an improvement in life, parents like Flora's who are non-literate and struggle to make ends meet, may be unable to finance their children's education and purchase literacy materials given the extremely low resources available to them. They also cannot afford time to support Flora's literacy development in non-monetary ways. A lack of experience with literacy and the absence of a model of success associated with the development of literacy skills may lead parents to deemphasize the need for literacy skill development among children. Schools may lend books to students during the school year but they do not do so during holidays for fear books may be damaged or lost. For this and other reasons, homes may have little to no print material present. Parents are absent from home most of the day, and being non-literate themselves may not feel confident in being able to help children with reading or writing at home. Reading is an activity that is thought of as limited to school. This limits literacy related activities that take place in the child's home. Given the heavy load of work that children are expected to share with the family and the distance between homes in certain rural regions, opportunities of interaction and practice of literacy skills among children who attend school together are slim.

In the larger community, an alternative form of literacy, consisting of a system of symbols and memorization, are used in lieu of conventionally printed signs and announcements during daily activities. This may lead families to devalue any urgency of literacy skill development. The coupling of literacy with education in the minds of villagers may be problematic: The impression of education as "an investment that gives no returns" unless completed, something that may be outside parental means, may cause successful reading acquisition to be thought of as beyond a family's reach as well. This in turn engenders low expectations and aspirations for the future.

In contrast, in the case of Jolly's family, where at least one parent is literate and several older siblings attend school, there are examples of successful readers within the family. Further, the family is earning enough of an income to provide basic reading materials. Given both the materials to read and the older readers to emulate, reading plays a somewhat larger role in the child's life. Children like Jolly may be provided with multiple opportunities for interaction with reading, through exposure to print material in the home, reading and writing with family members and playing games that require literacy skills. Jolly's mother, as a woman who dropped out of

school in Primary 4 but is passionate about the education and development of literacy among her children, appears to be a driving force in terms of their reading skill development. In situations like these, family members, as well as the children themselves, seem to exhibit higher aspirations for the future. However, there is some indication that Jolly's family stands out as an exception to the general trend in the village.

9 Works Cited

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